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# Creating Racial Identities Through Film: A Queer and Gendered Analysis of Blaxploitation Films

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# Creating Racial Identities Through Film: A Queer and Gendered Analysis of Blaxploitation Films

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## Abstract

*This paper examines how racialized knowledge is reproduced through film. Through an analysis of twenty blaxploitation films, this paper examines how gendered and sexualized discourses are used to shape Black identity. Discussed are the two typologies of queer images found within these films, the jester and the scoundrel, and how these images are used to frame Black identities. Consequently, we argue that queer images in blaxploitation films contribute to how racialized knowledge is produced.*

## Introduction

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) discusses the intersections of knowledge and race. In particular, she goes on to describe how some types of knowledge are privileged over others. Hill Collins (1990) writes, "Institutions, paradigms, and other elements of knowledge validation procedure controlled by elite [W]hite men constitute the Eurocentric masculinist knowledge validation process. The purpose of this process is to represent a White male standpoint" (p. 203). Here, Hill Collins describes how knowledge is governed by White elites, and argues that the White male gaze "validates" what constitutes as knowledge. Yet, as a part of this validation process, representations of this power become reified and act as ways to maintain this power. One way these representations are reproduced is through the use of images. It is when these images are mass produced that the knowledge paradigm does not shift, and that resistance to the images becomes futile. Image theorist Guy Debord (1995) argues that we then identify with these images and reinforce the discursive

power these images have over us. Thus, following Hill Collin's (1990) logic, images are used as representations to reinforce knowledge through the "Eurocentric masculinist knowledge validation process" (p. 203).

Knowledge is racialized through creating images or representations. These representations are created through a complex system of privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). This system of privilege includes both institutional and individual components (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Taking the cinematic representation of the image as an example, this image is a representation that is produced in the institutional context of "Hollywood" and panders to the populace or the audience for its survival – the individual component. Hollywood is then the site of reproducing specific "knowledges," especially knowledge produced under racism, and that racism was reinforced and reinterpreted by White audiences. These audiences, in turn, identify with images on screen because the portrayals were created through a White dominated institution. The complexity lies when the discourses of specific knowledge sets intertwine with racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. Further, the process of



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knowledge reproduction becomes complicated when audience shifts. In other words, when the audience changes from a White audience to a Black audience, does racialized knowledge reproduce the same oppression found in cinema? Thus, we seek to explore how racial identities, particularly the Black racial identity, are constructed through cinema and created by defining itself against what is, in essence, White supremacy. This paper argues that in light of a shifting audience, from a White audience to a Black audience, the discursive power of knowledge and White supremacy reproduces itself along with other processes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism. In order to understand how marginalized "audiences" or groups negotiate discourses, we examine a series of films in a specific genre that appeals to marginalized audiences to see how the dominant discourse still manages to reproduce itself, even though the audience and/or institutions attempt to redefine the space. We examine twenty blaxploitation films in order to understand how racialized knowledge is transmitted for Black audiences, in turn reproducing oppression. In this essay, we argue that racialized oppression in blaxploitation films is reproduced through the production of queer images and sexualities.

### Literature Review

To establish how Black Americans are represented in American cinema, we will briefly explore several topics that place these representations into context. First, we will examine how visual semiotics work in the context of social identity theory (Bordens & Horowitz, 2005) to examine the processes of how images become "raced" and the meaning of these representations in the context of race relations. Next, we will place these representations in their historical context by looking at how gendered representations intertwined with race in American cinema. Further, we will examine theories of queer sexualities and note the current understanding of how Black sexualities that are represented in American cinema are based on heteronormative assumptions. We then briefly discuss queer theory and how racialized sexualities have been depicted in cinema. This will segue into our discussion about how alternative Black sexualities are represented in a series of films targeting Black American audiences – blaxploitation films.

### *Social Identity Theory*

Social identity theory argues that group identity is created in relation to other groups through two

main processes: categorization and self-enhancement (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Hogg & Terry (2001) argue that individuals, through a socio-cognitive schema, associate themselves with a particular identity, for example, a national or ethnic identity. As individuals do so, they then create a sense of self and belonging. Along with this sense of belonging, clarity about one's identity occurs as she is able to distinguish between her own identity and others (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Thus, self-enhancement of the group occurs, where groups develop specific norms and stereotypes that reinforce the group's identity (Hogg & Terry, 2001). People then use self-enhancement to make comparisons between themselves and others (Stets & Burke, 2000). Ultimately, by attaining a social identity, groups create an in-group, out-group dynamic where other groups are excluded in order to maintain group solidarity.

### *The Politics of Semiotics*

Visual theorist Gillian Rose (2003) contends that visual representations are created in the midst of complex cultural meanings. These meanings have to be ascribed through various social agents (Rose, 2003). According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2001), this ascription occurs as social agents make choices to create an image. This image is then widely distributed and becomes encoded into the cultural framework in which people base their choices (Hall, 2001). Thus, the relationship between cultural representations and images reflect larger social structural patterns. Levi-Strauss (1986) makes this clear as he argues that cultural myths operate as referents to larger social structural patterns similar to how images on screen represent the social structure (Hall, 2001). In this framework, we then can elaborate on the relationships between audience, race, film, and identity.

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel proposed that people create their identities based on their identification with certain groups (Bordens & Horowitz, 2005). Consequently, those groups start to create in-group biases, and eventually through a series of processes, begin to discriminate against other groups (Bordens & Horowitz, 2005). If we take films as an example of how groups solidify their identities, early films that focused on creating the "Black image," such as *Birth of a Nation*, were essentially a medium of communication governed by Whites because of their ability to construct representa-

tions that negatively portrayed Blacks (Gordon, 2003). The in-group biases (Bordens & Horowitz, 2005) in film are reflected as racial prejudice. Consequently, through their representations, negative images of Blacks were used to solidify the White identity. Birth of a Nation reinforced the White identity, and by extension, White supremacy, because the White audiences identified with the exaggeration of the Black American experience, especially through reinforcing stereotypes that reinforced White supremacy (Bogle, 1973). Employing a cultural studies approach, we then see that movies, such as Birth of a Nation, were cultural instruments used to maintain a racial ideology reinforcing the White identity of the audience (hooks, 1996).

### ***Creating Racial Identity through Film and Social Forces***

As previously stated, in order to examine queer character representation in films targeting a Black American audience, blaxploitation films were chosen for this analysis. In the decades after World War II, Hollywood was in decline as film attendance dwindled (Hartman, 1994). Hoping to increase their audiences, Hollywood started to produce films that catered to various demographics that were historically ignored in mainstream film (Hartman, 1994). The need for Hollywood to draw a more diverse audience, coupled with the rise in the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, helped to usher in the blaxploitation film genre. Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) became the forerunner of this genre (Hartman, 1994). A box office hit, later that year Gordon Parks' Shaft was released in mainstream theaters. These films about strong and heroic Black men drew great praise from Black audiences and many White film critics around the country. As a result, approximately sixty of these Black American urban dramas and action films were made to target this newfound audience (Guerrero, 1993). With Black stars, and most often, Black writers, directors, and sometimes even producers, these films made large profits for movie studios and entertained Black American audiences who were excited to finally see representations of themselves on screen in leading roles (Guerrero, 1993).

With many films featuring pimps and drug dealers – typically antiheroes – as heroes, and police and other governmental officials (most often White) as villains, many Black American organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality

(CORE), as well as Black churches and cultural institutions, criticized these films (Guerrero, 1993). These Black organizations and institutions believed that film studios encouraged the portrayals of gratuitous sex, drugs, and violence as a way of further stereotyping the Black American inner-city community as crime-ridden and dysfunctional (Guerrero, 1993). By the latter half of the 1970s, many studio houses no longer supported the production of what became commonly known by that point as “blaxploitation” films, and this film genre ended in the late 1970s. The demise of this genre was aided by the fact that Blacks were going to the movies in large numbers to see box office hits such as The Exorcist (1973) (Guerrero, 1993).

Jon Hartman (1994) claims that the success from this film genre was due to its themes focusing on Black power and militancy. Specifically, this success was due to the movie's portrayal of working-class Blacks in urban settings having to deal with issues of crime and drug abuse that were identified as problems created by the Whites (Hartman, 1994). Likewise, in contrast to mainstream portrayals of Blacks, in blaxploitation films these characters had a sense of agency as the crime and gratuitous sex in these films demonstrated how Blacks take matters into their own hands to solve problems created by various forms of institutionalized racism, e.g. poverty, crime, and the legal system (Robinson, 1998). Robinson (1998) also notes that the images tended to focus on Black “vigilantism” in opposition to their White counterparts as a product of this institutionalized racism. Therefore, blaxploitation films were “exploitation” films (Robinson, 1998) that “exploited” the working-class Black Americans imagination. Hartman (1994) argues that it is through this portrayal of Blacks that various sources of media, especially “alternative” forms of media, began to start syndicating positive mentions of Sweetback and Shaft. Thus, in the 1970s, films were used to help solidify and create the Black American identity in the popular imagination. Yet, this identity was built upon a history of representation that proceeded far beyond the Black Power movement.

### ***Focusing on Race and Representation***

As we just discussed how racial representations are used to solidify and maintain identities, we will now examine this process of creating racial representations through processes of cultural “othering.” Jarod Sexton (2004) evokes a common interpretation of psychoanalytic theorist Franz Fanon's work by discussing Black

representation as "a lament about the deprivations of colonial domination, about the pain of being structurally denied access to the idealized images of oneself enjoyed by Whites, the pain of having to identify instead with images of monstrosity, incompleteness and, indeed, lack" (Sexton, 2004, p. 244). In other words, historically, Whites have been portrayed as the dominant race, and conversely, Black representation has often been skewed under auspices of subordination, especially in cinema (hooks, 1996); Blacks become the cultural "other." Thus, while film was used to create and maintain a racial identity – especially the cultural subordination of Blacks – through various representations of Blacks, these racialized representations are complex as they vary, especially in their portrayals of gender and sexuality (hooks, 1996; Brooks & Hebert, 2006). For example, Scatman Crothers and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson were Black entertainers who, in essence, put the Black body on display as a cultural object (Haskins & Crothers, 1991; Haskins, 1991). This cultural marginalization of Blacks occurred through creating gendered caricatures (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). Images, such as the "Blackface," "mammy," and "Sambo" have historically dominated the cultural representation of Blacks (Bogle, 1973). Focusing on gendered depictions of Black archetypes, the mammy, the jezebel, and Sambo provide insight into Black American representation and gender in American cinema.

The mammy image portrays Black women as a physically large, asexual, overbearing character that takes care of household chores and children (Anderson, 1974; Bogle, 1973). Among the most salient depiction of the mammy character was illustrated in both *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, where a Black woman was essentially ascribed to that role of the nurturer of White children and the housekeeper (Turner, 1994). In both instances, directors and/or script writers played upon this image as someone whose "overbearing nature" was used to fight off Black rebels as opposed to her own freedom (Turner, 1994) and illustrating loyalty to her White families similar to the "Uncle Tom" caricature – the depiction of a Black man who was overly submissive to his White master (Bogle, 1973). The jezebel image is another representation of Black femininity (Anderson, 1997). In contrast to the mammy, where the character is asexual, this representation of Black femininity exaggerates women's sexuality (Anderson, 1997). As we will discuss the significance of the jezebel's sexuality, it is important to note the racialized undertones of this depiction. For example, this character was often portrayed as the

"tragic mulatta" (Anderson, 1997; Jewell, 1993), where the biracial image of the Black woman was used as a representation to exaggerate Black gender/sexuality. This image is traditionally of a "light-skinned" Black woman with "thin lips, long straight hair, slender nose, thin figure and fair complexion" (Jewell, 1993, p. 46). This depiction attempts to create a foundation where some Black women were sexualized (opposing the mammy image), justifying sexual relations between a White man and Black woman (Jewell, 1993).

While we looked at two common representations of Black American women in American cinema, Black American men were also portrayed as gendered caricatures. Sambo or "the coon" archetype is the portrayal of the Black man who is lazy, loud, and carefree, usually having exaggerated physical features, such as large lips and noses, and are often depicted eating watermelons (Bogle, 1973). Slave owners used this representation of men as an exaggeration of a "lazy" slave who refused to work, thus justifying exploitative measures to force slaves to work (Bogle, 1973). Another image of masculinity, the "buck," is an image that depicts the man as someone who refuses to submit to White authority (possibly with violence). These gendered representations of the jezebel, mulatta, Sambo, Uncle Tom, and the buck became images consumed by White audiences.

Black sexualities are also constructed through images and representations. Yet, before we discuss how Black sexualities are represented, we will briefly examine queer sexualities, the marginalization of queer sexualities, and queer representations so that we may discuss the development of Black sexualities within a more specific context.

Michel Foucault (1990) argues that alternative sexualities (and identities that followed) were created in response to institutional discourse. Queer sexualities are understood as sexualities that do not conform to a heterosexualized image (Wilchins, 2004). This notion of heterosexuality is best understood by gender theorist Judith Butler (1989) where she argues that the heterosexual matrix consists of three components: sexed bodies, opposite-sex desire, and body concordant gender performances (Butler, 1989). This means that sexuality is conflated with gender, and often, gender ideologies are interwoven with sexualities and "sex-typical" bodies, e.g. male bodies performing hegemonic masculine acts (Butler, 1989). Consequently, queer sexualities consist of sexualities that involve all, or a combination of, an antithesis of those three components (Butler, 1989; Wilchins, 2004). These sexualities are typically marginalized, especially in terms of their representa-

tions (Connell, 1995). For example, in film, queer men are portrayed as the antithesis of heterosexual men in that queer men are portrayed as weak, flamboyant, and “feminine” (Benshoff & Griffen, 2011). In the same way that Black Americans were portrayed as supporting characters in very stereotypical roles, queer characters are often represented as the sissy, the villain, or the pitiful character (Gross, 2001; Smelik, 2000; Russo, 1987). For example, Mel Brook’s 1968 comedy, *The Producers*, features effeminate gay male characters, or “sissies,” who appear in both the 1968 and 2005 versions of the film. The 1971 James Bond film, *Diamonds are Forever*, portray two gay male assassins as villains, although unlike in the film *Rebecca* (1940), these characters are not the lead villains in the film. In *The Children’s Hour* (1961) directed by William Wyler, Shirley MacLaine’s character, Martha Dobie, cannot reconcile her homosexuality and her love for her best friend, and at the end of the film she hangs herself. These stereotypical portrayals are often couched in symbolic meanings and representations, which often emphasize the “otherness,” or deviant nature, of these characters. As Anneke Smelik’s (2000) research explains, “Stereotypes of gays and lesbians, such as the queen and the dyke, reproduce norms of gendered heterosexuality because they indicate that the homosexual man or woman falls short of the heterosexual norm: that they can never be a “real” man or woman” (Smelik, 2000, p. 134). Thus, a heterosexual audience, reinforcing patterns of cultural subordination, consumes these images.

Some scholars point to issues of race being a component of these types of sexualities because heterosexuality is sometimes defined through processes of White domination (Lorde, 1984). Heterosexual institutions, such as romantic relationships and marriage, are used to perpetuate race as per discussions of anti-miscegenation laws, especially its portrayal on screen (Courtney, 2005). Heterosexuality was then instrumental in maintaining the divisions between Whites and people of color, especially Blacks (Courtney, 2005). As portrayed on screen, Black sexuality was cast into two main representations: either being hypersexual or asexual. These two representations had gendered components. When Blacks were portrayed as hypersexual, they were portrayed as lascivious sex-fiends with exaggerated genitalia (Rocchio, 2000). In real life, this representation can be seen through the characterization and portrayal of “Sarah Baartman,” or the Hottentot Venus, a Black woman who was famously on display for White audiences because of her exaggerated buttocks and genitalia (Jewell, 1993). By exaggerating

Black sexuality, Whites have portrayed Black sexuality through the process of appeasing a White audience (Jewell, 1993; Rocchio, 2004).

### *Creating a Sexual Divide*

Historically, Black Americans have been persecuted and have had their sexuality attacked through slavery, rape, lynching, and other forms of oppression for hundreds of years (West, 2001). In film, Blacks were rarely allowed to portray anything beyond the roles of mammy such as in *Gone with the Wind*, or a buck in *Birth of a Nation* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* – roles where the characters’ sexuality was either hidden, or where they were thought to be aggressive and hypersexual. Blaxploitation films have allowed Black characters to reclaim their sexuality – their femininity and masculinity. Importantly, these films allowed Black actors to take a leading role instead of taking the role of the antagonist or the “other” in the film. Blaxploitation films not only allowed Blacks to scorn other groups perceived as deviant, such as queer people, but also to scorn groups who consider them to be the deviant, such as Whites.

Based on the literature examining how Blacks are represented in American cinema, we will employ an intersectional analysis of how queer sexualities are depicted in blaxploitation films. By using this approach in the context of social identity theory, we will examine how Black identities are reinforced through the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race. Based on this theoretical framework, we then argue that even though the depiction of queer subjects in these films are not always Black (some were White and Latino in some of the films analyzed), images of marginalized sexualities were created in order to reify the Black identity.

### **Methods**

In order to examine how films construct group identity through its creation of “the other,” we conducted a content analysis on twenty blaxploitation films. We first developed a workable definition of “blaxploitation films” so the correct films could be included in the analysis. Ed Guerrero (1993) defines blaxploitation films as, “the production of the sixty or so Hollywood films that centered on Black narratives, featured Black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974” (Guerrero, 1993, p. 69). For this project,

films were selected for analysis based on the actor (for example, multiple blaxploitation films star Pam Grier and Yaphet Kotto), release date (between 1971 and 1976 – the start and decline of this film genre), and the production company and/or director. The following twenty feature length films with theatrical release dates between 1971 to 1976 were analyzed for this project: *Shaft* (1971), *Sweetback* (1971), *Women in Cages* (1971), *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), *Black Mama/White Mama* (1973), *Blacula* (1972), *Slaughter* (1972), *Super Fly* (1972), *Coffy* (1973), *The Arena* (1974), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1973), *Scream Blacula*, *Scream* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Willie Dynamite* (1974), *Bucktown* (1975), *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), *Friday Foster* (1975), *Sheba Baby* (1975), and *Car Wash* (1976). We would like to note that the “women imprisonment films” include *Black Mama/White Mama* and the Roger Corbin Films: *The Arena*, *Women in Cages*, and *The Big Bird Cage*. These films are considered blaxploitation for the purposes of this project because they star Pam Grier (who was usually the only Black person in the film), they came out of the early 1970s, they targeted a Black American audience, and they are exploitative in nature (e.g. excessive sex and violence), even though they are not “urban” crime dramas in that they did not necessarily take place in urban environments.

These films were viewed on DVD or VHS. When available, the director’s commentary was also analyzed. Once the sample of films was selected, the films were analyzed for the presence of queer content. These characters were analyzed primarily based on character representation and dialogue (Neuendorf, 2002). Codes were then created and used to further analyze and categorize the different portrayals of homosexuality within these films (Krippendorff, 2003; Neuendorf, 2002). Here the rationale is that there would be a systematic method to code the different ways in which non-heterosexual representations are portrayed. By doing so, we can then examine the ways in which non-heterosexual representations in blaxploitation films are used. We then theorize the function of these alternative sexualities in the context of shaping Black identity. We hypothesize that there will be several representations used to serve as foils for the heterosexual protagonists, reinforcing their importance within these films.

### Results

Out of the twenty films selected, fifteen had at least one queer character; these films included *Shaft*,

*Sweetback*, *Women in Cages*, *The Big Bird Cage*, *Black Mama/White Mama*, *Blacula*, *Super Fly*, *The Arena*, *Coffy*, both *Cleopatra Jones* and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*, *Foxy Brown*, *Willie Dynamite*, *Friday Foster*, and *Car Wash*. The following films feature queer characters in primary roles: the transgender car wash attendant in *Car Wash*, gay male prison guards in *Women in Cages*, and both *Cleopatra Jones* films.

Films such as *The Big Bird Cage* (gay male prison guards), *Blacula* (gay vampires), *Friday Foster* (a gay informant), *Black Mama/White Mama* (lesbian prison guard), *The Arena* (gay slave master), *Shaft* (gay bartender), *Coffy* (pimp and prostitute who are lovers), and *Foxy Brown* (a scene at a lesbian bar) displayed one or multiple queer characters with more than several lines in the film. *Sweetback* (multiple gay and lesbian characters), *Super Fly* (gay male drug users), and *Willie Dynamite* (lesbian prisoners) had queer characters with very minor roles in the film.

Although not a focal point of analysis, it is important to note that derogatory comments and homophobic remarks are commonplace within these films. Derogatory comments such as “dyke” or “faggot” were often used to describe queer characters in the films: *Sweetback*, *Women in Cages*, *The Big Bird Cage*, *Black Mama/White Mama*, *Blacula*, *Super Fly*, *Blacula*, *Bucktown*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Friday Foster*, *Sheba Baby*, and *Car Wash*. In *Blacula*, Billy and Bobby - the interracial gay male, interior designing, and antique dealing couple who brought *Blacula*’s coffin to Los Angeles from Transylvania - were repeatedly referred to as “faggots” by everyone in the film, from the lead character, Gordon, who was also their friend, to police officers. In *Super Fly*, *Scream Blacula Scream*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, and *Sheba Baby*, heterosexual characters were insulted with the accusation of being a “faggot.”

Similarly, other films displayed homophobic or other insulting behavior directed at the queer character. For example, in *Sweetback*, the self proclaimed “Good Dyke Fairy God-Mother” granted the wishes of a lesbian by turning her into a “real man” – *Sweetback* – in the middle of a sexual act with another woman. *The Big Bird Cage* features gay male prison guards who the female prisoners attempt to seduce. *Shaft* also features female characters that flirt with the gay male bartender. The only film that directly addresses homophobia by allowing the queer character to respond to his oppressor was *Car Wash*. When Black American revolutionary Duane, a.k.a. Abdullah, calls his transgender (male to female) co-worker, Lindy, a “sorry lookin’ faggot” and goes on to say how “she’s just another poor example of

how the system is destroying our men," Lindy replies, "Honey, I am more man than you'll ever be and more woman than you'll ever get."

For the most part, however, homophobic slurs aside, queer characters in these films appeared to be well-integrated members of the fictional communities created within these films. We refer to the two primary queer character types found within this sample of blaxploitation films as the jester and the scoundrel. The jester is a queer character used for comedic relief. This representation usually exaggerates gender performance on sex-atypical bodies. In other words, queer men depicted as being hyperfeminine, and women depicted as hypermasculine. Eight of the fifteen films in the sample that portrayed queer characters portrayed them as jesters (*Coffy*, *The Arena*, *The Big Bird Cage*, *Black Mama/White Mama*, *Super Fly*, *Blacula*, *Shaft*, *Sweetback*, *Car Wash*, and *Friday Foster*). Conversely, the scoundrel character is not to be trusted and is frequently aggressive and violent. With the exception of *Shaft* and *Car Wash*, all of the queer characters represented in these fifteen films are portrayed as scoundrels. Through constructing the jester and the scoundrel, non-heteronormative sexualities reinforce the Black identity. These queer representations maintain the Black identity by reinforcing homophobic discourses that key into the Black collective conscience. The jester and scoundrel will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### Discussion

The two main queer archetypes of blaxploitation films are the jester and the scoundrel with the running theme that these two archetypes exist in order to reinforce the "normal" sexuality of the lead character and to emphasize the deviant nature of other sexual expressions. As Foucault (1990) suggests, the creation of the "homosexual" as a separate (deviant) identity created a separate understanding of heteronormative sexualities. Similarly, the scoundrel functions as a queer alternative to the protagonist (its binary opposition). The queer representation in blaxploitation films is defined by its heteronormative counterpart. As such, this counterpart reinforces the gendered identity of the protagonist – which is the main idea of the blaxploitation genre: to create a protagonist that functions as a mechanism to reinforce Black racial identity. Consequently, these queer representations' purpose as a foil is to reinforce the Black identity as portrayed on screen.

The first archetype found in this sample of blaxploitation films, the jester, is an emasculated man. Much of

the comedic relief in these films is based off of the queer character and her/his portrayal of her/his gender roles. For example, in *The Arena*, Priscium, the gay master of the gladiators plays an extremely feminized character, and much of the comedy in the film is focused around his sexual orientation. When he is told to "handle [the female gladiators] with care," he slyly responds, "I won't handle them at all." As previously mentioned, all of the male prison guards hired to watch over the women of *The Big Bird Cage* are gay men who ignore the advances of the female inmates. The notion of sex-starved female inmates throwing themselves at these prison guards, to no avail, is supposed to be amusing. Many of the scenes featuring Antonio Fargas's Lindy in *Car Wash* are clearly intended to be funny, from the opening scene where Lindy is fussing with her hair to her interactions with other characters. Interestingly, it does not appear as if Lindy's portrayal was intended to be more comedic than the other characters in the film. Nonetheless, Lindy's mere presence and her feminine character was the focus of the joke, as opposed to other characters in the film whose comedy was not based on exaggerated heterosexuality. Towards the end of the film *Sweetback*, while the police hunt Sweetback, they question three gay men, two Latino and one Black. All three wear eye shadow and repeatedly bat their eyelashes as they explain that do not know Sweetback's location. One gay character states, "No, chile, I mean, officer. I didn't see Mr. Sweetback." The second gay character says, "If you see him send him here." The first gay character later says, "I'm a militant queen." The third gay character then says, "Won't I do, officer?" Their presence certainly lightened the mood of the very tense final scenes depicting Sweetback running through the desert in an attempt to escape capture.

The first way to examine the archetype of the jester is to look at the larger, historical pattern of Hollywood placing Blacks at the center of mimesis. Cedric Robinson (1998) notes that women were at the focal point of marginalization in blaxploitation films. Yet, this performative construct of the feminine extends itself to "the jester" as an example of how women/the feminine are constructed in blaxploitation films. This means that the jester's depiction, in the context of media production and Hollywood, is a representation that further exploits Blacks to solidify the White identity and its dominance of representation. Rather than portraying the lustful, highly sexual Black man that takes a dominant, masculinist position (where the jester serves as a foil to this representation), this queer representation of sexuality serves as mockery and



marginalizes the Black community because of its visual space for non-heterosexualized gender performances that were written in the context of White-dominated Hollywood. In other words, the jester's mere existence in the blaxploitation film provides a space for a mockery of typical gendered performance. This means that because the directors of these films portrayed a gendered atypical character; arguably, the character's presence in blaxploitation films as opposed to mainstream cinematic films provides a space where it is acceptable to depict a gendered deviant. Butler (1989) argues that gender is intertwined with sexuality; therefore, the performance of gender – the non-heteronormative performance of being a feminine man instead of the dominant figure – represents a gendered parody of an already marginalized sexuality through the construct of race, especially since these films were created in a context that exaggerates the "imagination" of the Blacks claiming representation that "liberates" the Black community (Robinson, 1998).

It is through the exaggeration of gender and sexuality that the guise of liberation was used instrumentally. Although the audiences were primarily Black, this element of parody solidified homophobic attitudes via social identity theory (Bordens and Horowitz, 2004). Thus, one could read the jester's "image" as an instrument that further divided the Black community. Gay Black men are often marginalized in the Black community (McBride, 2005). Though not represented as the Black gay man, the jester is then the marginalized representation used to further the image of homosexuality. The image associated with homosexuality was then paired with a cultural representation that is aversive for the Black community. Then, as a product of White dominated Hollywood, the jester's representation can be understood as a signifier that purposely was created to vilify the Black image. In other words, through McBride's (2005) perspective, the alternative sexuality's image was associated with White community's solidarity, since being progressive is encoded into the "public" White image. Through "self enhancement" (Hogg & Terry, 2001), the Black identity separates itself from the White image of homosexuality. Likewise, we find that the discourse transmitted via these blaxploitation films for the Black audience essentially argues that to be gay and/or gender deviant means being White. Conversely, the homophobia created by the racial organization of sexuality creates and reinforces the Black identity. The "we" (the Black identity) is defined by "them" (the White identity) as described by Bordens & Horowitz (2004). Therefore, the jester's representation was a pastiche of masculinity, an already

marginalized construct, and used by White Hollywood to further divide the Black community and reinforce the Black identity by maintaining homophobia.

The scoundrel functions differently than the jester. The scoundrel was used comically (or not) as an antagonist. Its homosexuality also adds a level of perversion that prevents the audience from sympathizing with them, likely aiding in their villainous appeal (Benshoff, 1997). With the exception of *Shaft and Car Wash*, the queer characters represented in these films are portrayed as scoundrels or characters who are not to be trusted. For example, the frightening and sadistic lesbian is one character that repeatedly emerges.

In the film *Coffy*, while Pam Grier's title character questions the White prostitute, Pricilla, about the assault of her friend, Pricilla warns Coffy, "Now listen, my old *man* is coming back any minute and if *she* catches you here *she's* gonna wanna to kick your ass." During Coffy's interrogation Pricilla's pimp and implied lover, Harriet, a large Black woman in boots and a leather riding jacket, storms into the house to see Coffy holding Pricilla down on the bed. Coffy quickly runs from Harriet, scrambling out of the house. Harriet turns to Pricilla and angrily says, "I go away for a half an hour for you to turn a trick and I come back to find you ballin' some nigga bitch!?!". Although Coffy has easily been able to defend herself in a variety of situations, even when Pricilla threatened her with a knife, she was clearly no match for Harriet. Coffy did not even attempt to fight with her. This scene appears to signify that Coffy was so afraid of the big, Black, butch Harriet that she actually runs from her.

The lesbian villains in both *Cleopatra Jones* movies were not only non-comedic, but were brutal. In the first *Cleopatra Jones* movie, Mommy, played by Shelley Winters, is the leader of a dope-smuggling gang. She is a racist, overweight, older, White lesbian, who kills any employee who disobeys her, playing the perfect foil to offset tall, thin, suave, Black heterosexual Cleopatra. In fact, even toward the end of the film, one of Mommy's cronies tells her "You are no match for that Black lady." In *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*, the heroine battles the Dragon Lady, another brutal White lesbian dope smuggler. But unlike Mommy, the Dragon Lady's operation is based in Hong Kong as opposed to Los Angeles. She, too, is defeated by Cleopatra at the end of the film.

In terms of queer masculinities that represented the comic relief, the scoundrel could be understood as a figure that was created in opposition to the "strong" protagonists. However, as we discussed, this foil is

gendered: the lesbian is the aggressor while the male jester is the comic relief. Thus the depiction of creating the scoundrel through queer sexualities in blaxploitation has a gendered component. While the gay male version of the scoundrel is depicted as untrustworthy and villainous, like Ford Malotte in *Friday Foster*, the representation of the female scoundrel, as opposed to the male, is depicted as an aggressive character, such as Alabama in *Women in Cages*. In fact, many of these films portray women attempting to, or succeeding in, sexually assaulting other women; and in each film, the assumed heterosexual female character always tries to defend herself from these "lesbian rapists" and is, subsequently, scarred or tortured. For example, in *Willie Dynamite*, one of Willie's prostitutes is sexually assaulted in jail by a group of women, getting her face slashed in the process.

Returning to the discussion about the hypersexual jezebel and the domineering mammy, the female scoundrel's gender performance attempts to combine the idea of sexual perversity with the domineering nature of the feminine archetype. This means that this queer interpretation of femininity reinforces the White identity through demonizing a deviant sexual identity. In other words, while a queer male sexuality is interpreted by a homophobic lens and scorned, queer femininity is not simply scorned, but rather, created as an object of disgust. Consequently, it reinforces a Black hetero-femininity by demonizing an overly aggressive woman – almost in a cautionary manner. Further, placed in appropriate historical context, this image can be read as a raced cinematic attack of strong female political leaders, such as Angela Davis, as the symbol of sexual and racial liberation – as an exaggeration of her militancy. Thus the image of the scoundrel is used to demonize alternative sexuality while the jester is used to parody heterosexuality.

These queer images reinforce the heterosexual identity. These images drastically contrast with the images of Blacks in films where the audience or the directors were Black. Although the blaxploitation protagonists were portrayed as strong Black characters, the images of alternative sexualities are used to maintain the Black identity as these films, in essence, link homophobia to Blackness, thus creating an ideological separation between the Black community and the White community. Placed in the context of the sexual revolution of the 1970s, blaxploitation films represent a reaction against the White-dominated ideology of sexual and gendered freedom. This then maintains a racial separation, especially in terms of how people develop their racial

identities through sexual and gendered knowledge.

## Conclusion

This paper examines how, in favoring Black characters as the hero in blaxploitation films, other groups, especially queer characters, are then left to be re-defined as the new antihero within this film genre. This research focuses specifically on the ways in which queer characters are framed and portrayed in a sample of blaxploitation films. This paper builds on literature that demonstrates how Blacks are represented in American cinema. We identify two queer character types in blaxploitation films: the jester and the scoundrel. These two archetypes primarily reinforce heterosexist ideology that separates the Black and White communities – maintaining a value-system of apartheid in that race becomes a signifier for homophillic or homophobic values. This is not to say that Whites are not homophobic; rather, within this historical context of sexual liberation and feminism, both these movements represent a dominantly White framework in which Blacks have been historically excluded. Social identity theory helps us theorize how this exclusion works via depictions that lead to constructions of identity, in particular, the Black identity. Taken further, with the sites of knowledge production, whether oppressive (patriarchal/heterosexist) or even liberatory (may it be the feminism or gay liberation) knowledge have been historically dominated by Whites. This then shows how knowledge is raced. Using film as a medium to communicate and inculcate knowledge, this paper illuminates how, even when film is used against the dominant culture (i.e. blaxploitation being the reaction against mainstream films), the film's discourse sacrifices other systems of knowledge in order to preserve and protect itself. In this case, the blaxploitation film's discourse of a dominant Black identity marginalizes queer sexual identities by either portraying a pastiche of alternative gender/sexual identities, or simply creating discursive silence. This discourse then impacts how people create and maintain their identities. Racialized knowledge in film is used to separate racial identities creating two separate opposing groups, where Whiteness is defined as sexual/gendered liberation and Blackness reacted against it. Theoretically, this reaction can then further the racist image of Blacks (in and out of film). There, the blaxploitation films serve as a testament to the negotiation between racial and sexual identities.

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