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Brown Sugar and Spice: A Textual Analysis of the Intersection of Race and Gender in
Blaxploitation Films

(Under the direction of Dr. Dwight Brooks)

The purpose of this study was to examine the construction of racial and gender roles within the realm of blaxploitation films. Specifically, it provided a meaningful look into the intersection race and gender constructions and the implied hierarchy embedded within those constructions. Utilizing textual analysis, two popular films from the blaxploitation period (1970 to 1979) were studied, *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown*.

The study concluded *Shaft* (1971) is essentially a standard detective story infused with a little black sensibility. The character of John Shaft draws primarily on mainstream versions of masculinity and adds a touch of color eventually resulting in a presentation of black masculinity, which requires black men to be street smart, highly sexual, and physically intimidating. Meanwhile, Foxy Brown's black femininity provides her power derived not from herself, but from her ability to coerce men into the realization of her goals primarily through the use of her body. Black femininity then becomes related primarily to sexuality and the use of the body. Despite being the focus on the film, Foxy still lives in a male dominated world where her sense of identity is generally tied to her sexuality. Therefore, she must occupy the role of victim, vamp, or castrator.

INDEX WORDS: Blaxploitation, *Shaft*, *Foxy Brown*, Racial Studies, Gender Studies,
Film Analysis, Cultural Studies, Textual Analysis, Masculinity, and
Femininity

BROWN SUGAR AND SPICE: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF
THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND GENDER IN BLAXPLOITATION FILMS

by

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DEDICATION

To my loving family who believes in me even when I don't believe in myself.

Thank you for your unlimited love and unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Justification

The project examines the construction of racial and gender roles within the realm of blaxploitation films, in particular, the films *Shaft* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). It seeks to expand on the existing literature on blaxploitation films dealing with the intersection race and gender constructions and the implied hierarchy embedded within those constructions. In order to do so, the researcher sought to identify the major characteristics associated with blackness, masculinity, and femininity by asking three basic questions: how do John Shaft and Foxy Brown challenge stereotypes of black masculinity and femininity, how do they embody stereotypes and hierarchies, and what are the implications of the intersection of race and gender. Answering these questions provides insight into common perceptions of race and gender in the social sphere at the time of the films' production and presents an opportunity to compare past images of black masculinity and femininity to contemporary representations. It is important to note that the term "blaxploitation," for the purpose of this project, refers to any film produced from 1970-1979 that focuses on the (usually) urban, black hero fighting the system or attempting to gain some form of "justification" of black physical and/or mental ability and are specifically generated to be consumed by a minority audience. They can include horror, comedy, drama, action, and science fiction aspects and may often be considered part of the "cult" genre. However, blaxploitation in and of itself is not a genre of film, merely a general classification that encompasses several recognized genres of film.

The "original" blaxploitation period began in the early 1970s as America's political and cultural scene was in turmoil. Movements such as the Black Panthers and

the “Black Power Revolution” were beginning to wane. As the “Black Power Revolution,” which stressed self-reliance and racial dignity and included a number of independent organizations such as the Black Panther Party, Black is Beautiful campaigns, and movements advocating economic and social equality for Blacks began to crumble, black communities were searching for images reflective of black experiences (George 1994). Film provided an ideal medium to showcase new, powerful images to the black public.

In 1971, Melvin Van Peeble released his now famous film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, the film many scholars consider the first blaxploitation film. Although *Sweetback* could hardly be called a realistic depiction of black experience of the time, it ushered in a new form of film with a new central character: the urban black male striking out against "the Man," who attempted to hold him down at every turn (Cripps 1978). In these films the black hero was everything the average black character in Hollywood was not; he was strong, self-assured, and virile (a trait usually carefully avoided in mainstream Hollywood). He was, in essence, the quintessential black man.

For once, films were geared directly to black urban audiences and they made blaxploitation a very profitable business. It did not take long for the mainstream (white) Hollywood to take notice and begin producing blaxploitation films of their own. Throughout the '70s approximately 150 to 200 blaxploitation films were produced, most of them by major Hollywood studios (Watkins 1998).

However, blaxploitation films were routinely criticized for being too simplistic, glorifying violence, and focusing on unrealistic scenarios. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) actively opposed the films citing that they offered no legitimate prototype for resistance. Others felt that the films did not allow for character development and that women, in particular, were limited in their roles (hooks 1990).

The term blaxploitation itself hints at the negative aspects associated with the films. Blaxploitation, a combination of the words black and exploitation, evokes a sense of blacks being wronged and subjugated. Many black organizations, particularly the NAACP, felt that white writers and producers were misrepresenting black communities and people. What they failed to realize is the blaxploitation period employed more black actors, writers, directors, and crews than any other period of filmmaking (George, 1994). Many of the images that were being brought to the screen were the products of African-American writers and directors. Black filmmakers had more artistic power and control and black actors were given more screen time in the 1970s than any previous timeframe. Yet, many of the “new” images brought to the screen were simply reworked version of previous stereotypes and did little to improve the images of blacks in society. The black actors, writers, and directors use of such images just served to reinforce and valid many of the stereotypes they claimed to be tearing down. Some scholars argued that blaxploitation offered black filmmakers and actors the opportunity to exploit the mainstream film system and uplift the black population, but such a “revolution” never seemed to occur.

Film is often used as a tool of social change or preservation. Although many scholars believe that the original blaxploitation films of the '70s were meant to empower the black community, this project explores the claim that blaxploitation films only work to empower the black male while black women are left to fend for themselves on the sidelines or are resigned to being an extension of their men. Despite the “power” the black community has gained, black women are still struggling to gain respect as powerful individuals within and beyond the black community (Wallace 1999).

The blaxploitation films of the '70s remain popular and are often used the blueprint for many contemporary music videos, fashions, and pop culture references. In fact, many contemporary rap musicians have taken their names and video concepts straight from popular blaxploitation films, revitalizing the public's interest in blaxploitation and causing some of the more popular blaxploitation films to be re-released due to demand. There is an underlying assumption that these films gained popularity and remain so because they "speak" to the audience in a particular way. One question is simply what do they say about the intersection of race and gender.

Historical Social Context

Although the production of blaxploitation films began in the 1970s, the social climate that helped to shape their focuses and messages began to form as early as the 1950s. The 1950s was a time of slow change. It marked the end of World War II (WWII) and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. America in the 1950s was not a "land of opportunity" for blacks; Jim Crow laws abounded, limiting interaction between blacks and whites (Layman, 1994). The burgeoning new middle class hardly included the nation's black population. Even with the few gains that blacks had earned since the previous decade, they still trailed behind their white counterparts in income, educational status, and political representation (Price, 1969).

By the mid 50s, the country took important steps toward racial equality with the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision of 1954 (Layman, 1994). The *Brown* decision offered an opportunity for the black population to

improve their lot in life since better education would lead to better prospects in life. Middle and high schools across the nation began to open their doors to black students. With segregated schools ruled unconstitutional and educational opportunities opening up for blacks, black communities began to push for more civil rights.

The following year (1955) in Montgomery, the arrest of Rosa Parks, after she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, set off a firestorm of protest against the discriminatory practices of transportation systems and introduced the nation to a charming young pastor that would eventually become one of the most recognized icons of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The success of the Montgomery bus boycott became an inspiration for further demands of civil rights for blacks, while Dr. King's strategy of nonviolence protest became the blueprint for civil rights demonstrations for rest of the decade and much of the 1960s (Layman, 1994). Civil rights activists gained a victory in the form of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which required the Civil rights Commission and the Justice Department to investigate civil rights abuses and file suit on a case-by-case basis, but still remained far from their goals of racial equality (Layman, 1995). Throughout the remainder of the 50s, several more nonviolent protests and boycotts were staged, resulting in minor victories. Yet, these small gains were not enough to eliminate racial discrimination and violence.

The violent murder of Emmett Till in 1955 served as a reminder that racial injustice still lived on. Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were charged with murdering the black teenage after he allegedly whistled at one of the men's wife, which they interpreted as disrespectful. Although the men were acquitted, they later admitted that they did murder the boy. Even after their confession, they remained free since they could not be

retried for the crime they had just been acquitted of through trial. The Emmett Till case helped to keep the Civil Rights Movement mobilized and pushing forward (Layman, 1994; Davis, 1998).

Although the 1950s sparked the Civil Rights Movement, the 1960s witnessed its full bloom. The Civil Rights Act of 1960, which provided “voter referees” and empowered the Department of Justice to bring suits to force the registration of black voters, provided a preview of things to come and became the first of a series of Civil Rights Acts that would emerge throughout the decade, yet such legal advancements were not always immediately accepted by the general public and many cities (particularly those in the South) continued to enforce discriminatory measures (Layman, 1995). Blacks could see the injustice facing “their people” all over the world. In March of 1960, American’s heard news of black antiapartheid demonstrators being killed by South African police and their leaders being sentenced to life imprisonment, reinforcing the notion that blacks needed to fight for their rights and well being. On the home front, civil rights activists were still routinely encountering hostility and violence.

In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), one of the leading civil rights organizations, began a program known as the “Freedom Rides” as the next step in protesting segregated businesses in the South. The program set white and black riders out on a course from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans to test racial discrimination in bus terminals serving interstate travelers and was incessantly met with violence. One bus was attacked, stoned, and burned by a mob while attempting to pass through Alabama. Although the “Freedom Rides” eventually succeeded in forcing the Interstate Commerce Commission to tighten regulations against racial discrimination in interstate travel and

facilities and ceased the program, hostility and violence toward activists never ceased (Williams, 1987; Davis, 1998).

By 1965, violence against civil rights activists had escalated. In the summer of 1964 alone there were at least 1,000 arrest, 35 shootings, 30 bombings, and 80 beatings (Layman, 1995). News footage regularly showed protestors being arrested, beaten, sprayed by high-pressure fire hoses, or attacked by police dogs. Integrated schools and large black churches became frequent targets of bombings and vandalism. In the face of ever increasing violent reactions, the Civil Rights Coalition, which consisted of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), began to disagree on future actions and the nonviolent nature of the movement (Williams, 1987).

CORE and SNCC believed that passive resistance to physical force and building fellowships with white organizations would never allow blacks to become fully equal with whites, which they viewed as egotistical and unwilling to release the economic and political power they wielded. During the 1966 freedom march in Mississippi, Stokely Carmichael of SNCC coined the term “black power” to express his concern that the demand for freedom should be replaced with a call for more political, social, and economic power and control for black communities (Stoper, 1989). By the end of that year, SNCC had begun to expel all white members of the organization, in a move to produce a purely black organization focused on black concerns. By 1968, CORE followed suit and expelled their white members.

While SNCC and CORE grew more militant, another black power organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, began to emerge out of Oakland, California. Founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the group originally was meant to monitor police treatment of blacks within black neighborhoods, but soon grew to represent the idea of “total liberty for black people or total destruction of America” (Layman, 1995).

With this new militant branch of civil rights, came a call for separate art for blacks. Critics such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle, Jr., claimed that a black aesthetic was needed since blacks and whites occupied different cultures, they should have separate arts that reflect their cultural spheres. The rhetoric was revolutionary and shocking, but the message behind the movement was simple - black art should praise the people, support the revolution, and realistically represent black life (Layman, 1995; Gayle, 1971).

As the 1960s neared its end, despite the gains of the Voting Rights Act¹ and Civil Rights Acts of 1960², 1964³, and 1968⁴, the violence and hostility toward civil rights activists and the assassination of several high profile civil rights leaders (including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers) lead many young blacks to take up the mantra of the more militant civil rights groups and stop asking for and start

¹ The Voting Rights Act sought to end racial discrimination in the voting process in the South by eliminating literacy tests, Jim Crow laws, and other measures that would eliminate black voters.

² The Civil Rights Act of 1960 provided “voter referee and empowered the Department of Justice to bring suits to force the registration of black voters.

³ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in public places (such restaurants, bus terminals, hotels, and theaters) and allowed the federal government to cut off funding to any other level of government that was discriminatory.

⁴ The Civil Rights Act of 1968 outlawed discrimination in the sale or rental of all housing, allowing blacks

demanding their human rights (Layman, 1995, Davis, 1998; Williams, 1987). Even as militant ideas gained power, the organizational structure of such factions began to crumple. It was in this vein that the 1970s were ushered in and blaxploitation began.

Historical Film Context

The black image has been a permanent part of the history and evolution of American film. From the earliest forms of motion pictures, American films have a long history of being dominated by stereotypes and distortions when dealing with members of African-American communities. Many of the first images of blacks on film involved them dancing or eating, images of black life that were to be repeated and exploited again and again in the course of film history. Early in the evolution of film production several character types begin to form around the American Negro: the tom, the coon, the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the black buck (Bogle, 1989). Bogle argues that these images were employed “to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey” (p. 4, 1989). However, the five character types that eventually came to characterize blacks in film were not new; they were simple appropriations of black stereotypes that were already in existence in American popular culture.

The tom represents the ever loyal, “good Negro” that would do anything to help out his white superiors, even if it meant sacrificing his own life. He never challenges their authority in any manner - intellectual, sexually, or otherwise. In fact, toms are generally desexualized beings that pose no threat to the white men’s intellect or the white women’s purity they are entrusted to serve. In early films, of all the black characters, it

to move into areas previously closed to them.

was generally the tom character that managed to endear himself to white audience and emerge as a somewhat heroic persona (Bogle, 1989). For toms (and their female counterparts, mammies), emancipation made no difference. They would faithfully stand by their “massa and missy”. Toms justified the South’s slave mentality. Here was proof that blacks were happy being subordinates and even given the opportunity of freedom they would inevitably choose to remain loyal to their white masters.

While toms’ loyalty to their white masters endeared them to white audiences, the coons’ wild antics made them the butt of almost every comic situation. Usually depicted as slow (physically and mentally), unreliable, and lazy good-for-nothings, coons spent most of their time eating, sleeping, or playing. They seem to display an extreme dislike of physical labor and just about any distraction is preferable to a day’s work. Often their favorite distractions are watermelon, fried chicken, or the company of a pretty girl. Unlike the toms, coons retained some sexuality. They were allowed to flirt (albeit only with other “darkies”) since, in true coon fashion, they are likely to run at the first sign that a commitment is required. Much like the tom, the coon only reinforced notions that blacks needed whites to supply their lives with structure, lest black communities fall to pieces due to the coon’s aversion to work and lack of intelligence.

The mammy, blending many of the tom and coon characteristics, became the surrogate mother figure for the white children she cared for. Mammies, like toms, stood by their white superiors even after emancipation and often displayed the jolly nature of the coon. She joyfully washes, irons, and pampers her surrogate white family, but is often presented as cantankerous and overbearing with her own family and other blacks. Mammies are always big, heavy set, broad featured, and dark-skinned black women.

With their dark skin and broad features, mammies are no threat to the beauty and grace of the white women they served. Like their male counterparts, the tom, the mammy is desexualized. There is no danger of her seducing and luring away the white head of the household; therefore, she is welcomed in and allowed free range of the house.

The tragic mulatto suffers the burden of being a “ruined” individual by fault of their black heritage. The tragic mulatto (almost always female) is made likable, even desirable (due to her white blood) and the audience is led to believe that the girl could possibly live a happy and fulfilling life if not for her questionable racial status. Unlike the previous black character types, the mulatto is openly sexual. Her mixed blood allows her beauty and grace generally associated with white women, but the lust and passion assigned to blacks. With this combination, the mulatto is often portrayed either as the “good” girl whose bad blood ruins any chance of her finding and marrying a decent (i.e. white) husband or as the whore / seductress whose easy ways brings destruction to herself and the men she’s involved with. Her “unnatural” heritage ruins her ability to fit easily within the white or black communities, thus forcing her to never have a fully realized “place”. The “tragic” nature of the mulatto in the realm of film clearly demonstrated the perceived horror and unnaturalness of interracial coupling.

The final character type, the black buck, personifies the major fears of white society when dealing with black men. The buck is a brutal, arrogant, and lustful creature that is barely more than a wild animal. Bogle (1989) claims that these “big, baadddd niggers, over sexed and savage, violent and frenzied” represent the greatest sin a black man can commit - a challenge to white men’s superiority and white women’s purity. Where the good toms and mammies would do anything to preserve the honor and

happiness of their white masters, the buck joyfully assaults whites, reeking havoc on all those in their way. The buck's over-sexualization reveals the underlying connection of sex, gender, and race in America.

Although the five black character types periodically drift onto screen in the days of early cinema, it was not until D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that a film addressed a black theme and included the entire assortment of black character types. Griffith's melodrama of the Civil War and Reconstruction exploded onto the motion picture scene, eventually becoming known as "Hollywood's first big gun in its war against black America" (Peterson, Jensen, and Rivers, 1965). Considered a technically brilliant film, *Birth of a Nation* altered the concept of American film production for generations by using effect lighting, the close-up, the fadeout, cross-cutting, the tracking shot, and rapid fire editing in ways never before seen (Bogle, 1989; Leab, 1975). The film's epic splendor thrilled audiences, ignited controversy, and solidified the five character types that would dominate cinema for the next half century.

Although Griffith's film enjoyed a great deal of success, few studios were willing to produce similar films and risk the controversy that had plagued *Birth of a Nation*. Instead, a flood of jungle films and pictures about "dark" Africa became popular. These films employed large numbers of blacks as background to the white stars. If the camera happened to focus on the blacks, they were presented as savages that could never achieve the greatness of the white heroes and must either follow them or be doomed to be defeated by them.

The evolution of sound to compliment motion pictures in the 1920s provided some movement toward cinematic realism. Pines (1975) claims that "sound is the only

kind of film technology (apart from the invention of film itself) which has had a direct impact on the black image process in the American film.” This new technology allowed Hollywood to exploit the talents it had always associated with blacks - their “natural” ability to sing and dance. As the jazz era made black performers commercially valuable as musical entertainment, Hollywood picked up on the trend and began producing films with at least one major song and dance number performed by blacks.

Early in the talkie era, two films, *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!*, set out to display the wide range of musical talent possessed by the Negro population. Both utilized all-black casts and a Southern setting. *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) was little more than an expanded series of musical shorts weaved together. Set on a Southern plantation, “here were characters living in shacks and working from sunrise to sunset, and always, instead of suffering or misery, they seemed to be floating on some euphoric high brought on by cotton fields and spirituals” (Bogle, 1989). Despite the use of real blacks and an entirely black storyline, the film only served to reinforce the plastic images of blacks already present on the big screen. The plantation workers, which the film focused on, came across as more an updated version of blackface than an actual representation of black culture and lifestyle.

However, *Hearts in Dixie* introduced America to Stepin Fetchit, one of the first bona fide black film stars. In fact, the film’s second half revolved almost exclusively around his over-the-top coon character, Gummy. Although many blacks considered Fetchit’s clowning demeaning, his additions to the film managed to carry the film “to new summits” and begin the development of the “coon jester” that would gain substantial popularity in the 1930s (Bogle, 1989).

Unlike *Hearts in Dixie, Hallelujah!* (1929) offered the audience a more conventional plot. The film focuses on “the age-old problem of a Good Colored boy going bad and the battle within him between callings of the spirit and temptation of the flesh” (Bogle, 1989) The Johnson family lives a peaceful and simple farm life. They work hard during the day and entertain themselves at night with song and dance. All is well until Zeke, the oldest boy, and Spunk, one of the younger brothers, are sent to town to sell the family’s cotton crop.

Upon getting to town, Zeke spies Chick, a sexy cabaret dancer, and all other thoughts are wiped from his mind. She convinces him to join a loaded crap game with her current lover, Hot Shot. During the game Zeke loses the family’s money, realizes the dice are loaded, gets into a fight with Hot Shot, and mortally wounds his brother. Spunk dies on the way home and Zeke, utterly repentant, finds God at his brother’s wake. After being forgiven by his father, Zeke takes up evangelism and begins holding revival meetings in an attempt to save souls. Once again Chick enters the scene, but this time she is convinced to denounce her former ways and repent. Caught up in the moment, Chick becomes enamored with Zeke and deserts Hot Shot. However, Chick’s conversion doesn’t last long and she is soon back to her old ways. Zeke gives up preaching to pursue Chick and she leads him down a path of ruin and shame. When Chick deserts Zeke to reunite with Hot Shot, Zeke tracks them. The pursuit ends with Chick dying and Zeke killing Hot Shot in a fit of rage. After spending time on the chain gang, Zeke once again finds salvation and returns home to his forgiving family, which gladly welcomes him back with open arms (Bogle, 1989; Leab 1975).

Like *Hearts in Dixie*, *Hallelujah!* did little to progress the image of the black in film. It merely reinforced the well-established character types while connecting them to religious ideas. For drawing these connections, the film came under attack for its treatment of the church and black spirituality. While both films won critical acclaim from white critics, they had major problems in distribution and enjoyed only lukewarm box office success. The failure of these films substantiated the film industry's conviction that black leads were not capable of producing major profit and blacks were demoted back to supporting and minor roles.

The 1930s provided little change for black actors and actresses. They still occupied minor roles and seemed constantly prepared to break out in song and dance. However, instead of field hands and slaves, they now appeared as faithful domestics. The Depression years saw more blacks than ever traipsing in and out of scenes. Bogle (1989) contends that "the black servants provided a down-hearted Depression age with buoyancy and jocularly...They seemed to say that even during the worst of times everything could be straighten out as long as people kept their chins up." *Gone with the Wind* and a host of Shirley Temple films featuring Bill "Bojangles" Robinson exemplify this period of film production.

Occasionally a film would arrive on the scene that attempted an accurate portrayal of black lifestyles or issues. Two films, *They Won't Forget* (1937) and *Fury* (1936) endeavored to discuss the horrors of lynching, while *Imitation of Life* (1934) explored the pitfalls of a light-skinned black attempting to pass as white - although only as a subplot (Leab, 1975). However, these films provided to be the exception, not the rule and

Hollywood continued with business as usual. Most black actors remained in the background, little more than moving props.

Although blacks in general gained no new status in the film world, certain actors such as Stepin Fetchit, Hattie McDaniel, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson gained popularity and a moderate level of fame. Each of these “colored” actors managed to make a mark on white Hollywood despite the fact they were never the focus on the film. Their contributions to film production had enough of an impact from Hollywood to begin to reconsider major black productions again.

By the 1940s, with musicals at the height of their popularity, black entertainers became the rage. It became common practice to set at least one scene in a bar or nightclub where the talented Negro band and/or singer could perform without interrupting the flow of the script. This way the scene could be cut from the film without problems if the local theatre owners disliked the concept of showing blacks on screen (Bogle, 1989). With their charm, good looks, and talent, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Hazel Scott, and Lena Horne became popular entertainers for these ready-to-cut scenes.

Soon studios branched out into bigger undertakings, committing to full blown all-black musicals. *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1943) offered their casts the opportunity to extend their musical talents beyond ready-to-cut scenes into full-length features. Although neither musical offered incredibly realistic or dramatic plotlines, they enjoyed critical acclaim and a moderate response from their audiences. By the mid 1940s audiences seemed to have grown tired of “the entertainer syndrome” and the industry shifted to producing films in which blacks played major dramatic roles. From this point,

blacks begin to portray soldiers, law students, and other “normal” characters. Blacks became major characters, not just supporters of the action or moving props. By the beginning of the next decade such depictions were commonplace.

“Race problem” films, which sought to explore the issues surrounding race in America gained popularity in the 1950s. Bogle (1989) claims “the Negroes of the films had their color stamped indelibly upon them, and they suffered, struggled, bled, yet endured. But as Hollywood had it, they always won their battles.” Despite the attempt to move beyond the standard five black character types, most of the films of the age simply repackaged the tragic mulatto, mammy, or tom character types.

Films like *No Way Out* (1950) and *Carmen Jones* (1954) simply forced their stars to “update” the character types America was already so familiar with. As the title character in *Carmen Jones*, Dorothy Dandridge was praised for her beauty and grace. Yet, the character is easily reduced to a hyper-sexualized mulatto common in early films. She struts and seduces men effortlessly before meeting a tragic end brought on by her deceitfulness. Likewise, Sidney Poitier’s character in *No Way Out* operates under the same rubric that the tom has always occupied. He endures any and all malice directed his way from the whites around him, working tirelessly to prove himself. He came to represent the “modern integrationist tom”. The core remains the same, only the trappings have changed. Poitier manages to be everything the white (and in this case black) communities could desire - a well spoken, educated, handsome, and amazingly respectful man. Yet, even these images seemed to fail to live up to the ideals of the American public and by the end of the 50s blacks in films were moving in a new direction, away from flat characterization toward something more complex.

The political upheaval of the 1960s proved a transitional time for most black Americans and films followed the political arch. During the early part of the decade, the focus was assimilation and integration, but as the decade wore on organizations calling for separatism and black cultural aesthetics emerged (Bogle, 1989). The motion pictures of the era reflected the transition. Throughout the course of the 60s films begins to explore the American ghetto, clashes within the black family, and interracial romance. Multidimensional leading black characters shared the screen with white counterparts. Film genres such as westerns suddenly begin to include black characters. Blacks were slowly beginning to exhibit some authority and power previously unseen on screen. Southern injustice became a major theme and blacks were slowly shown fighting back (not physically, but verbally). Films begin to portray blacks as having social problems (institutional racism) as well as individualistic problems like personality clashes (Pines, 1975).

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the portrayal of blacks on film was the return of the black male's sexuality. Along with the blacks' budding militant nature came his libido. It became moderately acceptable for a black man to passionately embrace or even kiss another character. In doing so, Hollywood simply shifted the dominant character type from the tom and mammy to the black buck. Actors such as Jim Brown, a former all-star football player, came to represent the "new" black man on screen. He was physically intimidating, bold, outspoken, and overtly sexual. His characters strongly reinforced the myth of the black male as an overwhelming sexual creature. Despite the extremely physical nature of the new black hero, throughout the 60s his strength was never used to overthrow or disrupt the white hegemony instead he constantly aided the white powers

that be. By the time the 1970s were in full swing the focus of the black hero had changed dramatically.

The slick and visually stunning films of the 1970s brought back the black buck with a vengeance. The battle cry became “Down with Whitey” and “Damn the Man.” Black viewers were fed up with complacent black hero working within the system. It was in this vein that blaxploitation films arrived on the scene. A new breed of black hero, who was willing to take on the dominant white culture, was needed. Many of the non-violent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement had been assassinated or jailed and black communities were growing tired of waiting for white America to see the error of their ways and do the right thing. Blacks wanted a strong black hero that could force change if need be. Using his own money to finance his film, Melvin Van Peebles produced *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), presenting black America with a new form of black hero. As Bogle (1989) notes:

The fact that a black man met violence with violence and triumphed over the corrupt white establishment appealed not only to the mass black audience (particularly, the black young, who flocked to it) but to some young white audiences as well. Then, too, after decades of comic asexual black male characters and an era like the 1950s when Poitier and Belafonte, while considered sexually attractive, were rarely permitted to be sexually aggressive in their films, audiences were ready for a sexual black movie hero.

Audiences flocked to see *Sweetback*, proving an aggressive black hero was not only acceptable, but also bankable and ushering in the blaxploitation era.

Chapter Organization

In order to aid comprehension and ease the reader's ability to find information of importance to them, this study is organized in five chapters: Introduction, Conceptual Framework and Literature Review, Methods, Analysis, and Conclusion. This chapter sought to briefly outline the purpose of the study and supply a comprehensive historical background of blaxploitation films, including the major social issues that influenced the onslaught of blaxploitation and the mainstream film industry prior to the blaxploitation era.

Chapter two, Conceptual Framework and Literature Review, discusses the theoretical perspectives through which the analysis of *Shaft* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) takes place. While providing the conceptual framework, this chapter also functions as a review of the literature which influenced the style and methodology of the study. The chapter begins by exploring the idea of race as a social construction and proceeds to explain the use of Gender Studies, Black Feminism, Cultural Studies, and Film Analysis in the context of this project, highlighting some of the fundamental aspects of each field.

Methods, the third chapter, begins with an explanation of the appropriateness of qualitative research methods for answering the questions posed by this study. This is followed by a more in-depth view of textual analysis, the research method utilized by the project. The major objectives of the study are outlined and research questions are clearly stated with explanations of what each question was perceived to address. The Chapter

concludes in a extensive explanation on the choice of films and the film viewing and analysis procedure.

The fourth chapter, Analysis, offer the in-depth readings of the chosen texts. The first half of the chapter deals with the film *Shaft* (1971) and its portrayal of black masculinity, while the remaining portion of the chapter addresses black femininity in the film *Foxy Brown* (1974). This chapter provides a short summary of each of the films' plots and then the analysis based on the primary character's clothing, speech patterns, musical accompaniment, and interaction with other characters. Description of the scenes which support the analysis are included throughout the chapter. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study's findings.

The Conclusion chapter presents suggestions for future research. It justifies the undertaking of this project and draws connections between the images explored in this study and contemporary films, claiming that contemporary film is still plagued by problematic issues of intersection race and gender. It concludes by posing the question if contemporary depictions of black masculinity and femininity have changed or remained relatively static over the past 30 years and urging other researchers to devote time to the study of issues surrounding the intersection of race and gender.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to note that the study of blaxploitation films falls across several fields of study, which include film theory, feminism, gender studies, music, racial studies, cultural studies and linguistics. Within each of these fields of study, scholars have vigorously taken an interest in the topic and explored it in depth. However, most of the most relevant research for this project have emerged from the disciplines of film and cultural studies.

Race as a Social Construction

This analysis proceeds from the premise that race is a theoretical construct, a socially constructed classification realized through performative action and discursive strategies. By studying the meaning of race, we can begin to understand its place in the complex arena of social relations. It is through communication that we construct and maintain understandings of the world around us, including that of race (Hall, 1981). Among our chief modes of communication is that of the media - newspapers, magazines, television, and films. As Hall (1981) states, “the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be” (p.35). By helping us to define race, the media teaches us what characteristics are expected to associated with particular skin colors. Dyson (1996a) contends that popular culture (including images presented on film) allows society to understand the “rules of race, which is vital to our everyday lives” since “race continues

to plague our lives. Race continues to make a difference. Race continues to dominate. Race rules” (p.4). As O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery and Fiske (2000) note “whereas race can at first glance be viewed as an innocent description of what certain people look like, it carries a hidden agenda about their ‘nature,’ how they behave and are expected to behave,” which often sets the stage for xenophobia and bigotry (p. 255).

The “race as a personality/ flaw signifier” racial classification system that easily lends itself to being adopted by bigots and xenophobes provides a dangerous aspect of racial issues since race is fluid and capable of being changed depending on laws, history, emotions, and politics (Orbe and Harris, 2001). History has shown that despite the fact that race is a socially constructed category, it has very real and significant consequences. As Orbe and Harris (2001) note, the concept of race as been used to justify the suppression of various groups of people throughout the ages as supposedly “superior” races subdued “inferior” races in order to civilize them. Paul Spickard claims

racial distinctions are a necessary tool of dominance. They serve to separate the subordinate people as Other. Putting simple, neat racial labels on dominated peoples -- and creating negative myths about the moral qualities of those people -- makes it easier for the dominators to ignore individual humanity of their victims. (quoted in Orbe and Harris, 2001, p.30)

However, the fluid nature of race provides hope that a negatively viewed “race” can alter the manner in which their group is perceived by constructing a new set of characteristic associated with their classification or placing a positive “spin” on the characteristics already connected to their “race.”

This process of “constructing race” has inspired a great deal of research exploring the representation of various, usually minority, racial groups in the media in order to

understand how racial difference is portrayed. Since African-Americans have until recently been the largest minority racial group, most of these studies have focused on the construction of blackness - which not only represents a racial category, but also “the traditions, rituals, values and belief systems of African-American people” (Marable, 1992, p. 295). In constructing blackness, media often attempts to redefine blackness, eliminating the negative aspects associated with the racial classification. Gandy (1998) notes

The negotiation of power over racial classification is reflected in the names which have been attached to different racial and ethnic groups over time. The struggle over naming reflects shifts in the political goals and strategies of the groups over time. These shifts have been ‘symbolized by the shifting, and sometimes contentious, history of the way in which the Black-Negro-Colored-African-American community has defined and identified itself’ (p. 43).

Many scholars claim blaxploitation was an attempt to reflect the social and political goals of the time and reconstruct blackness in a positive mode (Reid, 1993; Dyson, 1993). Yet these same texts can “repudiate racism at the same time that it accepts or resists sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia” (Reid, 1993, p.69).

Gender Studies / Feminism

Since racial studies generally makes no attempts to account for gender and usually focuses on males, it was necessary to employ some form of analysis that would allow for deep understanding of gender and sex since this project focus is not merely blacks as a collective, but black men and black women. This study’s analysis proceeds from the assumption that gender, like race, is a social construction and communicated to society

through media and other sources which allows for shifting concepts of gender. Although gender and sex are often used interchangeably, it is important to note that they are not the same concept. For the purpose of this study, gender is viewed as the act of performing masculinity and/or femininity (a socially constructed set of characteristics), while sex is considered biological (unalterable and constant).

In considering gender theory, one is open to the option of not only examining how the feminine is depicted, but also the masculine since “gender is a relational concept” and “our society defines femininity in contrast to masculinity and masculinity as a counterpoint to femininity” (Wood, 2001, p.27). Gender related research has boomed in recent years, and although it follows lines of theory pioneered by class and race studies, it has several other dimensions. As gender plays a major role in society’s social interactions, several branches of gender studies have developed over the years.

Feminist criticism, which has several distinct “branches” itself, is generally recognized as the most prominent division of gender studies. While most feminist analyses centers around the broad question of how texts position female subjects and, thus contribute to the construction of femininity, Berger (2001) argues that feminist criticism generally seeks to deal with four major issues:

- The roles women are given in texts and the roles they have in everyday life
- The exploitation of women in the media and in everyday life as sexual objects, objects of male desire and lust
- The exploitation of women in the workplace and the domination of women in various areas of life, including sexual relationships

- The need for women to develop a consciousness of their situation and to do something about it (p. 82)

Despite this broad range of topic encompassed in feminism, several schools of feminism have developed. Note that in feminist studies, unlike the gender studies of which it's considered a part, the focus is placed squarely on women.

This project chose to utilize Black Feminism as the primary branch of feminism in which to situate the analysis. Since the focus of this study remains on representations of black men and women, it was important to use a mode of analysis that is particularly geared to addressing issues specific to blacks. There is an unspoken assumption that women of all races can all be viewed in the same way and will occupy the same nature of roles. This assumption is simply flawed. Black Feminism argues that black women experience a combination of “oppressions,” as a result of being members of two minority groups (women and blacks), that must be addressed and mainstream feminism, with its focus on primarily on sex, fails to supply an adequate outlet for their issues (King, 1995; hooks, 1994). The issues of race and sex intertwine and effect black women's lives and actions, forcing them to discover how to focus on her womanhood without feeling as if she is betraying her race and how to embrace her race without disregarding her gender. This concept of multiplicity in relation to the connection of race and gender provided the driving force behind this paper.

bell hooks and Michele Wallace provide distinctly Black Feminist readings of film which can be directly applied to the films analyzed by this study. Both argue that women are nearly always placed in lower power positions than men. hooks (1981), a radical feminist, claims that “no other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (p. 7). Such an assertion provides a wonderful frame for discussing the character of Foxy Brown and her place in society.

Is she fighting the socialization that hooks claims would exterminate her existence? Such questions help to frame the way in which these film can be analyzed.

Wallace (1999) claims that women's oppression and racial oppression are viewed as mutually exclusive which results in the myth of a color-blind society or the illusion of gender equality. This notion of black women being forced to stay in the background and become part of the patriarchal society while accepting the illusion of equality, provides the researcher with the opportunity to explore if blaxploitation films actually allow black women to experience gender equality or merely the illusion of it.

The use of gender studies, in general, and Black Feminism, in particular, coupled with race studies allows for deep understanding of the individual constructions of race and gender as well as the intersection of the two categories. Young (1996), a British film scholar, claims that a solid understanding of race and gender within their historical, political, and social contexts simplifies the analysis process. She (1996) argues that there are specificities of racial privilege and subordination embedded in gender issues and that the study of these issues helps to expose how and why race and gender are constructed the way they are in films. By understanding the hierarchy embedded within the films, society can begin to deconstruct the inherent biases that the films represent and move toward complete racial and gender equality.

Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies "focuses on the relations social relations and meanings - or more exactly on the way social divisions are made meaningful" (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske, 1994, p. 71). In short, it is the study of culture, which "is seen as the sphere in which class, gender, race, and other inequalities are naturalized and represented....[and] the means by and through which various subordinate groups live and resist their subordination" (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske, 1994,

p. 71). This concept that cultural studies allows for the exploration of subordinate groups and the ways in which they “live and resist their subordination” is particularly relevant to this study as it seeks to understand the how the characters of John Shaft and Foxy Brown challenge or reinforce racial/gender stereotypes and hierarchies.

With the acknowledgement that the messages that cultural studies are polysemic - capable of having several interpretations, which may be decoded differently by different audiences, coexist as potential in any one text - one can feel confident that a self-actualized analysis is acceptable. Even with such polysemy recognized, Hall (1980) states that there are “preferred meanings” encoded into texts by the dominant culture and these encoding “will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate,” but that these meanings can be and often are subverted by the various audiences as they decode the media (p. 135).

Fiske (1989) notes another valid point of study, claiming popular culture (including film) is “made by subordinated people in their own interest out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interest of the dominant” (p.2). This comment would seem to imply that regardless of whether blaxploitation films, such as *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown*, attempt to challenge or reinforce dominant ideas, they will always end up serving the dominant group in some manner. Yet, Fiske (1989) goes on to say that popular culture “is possible and pleasurable only if the subordinate can make their own meanings out of it, otherwise the [item] would be part of dominant, hegemonic culture only,” which explains how whites and black can have extremely different views of blaxploitation (p. 3).

Film Analysis

Not surprisingly, the majority of the discussion of blaxploitation has taken place in the realm of film studies and analysis. Several books have been devoted to the history and development of black film and the issues discussed within them. As one of the first works on black film, Thomas Cripps' book Black Film as Genre has become one of the first sources scholars look to when studying black cinema. In his work, Cripps (1978) attempts to define black film, eventually settling on the somewhat all encompassing concept of black film as "those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, writer, or black performers that speak to black audiences" (p. 3). Over time, this definition of black film has come under attack for being too inclusive, but many of Cripps' other ideas regarding black cinema are still accepted and expanded on. Cripps claimed that black cinema should be evaluated on social and anthropological rather than aesthetic factor - a statement that many scholars support today. His classification of black film helped to shape this study's concept of whether blaxploitation films actually qualify as black films. Furthermore, he was one of the first individuals to claim that black cinema often used the traditional "trickster" character common in African-American folklore. It is this trickster-like quality in blaxploitation heroes like Shaft and Sweetback that allows them to outwit and triumph over their foes.

S. Craig Watkins (1998), in his book Representing, notes that "the production of black cinema corresponds with historically specific social, economic, political, and cultural currents" and, thus, "have fought diligently to carve out a distinct and relevant cinematic practice" (p. 90). This statement lends itself to the argument that blaxploitation arose from the black communities' need to fight the social, economic, political, and

cultural currents surrounding the black urban experience. Watkins devotes a section of his book to examining blaxploitation films which is invaluable to this study. He argues that “as young African-American male leadership begin to question the efficacy of traditional civil rights leadership, it proposed in its place a hyper masculinity form that privileged male leaders over female leaders” (Watkins, 1998, p. 94). His views of the blaxploitation era (which he defines as 1969 to 1974) offer insight into industry production strategies and how white mainstream production practices may have influenced the production of blaxploitation films, which is vital to placing these films in context.

Mark Reid (1993) expands on Watkins’ assertions that white production practices influenced the production of blaxploitation film and claims that most black film “merely inverts the racial aspect of white patriarchy, making it a black patriarchal system” and, thus, placing power in the hands of males. He goes on to outline the Black Power movement, the background behind the making of *Sweetback*, and a “reading” of some blaxploitation films with women as the central characters. Throughout his argument, Reid (1993) notes women rarely have any true power and, in fact, most films within the blaxploitation classification “appeal to a male ego that has been threatened by the rise of the women’s liberation movement” (p. 88). This assertion lends itself to further study of the intersections of race and gender within the context of the films.

In a chapter titled "Theorizing Black Film," Gladstone L Year wood (2000) articulates what may well be one of the best call of (black) film study:

Black film aesthetics is a key epistemological activity that is relevant not only as a form of scholarship in itself, but for its central role in articulating and exploring paradigms that offer a more incisive grasp of

film in relation to the black expressive tradition....It should provide concepts, tools and strategies for initiating and maintaining a struggle against the way the black world is marginalized and shaped by forces beyond its control. (p.69)

Yearwood clearly believes that black film actually has something to say about black experience. She provides not only an outline of black film aesthetics, but also a critique of European aesthetic theory, a discussion on the purpose of black art (eventually she concludes the film should try to present true and useful images), exploration of the limits of sociological theories (the inadequacy of indexical means of definition), the importance of the text in defining black film, the concept of black genre film (with extensive references to blaxploitation films), comments on and critiques empowerment theories, and explores the signifying practice of black cinema.

Each conceptual framework (racial studies, gender studies, feminism, cultural studies, and film analysis) helps to illuminate a different aspect of the study. Racial studies draws focus to race, gender and feminist studies emphasize sex and gender, while cultural studies and film analysis helps to place the films in social and pedagogical context. Combined, they form a solid basis with which to read the chosen texts, *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown*.

METHODS

Qualitative Research

Pauly (1991) claims that humans fabricate reality; they use symbols to construct the worlds in which they live. No where is this truer than in regards to the focus of this project, movies. He states that “groups use cultural artifacts to assert and sustain a version of reality, articulate and celebrate a sense of identity, and disguise or flaunt styles of domination and control” (1991, p.2). This concept that cultural artifacts, blaxploitation films in this case, constitute a reality (or version of reality) and can produce a definite sense of identity is crucial to this work. By definition, things such as identity, domination and control cannot be adequately measured in numerical terms and, therefore, must be viewed in a qualitative vein.

Berg (1989) states that qualitative research “refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things” (p.2). The questions that arise from studying blaxploitation film and what they “say” in regards to race and gender easily falls into the realm of qualitative research and analysis (Berg, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While quantitative methods tend to be concerned with who, what, when, and where issues, qualitative research focuses more on the how and why and allows for the exploration of deeper interpretive meanings. Quantitative methods while allowing one to answer questions regarding how much screen time black men or women occupy and what role black women most commonly occupy in these films, these methods do not allow for delving beyond surface issues. Since the emphasis of this project is on exploring *how* the intersection of race and gender are dealt with in the realm of blaxploitation film in regards beyond issues of who appears

onscreen, what occupations they hold, and where the films take place, qualitative methods provide the best tools to investigate the films. Textual analysis is the chosen method for this project.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis, which grew out of a tradition of humanist criticism of religious and literary texts, focuses on what a “text” signifies or means. A text, as defined by O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske (2000), “refers to a message that has a physical existence of its own, independent of its sender or receiver” and “work[s] on a number of levels and is thus capable of producing a variety of meanings according to the socio-cultural experience of the reader” (p. 317). Books, films, letters, television shows, photographs, and records can all be considered texts capable of analysis. The films *Shaft* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) are the text of this study.

Generally associated with semiotics, the study of signs, textual analysis focuses on more than just words. It delves into the social and cultural meaning behind words, actions, and items (McQuail, 2000). Semiotics, based on concepts by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, contends that the world is made up of signs and that these signs play an important role in our thinking and understanding of our surroundings. Saussure believed that signs are made up of sounds and images, a word, (the signifiers) and the concepts these sound and images bring to mind (the signified) (Berger, 2000). Peirce, drawing on Saussure’s work, claimed that there were three different kinds of signs: icon, which signify by resemblance; indexes, which signify by cause and effect, and symbols, which signify on the basis of convention (Berger, 2000). The combination of these two concepts of signs allows one to begin to understand how people find meanings in things.

Textual analysis, drawing on semiotics, allows one to explore a text on a level beyond what is written or said and investigate latent meanings not expressed directly in

words. By centering on the text as a whole, textual analysis opens the likelihood of revealing more of the underlying meaning of a text and allows for the analysis of texts such as films, advertisements, video games that involve more than one sign systems (McQuail, 2000).

Objectives

This paper seeks to build on the existing literature on the topic of blaxploitation while offering more insight into the connection of race and gender within the constructs of blaxploitation films. While much of the literature on blaxploitation discusses race or gender, very little attention is devoted to the intersection of the two categories. There is an unspoken assumption that women of all races, blacks regardless of sex, etc. can all be viewed in the same way and will occupy the same nature of roles. This assumption is simply flawed. Black Feminist studies have long argued that black women have multiple oppression and consciousness because they are members of two minority groups (women and blacks), while black men experience both oppression and benefits by occupying membership in a minority group (blacks) and a majority group (men) (Beale, 1995). This concept of multiplicity in relation to the connection of race and gender provides the driving force behind this paper.

In order to achieve the primary objective, this project seeks to identify the major characteristics associated with blackness, maleness, and femaleness. By identifying the distinctive aspects connected with each of these classifications, one comes to understand what constitutes the “norm” for each individual group and can begin to recognize deviations from the ideal image. From this point, one can begin to analyze how the norms of each category shift when it intersects with another grouping.

The intersection of race and gender then provides two new groups, black masculinity and black femininity, with their own distinct characteristics to be identified. The third objective then becomes to discover the major aspects of these classifications

and ascertain the norm in these groupings, which generally differs from the norms of the two groups that combined to form the new category. Once the ideal image is established, one can begin to recognize the deviations within these classifications and whether a hierarchy emerges within the groupings.

Finally, the project seeks to identify any racial and/or gender hierarchies. By acknowledging hierarchies, one can begin to analyze the larger social implications of the films. Since hierarchies generally reveal what is valued in a society, analysis of the racial and gender chains of command would allow one to discern the values that govern society and what characteristics are deemed desirable within the realm of the film. If the characters work against the pre-established hierarchy, one can determine the aspects of society that the characters see as needing improvement and then analyze what they (the characters) seem to wish to replace the established norm.

These objectives could lead to a host of questions, but for the purpose of this project three basic questions are posed. The answer to these questions form a important base to further racial and gender studies.

Research Questions

In short, the study asks:

- 1 How do John Shaft and Foxy Brown challenge stereotypes and hierarchies of black masculinity and femininity?
- 2 How do John Shaft and Foxy Brown embody stereotypes and hierarchies of black masculinity and femininity?
- 3 What are the implications of the intersection of race and gender?

There is an underlying assumption that these films gained popularity so quickly because they “said” something about race and/or gender that been absent from the screen up until then. The question is simply what did they say.

The intersection of race and gender provides many complications to a simple reading of just race or gender, so it is important to understand the implications of each category as a separate entity (black, male, or female) as well as a portion of a larger classification (black men or black women). Therefore, the research questions were conceived as a simple way to begin thinking about the issues of race and gender.

Question one allows one to analyze the deviant aspects of the characters. Does the character deviate from the norm in what is considered a positive or negative manner? How does such a deviation effect the hierarchy? Such departures from the norm allows for analysis of whether the aspects are seen as positive because the deviant characters more closely resemble those associated with the upper levels of the hierarchy. Generally when characters work against the pre-established norms, one can view the deviation in one of two ways - the system is flawed and the character is seeking to improve it or the character is flawed and lashing out against a just system. Either way, the question allows one to examine the social systems and structures within the film.

The second question provides a similar point of analysis. It simply reverses question two and allows one to examine the “goodness” of a character on the basis that he or she has stayed within the norm. The concept than becomes one of whether the character stays within social boundaries because the system is appropriate and fair or repressive of deviation. Once again, one is allowed the opportunity to investigate the social system within the context of the film.

This final question is vitally important to the study, as it allow for deeper investigation of the intersection of race and gender and provides an entry point for other studies. Only when the intersection of race and gender are understood can one truly begin to analyze the role of black men and women in the realm of blaxploitation or any other form of film and the larger social world.

Film Selection

Two films were included for study in the project, *Shaft* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). These films were chosen based on their ability to be easily obtained; they can be found in most video stores, libraries with film collections, or available for order on the Internet. *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown* are two of the best known films of the blaxploitation period by the public and are generally considered representative of the “average” blaxploitation film by scholars. In fact, the characters John Shaft and Foxy Brown are often described as blaxploitation character prototypes, which allows the findings of this project to be applied to most blaxploitation films. Also, the popularity of these films assumes that they appealed to the audience more than other films and, therefore, their “messages” were more likely to construct a reality that the audience was comfortable with and found acceptable.

Foxy Brown (1974) was chosen due to its use of a female character as the focus of the film. *Foxy Brown* still utilizes the standard concept of the urban black hero fighting the system, the most notable point is the film chooses to make that hero female. Leab (1975) states, that “at a time when women’s lib had become increasingly militant, these [blaxploitation] films served as splendid examples of male chauvinism” (p.256). However, *Foxy Brown* proves an exception to this general rule, utilizing a strong black female as the focus of the film. This film allowed the researcher to analyze the way in which women are depicted as focal characters as opposed to supporting characters. Considered one of the most popular blaxploitation films ever made, *Foxy Brown* still inspires contemporary filmmakers in regards to female characters¹. The popularity of the character implies that she presented a model of black womanhood that audiences found appealing and, therefore, worthy of study.

¹ Quentin Tarantino was so fond of blaxploitation films that he not only based his 1997 film *Jackie Brown* them, he also sought out the star of *Foxy Brown*, Pam Grier, to star as the title character. Another film, *Austin Power’s in Goldmember*, went so far as to name the major female character Foxy Cleopatra, a combination of two blaxploitation characters’ name - Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones.

Meanwhile, *Shaft* (1971) provided the opportunity to examine the role of black men as primary characters. Considered by many critics as the first true “blaxploitation” film, since it was the first major black film produced and financed by large mainstream Hollywood studio (MGM)², *Shaft* is often cited as the blueprint for blaxploitation gangster films. John Shaft, often called the black James Bond, has become a major icon of the blaxploitation era and is generally the first character contemporary audiences think of when confronted with the term blaxploitation (James, 1995). Much like the character of Foxy Brown, John Shaft continues to inspire contemporary filmmakers in their creation of black male characters³. He presented a model of black manhood that audiences found so appealing that MGM rushed to produce two sequels while other studios used it as a prototype for their own black heroes. It is difficult to produce a study of blaxploitation film without including *Shaft*, one of the most recognized names in blaxploitation.

Film Viewing and Analysis Procedure

In choosing films for this project, the researcher choose two dominant blaxploitation films with relevant racial and gender basis. In essence, one film focusing on a black man and one on a black woman. A textual analysis was employed as the most appropriate form of investigation of the subject, as it allows for in-depth study of a given text - “a message that has a physical existence of its own...[and] consists of a network of codes working on a number of levels and is thus capable of producing a variety of meanings according to the socio-cultural experience of the reader” (O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske, 1994, p. 317). The texts, in this case, being *Foxy*

² Although *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* - which is often cited as the first blaxploitation film - also featured a black urban man fighting “the system,” it was independently produced and financed by its director, Melvin Van Peebles and, therefore, considered less exploitive.

³ *Shaft* remains such a pop culture icon that John Singleton reconceptualized the black private detective for

Brown and Shaft. Berger (2000) recognizes four forms of textual analysis - semiotic analysis, rhetorical analysis, ideological criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism. For the purpose of this project, the textual analysis method used utilizes principles of semiotic analysis, which focuses on signs such as clothing, facial expressions and actions, and ideological criticism, which locates the evaluation of a text in a larger system of understanding of collective goals and/or ideals of a class or group. The semiotic approach, according to linguist Jonathan Culler, allows for deeper understanding of social and cultural issues since it allows the researcher to first recognize objects and events as signs and then realize that such signs “do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations,” such as those of race and gender (quoted in Berger, 2000, p. 43). This form of analysis is ideal for film since, as McQuail (2000) claims:

The application of semiological analysis opens the possibility of revealing more of the underlying meaning of a text, taken as a whole, than would be possible by simply following the grammatical rules of the language or consulting the dictionary meaning of separate words. It has the special advantage of being applicable to ‘texts’ that involve more than one sign- system and to signs (such as visual images and sounds) for which there is no established ‘grammar’ and no available dictionary. (p.314)

The complexity of film’s images requires a broad range of analysis that semiotic analysis allows.

Meanwhile, the ideological criticism approach of textual analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the texts’ larger social implications of race and gender since ideological criticism allows for the easy integration of several theories, including those of Gender Studies and Race Theory, as it attempts to understand and critique society’s

values and norms. Since ideological criticism often involves identity politics and argues the social conception of knowledge, it readily embraces Race Theory and Gender Studies, which are generally based on the premise of race and gender as social constructions. Thus, this form of textual analysis permits one to explore the issue of socially constructed categories in a more coherent manner and, thus, lending this project a bit more shape.

Personal copies of the films were obtained in DVD format and multiple viewings were used to conduct a close reading of the films. Observations were made over the course of six weeks and approximately 15 viewings of each film. A character focused mode of textual analysis was employed, where focus remained on the characters of John Shaft and Foxy Brown with little attention directed toward other characters except in moments when they actually interact with the focal characters of the study. Issues such as clothing, speech, personal interaction with other characters, and musical accompaniment are analyzed.

Clothing is analyzed in regards to color, perceived texture, and fit (accessories such as purses, belts, and jewelry are also considered, albeit not to the same degree). As color is generally associated with various emotional states and/or attributes, much attention was paid to general color schemes within the character's wardrobe (such as whether he or she wore primarily warm or cool colors) with slightly less attention focused on specific color schemes (such as light tops with dark bottoms). Texture was also taken into consideration, as various fabric types are generally associated with particular attributes (i.e. velour denotes an enjoyment of physical contact while smooth leather denotes a physical toughness or cool inner strength). Finally, fit was considered with more contoured clothing generally considered sexy or alluring and looser items

deemed comfortable and relaxed. These distinctions were used to gain an overall view of the character's personal style and, by extension, personality.

The characters' speech patterns and styles were then analyzed with close attention devoted to use of slang and/or revolutionary rhetoric, as such uses of language are associated with "street credibility" - a concept that one is "real" and has an understanding of contemporary urban and/or black life's hardships. Special contemplation was placed on the speed of delivery, with rushed speech generally noted as highly emotional and uncontrolled and steady speech documented as collected and self-assured. Furthermore, the characters' speech was looked at in regards of its directness - whether they made direct statements or made statements couched in a questioning format. Issues of speech were used as an indication of power and belonging within the community as well as representative of education and/or class.

The focal point of the analysis lay on John Shaft and Foxy Brown's interactions with other characters. In these scenes, the audience gains a full understanding of the character by means of comparison. Within their interactions with other, it was noted whether the focal character or another person was considered the leader and, if the focal character was not the leader, if they willingly and obediently followed instructions. Issues of visual power dynamics were explored such as if the focal character stood towering over another character or was subdued and placed in a visually subordinate position (sitting or lying down). Who initiated conversation or action was also closely monitored. Examining the exchanges between the study's focal characters and other characters inhabiting their reality helped to solidify the various hierarchies and

characteristics associated with each one as well as how the focal characters fit into those groupings.

Finally, musical accompaniment was taken into account. However, setting based background music (such as songs played on a bar jukebox) was disregarded unless they were chosen by the focal character. Musical accompaniment helps to establish how the character should be viewed. Special attention was paid to lyrics of theme songs and end credits, as these are the first and last impressions audiences receive. The Shaft theme song, for example, offers one a great deal of information on how the hero should be viewed by emphasizing particular aspects of his character. Musical style was noted, since various music types are often employed to heighten emotional states or focus attention on one particular concept. Music was generally characterized as “sexy,” “preparing for action,” or “dangerous.”

Once the four major areas of observation were identified, the films were viewed four times with each viewing focusing on one of the areas of observation. Subsequent viewings were undertaken in order to review and confirm notes made during the initial viewings as well as record any new observations previously unrecorded. For the purpose of this study, observation and basic analysis occurred simultaneously.

Once viewings no longer provided new observations (approximately after 10-12 viewings), examining viewing ceased and in-depth analysis began. Analysis began with submersion into the data (in this case, the notes taken during initial viewing). While reading and rereading the notes recorded during viewing, patterns began to emerge. Noting overarching patterns on index cards, the researcher sought to “bring together into provisional categories those cards that apparently relate to the same content; to devise

rules that describe category properties” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 347). Drawing on primarily feminist and critical cultural texts, the notes from films were situated within these conceptual frameworks, conclusions drawn, and supporting quotes and concepts sought and made note of. Further viewings were then undertaken to assure that said conclusions were “reasonable” readings of the text and note the particular scenes in which the reading applied.

ANALYSIS

Key Terms

Throughout the analysis, the terms masculinity (or masculine traits) and femininity (feminine traits) are used often. As noted in the Conceptual Framework and Literature Review chapter, masculinity and femininity are social constructs and the concept of these classifications may vary from person to person and region to region. The American ideas of gender dominate this study. For the purpose of this analysis, masculinity is associated with physical strength, intelligence, emotional stability, aggressiveness, the ability to control / dominate, and a general sense of emotional and physical fortitude. It is important to note that the masculine ideal requires men to not only possess these qualities, but also be physically alluring - generally possessing a muscular, fit frame. While masculinity is focused on logic and physicality, feminine is relegated to the realm of the emotional and psychological. Femininity (usually viewed as masculinity's binary opposite) was connected to gentleness, passivity, emotional availability and shifts, dependence, and a general sense of warmth and nurturing. While masculinity generally evokes a sense of fortitude, femininity relies heavily on the concept of "womanly weakness." Like its counterpart, femininity also requires its possessor to fulfill particular physical qualities. In order to be considered feminine women are expected to be slim, petite, and moderately endowed, but never physically threaten to the masculine ideal.

The definitions noted here do not constitute a definitive list of characteristics of masculinity and femininity and are only presented as a basic framework of these concepts, nor do they reflect an accurate description of black masculinity and femininity as it is explored within this analysis. Since race complicates the characteristics of gender, black masculinity and black femininity differ in many ways from traditional masculinity and femininity. Through the analysis of the characters John Shaft and Foxy Brown the complex nature of black masculinity and femininity is addressed and described.

He's a Bad Motha....: Shaft and the Mantle of "Supernigger"

Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971), based on the novel by Ernest Tidyman, follows the story of John Shaft (Richard Roundtree), a black private detective, as he sets out to rescue the kidnapped daughter of a black gangster, Bumpy Jonas (Moses Gunn). Bumpy searches out Shaft, claiming that he believes his daughter has been kidnapped by the local black revolutionary, Ben Buford (Christopher St. John), and his men. When Shaft confronts Ben, a former street partner of his, about the kidnapping of Bumpy's daughter, he discovers that the white mafia has stolen the girl in an attempt to "muscle in" on Bumpy's control of Harlem. Joining forces Ben and his group of revolutionaries, Shaft agrees to take on the mafia and return the girl to her father. Dodging questions by the police and the mafia's attempts to kill him, Shaft and his army of radicals storm the mafia's hideout, rescue the girl, and disappear into the streets before the cops can arrive. Through all the hardships, Shaft always manages to keep his cool, get laid, and stick it to "the Man."

As the film begins and the camera pans over the streets of New York, Shaft emerges from the subway ready for action. Taking a brief moment to take in his surroundings, Shaft struts out onto the city sidewalk. Coming to an intersection, he boldly walks out into the street showing utter disregard for the heavy oncoming traffic. When a white cabbie, annoyed by Shaft's snubbing of traffic laws, honks at him and yells for him to get out of the way, Shaft simply flips him off, shouts an obscenity, and heads on his way as if nothing has happened. Head held high and decked out in a beige cashmere turtleneck, brown slacks, brown leather shoes, and a flowing leather trench coat, Shaft is the picture of self-confidence. His earth-toned ensemble suggests a grounded nature, with the muted, neutral colors evoking a sense of balance. As he strolls through the crowded streets to the beat of his personal theme song, Shaft's black form wrapped in a leather trench coat oozes a sense of toughness and marking him as a truly masculine man. While Shaft's well-tailored ensemble implies a manly fortitude, it also projects a sense of sophistication and financial freedom, as leather and cashmere are generally considered luxury items and can be quite costly. In essence, Shaft has taken on the traditional "tough guise" - an image of masculinity involving a sense of dominance, sexuality, and often violence. His mini afro, evocative of black revolutionaries, accentuates his blackness and conjures up notions of a "soul brother" prepared to take on "the Man." Combining the traditional notions of masculinity with a touch of ethnicity, Shaft seems to be at home in the heart of Time Square or drifting through the slums in search of lead. His "go anywhere" style is chic, but functional drawing forth images of both traditional masculinity and militant blackness.

As if the initial visual image of Shaft is not enough to convince the audience that he's worthy to be a black hero, R&B recording artist / songwriter Isaac Hayes quickly lays out a sort of qualification of black masculinity as embodied by John Shaft through the song, "Theme from Shaft." Although the audience is presented with the image of Shaft for almost three and a half minutes before the lyrics of the theme song begin, Hayes' lyrics promptly begin reinforcing who Shaft is and what he represents. From the moment Isaac Hayes croons the classic line "Who's the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks," an underlying sexuality is associated with the image of John Shaft. This sense of sexuality becomes a major part of the John Shaft persona and a defining aspect of black masculinity. Within the first line of the song, Hayes has linked John Shaft's essence to his race (black), his occupation (private dick), and his sexual prowess (he's a sex machine). Here the term "dick," although referring to Shaft's profession, effortlessly calls forth dual images - the cunning detective and the male sexual organ. Hayes' play on words cannot be ignored when he concludes the lyric with the phrase "that's a sex machine to all the chicks." When a chorus of female voices cuts in to answer the question Hayes has posed, quickly offering up the response "Shaft," Shaft's image as a ladies' man has been sealed. The sisters themselves have proclaimed this to be true.

Yet it is not enough for Shaft to be simply a ladies' man, he must have his manhood confirmed by his fellow men. By the time the song has ended, the audience is assured that Shaft is not only black, virile, and gainfully employed, but also courageous ("the cat that won't cop out when there's danger all about") and supportive of racial solidarity ("the man that would risk his neck for his brother man"). Shaft's masculinity

has been confirmed in his ability to perform action and not “cop out when there’s danger all about,” while his blackness is punctuated by his willingness to “risk his neck for his brother man.” As Hayes blatantly proclaims, “Shaft is a bad motha...,” Shaft is solidly positioned as the ultimate man, the kind that ladies love and men respect. Possessing all the traditional masculine qualities of physical strength, dexterity, intelligence, charm, and good looks, Shaft comes to embody the mainstream masculine ideal with black sensibilities.

Shaft’s race complicates his ability to perform the masculine ideal. He is not part of the dominant (white) culture and, as an outsider, must work hard to prove his manhood in a world that generally defines power and masculinity in terms of the mythical norm, which is generally fit, male, young, heterosexual, and middle-class. Therefore, Shaft must work to prove his masculine power to the dominant culture while maintaining a connection to racial ideals associated with blackness. In his video, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis of Masculinity*, Jackson Katz (1999) argues that the pressure to conform to traditional masculinity is greater for men of color. Since black men have long been denied access to social and political power, the majority of their masculinity has come to be associated with the physical form. Thus, they reinforce their masculinity through physical strength and the ability to excel at bodily tasks, a notion that lends itself to black masculinity being equated with violence. Given that blackness has long been associated with primal notions, black masculinity becomes firmly associated with excellence in basic physical tasks such as sexual intercourse and athletic endeavors (particularly running and fighting) and less attached to domination through social and political means. In order to survive, black men must go above and beyond the

requirements of traditional masculinity, which often mean they must appear even tougher and more capable of dominating than their white counterparts. Such is the case with Shaft, he must either adopt the ideals and manners of the dominant society (mimic white masculinity) or excel beyond them and establish his own set of rules with which to approach life (create his own black masculinity).

Early in the film, we are given the impression that Shaft has chosen the latter opinion, forsaking society's prescription of white masculinity in order to pursue his own path of black masculinity. Aspects of Shaft's black masculinity are exposed early in the film when Shaft is confronted by two white police officers. Drawing from the "trickster" character commonly found in African-American folklore, Shaft employs a traditionally black form of verbal distraction and domination. While Shaft refuses to be straightforward in his responses, he incessantly demands candid statements from the police. While Vic (Charles Cioffi), the white police lieutenant, is pumping Shaft for information, Shaft is learning what the police know. As Vic explains that the police have been hearing "rumblings" from uptown and can "pick up the sound of it, but no words," Shaft coolly explains "that's cause us black folks talk mush mouth," insinuating that the black uptown gangsters and natives are unlikely to let white outsiders in on neighborhood happenings. While Shaft's comment is derogatory toward his own racial group, it is used as a mode of empowerment (a common trickster technique). It allows Shaft to momentarily divert Vic from his line of questioning while sarcastically critiquing a social stereotype. When Vic finally regains his bearings and demands to know why two black men from "uptown" Harlem are looking for Shaft, Shaft continuously dodges the question, using the traditional trickster quality of responding in a joking manner and

lightheartedly informs Vic that the two men are “soul brothers” he has promised to “teach the handshake.” Unable to gain any useful information, Vic must give up his attempt to coerce Shaft into “pigeoning” and Shaft departs without have divulged any information to the white authority figures.

Shaft’s black machismo plays a major role in warding off the police. He can ignore the cops’ pressure because he knows that the black community will not speak to them and they have no other way of gaining the information. In short, Shaft’s form of masculinity has trumped that of the white police officers, allowing him to dominate and subdue the “lesser” men. Instead of attempting to gain validation from the white justice system (embodied by Vic and his partner, Tom) by willingly surrendering any information he has, Shaft simply says, “up yours, baby” to the establishment and glibly brings the conversation to an end. Shaft has managed to create a model of black masculinity that white society is forced to accept. Yet as Tom tells Vic “that boy’s got a lot of mouth on him” and Vic replies “that boy’s man enough to back it up,” one realizes that Shaft is still reduced to a “boy” in the eyes of the white establishment. Tom’s use of the term “boy” to reference Shaft simply reinforces the (highly racialized) power relations of society. While Shaft has proven his ability to dominate and control situations as traditional masculinity dictates, his race remains a point of conflict in the achievement of social acceptance for his form of masculinity.

Shaft’s masculinity presents a stark contrast to take of the white cops trying to figure out and stop the “trouble” brewing on the streets. Although they (the cops) seemingly have more money and resources to apply toward the case, it is Shaft that has the street smarts and “hook-ups” to gain access to inside information. They (the white

justice system) not only ask for Shaft's help, they need it. The likelihood of them breaking the case on their own is practically nonexistent. While the white cops are floundering around, Shaft is jiving his way into and out of tight situations, steadily gaining more and more information. Black machismo becomes an advantaged disadvantage; it allows one navigate areas sealed off to the white mainstream, but restricts the resources one can utilize. Every black man, woman, and child seems to have an idea of what's going down between Bumpy and the white mob, yet the white police still can not crack the case. Whiteness becomes a social handicap. Shaft's black masculinity is then not only an alternative to mainstream ideals, but also an improvement. While masculine white society has to rely on money and power, black masculinity (as presented by Shaft) possesses the know-how (street smarts) and physical ability to eventually resolve the problem with or without financial or political means.

It would seem that Shaft need not strive to emulate white society as his form of black masculinity provides him with a set of ideal that deviates from social norms and, therefore, would manifest in a different lifestyle. Yet, as viewers, we come to realize that Shaft is more a part of the white societal norms that he verbally rejects than streets he patrols. From the outset of the film, the audience is given the impression that Shaft not only knows the streets, but he is a part of them. However, we quickly discover that Shaft has chosen to live and position his place of business from the black neighborhoods and slums, which assumedly supplies the majority of his business. He resides in a luxurious and well-furnished split-level brownstone apartment in Greenwich Village. Oddly, nothing in his residence reflects a black aesthetic or mentality. Even the location of his office, situated in Times Square, aligns him more with social and financial power

associated with white masculinity than the black male audience members he supposedly represented. During a phone conversation with his girlfriend, Ellie, Shaft laments the two biggest problems of his life, being born black and poor, yet his office, home, and personal belonging reflect neither an essence of blackness or poverty. In choosing to locate himself outside of the area he serves, Shaft effectively disconnects himself from the majority of the area's black population and moves in the direction of the mainstream ideals.

Since much of the allure of the film is the positioning of Shaft as a strong black masculine presence, his personal disconnection from the black community must be smoothed over. Once again the film's score helps to redirect focus and reinforce Shaft's connection to black communities. In a song titled "Soulsville," Hayes laments the hardships of slum life as the audience is presented with images of Shaft strolling through the projects and slums. As Hayes croons, "Black man. Born Free. That's the way it's supposed to be. Chains that bind him are hard to see," images of Shaft pounding the pavement in an attempt to gain information about Ben Buford's whereabouts abound. By shifting the focus away from the inhabitants of the area and onto Shaft, Shaft becomes related with the sympathetic figure discussed in Hayes' lyrics. Thus, Shaft is realigned with the oppressed black man image.

Yet, Shaft's strong black masculinity rarely allows him to be oppressed by whites or blacks. Shaft expertly demonstrates his ability to wield his form of black masculinity to his advantage in his encounters with Bumpy Jonas. Early in the film, when Bumpy Jonas comes to Shaft's office to recruit him to find his kidnapped daughter, Shaft pits his performance of black masculinity against that of Bumpy's. As a gangster, Bumpy

generally is known as the lead man, yet Shaft engages Bumpy in a battle for dominance by forcing Bumpy to wait on his arrival at the office. Although Bumpy's henchman warns him, that if "[he] takes crap off of [Shaft], [Shaft] will give [him] some more crap," Bumpy remains confident that his version of black masculinity can and will put Shaft in his place. When Shaft finally arrives at his office, he attempts to keep the upper hand by showing he is not a man to be toyed with and undermining Bumpy dominance. Instead of recognizing Bumpy's position as a strong black male presence in the community and deferring to him, Shaft immediately begins to challenge Bumpy. Crossing directing to Bumpy and glaring down on him, Shaft declares that Bumpy is "in [his] chair" and waits for the gangster to relinquish control of the seat.

Although Bumpy relinquishes the chair, the battle for control does not end there. With Bumpy settled into a new seat, his henchman dismissed, and Shaft prepared to demonstrate his "superior" form of masculinity, the two men engage in a verbal struggle for control of the situation. Again utilizing the trickster's sense of the wordplay, both men attempt to "feel out" the other, constantly trying to bend the other to his own will. When Bumpy insist that he come with a job for Shaft, Shaft counters with the asserting that he isn't willing to do dirty work. Although Bumpy insist that it's a legitimate detective job and explains his circumstances of his daughter's kidnapping to Shaft, Shaft still refuses to buy in, stating that the "police got a whole unit that does that kind of work free."

Shaft reinforces his black masculinity by forcing Bumpy to admit that he can't go to the police and needs the help of the "black spade detective." Once Bumpy has acknowledged Shaft's masculinity, Shaft becomes a little more willing to discuss

Bumpy's case. Having demonstrated his form of black masculinity and forcing Bumpy to accept it, Shaft seems willing to accept Bumpy's case as long as he can set his own terms on how the case will be handled. When Bumpy fingers Ben Buford, the local neighborhood radical and former friend of Shaft, as the kidnapper, Shaft seems hesitant to believe him, but takes on the case anyway. Demanding that Bumpy pay his \$50 an hour fee and give him free rein to pursue the retrieval of Marcy (Bumpy's daughter) the way he sees fit, Shaft assures that his control and, by extension, manhood will not be questioned.

Yet Shaft must again defend his version of black masculinity when he tracks down Ben Buford and his band of revolutionaries. Shaft boldly enters into their presence, relying on his performance of black masculinity to allow him to easily dominate the situation. Shaft swaggers into Ben's hideout issuing suggestions on improving the security and undermining Ben's authority within that space. When one of Ben's men quickly tries to defuse the situation by telling Shaft to "cool it," Shaft reducing him to a level of unimportance by shooting the comment directly back at him and referring to the grown man as "boy" - the same technique the white police officers employed to undermine Shaft's masculinity. When Ben unceremoniously informs Shaft that he has nothing to say to him, Shaft again attempts to dominate, warning Ben not to "jive" him. In an attempt to reassert his own form of black masculinity, Ben lays down an ultimatum. He will allow Shaft one minute to speak his piece and exit or he will physically remove him from the room. When Shaft begins to question Ben about Marcy's kidnapping, Ben tolerates his questions for a moment before he calls Shaft a tom and instructs him to leave.

By evoking the tom image, Ben calls into question the very core ideals of Shaft's black masculinity and connects a sense of militancy with black masculinity. The tom, which represents the black man's utter subordination to white authority, becomes the ultimate counterpoint of black masculinity. The argument is left incomplete as gunfire announces the arrival of intruders and the men must flee. It is during their course of escape that Shaft has the opportunity to prove his black masculinity. Using street smarts and his physical ability, shaft guides Ben out to safety and into hiding at a female friend's house. It is Shaft's ability to authenticate his black masculinity through his forceful handling of the situation that eventually forces Ben to retract his tom statement and acknowledge Shaft's version of black masculinity.

Yet, Shaft must continuously justify and prove his black masculinity. After confronting Ben, when Shaft feels that Bumpy has not been "dealing [it] up straight" and goes to Bumpy's office accompanied by Ben to contend with Bumpy, what ensues is yet another battle to ascertain the superior form of black masculinity. As Shaft (backed by Ben) demonstrate that he knows "what's going down" and accuses Bumpy of knowing all along who grabbed her daughter, Shaft and Bumpy again verbally grapple for control of the situation. While Bumpy tries to push his hand by claiming that Shaft "bought [the] deal" and is required to return the girl, Shaft admits he agreed to the endeavor, but refuses to continue at the original cost. Relying on his financial power, Bumpy again tries to dominate Shaft, insisting that he'll pay any cost for the return of his daughter. When Ben claims that he'll take no less than \$10,000 for his involvement (and each of his men should receive the same amount) in Marcy's rescue, Shaft views the negotiations as another opportunity to assert the superiority of his form of black masculinity. He

maintains “that if [Ben’s] worth 10, [he’s] worth 20.” Thus, insuring that his masculinity is seen as more valuable and worthy of admiration.

Shaft and Bumpy struggle to establish who will be dominant and, thus, be the main man - the most masculine, the most capable of control. Marcy’s rescue seem less about the girl and more about Bumpy refusing to play with the hand the white mafia has dealt him, while for Shaft, Marcy’s rescue becomes another opportunity for him to prove his brand of black masculinity is worthy of admiration within and outside the black community. When Bumpy gives into his demands, Shaft’s form black masculinity is again verified.

While Shaft’s skin color works to get him in doors, it is his ability to showcase dominance and control of situations that keeps him from being tossed right back out the door he came in. What Shaft lacks in resources he makes up for in sheer masculine fearlessness, resilience and sex appeal. While white heroes such as James Bond, whom Shaft is often compared to in film critiques, rely on impressive mechanical gadgets, Shaft gets by on his mix street intelligence and physical fortitude. Despite his lack of resources, Shaft remains unfazed obstacles he encounters throughout the course of the film, relying heavily on his black masculine persona to smooth over situations and subdue dissenters.

In Shaft’s world male characters dominate; manhood (particularly black manhood) is associated with a toughness, an ability to control situations, a smoldering sexuality, and penchant for action. While the white police detectives are assertive and capable of action, it is the black men who are presented as the “true” masculine personas capable of initiating action. In order to define black masculinity, Shaft’s (and to a lesser extent Ben and Bumpy’s) actions are contrasted with those of the women in his life.

Practically absent from the film, only four women play any “significant” role in the action - the kidnapped daughter, Marcy, who never says anything and is there solely to give Shaft and his men a reason for action and a tangible goal; Shaft’s lover, Ellie, and a random bar ‘pick-up,’ Linda, who works to prove Shaft’s sexuality and, by extension, help define black masculinity; and the woman who shelters Ben after the mafia raids his hideout and dispatches five of his “soul brothers.”

In each woman one finds a model of femininity with which to compare Shaft and his fellow men. Marcy (Sherri Brewer), Bumpy’s daughter, remains a passive victim throughout the course of the film. Constantly man-handled by the white mafia men holding her captive, she makes no effort to free herself. During Shaft’s first attempt to free her, Marcy stands beside her captors making no movements toward her “rescuer.” Even when Shaft instructs her to come to him, assuring her that her captors are unlikely to shoot her, she remains firmly planted at the side of the white mafia men. Although Marcy is apparently distraught and desperately wants to go home, she makes no effort to make that wish a reality. Unlike Shaft and her father, who are shown actively plotting ways to free her, she relinquishes all control and submits to being used as pawn in the affairs of men.

In contrast to Marcy, the active, physical nature of black masculinity is demonstrated. While the feminine girl remains passive and weak, Shaft and his men are highly active and tough. When Shaft is machine gunned down, during the first rescue attempt, within moments he’s back on his feet ready to try again. Yet, Marcy, who is apparently in perfect health, cannot or will not defy the white mafia men’s control. Passively, she waits for the “active” men to end her oppression. It is only when Shaft and

his “army” have utterly destroyed the mafia men and Shaft literally drags Marcy from the room that she becomes part of the action (albeit still a passive member of the action).

Meanwhile, Shaft’s lover (Gwenn Mitchell) and her white counterpart (Margaret Warncke) take slightly more active roles in the film. Yet, they are still used as passive individuals relying on men to define them. When Shaft’s lover comes home to find him completely undressed and lounging on the couch, she barely has time to put her groceries down and acquire her bearings before Shaft initiates sex. While she rushes to him concerned for his well-being, Shaft seems to have little interest in returning her concern and doesn’t even ask how she doing before drawing her body to his. Apparently unconcerned about her feelings on the matter, Shaft uses this intimate time to release the stress that has been building up within him. Claiming that he “got to feeling like a machine” and “that’s no way to feel,” Shaft uses Ellie’s body for his own personal gain. Here Shaft’s dominates the situation as his partner, Ellie, unquestioningly submits to his advances. The focus remains on his ability to control and dominate. Thus, Shaft’s masculinity is defined in opposition to Ellie’s passivity and nurturing.

Even as the camera offers the audience a titillating, voyeuristic glimpse into Shaft’s sex live, one is (perhaps subconsciously) reminded of the sense of overt sexuality that has come to be associated with black masculinity. As the close-up of Ellie’s hand kneading Shaft’s back during intercourse dominates the screen, one becomes aware that she has just reached climax as her hands begin to tremble and an audible gasp is heard. Here the connection between black masculinity and a strong sense sexuality is reinforced. Yet, there seem to be little emotional connection for Shaft as the scene ends abruptly and cuts to Shaft eating a pastry in a small café. Shaft, the embodiment of black masculinity,

retains an emotional aloofness that defines not only his sexual relationship, but also all the relationships in his life.

The same sensation of sexual prowess and emotional aloofness occupies visions of Shaft picking up a vivacious white girl, later in the film, at the bar across from his apartment. While this time the woman initiates contact, Shaft still remains in control of the situation. The choice is his whether he will or won't act on her advances. Once Shaft decides to accept her advances, he simply uses her body for his own purposes. While the audience is presented with the young lady slipping into the shower with Shaft because she "just couldn't wait," the film quickly cuts to Shaft visiting the police station. Once again, the emotional aspects of Shaft's coupling are skipped while the image of physicality reinforced. The young woman becomes another notch in Shaft's belt, proof that his black masculine appeal extends beyond racial lines. When Shaft returns home to find the woman still in his bed, his emotional aloofness is again highlighted as he prods her to get dressed and leave. As Shaft proclaims "the party's over" and assuring her that perhaps they can have a repeat performance some other time since he currently has business to attend to, the disconnect between black masculinity's sexual ability and emotional attachment is clarified. As Linda notes, as she exits, Shaft may be "really great in the sack, but [he's] pretty shitty afterwards." Thus, black masculinity comes to be connected to sexual ability, but not the emotion that one would generally attach with intimate encounters.

The final female character, the woman who shelters Ben in his time of need, is so marginalized that one has difficulty discussing her role in the film. Presented as nurturing mother, Dina (Camille Yarbrough) allows Shaft to lean on her for assistance.

Although Shaft and Ben are occupying her space, Dina remains in the background of the scene. While the men discuss what their next move should be, Dina lingers in the kitchen, asserting her presence only when it seems the men's interaction may disturb her children. Although she warns them to keep their voices down because her son is sleeping and insist that Ben refrain from using "bad" language while he's there, Dina otherwise gives the men free rein to behave as they wish. Once again the active and dominant nature of black masculinity is accented by the passivity and subordination of the female.

While the female characters help to define black masculinity, they are never "fleshed out" in the course of the story. They generally appear in one scene and then are never seen or discussed again. When they are addressed, the male characters usually referred to the women as "baby" or some other diminutive label. By refusing to call the women by their names, the male characters make them interchangeable and forgettable since it's almost as if they do not possess a name at all and therefore, no identity. It is clear that in Shaft's world it is the men that matter. The women are left to be eye candy, motivators of action, and/or sanctuary in time of need.

Shaft is the ultimate hero because of the attributes his black masculinity offers him. Although film's images and score suggest some model of black masculinity at the beginning of the film, it is not until the last few scenes that a sense of distinctly revolutionary black masculinity emerges. As Shaft prepares to meet with the white kidnapers, the racial and militant distinctions suddenly come into sharp focus. Until this point, the masculine representations in the film have been performed in a way common to most action films, evoking a sense of general black masculinity not exclusively attached to militancy and revolution.

Yet, when Shaft undertakes the rescue of Marcy decked out in black from head to toe, recalling images of the Black Panthers, and teamed up with Ben Buford and his gang of radicals, Shaft has assumed the guise of the revolutionary. Directing Marcy's rescue as if it is a military maneuver, Shaft's daring plan becomes the ultimate expression of black masculinity in the film. His outfit and demeanor suggest links with the Black Panthers' cry for total liberty for black people (or Marcy, in this case) or total destruction. No longer capable of separating Shaft's actions from the racial imagery he evokes, we are faced with associating every move he makes with a sense of militant blackness. Furthering this connection of black masculinity with a sense of militant revolution is the fact that the target of Shaft's attack is a white system of power (the mafia). Had the opposing force been another group of black men the revolutionary component of Shaft's masculinity would not have emerged. Instead, Shaft's black masculinity must be pitted against that of the dominant white society. Thus, the concept of challenging dominant (particularly white) power structures becomes attributed to black masculinity. Ironically, this is where the violence in the film reaches its climax. Thus, we must associate black masculinity with nothing more than a heightened sense the traditional masculine attributes of violence, domination, and action with a touch of the more ethnic notions of street smarts, sexual prowess, and militancy.

Damn the Man: *Foxy Brown* and Feminine Power

Foxy Brown (1974) tells the story of a young woman, Foxy Brown (Pam Grier) as she goes after Katherine Wall's (Kathryn Loder) crime ring. After attempting to bust up the crime ring's business, Foxy's boyfriend, Michael (Terry Carter), is considered the

ring's number one target. With a plastic surgery job to conceal his identity, Michael returns to Foxy with plans of starting a life together. However, Foxy's drug dealing brother, Link (Antonio Fargas) destroys those plans when he exposes Michael's whereabouts to the crime ring in exchange for the hoods to abolish the debt he owes them. With the information Link has given them, the crime ring tracks down Michael and guns him down in front of Foxy's door. Vowing to get revenge and clean up the neighborhood, Foxy poses as a call girl to gain access to Wall and her inner circle. Once she's in, all hell breaks loose. She fouls up the crime ring's plans to keep two of their drug dealers out of jail, helps another call girl leave the ring and reunite with her family, and burns down one of the ring's drug manufacturing facilities. Finally, with the help of the neighborhood revolutionaries, Foxy ambushes Ms. Wall's right hand man and lover, Steve Elias (Peter Brown) at a cocaine drop, destroying the drugs, killing the gangsters, and castrating Elias. The finale of the film has Foxy delivering Elias' severed member to Wall before calmly driving off with Oscar (Bob Minor), the head neighborhood radical.

From the start of the film, it is obvious that primary focus of *Foxy Brown* is Foxy's body, which becomes the weapon she exploits to gain revenge. The concentration on her body is established during the opening credits, in which Foxy dances seductively in a host of outfits designed to showcase her figure to the beat of a song that defines her primarily in relation to men (the kind of woman that won't let her man down) and praises her physical attributes (her winning smile, etc.). As Foxy's body sways and bobs to the beat, Motown recording artist Willie Hutch's proclamation that she's a "treasure of ecstasy...that most men have been searching for," undeniably links Foxy with male fantasy and strong sense of sexual energy. Almost immediately her blackness must be

related to her feminine nature and sexuality. The camera's close-up of her hips swiveling and breast bouncing effectively emphasizes her gender, particularly in terms of the physical body. Yet, much of her physical allure must be associated with her race. Foxy's alluring curves and physical endowments are qualities that have long been linked with black women. Her ample chest and derriere remind the viewer of her blackness while her seductive dancing evokes several sexual stereotypes commonly connected to the black woman. It is not only important that she is a woman, but a black woman with an intense sense of sexuality.

Black women and their bodies have been saddled with a host of images and stereotypes throughout history. Myths about black womanhood, particularly black female sexuality have followed black women since other races first encountered them. Many of the images work to justify the sexual exploitation and oppression of black women. The history of the United States is rife with issues relating to the black woman and her body. One of the most prominent images of black female sexuality is that of the jezebel or the fast, loose woman. The jezebel comes to represent a deviant form of sexuality, a sexually aggressive black woman with excessive sexual appetites. This concept that jezebels are constantly looking for sexual encounters helped to justify the sexual assault many black women suffered during slavery and continue to suffer in contemporary times. Since this image is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are beyond the norm, it becomes easy to classify her as a "freak" and justify the rape of such women by claiming, "she wanted it."

A similar, but less deviant form of sexuality is found in the vamp image. These women are generally seen as sexual creatures that wield their bodies as bargaining tools.

While the jezebel engages in sex primarily for the pleasure, vamps use their sexuality to gain some form of compensation - monetary or otherwise. Also known as “gold diggers,” vamps are considered conniving and untrustworthy. A sister image to the vamp, the tease uses her body to dominate relationships and shift events to her personal advantage. However, unlike the vamp and the jezebel, the tease often withholds sexual favors. While she behaves and speaks in a way to arouse sexual interest, the tease generally never delivers the promised sexual encounter. These images perpetuate the idea that black women are not only loose in their morals, but also undeserving of trust. It capitalizes on the belief that black women are likely to abandon their current partner at the arrival of another individual with more power, money, or fame. The idea that black women are not committed to building strong relationships and, instead, are only concerned with relationships they can dominate are reinforced through the use of such stereotypes.

While not as overtly sexual as the previous stereotypes, the sapphire image also addresses issues of black female sexuality. The sapphire or “sassy black woman” is generally presented as a loud mouth, gossiping black woman. While loyal to the men in her life, she has a hard time keeping a lover, as they tend to tire of her endless chattering and nagging. Often these black women are presented as being “uppity,” challenging the dominance of their male counterparts by questioning the appropriateness or intelligence of particular actions, and in need of being “put in their place” through verbal and/or physical means. Although sapphires are often bright and physically alluring, their vocal nature deems them less appealing and forces them to chase after men in an attempt to

gain their affections. In short, this image of the black women still acknowledges her sexuality, but warns black women to know their “place” lest men reject them.

However, there is an image of the “good black girl” that works to offset the more negative aspects of the previous images. The good black girl retains the overt sexuality of the jezebel, vamp, and tease, yet directs her attention toward one individual. The good girl is expected to be sexual and alluring, but not distracting. She knows her place and uses her charm for the pleasure of the man in her life, not for her own gain. Here the black woman becomes subdued and pliant to the wishes of a dominant male figure. Aligning more with the ideals presented by the cult of true womanhood, the good girl must rely on her male companion for direction and motivation, blindly submitting to male domination and quietly enduring all emotional, physical, and psychological abuse.

Black women’s assertiveness and their attempts to go against the inequality they have been presented with represent a threat to the status quo. In retaliation, black women have been burdened with sundry images (only a few which have been discussed here), many of which relegate them almost entirely to the realm of sexual objects. With the opening credits of *Foxy Brown*, Foxy situated firmly within the realm of sexual fantasy. The opening shot, in which the camera frames Foxy’s face then focuses in on one eye as she winks at the viewer, establishes her as flirty and outgoing woman. As Foxy dances enticingly while the camera glides over her body, frequently pausing to focus on her breast, an undeniable association of Foxy with male fantasy and strong sense of sexual energy is drawn. Her body becomes the primary canvas on which the nature of black femininity will be presented throughout the film.

The focus on Foxy's body is reiterated in her next appearance on screen as the audience glimpses her bare breasts as she slips out of bed and begins to dress in preparation to go to the aid of her brother, Link (Antonio Fargas), who has been cornered by two thugs he owes money. Capitalizing on the "jezebel" image, Foxy's bare or scantily clad body is constantly used as a source of male fantasy and voyeuristic pleasure as the film continues. If the opportunity presents itself, the camera almost always glides over Foxy's body in a close up before panning out to encompass the scene. Usually dressed in body hugging outfits featuring bright, eye catching colors (oranges, yellows, blues, and greens), Foxy's body cannot be ignored. Her sexuality becomes inseparably linked with her gender and her race. In the world of *Foxy Brown* all women, regardless of race, are presented as sexual creatures, yet Foxy's sexuality appears to be fundamental part of her personality while the other women are "trained" to arouse male interest.

Early in the film, as Foxy visits her lover Michael (Terry Carter) in the hospital after his plastic surgery, her "natural" sexuality is showcased. As Foxy walks through the door, she gazes at Michael's body lovingly and gently closes the door behind her. Willie Hutch croons the suggestive lyrics "let me make you feel fine" as Foxy glides toward the unconscious object of her affection. Although, Michael's face is wrapped in bandages and he appears to be sleeping and would be unaware of her advances, Foxy playfully pulls up his hospital gown and begins kissing and nuzzling his torso, slowly working her way downward. The image of the sexually aggressive jezebel is evoked as Foxy's black femininity is again connected to this overly sexual behavior. When Foxy's caresses cause Michael to awake, Foxy's primal sexuality is confirmed in her willingness to draw

the curtains and take the action further despite the possibility of being “caught in the act” by any number of doctors, nurses, or visitors that could appear.

Despite being the focus on the film, Foxy still lives in a male dominated world where her sense of identity is generally tied to her sexuality and that sexuality is shaped by the notions of eroticism produced by dominant white culture. Therefore, she must occupy one or more of three general roles - the victim, vamp or castrator. The victim role is marked by its lack of identity; those that occupy this classification have generally been used, abused, and cast aside by society. While the victim is used by society, the vamp uses her sexuality to coerce others into helping her achieve her goals; thus, possesses a form of societal control usually relegated to the masculine realm. However, even in utilizing their power, vamps remain closely associated with the feminine. Castrators, on the other hand, step outside the traditional feminine boundaries and exercise domination of situations in the more “masculine” use of physical force and intimidation.

From the commencement of the film, Foxy is depicted as a vamp. The opening credits position her firmly in the realm of sexual femininity and her ability to use her feminine wiles to her advantage becomes a running theme throughout the film. Whether it's as simple as putting on a sexy pout in an attempt to make her lover stay by her side a little longer or seducing a pilot and sabotaging his involvement in one of the crime ring's drug drops, Foxy is willing to use her body and sex appeal to her advantage. Nowhere is this more obviously than when, relying on her ability to play the sex kitten role, she infiltrates the crime ring's prostitution racket. Attired and prepped for “action,” Foxy presents herself to the crime ring's leader, Katherine Wall (Loder) as Misty Cotton, a woman willing to “do the hell out of [anyone]” if the trade off is what she desires. Wall

never questions “Misty’s” ability to perform at the level promised and hires her on the spot. Once again black femininity is associated with enhanced sexuality. When “Misty” arrives at Wall’s residence later that evening to be outfitted for her mission, Wall is in the process of instructing a young white woman on how to succeed in seducing her “mark.” Yet Foxy is given no such instruction, Wall simply sends her off noting that the gentleman she will be meeting has a “preference for [her] type.” Foxy’s ability to perform a highly sexualized role is assumed based solely on her black femininity. Of course the underlying irony is that the real Foxy is laden with the same assumptions that her fictional Misty Cotton is saddled by, which Wall uses later in the film to justify the sexual assault inflicted on Foxy. As she encounters more and more obstacles, Foxy’s primary role begins to shift from that of vamp to victim.

Suffering from the loss of her lover and her inability to draw her brother out of a life of crime when she infiltrates Wall’s prostitution ring, Foxy could already be viewed as a victim of an unjust society. Yet her victim status grows the longer she’s involved with Katherine Wall and her associates. After attempting to destabilize the crime ring’s power structure from the inside, Foxy’s true identity is discovered and her descent into victimhood begins. Once Wall realizes that Foxy intentionally sabotaged her encounter with the judge, Wall sends out her henchmen to bring Foxy in. Utilizing the street smarts and feisty spirit often connected with black femininity, Foxy manages to temporarily evade the henchmen, but is captured while trying to aid Claudia’s (Juanita Brown), another young black woman that formerly worked for Wall, escape efforts. While Claudia manages to escape, Foxy’s capture begins her reclassification as a victim in the most traditional meaning of the word.

Once captured, she is physical beaten and sexually assaulted under the direction of Wall. The image of a bound and tied Foxy being dominated and assaulted by her white captors evokes a host of historical baggage in regards of black women and issues of sexual oppression. The image is further compounded when Foxy is eventually sent down to “the Ranch,” one of the crime ring’s drug production facilities, to be punished for interfering in Wall’s affairs. The historic connections between Foxy’s sexual violation and that of black women throughout time becomes even more dominate at “the Ranch,” which is oddly reminiscent of the small cabins often found on Southern plantations. When one of Foxy’s white captors wraps a bullwhip around Foxy’s throat and drags her into the cabin, the horrors that result from connecting black femininity with sexuality are realized. Here Foxy is drugged, beaten, and raped by two white thugs as they joke and laugh at her misfortune. Her identity is momentarily stripped from her and she becomes plaything, “a big juggled jigaboo” supplied for the men’s own personal entertainment. Much like female slaves of eras past, Foxy remains defiant. Drawing on black femininity’s resourcefulness, Foxy devises a plan of escape. Drawing a nearby razorblade into her mouth, Foxy cuts her bonds and begins her journey to freedom. While she willingly occupied the role of the vamp, she refuses to accept being classified as a victim.

Shirking the classification of victim, Foxy decides to escape her captivity and regain her identity. In her attempt to empower herself, she moves toward becoming a castrator. She takes on more “masculine” traits; she responds to the violence and degradation visited on her with like modes of violence, dominance, and action. Moving away from a vamp’s reliance on the sexual presentation of body as a means to achieve

goals and the nonidentity of the victim, Foxy begins to step out of the feminine realm and adopt more traditionally masculine means to dealing with enemies and achieving goals. Starting with her two captors, Foxy rains down various violent and cunningly crafted punishments for the ills she has suffered. Foxy gashes the eyes of one of her tormentors, sets the other one aflame, and walks away as the building burns to the ground, effectively asserting her dominance over the situation and, thus, emasculating the two men. From this point until the conclusion of the film, Foxy remains in castrator mode, dropping back into the more traditionally feminine ways of the vamp and victim only when they prove the best strategic maneuvers.

Seeking out the neighborhood “committee” - a small group of black revolutionaries bent on cleaning up their neighborhood - upon her return to her home, Foxy once again slips into the victim role, but this time to convince the brothers to help topple Wall and her cohorts. She falls back on the idea of the abused and oppressed black woman merely wishing for justice for her community and loved ones, unconcerned about the well being of larger society. While Foxy cites the unfairness of a few “big shots” being able to “climb up on the backs [of the common man] and laugh at the law,” she really only seems concerned about how Wall and her associates have impacted her life personally. In fact, she barely seems to be concerned with the hegemonic racial biases limiting the upward mobility of minorities groups. However, it is her final plea that the brothers accept her mission for the sake of her slain lover, Michael, “a good man” whose life was taken “because he went out of his neighborhood to try to do what he thought was right” that truly capitalizes on the victim image of black femininity.

With this statement, Foxy issues a “he did it - - Why won’t you” challenge to the committee’s collective manhood while still appearing to defer to their masculinity. Only when it seems as if they may not go along with her request and suggest that she seems to be calling for revenge, not justice does she alter her strategy and lapse back into her castrator mode. Situated at the head of the table the committee has gathered around, Foxy is a powerful figure. Seeing their hesitation to join her mission, she glares down and length of the table and offers them one final challenge to their control of the situation, stating “you just take care of the justice, I’ll handle the revenge.”

When the committee takes up Foxy’s fight and allows her to control the planning and execution of the mission, her ability to dominate even in the most masculine arena is confirmed. However, it is not until Foxy comes face to face with Wall’s right hand man and lover, Steve Elias, that she fully achieves the castrator mode. Together with the neighborhood vigilantes, Foxy ambushes Elias at a cocaine drop. Once she has him in her sights, she rains down destruction with a vengeance. Disregarding the concepts of feminine understanding and mercy, Foxy goes on a rampage - destroying the drugs, killing Elias’ associates, and blowing up the plane the cocaine was transported in - before turning her attention to Elias. Foxy reaches the epitome of the castrator role when she punishes Elias by literally removing his manhood. In this moment, she has symbolically snatched control of the situation from Elias, removing him from a position of masculine dominance and emasculating him. As she takes on the mantle of leadership, asserting her control of the situation, Foxy claims the physical symbol of Elias’ power - his penis. To accentuate Foxy’s new masculine power, the film has her deliver the severed penis to Wall, who has been waiting at home for Elias to return. When Wall realizes what Foxy

has brought her and breaks down sobbing on the floor, Foxy stands towering over her and absorbing the moment. With her need for vengeance quenched, Foxy can resume her life. As the theme music begins to play, Foxy slides into a car with the committee's leader, Oscar, and heads on her way. The assumption is that she has found a true sense of black femininity, one that matches the black masculinity embodied in Oscar and the local revolutionaries.

In essence, the black woman as embodied by Foxy Brown is nothing but a female version of the super spade with slightly more feminine sensibilities. Possessing, strength, cunning, sex appeal, and a penchant for action and violence, there is nothing a man can do that a black woman can't according to this film. Since both their race and gender work against them in society, black womanhood requires a sort of resilience and ability to adapt. While Wall completely breaks down and ceases to function at what she sees as the loss of her man at the end of the film, Foxy is allowed no such moment. Although Foxy is seen mourning the loss of her beloved Michael, within what appears to be just a few minutes, she is back on the street and ready to take on his murderers. Despite the fact that the death of a loved one is generally considered a major emotional happening and requires time to process, Foxy remains strong and action oriented. She barely seems to spend more than a moment reflecting on Michael's loss (although his death is the catalyst of the entire film). Drawing on the anger and using it for Foxy, Foxy is expected to go on with life without complaining or attempting to strike out. She is given a limited range of options to pursue. She can chose to be the victim, acknowledge her loss and wait for things to get better; she can actively pursue a return to "normal" life by finding another man, settling down, and taking on married life; or she can get hostile, attempt to exact

revenge and dominate the situation. Within these three options are imbedded the victim, vamp, and castrator ideals that Foxy cannot escape.

While Foxy does not seem conscious of the classifications pressing in on her, one can assume that she has a basic understanding of the concept. Her sense of black femininity is shaped and confirmed her interaction with the major male figures in her life - her brother Link and her lover Michael. While Foxy carefully performs one version of black femininity toward Michael, she presents a very different face of black femininity when dealing with Link. Michael's presence elicits a more subdued version of femininity from Foxy. While she speaks her mind, she never offers a direct challenge to his masculinity. Instead, she dotes on him, allowing him to dominate the relationship. In turn she devote all of the feminine abilities to pleasing her man. Thus, she willing plays upon notion of black female sexuality, racial solidarity, and passiveness. Yet, when she interacts with her brother, Link, she presents a much stronger version of black femininity. Drawing on the domineering and spunky qualities of black femininity, Foxy responds to Link as if he were a troublesome child. Although she comes to his rescue when he's in danger, Foxy scolds Link harshly for his mistakes and attempts to lead him down a better path with firm, but loving criticism. Reconceptualizing the mammy ideal in new ways, Foxy provides the men in her life with unfailing love, devotion, attention, and discipline.

Yet, as Foxy infiltrates the white crime ring, her black femininity is redefined in binary terms with the white "norm." While Foxy's femininity may be unquestioned within her own community, in the world of the white drug lords, Foxy is condemned to the classification of the exotic "other." By default, her black femininity becomes exoticized and deemed deviant. While the white prostitutes seem demure and bland,

Foxy's "natural" sexuality, sharp wit, defiance, and straightforward nature comes to define black femininity.

It is through the combination of the initial presentation of black femininity, the dominate white view of black femininity, and the militant black femininity Foxy adopts when dealing with the neighborhood committee that one forms the overall concepts of black femininity. When Foxy asks for the aid of the local neighborhood committee, her femininity is redefined in the image of the Black Nationalist ideal associated with leaders like Angela Davis. Foxy, as she sits in the waiting room of the committee's office, is identified with Davis through the placement of a portrait of Davis behind her. As the camera focuses on Foxy, the image of Davis hanging on the wall behind Foxy is visible. With both women sporting large afros and hoop earring, the resemblance is striking. Drawing on images of Black Nationalist womanhood, Foxy is recast as a woman that will add to the cause by unwaveringly supporting the brothers and fighting the dominant power system. While Angela Davis (and other black female nationalists) sought to address black femininity in terms of women's ability to help restructure society through social and political means, Foxy appropriation of Davis reduces black femininity's motive for social change to a matter of personal rage. Foxy's drive to eliminate the drug ring's control over the neighborhood stems directly from her anger at the loss of her loved one and her own personal oppression.

While constructions of both black masculinity and femininity draw strength out of oppression, black femininity seems to stem more from a place of quiet rage. The all male committee focuses its energies on cleaning up the community out of concern for the general well being of the neighborhood, but Foxy's reasons for dispatching the bad guys

are purely personal. She is not concerned with the socio-economic politics and the political implications. Even as they work toward the same goal, black femininity is seen as emotional and, at times, rash.

Regardless of who plays the primary role in defining her femininity, the overarching concern is that Foxy is not truly given the option to define black femininity for herself. She must rely on others to supply the framework and adopt or ignore characteristics as she sees fit. In each case, Foxy is reduced to a version of the victim, the vamp, or the castrator.

Summary of Analysis

Shaft (1971) follows the story of John Shaft (Richard Roundtree), a black private detective, as he sets out to rescue the kidnapped daughter of a black gangster, Bumpy Jonas, from the clutches of the white mafia. Along the way, Shaft must join forces with a former street partner, Ben Buford, and his group of revolutionaries to free her.

John Shaft is the embodiment of ideal black masculinity. Combining traditional characteristics of masculinity with those of blackness, black masculinity comes to be associated with toughness, emotional aloofness, street smarts, wordplay, sexual prowess, and militancy. Although Shaft garners the respect of his fellow characters, his own version of black masculinity is continuously challenged and must be defended several times. Defined primarily through comparison to femininity and white masculinity, Shaft's black masculinity becomes a legitimate alternative to traditional masculinity and worthy of admiration within and outside black communities.

Working from a supposedly female perspective, *Foxy Brown* (1974) tells the story of a young woman, Foxy Brown (Pam Grier) whose narcotics investigator boyfriend is brutally murdered by Katherine Wall's (Kathryn Loder) crime ring. Vowing to get revenge, Foxy poses as a call girl and infiltrates Wall's inner circle. Foxy then fouls up the crime ring's plans to keep two of their drug dealers out of jail, helps another call girl escape her life of prostitution and reunite with her family, burns down one of the ring's drug manufacturing facilities and finally, with the help of the neighborhood revolutionaries, brings down Ms. Wall and her right hand man and lover, Steve Elias (Peter Brown).

Foxy Brown's power derived not from herself, but from her ability to coerce men into the realization of her goals primarily through the use of her body. The bright, flamboyant colors and styles of her clothing are designed to illicit sexual arousal. The fabric clings to her body so that even when covered one cannot be unaware of her physical endowments. Despite being the focus on the film, Foxy still lives in a male dominated world where her sense of identity is generally tied to her sexuality. Therefore, she must occupy the role of victim, vamp, or castrator. Before the end of the film, Foxy has managed to cycle through all three roles.

Although both of these films draw heavily on gender roles, race cannot be eliminated from the equation and still yield the same product. The characters of John Shaft and Foxy Brown simply cannot be played by white actors and be the same stories. Many of the films complexities and covert social critiques would be lost. Foxy's eventual triumph over her captors / rapists carries more weight due to the historical issues surrounding black women and sexual oppression. John Shaft's ability to accomplish his

task while sidestepping questions by the police takes on greater significance since blacks (particularly black men) have historically had a problematic relationship with the justice system in the United States. Race simply cannot be ignored.

The connection of some characteristics to both John Shaft and Foxy Brown illustrates that much of the constructions of those characters derive from their shared blackness. While both characters were firmly grounded in gender roles, particular aspects of their being mirror the other almost identically. The focus on the main character's sexuality in both films demonstrates the heightened sense of the physical associated with blackness. While neither gender construction promotes such an emphasis on sexual nature, the introduction of race into the equation plays a major role in the depiction of Shaft and Foxy Brown. The same argument can be made for their resourcefulness. Since blacks have been denied many social and political opportunities in the past, they must develop alternate ways to reach their goals. Both Foxy and Shaft demonstrate this shared sense of maneuverability throughout the course of their films. Most of all, they share a sense of militancy. While Shaft displays his overt need to undermine dominant power structure throughout the film, Foxy's revolutionary tendencies do not emerge until well into the film. Yet at the height of their violent, revolutionary behavior the audience is reminded of their blackness through the evocation of patently black icons (the Black Panthers and Angela Davis).

While Foxy is allowed to move (briefly) into the realm of masculinity in order to achieve her goals, Shaft is never allowed to shift outside the realm of strong black masculinity for fear of being labeled weak. Although Foxy may make the leap, society dictates that she only occupy the masculine realm for a limited time. Then she must

return to her “rightful” place and again subordinate herself to the masculine. Overall, these films still privilege the masculine over the feminine. Patriarchy reigns supreme. While black femininity is presented as a powerful force, it is no match for black masculinity. The dominant gender roles are reinforced - only this time they’re in color.

CONCLUSIONS

Significance of the Study

After exploring our text and its deeper meanings it is now important to return to the larger question: why is this study important? The power of film is an alluring one and, whether society acknowledges it or not, film teaches us a great deal about how we should view the world and the people that occupy it. Often considered “just fun,” movies allow us to experience people and places we may otherwise never encounter and, therefore, provide the only view of those items we may ever draw information from. Film constitutes a new frontier, providing a sense of movement, of pulling away and journeying into and beyond the world of the other (hooks, 1996). Hence, it is important that society views films as a learning tool, a socializing system. Film such as *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown* provide an education on black masculinity and femininity that should be explored.

This study provides an in-depth look at the issue of the intersection of race and gender in a particular form of film (blaxploitation). While other studies have addressed issues of race or gender, this one attempts to understand the complexities of the intersection of those classifications and the problematic portrayals that the intersection incites. Filmmakers are generally forced to focus more on either race or gender, since the two categories often are seen as having conflicting characteristics.

This study analyzes how blaxploitation film addressed the intersection of race and gender within the films *Shaft* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) and provides insight into

how such depictions reinforce or contradict the general stereotypes and hierarchies associated with black masculinity and femininity. In recognizing the effects of such representations of black masculinity and femininity, society can begin to develop other models of representation that produce more inclusive modes of thinking in regards to race and gender shifting our gaze of blackness as a binary opposite to whiteness and masculinity as the counterpoint of femininity. In this way, we can begin to think inclusively, which shifts our perspective from the white, male-centered forms of thinking common in our society and places the experience of under or misrepresented groups (such as black men and women) at the center of thought, so that society can better understand the intersections of race and gender in the experience of all groups, including that of the dominant white male.

On a pragmatic level, this project offers researchers a brief discussion of representations of black masculinity and femininity in a bygone era. This information may prove useful to researchers conducting studies of how representations of black masculinity and femininity have changed, remained the same, or been modified over time. It also offers researchers a starting point for more in-depth analysis linking race and gender with class and political issues not thoroughly discussed in this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should attempt to analyze the depiction of other racial groups and gender, as the outcome of the intersection of race and gender will vary with different racial classifications. Of course, it may be helpful to have researchers outside of the

race/gender group analyzed conduct research. This will promote an understanding of how non-members of a race/gender classification view representations of the intersection of race and gender of other groups.

Furthermore, more attention could be given to the interaction of class, race and gender. This study did not explicitly address issues of class, yet class is associated with a variety of issues just as problematic as race or gender. The study of class' influence on representations of race/gender groups would provide a better understanding of social hierarchies and stereotypes.

Future studies may wish to also address the issue of sexuality (sexual preference). Like class, race, or gender, sexuality tends to be associated with particular characteristics. In bringing this issue to the table, researchers can explore not only the depictions, but also the generally silencing of any form of sexuality deemed deviant. This problem of silencing is often considered more prevalent in minority communities; perhaps such a study could offer an explanation of this phenomenon.

It is also important that future research address issues of the influence of various representations of race/gender coupling on contemporary culture. As much of today's "hip-hop culture" claims to draw from images and messages from blaxploitation, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, it is important to study how contemporary audiences interpret these texts. Do their readings vary from the readings of past generations? Are they ignoring vital aspects of the depictions in order to reinforce the modern views?

The emergence of the "ghetto films" (*Boyz 'N the Hood*, *Menace to Society*, *Juice*) in the 1980s and 1990s were called by some critics second-generation

blaxploitation films. These films, like the original blaxploitation films, addressed the black urban experience and often presented “new” versions of old stereotypes. Like *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown*, these “ghetto films” depicted forms of black masculinity (usually the gangster) and black femininity (usually a sapphire type character) that helped to define the image of black men and women for a generation. An analysis of how these films compare to those produced in the 1970s may yield interesting findings on the nature of race/gender depictions over time.

Future research should address the issues of how non-traditional depictions of race and gender intersection effects society’s views. Do they register on people’s psyches or are they generally ignored or reshaped to fit society’s preconceived notions? Are children, teens, adults, or the elderly more likely to notice non-traditional depicts? If so, how are these representations processed and applied to their daily lives?

Conclusions

This study should help to draw attention to the problematic portrayal of race and gender in film. While blaxploitation set out to produce black heroes, the films generally relied on highly gendered (usually masculine) depictions. Both films use highly gendered concepts to propel to action and outcome of the film. *Shaft* gains his power through being a “bad motha...,” while *Foxy* wields her body and feminine charms as a weapon in order to bend men to her will. The broad concepts of the active, tough male and the sexy, charming female drive the majority of the plot making these films without a doubt grounded in gender.

Although both of these films draw heavily on gender roles, race cannot be eliminated from the equation and still yield the same product. The characters of John Shaft and Foxy Brown simply cannot be played by white actors and be the same stories. Many of the films complexities and covert social critiques would be lost. Foxy's eventual triumph over her captors / rapists carries more weight due to the historical issues surrounding black women and sexual oppression. John Shaft's ability to accomplish his task while sidestepping questions by the police takes on greater significance since blacks (particularly black men) have historically had a problematic relationship with the justice system in the United States. Race simply cannot be ignored.

While *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown* fail to present a completely reconceptualized form of black masculinity and femininity, the films do occasionally work against the standard stereotypes. In the moments that John Shaft shows concern for a child or Foxy Brown exercises amazing cunning, we see glimpses of what black masculinity and femininity could be equated with and long for more of those brief, but endearing flashes of humanity. What we're presented with are films with generally conservation, stereotypical notions of blackness, masculinity, and femininity with a touch of revolutionary rhetoric and lip service to suggest a black-friendly depiction of black lives. Regardless of the race of the heroes, patriarchy reigns and most of society's established hierarchies are represented with a touch of color.

While comedies have become the standard fare of black films in recent years, society has been bombarded with a host of representations of black masculinity and femininity. Yet many of the stereotypical images and notions set for in the original blaxploitation films continue to persist. While few films have focused on notions of

black femininity through the use of a female protagonist, images of black masculinity have rained down upon the public and are quickly validated by black and white society. This common acceptance of the current incarnations of black masculinity and femininity mirrors the fervor with which audiences in the 1970s embraced the representations of black men and women in blaxploitation films. Perhaps as we continue to study these images, we will come to a greater understanding of how and why these images remain intact over changing decades.

The majority of the nation's population will never stop to "read" a blaxploitation film or wonder how the images they present effect our society, yet they will still feel the force of those images as they interact with black men and women. They will pull up their mental list of characteristics for black masculinity and femininity and check off the aspects that fit the next time they encounter a black man or woman in their social lives. All the while, they will probably never realize what helped to form and reinforce those classifications. As hooks (1992) says:

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. (p.2)

Therefore, it is important that society continues to explore and analyze media texts, even those that may seem inconsequential - like *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown*, which address issues of race and gender, so that we may create representations of race and gender that better illustrate the intersections of race and gender in the experience of all groups.

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