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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Genealogies of the Stud:
Homosocial Hunger in Blaxploitation Film and Pornography

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

by

Mohammed Syed Ali

Thesis Committee:
Assistant Professor Allison Perlman, Chair
Assistant Professor Emily Thuma
Associate Professor Sharon Block

2016

DEDICATION

To

my friends, family, and fellow troublemakers.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Genealogies of the Stud:
Homosocial Hunger in Blaxploitation Film and Pornography

By

Mohammed Syed Ali

Master of Arts in History

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Assistant Professor Allison Perlman, Chair

This is a work of theory that seeks to conceptualize relations between black and white men through four Blaxploitation films released in the early 1970s in the United States (*Africanus Sexualis: Black is Beautiful*, *Sweet Sweetback's Badaaassss Song*, *Shaft*, and *Lialeh*). While Film scholars and cultural critics have tended to read Blaxploitation films as vehicles for celebrating unabashed sexism, homophobia, and patriarchal domination of women, I develop an alternative reading of Blaxploitation films focused on relationships between male characters grounded in feminist and queer theory. I explore how reading for the constructions of manhood and blackness through the heroic male figure of the “stud” nuance anti-sexist and anti-homophobic critiques. To accomplish this reading, I develop a theoretical lens based on what I call “homosocial hunger,” a relationship through which black males desired to be seen ‘as men’ in commercial film products (financed primarily by white men), and for whites males to reap profits through the black male box office by financing successful films featuring manly, stud heroes. I focus on shot compositions, jokes,

double-entendres, and plot points to show how homosocial hunger is acknowledged and disrupts stable gender binaries between 'men' and 'women' in each film.

INTRODUCTION: The Subject of Gender

The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.¹

This project works towards a genealogy of gender through the emergence of a trope: the “stud,” or “Superspade,” coeval with United States Blaxploitation films in the 1970s.² Blaxploitation film may seem like an unlikely place to conduct a genealogy of gender: it is often understood as sexist, homophobic, and patriarchal.³ Yet it is often in these contexts, when gender appears most harshly solidified, that a dynamic struggle to define gender roles and knowledge-power lies just beneath the surface. Put differently, gender appears most stark when it is most precarious.

Blaxploitation films were consciously made to profit by and through appeals to emerging social values advanced by the Sexual Revolution, Women’s Liberation, and Black Liberation movements. As such, this project aims to read for traces of instabilities that complicate anti-sexist and anti-homophobic critiques of Blaxploitation films from cultural critics and film scholars. In my close readings of early Blaxploitation films, I focus on seemingly insignificant phrases, minor plot symmetries, throwaway jokes, shot constructions, and double-entendres that evoke a more complicated engagement with gender and sexuality in these films. In this project, I make a “both-and” argument: that

¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 82.

² I use stud and Superspade interchangeably.

³ For this view, see e.g. Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

while anti-sexist and anti-homophobic critiques are valuable additions to discourse on Blaxploitation films, it is important to also consider the ways in which these films trouble fixed gender hierarchies in plot points, dialogue, and shot composition.

Why the stud? What role does he play in this genealogy? Historian Daniel J. Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* covers one of the defining legacies of Blaxploitation film. The birth of this genre in the early 1970s reflected the culmination of a turning point in US cinema in which productions financed by white-dominated Hollywood production companies abandoned stereotypes of black men meant to cater to white (male) audiences in favor of creating protagonists favorable to urban black (male) audiences. Leab structures his book as a survey of representations of black men in cinema, "from Sambo to Superspade." In doing so, Leab presumes the stability of a "black male" subject that runs consistently from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Shaft* (1971). The relationship between black men and US mass film may change with the political and economic factors of the time, but Leab gives scant attention to the racial politics of gender as they change over the course of his survey. This is to say, blackness and maleness were themselves subject to conditions of flux, which we can read through changes in these tropes. What can the rise of the Superspade trope tell us about the changing ways in which artists, producers, and distributors understood gendered blackness?

Leab published his book in 1975. Gender, as a "useful category of analysis," would need time to come into its own within the halls of academia.⁴ Nevertheless, as early as 1969, scholars were already speaking out against the imperialist implications of the

⁴ Joan Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 No. 5 (1986), 1053-1075.

Western gender system.⁵ In “On the Issue of Roles,” dramatist and English Literature scholar Toni Cade Bambara calls for a revolutionary praxis against Western gender identities:

Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood. We have much, alas, to work against. The job of purging is staggering. It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to struggle.⁶

Bambara links her liberationist praxis to the gender systems of pre-colonized African society, in which gender roles were flexible and women were not considered the property of men. Instead, they were seen as co-participants in the making of society.⁷ Philosopher and African Studies scholar Greg Thomas calls this a “Pan-African embodiment,” a critical way of being that foregrounds the heritage of African civilization to resist and imagine sociopolitical alternatives to European colonial patriarchy and gender binarism throughout the African Diaspora.⁸

In *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power*, Thomas defines a tradition of anti-gender Pan-Africanism critically attentive to the ways in which Western imperialism constitutes sex/gender systems via white supremacist discourses.⁹ In Chapter Two, “The Madness of Gender in Plantation America,” Thomas takes up Bambara’s essay in order to critique

⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, “On the Issue of Roles,” in *The Black Woman* ed. Toni Cade Bambara, (New York: Washington Square Press),

⁶ Bambara, “Roles,” 103.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Thomas, *Sexual Demon*. See especially Chapters 1 and 2.

⁹ As we will see in Part I of this paper, Thomas locates this anti-gender Pan-Africanist tradition in scholarship invested in the history and practice of matriarchy as a social system that unifies and defines civilization across the African continent. For these scholars, particularly Cheikh Anta Diop and Ifi Amadiume, matriarchy is defined as a system in which gender roles and identities were flexible, families were organized around the matriline, and women cooperated with men in mutual control over major social institutions.

historiographies of United States slavery. He argues that the gender system of United States slaveocracy depended on excluding black people from gender/sexual identities. To claim admission to the gender system was to claim admission into the human community as a *subject* of gender. The cults of true white manhood and womanhood were premised on discourses of African sexual bestiality in which black people could be anatomically sexed but could lay no claim to gender identity.¹⁰ They were figured as bestial objects foundational to the creation of human subjects of gender. The madness of manhood and womanhood refers both to the depravity of white supremacist slavery and to the way in which black intellectuals compromise their anti-colonialist politics by implicitly falling back on this “heterosexualist” binary between men and women.¹¹ Thomas argues that there can be no rescue of black “manhood” or “womanhood:” these very categories are obstacles to the formation of an anti-colonialist praxis. Thomas’s argument conceives of the stable man-woman binary as an “erotic scheme” of European empire that was challenged by (and continues to be challenged by) Black Liberationist, anti-colonial activists. His analysis offers a useful conjectural justification for examining the ways in which Blaxploitation films made complicated engagements with gender discourse: if Blaxploitation films professed commitments to Black Liberationist politics and aesthetics, then in what ways might they have also taken up critiques of gender roles and sexual identities?

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates how the trope of the black Mammy “buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood” both by fetishizing enslaved black women’s labors to nurture white families and by severing sexuality (as a privileged boundary condition of ‘humanity’ demarcating and recognizing desires and passions) from fertility (for engendering ‘increase’ in enslaved populations). As we will see, I argue that the Sambo controlling image functions in an analogous way for black men: it buttresses the cult of true (white) manhood by likewise separating black men’s fertility from white men’s sexuality. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.

¹¹ Thomas, *Sexual Demon*, 50.

This paper draws from Thomas’s framework to analyze in particular the making of black manhood in Blaxploitation film. I go beyond Leab’s analyses of the film productions of and public receptions to tropes of blackness in from Sambo to Superspade in order to shed light on constructions of black people as gendered subjects in the context of commercial film products. Inspired by African American Literature and History scholar Saidiya Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery” in combination with Sociologist and Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall’s “inferential racism,” I conduct my analysis against the backdrop of United States slavery and the ways in which white gender systems were built on the exploitation and circulation of black people, and how these white gender systems relied on racist ideological tropes in order to naturalize white supremacy over black people.¹² I do so in order to ask: what contradictions or excesses of the heteronormative gender binary emerge when blackness and manhood are brought together in the form of the “stud” or “Superspade?”

¹² Hartman writes, “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.” Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), 6. Hartman does not directly invoke mass media and representation. Hence, I invoke Stuart Hall’s notion of “inferential racism” to highlight the ways in which the structure of the afterlife of slavery also produces “apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racists [sic] premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*.” Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media.” In *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1995), 20.

SOURCES AND METHODS

This paper engages with questions of black masculinization in Blaxploitation film at a specific time in US cinema history when market, ideological, and legal forces combined to make possible a convergence between blackness and masculinity on the silver screen. Rather than restricting my itinerary to mainstream Blaxploitation film, I undertake a preliminary engagement with presentations of black masculinity in the concomitant Blaxploitation pornography genre. Pornography offers a politically charged vision of society in which anxieties concerning gender, race, and class hierarchies are articulated even if only to be ‘solved’ by sex.¹³ It is an important genre for examining gendered and racialized social hierarchies and identities.

I engage with four primary source films released in the early 1970s: *Africanus Sexualis: Black is Beautiful*, *Sweet Sweetback’s Badaaassss Song*, *Shaft*, and *Lialeh*. Each film presents versions of blackness and masculinity inflected with the conventions of specific commercial genres: soft-core pornography, experimental film, Blaxploitation film, and hard-core pornography, respectively.¹⁴ My interpretive practice centers on bringing these films into dialogue with one another in order to understand how blackness and masculinity intersected in the entertainment industry at a time of major social, political, and theoretical mobilization against white supremacy in Hollywood, the United States, and across the African continent.

¹³ On hard-core pornographic utopias, see Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 155.

¹⁴ I define genre here as a mixture of reiterated aesthetic conventions and differing commitments to making sex explicit on screen. For example, while soft-core pornography features full-frontal nudity and sex scenes, genital intercourse is implied rather than shown outright. Hard-core pornography makes genital intercourse visible during its sex scenes.

Each of these films enjoys canonical status in the history of the development of the Blaxploitation genre. *Black is Beautiful* is likely the first feature-length soft-core pornography film featuring an all black cast. *Sweetback's Song* is widely recognized as the film that galvanized Hollywood's investment in the black urban box office and played a crucial role in defining the Blaxploitation formula. *Shaft* is recognized as the inaugural studio-produced Blaxploitation film. *Lialeh* is the first feature-length hard-core pornography film explicitly designed to appeal to black male audiences.

While they are canonized, my choice in primary sources is not meant to typify gender discourse in Blaxploitation films. I do not seek to make historiographical claims about the genre as a whole, nor historiographical interventions about the nature of entertainment and politics in the 1970s United States film industry. Rather, my intention is to understand how the particular political contexts and articulations of manhood in each film can be read in the same light. My goal is to put into practice an approach to reading gender in films that inverts the methodological relationship between primary and secondary sources. Rather than mobilizing secondary sources to guide my interpretations of these particular films, I use my readings of blackness and manhood in each film to guide a critique and interpretation of the secondary sources themselves.

Thus, I do not generally engage with Historians of gender in this period of United States history. Instead, I engage with secondary sources authored by Film and Media Scholars, English Literature scholars, and cultural critics. In order to highlight and contextualize my engagements with their works, I introduce my interlocutors with their professional disciplines. In doing so, I hope to emphasize that this paper is not about making contributions to the fields of US History and Film History, but about developing an

interpretive approach for reading blackness and manhood in Blaxploitation films. To do so, I focus on dialogue, shot composition, and plot points that structure relationships between male characters in each film. My readings are not just based in the primary sources themselves. In the following section, I develop a theoretical lens grounded in feminist and queer theory that structures my interpretations of each film and provides an analytical vocabulary for understanding their broader significance. To name and situate my lens in queer and feminist theory, I coin the term “homosocial hunger.” The following section explicates my theoretical foundations and defines this coinage.

PART 1: Theoretical Lens

Narratives of Genre, Dialectics of Pornography

Africana and Cinema scholar Ed Guerrero wrote the definitive narrative of the creation of Blaxploitation Film in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. In the United States, 1960s, Hollywood was in major trouble. First, Hollywood faced a financial crisis. Big budget films were not making sufficient returns. Second, Hollywood faced an ideological challenge. The Black Liberation movement was in full swing. Black intellectuals sharpened their critiques of the “ebony saint,” a Hollywood stereotype that made black men’s roles explicitly nonsexual, and therefore ‘safe’ for white (male) audiences.¹⁵ Third, Hollywood faced a legal challenge. From 1963 through 1969, Hollywood faced increasing legal pressure from the ACLU, NAACP, and the United States Justice Department to end discriminatory hiring practices that kept black talent out of the movie industry.¹⁶

Blaxploitation emerged as the solution to this tripartite crisis. Hollywood cut costs, minimized risk, and addressed the legal challenge by hiring underpaid black talent for majority black-cast films. Hollywood also caught up with shifting market demographics: after white flight, young, black consumers controlled an increasingly significant share of potential ticket sales for the high-capacity urban theaters.

Guerrero’s overview is incredibly useful, yet it misses how Hollywood’s financial troubles and ideological shifts were also tied to competition over the urban box office from

¹⁵ See Leab, *Sambo to Superspade*. The ebony saint is essentially built single-handedly through Sidney Poitier’s acting career.

¹⁶ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 85-6.

sexploitation film.¹⁷ Grind-houses were urban theaters that showed mainstream Hollywood films as well as cheaply produced, sensational, non-mainstream films. Their screenings of European-imported and US-made sexploitation films stoked public demand for sexual content in film.¹⁸

Guerrero's analysis focuses on the "dialectical push of Hollywood's cultural construction and domination of the black image and the pull of an insistent black social consciousness and political activism."¹⁹ Scholars of Blaxploitation must also take into account how the dialectical push and pull between Hollywood and grind-house cinema helped to give shape to the genre. Blaxploitation had close ties to sexploitation. Both genres traded on ethnic/racial exotification (African people and European people, respectively). Both featured sex scenes involving male and female nudity, but did not make visible genital intercourse. Moreover, grind-houses played an essential role in bringing both sexploitation and Blaxploitation films to urban audiences.²⁰

This dialectic also played a role in the emergence of mainstream hard-core pornography in the early 1970s, an era known as the Golden Age of Porn. Film and Media Historian Eric Schaefer's classic article "Gauging a Revolution" delves into the technological conditions that made the Golden Age possible: in particular, the growing feasibility of shooting on 16mm film.²¹ In doing so, he pushes beyond progress narratives that link the beginnings of the Golden Age to expanding legal classifications of protected free speech. Yet

¹⁷ David Church. "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films." *Cinema Journal* 50 (2011): 17. Church is a Film and Media scholar.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*. 21.

²¹ Eric Schaefer. "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature." *Cinema Journal* 41 (2002).

Schaefer does not consider how consumers' receptivity to hard core was conditioned by the dialectical push and pull between Hollywood and grindhouse cinema. By incorporating sexploitation genre elements into Blaxploitation, Hollywood producers were able to tap into the urban box office by meeting demand for more sexually overt products. Meanwhile, Golden Age pornographers would continue to push the envelope on sexual explicitness until they captured the niche that independent sexploitation producers once enjoyed.

This also means that we should see the production and distribution of Blaxploitation film in the early 1970s both as a reflection of growing social permissiveness concerning the display of sex on screen, and as helping to nurture this growth and pave the way for audiences' receptivity to Golden Age pornography. This bears important implications for how scholars periodize the history of pornography in the United States.

Film and Media scholar Linda Williams set the standard itinerary for the history of pornography in her canonical book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible.'* In it, she lays out a pornographic lineage that begins with early moving-image photography developed by Edward Muybridge, moves on to the heyday of illicit stag films, and finally, the feature-length films of the Golden Age of Pornography. While Williams' itinerary may make sense in terms of constructing a genealogy of sexually explicit visual entertainment, it obscures the processes through which pornographic material coexisted with, 'talked to,' shaped, and was shaped by nonpornographic genres. Such a project would require a more inclusive itinerary designed to chart the visual ecology of cinema as it shaped and was shaped by pornography.²²

²² See "Pictures: Roster of Porno Emigrants Covers Lenses [sic] & Actors." 1988. *Variety* (Archive: 1905-2000), Mar 09, 3-3, 32. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1438493560?accountid=14509> [I believe that

Moreover, Williams' itinerary runs the risk of constructing a narrative of pornographic development that obscures the dynamism of this visual ecology. By focusing on white-oriented, majority white-cast heterosexual pornography, Williams implicitly reproduces a typology of political economy that defines and relegates "niche" pornography to marginalized genealogies. In other words, her source base produces an illusion of isolated genealogies (black straight porn, white gay porn, etc.) that obscures the ways in which developments in specialized genres of grindhouse products influenced mainstream content both within and beyond grindhouse cinema. In this case, to argue that Blaxploitation film bore an important influence on the development of mainstream hard-core pornography is to simultaneously argue that we underestimate the impact of Blaxploitation when we read its historical significance solely within the context of black film.

Blaxploitation and Pornography, Men and Masculinity

The rise of Blaxploitation film coincided with the rise of Golden Age hard-core pornography. These genres came together with the emergence of Blaxploitation pornography: a new genre towards the mid-1970s that fused elements of Blaxploitation and hard core pornography. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, American and Women's Studies scholar Jennifer Nash refers to this genre as "blax-porn-tation" as a way to foreground its generic forerunners.²³ In *A Taste For Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, Historian

"lensers" may be industry slang for either directors or cinematographers]. This primary source lists various directors who attempted to find work within and outside of the pornography market.

²³ Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 59.

Mireille Miller-Young calls it “soul porn” to emphasize its attempt to appropriate of the aesthetics and ethos of soul in black cultural production.²⁴ For this paper, I use “Blaxploitation pornography” to emphasize its relationship to the broader visual ecology of contemporaneous Blaxploitation genres.

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, Miller-Young develops a multifaceted metaphor of brown sugar to describe black women’s labor and performance in heterosexual pornography. Drawing on the history of enslavement and brutality in the sugar industry of the Americas, Miller-Young uses brown sugar to highlight the paradoxical relationship black women have to their labor in a white-dominated industry that trades on producing degrading images of black women. It describes the white fetishistic construction black women’s sexualities as raw and unrefined, illicit and alluring in ways contradistinct from the purity of the white beauty standard.²⁵ Brown sugar also describes a site of reclaimed sexual agency: a term for endearment and erotic hunger, of tenderness bringing black people together.²⁶

Much as how the commodity fetish makes black women’s labor in pornography invisible, the granules of brown sugar dissolve in the sweetness of “a cup of tea.”²⁷ Considering that Miller-Young focuses her book on black women in heterosexual pornography, one might wonder how to create a corresponding metaphor for the black

²⁴ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 18.

²⁵ Miller-Young, *Brown Sugar*, 5.

²⁶ “In African American vernacular speech and song, brown sugar often expresses adoration, loveliness, and intimacy even as it articulates lust, sensuality, and sex (along with other illicit, pleasure-giving materials like heroin or marijuana). As in the saying, ‘the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,’ brown sugar is sometimes used by black people to speak to the complex pleasures they derive from their own eroticism.” Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. Miller-Young writes, “Like sugar that has dissolved without a trace, but has nonetheless sweetened a cup of tea, black women’s labor and the mechanisms that manage and produce it are invisible but nonetheless *there*.” [Emphasis by the author]

men working alongside black women to create films for this genre. Taking for granted the heteronormative logic of 'straight' pornography, if black women are the sweet sugar, then are black men the bitter tea?

This bitter tea model suggests that male consumers of Blaxploitation pornography intend to feed their hunger for sweetness. The tea provides the context through which the sugar can be delivered and enjoyed. Its bitterness refers to the way in which mainstream heterosexual pornography, where women's bodies are the explicit product, still requires the presence of naked men and penises. In this model, black men function as an *implicit* product in Blaxploitation pornography. This bitterness is tolerated because it allows male viewers to enjoy women's "confession of pleasure" for men's bodies, and provides a way to display men on screen without provoking the specter of homoerotic subtext.²⁸

The bitter tea model presumes a stable gender binary between the male and female bodies foundational to heterosexual knowledge-power. Through this binary, the category of "woman" is seen as stable and prior to the bodies and performances that ultimately become the products of Blaxploitation pornography films. The category of "man" is likewise seen as prior to the bodies and performances that ultimately function as the protagonists for male audiences. This formulation is useful for understanding the heteronormative internal logic of Blaxploitation pornography (and Blaxploitation, generally) at the cost of making visible the ways in which white supremacist discourse needs to negate blackness in order to instantiate its normative gender binary.

²⁸ Williams describes the "confession of pleasure" as a way to read pornography as a scientific discourse that aims to make visible the truths of women's pleasure and desire for the phallus. "Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession. The woman's ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake (at least according to certain standards of evidence) seems to be at the root of all the genre's attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core 'frenzy of the visible.'" Williams, *Hard Core*, 50.

In the antebellum United States, the “Negro” was known as the “lady of the races.”²⁹ Just as black women were excluded from the “cult of femininity,”³⁰ black men were excluded from the cult of masculinity in order to undergird the gender norms central to the imaginary of white prestige.³¹ In light of this history, how do we analyze men and masculinity in Blaxploitation film as contested and unstable categories rather than using them as reified points of departure?

English Literature scholar and cultural critic bell hooks’ gloss of the gender politics of the 1960s in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* offers a useful starting point. For hooks, Black Power activists embraced patriarchal values conditioned by white supremacy in a politics of pessimism and “hustle” following the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.³² This new sentiment, crystallized in works like Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Black Panther activist George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, and artist-director Melvin van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Badaaassss Song*, articulated a new ideal for black manhood that hinged on embodying white fears concerning black men’s

²⁹ Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, eds. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 37.

³⁰ “This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: in order to approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of the slaves—the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity...In order to function as slave, the black woman had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in her historical stance of wardship under the entire male hierarchy.” Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13 (1972): 87. Davis is a Philosopher and Political Activist.

³¹ For the imaginary of white prestige, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Stoler is an Anthropologist.

³² “This notion of cool was all about exploitation, the con, the hustle, getting over, getting by. Even though it dumped on the white man, it was all about being the white man, with all the perks and goodies that come with patriarchal dominator power.” bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 156.

capacity for physical violence and sexual prowess through the rape and patriarchal domination of black and white women.³³

This “gangsta culture” archetype is an important part of the ethos of the films studied here.³⁴ *Sweetback’s Song*, *Shaft*, *Black is Beautiful*, and *Lialeh* all privilege black men’s perspectives. Yet hooks’ central insight focuses on how these articulations of black patriarchy are deeply dependent on white supremacist notions of male domination. First, she argues that gangsta style was founded on a metric of masculine power that was endemic to “plantation patriarchy:” measured through sexual conquests and hustling.³⁵ Second, she argues that white capitalists financed gangsta style in part because it served their interests by fetishizing the disposability of black life and foreclosing on truly radical alternatives for black empowerment. She concludes that the consumption of Blaxploitation as entertainment marks a domestication and feminization of black patriarchal masculinity.³⁶

For this paper, hooks’ insight yields an alternative to the bitter tea model that pays attention to the politics between men of Blaxploitation film, in which the specter of white patriarchy casts a shadow over articulations of black manhood. Whether financed by capital controlled by a white patriarchal industry, reacting against “The Man,” or trouncing white manhood through sexual conquest and superior gunmanship, any study of Blaxploitation masculinity cannot ignore this homosocial dynamic enabled by and productive of whiteness and blackness.

³³ For example: “Rather than repudiating the negative stereotypical image of the black male as a predatory and lust-filled rapist, Cleaver claimed this identity as central to his definition of black male being.” Ibid, 74.

³⁴ Ibid, 25.

³⁵ “[Black men] had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power.” Here, hooks argues that plantation patriarchy provided this ‘education.’ Ibid, 3.

³⁶ hooks, *Cool*, 79.

I call this alternative interpretive model the “erotic triangle” after English Literature scholar and Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s coinage in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick develops the erotic triangle as an analytical schema for male-male bonds in English literature, but her general purpose is to theorize how specific forms of male homosociality are defined and constitutive of “gender systems.”³⁷ In the context of Blaxploitation film, the erotic triangle is useful for characterizing the structure of mutual rivalry and desire between black and white fraternarchs.³⁸

The erotic triangle is premised on the division between homosocial and homosexual interaction between men: a “radically disrupted” continuum of homosocial desire.³⁹ Through the “conduit” of women, men experience and negotiate feelings of envy or desire for one another in stylized social relationships that disavow the specter of homoerotic desire.⁴⁰ In the context of Blaxploitation film, the erotic triangle offers a productive way to trouble heteronormative assumptions that undergird articulations of white/black competition over sexual access to and protective power over women.

The erotic triangle also allows me to approach queerness in Blaxploitation machismo differently from Film scholar Joe Wlodarz in his 2004 article, “Beyond the Black Macho.” Wlodarz undertakes a study of queer characters in Blaxploitation film to argue that

³⁷ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

³⁸ My use of the term ‘fraternarchs’ is motivated by Anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s argument for using ‘patriarchy’ as a technical term that is not necessarily synonymous with “gender-stratified systems.” Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 167-8. My terminology derives from Carole Pateman’s insights into the way in which the drama of liberal democratic political philosophy is founded on a revolutionary origin story. In this myth, the sons of the patriarchal monarch stage a revolution so that they may each share in their ‘rights’ to women. Hence, a form of fraternal political domination overthrows its patriarchal predecessor (in which political power and sexual domination was the exclusive right of the father). See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Rubin is an Anthropologist. Pateman is a Political Theorist and Feminist Theorist.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 2.

⁴⁰ Rubin, *Traffic*, 174.

their performances alongside macho leads destabilize heteronormative blackness.⁴¹ The way in which their presence is jokingly affirmed may serve to shore up the heterosexual self-possession of the male lead, but also calls attention to the ways in which sexual presentation is performative, challenging contemporary assumptions that the genre is fundamentally homophobic.

Wlodarz's analysis makes useful interventions into the interpretation of Blaxploitation film. However, by limiting his analysis of homosexuality to scenes featuring gay black and/or white men, Wlodarz takes for granted the radical disruption between male homosocial and homosexual desire central to the erotic triangle. This assumption prevents Wlodarz from recognizing the presence of homosocial desire in contexts where Blaxploitation films code black men's sexual relations with women as expressions of political antagonism between white and black men.⁴²

This paper's interpretive practice brings both the bitter tea model and the erotic triangle model in tension with one another. To some extent, their respective frames complement one another. The bitter tea model foregrounds how heterosexual pornography is premised on the consumption of images of women, "confessing pleasure" to the camera;⁴³ yet it does so at the expense of being able to situate pornography in a "traffic of women" that structures relations between men: producers, directors, distributors, government authorities, talent, consumers, and the broader public.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Joe Wlodarz, "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation" in *The Velvet Light Trap* 53 (2004).

⁴² "Nevertheless, we may take as an explicit axiom that the historically differential shapes of male and female homosociality—much as they themselves may vary over time—will always be articulations and mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between women and men." Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 5. This is just as true for the ways in which homosocial racial relations between white and black men articulate and enact inequalities of power.

⁴³ See note 29 for "confession of pleasure" in Williams, *Hard Core*.

⁴⁴ Rubin, "Traffic."

At the same time, the erotic triangle model risks forcing sexual discourse to signify “other centers of power,” creating a “slippage between the sexual symbols of power and the politics of sex.”⁴⁵ It runs the risk of ignoring how the consumption of women is implicated in a politics of gender roles that cannot be reduced wholesale to a metaphor for relations between white and black men. Thus, I engage with both models in order to develop an interpretation of masculinity in Blaxploitation film that is responsive to the politics of homosocial and heterosexual desire. To do so, I offer an interpretive model of my own through which this paper’s analysis is grounded: a reading practice based on what I call “homosocial hunger.”

Homosocial Hunger: Desire and Consumption Between Men

Homosociality works on many levels in Blaxploitation film. In production and distribution: the male-dominated network of producers, directors, casting agents, talent, writers, production crew, marketers, distributors, theater managers, and staff must all come together to bring films to consumers. In mass consumption: the male-oriented public sphere constituted by national audiences is supported by viewer identification with male leads. In the diegesis: the relationships between male characters must also drive the narrative.⁴⁶ At every level, these male-male relationships are mediated by desire: the desire to be entertained; the desire to turn a profit; the desire to bring a character to life; the desire to be recognized for one’s labor. These levels are joined to one another. Hence, their mediated desires are also linked to consumption and fungibility. Actors’ performances

⁴⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 44.

⁴⁶ The diegesis is a Film Studies term denoting the ‘world within a film.’ Most films expect audiences to ‘suspend their disbelief’ in order to accept the supernatural or mythological rules of the film world.

must be compensated. Tickets must be priced. Returns on investment must be counted. The hype train must feed on the bevy of reviews, analyses, posters, trailers, condemnations, awards, and cast interviews. In Blaxploitation film, this ecology of packaging, presenting, counting, and valuing can be read as a process of consuming black people's bodies and labor. Read in this way, the Sambo and Superspade icons can be seen not just as presentations of blackness, but also as figures mediating a particular set of relationships between producers, talent, distributors, and male audiences.

In *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, English Literature scholar Vincent Woodard develops an analytic around "homoeroticism" to make legible the sexual, physical, and emotional desires white slave-owners and had for their enslaved people—specifically, the desires (male) masters had for (and hid from) their male human property. Quoting from the work of Sociologist Orlando Patterson, Woodard demonstrates how the stereotypes white slaveholders ascribed to enslaved black people "camouflaged" a relation of parasitic dependency.⁴⁷ It was a "reality wherein the master deflected his appetites and hungers onto myths of the chattel slave as dependent, childlike, and somehow ennobled by the master's consumptive needs."⁴⁸ The movie character of Sambo brought these rituals of psychic projection and consumption to a mass (male) audience.⁴⁹ Any white American who could afford to attend the movies could be organized into a viewing public that vicariously disavowed and projected their feelings

⁴⁷ Woodard, quoting from Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 6.

⁴⁸ Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 7. Elsewhere in the book, consumption takes the form of black men and women weaning white children, feeding them and cooking for them, and acts of psychic consumption to allow white master's children to learn the proper ways of behavior and superiority over black people.

⁴⁹ Sambo is defined as childish, dependent, and bettered by serving white people as a means to work and wage. See Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), Chapter 1: "The Gamut from A to B."

of dependency onto the Sambo trope. This trope mediated an exchange between white (male) audiences and white (male) producers. Sambo metabolized this white appetite for racial superiority into box office returns on investment for the films' investors.⁵⁰

The emergence of the Superspade trope, designed to tap into the black box office, registers an attempt by producers to feed the hunger of an urban, black youth viewer base.⁵¹ Icons such as the Superspade served to sustain a new relation of exchange wherein black moviegoers' hungers for an empowered black iconography could be metabolized into box office revenue. To cultivate this new icon, producers had to harvest new tropes according to their black male audiences' palates, often reversing the characteristics once reserved for Sambo. The Superspade was tough, savvy, energetic, courageous, and independent.

Yet the Superspade also registered a shift in the articulation of blackness in relation to gender. Whereas Sambo was sexed male, he was by definition impotent and incapable of living up to the standard of virile white masculinity. Sambo marked one boundary by which black people were excluded from the gender schemes of (white) humanity.⁵² The arrival of the Superspade signals an attempt to merge blackness, previously bestialized via "pornotropic" discourse, into a gender scheme.⁵³

⁵⁰ This portrait of the political economy of Blaxploitation film carries echoes of how the exchange of black people facilitated relations between white men in US slavery.

⁵¹ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 233.

⁵² The Mammy is the female counterpart of Sambo: de-gendered, asexualized, loyal to white people, superstitious, boisterous, and vulgar. In other words, the Mammy is excluded from the cult of true white womanhood. "According to the cult of true womanhood, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Elite white women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images." Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 71.

⁵³ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 No. 2 (1987), 67.

The genderization of blackness in film was by no means instantaneous. Leab shows us a procession of black male archetypes between *Sambo* and *Superspade*: new paradigms that register new iterations in the attempt to articulate a black manhood profitable for US film.⁵⁴ Positive or negative, the reactions and responses from black intellectuals and communities reveal a *homosocial hunger*: that is, the desire to be seen “as men” on screen, in products from a white-dominated industry that had historically excluded black people from the province of masculinity. Hence, I use the term homosocial hunger to describe a desire to *become* men on screen, for the relationship between blackness and manhood to become homologous with whiteness and manhood.

I use “homosocial hunger” to consciously depart from Woodard’s “homoerotism.” Woodard uses homoerotism to address Foucauldian controversies over the proper use of the term “homosexuality” in historical context. This maneuver notwithstanding, I believe homoerotism veers too close to connoting a relationship of reciprocal desire between white masters and enslaved black men. The root, *eros*, is inadequate to the task of alluding to the unrepresentable violence inherent to the master-slave relation.

Any attempt to ‘fully’ account for the immeasurable violence of slavery will prove futile. My use of hunger is meant specifically to theorize the dynamic of consumption endemic to white supremacy. Hunger connotes a relation through which the object of consumption is chewed up, digested, metabolized for the consuming life form. Hunger conveys a dynamic of destructive power unacknowledged in *eros*, in which the object of hunger risks death through the act of consumption. At the same time, hunger implies

⁵⁴ Leab traces how Sidney Poitier’s “ebony saint” paradigm gives way to Jim Brown’s “new ‘hip’ image of the aggressive urban black” in the mid-1960s. Brown’s roles are a precursor to the *Superspade* of 1970s Blaxploitation proper. Leab, *Sambo to Superspade*, 234.

creation: an unavoidable, gnawing desire that also constitutes and structures the subjectivities of the 'consumer' and the 'consumed.'

Yet "hunger" enjoys plenty of appearances in Woodard's text as part of his analytical vocabulary.⁵⁵ *Eros* may be problematic, but it does not capture the entirety of what is at stake. What is key to my theoretical construction is its combination of "homosocial " with "hunger," to convey the way in which the *homo-* of homosociality is a locus of desire that makes visible a politics of gender exclusivity founded on white supremacist anti-blackness. Woodard's "homoerotism" assumes that there is a same-anything to begin with: but this is exactly the kind of relation that begs interrogation. For instance, Thomas writes on the subject of "same-sex" violation in US slavery:

Yet to be African and enslaved in the Americas means to be barred from gender conceits of empire, the humanity of manhood or womanhood and its Western heterosexuality. This sex could only transpire between those classified as human beings conventionally identified as men and women, not merely male and female, as non-human animals may be described...Crucially, the classification of Africans as sub-human facilitates these attacks against all Africans, since Black bodies can be abused as non-men and non-women by whites without white fears of homosexuality necessarily coming into play. Ideologically outside heterosexuality proper, enslaved Africans are physically and symbolically assaulted by heterosexualism, which in racist fashion applies the concept of bestiality (and sodomy, etc.) for precisely this kind of violence.⁵⁶

As Thomas shows, there was nothing necessarily *homosexual* about sexual abuse carried out by masters and mistresses because the bodies of enslaved people were seen as non-human beasts, and therefore excluded from any purchase on gender identity. Thomas also

⁵⁵ For example, "mother hunger." Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 112.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Sexual Demon*, 46

argues that the white ruling class did not see anything *sexual* about the abuse either: by implication, *sex* is defined as something that can only transpire between human beings. By virtue of enslaved black people's exclusion from the human community, this kind of violence was understood as bestiality rather than sexuality, sodomy rather than intercourse.

I have conceived of homosocial hunger as a theoretical lens to fit the context of black-white politics in the US entertainment market during the early 1970s. In this context, homosocial hunger not only reflects the ways in which black male audiences hungered for gendered black icons, but also reflects the ways in which white male producers hungered for the black box office by attempting to produce profitable articulations of black masculinity in their films. The semantics behind "commodity consumption" camouflages the way in which the capitalists of the entertainment industry consume their audiences via money as a store of labor time. Between producers and audiences, watching a movie concentrates a dense web of hungers and consumptive rituals mediated and hidden by the screen. The next sections will show how these hungers and rituals of consumption leave traces in the bodies of Blaxploitation films through the lens of homosocial hunger between black and white men.

PART 2: Black and White Male Appetites:

Disciplined Consumption and Utopian Hungers in *Black is Beautiful*

I lead my primary source analyses with *Black is Beautiful*;⁵⁷ both for chronological purposes and in order to demonstrate how homosocial hunger operates with respect to “scripting blackness” (specifically, blackness and manhood) for white male audiences.⁵⁸ I use this analysis to draw general conclusions for my subsequent readings of *Sweetback’s Song*, *Shaft*, and *Lialeh*. In this section, I argue that *Black is Beautiful* posits an erotic triangle between black and white men modulated by its appeal to a tasteful bourgeois aesthetic. By analyzing its invocation of the “stud,” I argue that this tasteful aesthetic articulates a scheme of consumption through which white men are given proper instruction for how to discipline their hungers for black men, and black men are encouraged to hunger for a patriarchal Pan-African utopia in which a fraternity of black men shared in the sexual domination of women.

The dual title of this film could be read as an attempt to market the film to a broad spectrum of consumers.⁵⁹ *Africanus Sexualis* reflects the film’s faux-ethnographic style by giving it an air of scientific neutrality. *Black is Beautiful*, by contrast, is a clear reference to

⁵⁷ *Africanus Sexualis: Black is Beautiful*. Dir. Matt Cimber. (1970, Aquarius, Film). This is a soft-core feature-length pornography film notable for being the first to showcase an all-black cast. The director, Matt Cimber, is white.

⁵⁸ “The terms inscription, scripting, scripts, inscriptive, and inscribing are used interchangeably throughout to mean figuratively that the body is socially understood and treated as a discursive text that is read by interactants. There are various racial meanings attached to bodily texts that can inspire individuals to behave differently toward foreign or unfamiliar bodies when encountering them in public and private spaces.”

Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 2. Jackson is a Communications scholar.

⁵⁹ An advertisement for the film published in *Variety* uses language that suggests an appeal to black viewers by using specific tribe names and flattery: “See in living color...the strange and erotic practices which make the Modern Black Man the happiest, best adjusted of all humans.” Its appeal to white viewers is coded with reference to the African “dark continent” trope and “scientific study.” “Institute for Adult Education.” *Variety* (Archive: 1905-2000) 258, no. 10 (Apr 22, 1970): 25.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1505792448?accountid=14509>.

the concurrent Black is Beautiful movement in which Black activists sought to negate anti-black beauty standards and white supremacist associations between blackness and ugliness. The dual titles work to digest the film in multiple ways: a scientific exposition of knowledge about black subjects; a timely connection to black uplift politics of the late 1960s; and a liberal articulation of racial tolerance discourse that seeks to know black subjects 'as they are,' through a lens unsullied by white supremacist biases against black people.

The film posits itself as an ethnographic look at "Negro" sexual customs passed down through an orientalized black Africa. However, because the narrator is positioned as a black male spokesperson for the entire black community, this lens is fashioned as an authentic look into an exotic community's erotic practices.⁶⁰ The cast is all black, and the narrator maintains an authoritative presence throughout the film by way of voiceover and direct address to the viewer. The narrator simultaneously speaks for black men and speaks to an implied white male audience: as if to say, like you, "we will not abide a dominant woman."⁶¹

This phrase offers a glimpse into the erotic triangle undergirding the film's message. The narrator indexes a black-white binary by playing orientalized African blackness against modern European whiteness. At the same time, he appeals to a shared fraternal community

⁶⁰ The creation of an exotic, erotic black Africa is reminiscent of Malek Alloula's analysis of French postcards depicting Algerian harems. Similar to the postcards, the film uses mock-ups of African 'tribal huts' to set the scene for its sex performances. See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Alloula is a poet, writer, editor, and literary critic.

⁶¹ The narrator states: "The African male is considered the dominant part and the central force of the marriage. The woman is usually taught by her mother that it is her duty to please the husband whenever he wishes to be pleased. And this is the way it still is, regardless of the North American influences that have pervaded most tribes. Woman is still considered the property, and primary possession of her man. Our ancestors felt that the man was master, the woman slave [sic]. Even though we no longer carry it to this extent, we will not abide a dominant woman." *Black is Beautiful*, 13:37.

that crosses this binary. This fraternal community is premised on the domination of women and a shared understanding of the responsibilities domination entails, even if it achieved through different cultural practices. In doing so, *Black is Beautiful* relies on fraternarchal appeal to simultaneously affirm and cross the proposed racial barrier to mutual understanding.

As a soft-core pornography film, *Black is Beautiful* includes plenty of scenes featuring black men having sex with black women. In the first instance of nudity, the voyeuristic camera examines black men and women's bodies with equal attention. Yet the stated goal of the film is to understand the cultural etiology of "truths" behind white stereotypes of black men as "studs...possessing a secret sexuality."⁶² There is no corresponding inquiry into the truths of black women's pleasure or any attempt at narration from their perspective. This structured absence suggests that we read the film not merely as a cover for prurient interest in black women's bodies, but as a text that traffics images of black women to establish a virtual relationship between black and white men.

To what extent can homosocial hunger characterize this virtual relationship? What is the connection between the fraternal bond and homosocial hunger? In the following paragraphs I read *Black is Beautiful* as an exercise in cultivated appetite for white viewers and a utopian vision of African patriarchal civilization for black viewers. In the first half of this section, I argue that through the process of teaching "ethnographic" knowledge of the African black other, *Black is Beautiful* proposes to convert white men's repulsion for black men's bodies to a studied appreciation. I argue that this process of conversion exceeds the

⁶² *Black is Beautiful*, ~39:50.

stated bounds of the film's project by betraying the presence of an underlying hunger for black men's bodies. In the second half, I argue that *Black is Beautiful* articulated a version of Pan-African identity marked by patriarchal social organization at a time of heightened controversy surrounding the question of whether African civilization was originally matriarchal or patriarchal. This reveals a homosocial hunger of a different sort, a longing for a narrative of African civilizational history in which patriarchy is an expression of Pan-African identity and challenges to this gender regime are dismissed as foreign corruptions.

For white viewers, *Black is Beautiful* promises to explain the secrets of the black 'African' stud in an exercise of cultivated appreciation. The film takes for granted the existence of a latent hunger white men have for black men that manifests outwardly as sexual insecurity, jealousy, and hatred. Disciplined by way of learning proper sexual knowledge and cultural empathy, this hunger manifests as cultured appreciation and a means to sexual self-improvement. Under the auspices a cross-racial fraternal bond, *Black is Beautiful* claims to teach bourgeois white men how to properly consume black men: not as objects to be destroyed, but as objects to be known and incorporated into white male identity. Appeal to this fraternity effectively disavows the underlying dynamic of white men consuming black men by offering up women as the shared bodies of black and white male consumption.

The opening crawl reproduces quotations from W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr. about the "Negro question" and the importance of understanding the other.⁶³ The crawl goes on to propose that white men hate and fear black men as sexual predators

⁶³ Notably, no mention is made of the 1968 assassination of Dr. King or the nationwide Holy Week Uprising, two years before the release of the film. Given this recent historical context, the film's emphasis on tolerance seems to suggest an attempt to obliquely, yet topically, engage with tense national black-white relations. The film's 1970 advertisement in *Variety* claims that black men are the "happiest, most well-adjusted" members of the human race (see Note 61); this strikes me as a combination of willful ignorance and wishful thinking.

because of their lack of understanding of black African sexual customs. The film also promotes itself as sex manual that demonstrates how white men can improve their sex lives by incorporating African practices and attitudes about sex. Each sex scene is paired with a voiceover explaining black African 'tribal' customs and names for sexual positions. Using clinical language, the voiceover provides instructions for how to do each sex position.⁶⁴ The implication is that white men can follow these practices in order to become studs themselves and to assuage their jealousies of black male sexual prowess. Hence the film's commitments to liberal empathy and sex instruction are linked: by following the exercises and becoming studs themselves, white men can conquer their resentment of black men and see them as peers.

Black is Beautiful's scheme of consumption is conceived as taste for black African sexual practices. Its instrumentalization of black African sexual culture and schematized scrutiny of black people's bodies resonates with the everyday practices of US slavery: auctioning, breeding, and the cultivation of mastery based on 'knowledge' of African 'tribal' dispositions. These parallels suggest that *Black is Beautiful* inherits its scheme of consumption through the afterlife of slavery.⁶⁵ Latent in the promise that white men must study black men in order to become potent studs are the impulses of a historical relationship through which white men consumed black men in order to become proper masters.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Some examples of the names for these sex positions include "Lundi entry" and "Anandi." Sources are not cited in this film: there is no reason to believe that any of this information reflects research on sexual customs across the African continent.

⁶⁵ See note 12. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

⁶⁶ "In the public domain, whites, I have shown, either repressed the topic of human consumption or spoke of the consumed slave as a philosophical and moral issue. However, the slaves, having less to lose, described their enslavement as a form of appetite and epicurean hunger for black flesh that whites cultivated in the

Yet *Black is Beautiful* was not just released with white (male) audiences in mind. Its advertising campaign and dual title suggests that producers were hungry for both the black and white (male) box offices. The film's commercial success suggests that attempts to market the film's 'crossover' appeal worked. Popular interest in black Africa rose on the crest of a series of triumphant national independence movements. Historian and cultural critic Manning Marable surveys the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, reminding us that "[s]udden changes in the consciousness of oppressed people are often reflected in their poetry."⁶⁷ He notes how "some Black women intellectuals" affirmed Black men's leadership by embracing the cult of true black womanhood. Marable demonstrates how writers "combined the African mythology of the cultural nationalists with the sexist acceptance of the woman-as-womb."⁶⁸ Yet repressed beneath these "high hosannas" written by women to celebrate men was a bitter conflict over the nature and meaning of black women's liberation from patriarchy in the context of the black liberationist struggle against white imperialism.⁶⁹

Anthropologist Johnetta Cole and English Literature scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall describe this atmosphere in their chapter: "Collisions: Black Liberation Versus Women's Liberation."⁷⁰ Cole and Guy-Sheftall combine the critical insights of black women intellectuals and organizers on the sexist organizational politics within black liberationist organizations. Cole and Guy-Sheftall also support their argument by using patriarchal

context of physical abuse, sexualized abuses, and all manner of daily master/slave relations." Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 76-7.

⁶⁷ Manning Marable, "Groundings with My Sisters: Patriarchy and the Exploitation of Black Women," in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), 133.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

⁷⁰ Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 2003), 71.

essays penned by intellectual leaders in “the masculine sixties” to reconstruct the scene.⁷¹ Yet what emerges from this historical portrait is that the sheer volume of black nationalist patriarchal essays and speeches available to the authors (and others writing on the period) betrays just how much women were advocating for themselves in the black liberation movement. This is not to suggest that women were ‘doing just fine,’ but to argue that referring to the decade, or movement, as masculinist, fails to capture the sense of gender crisis repressed beneath vehemently patriarchal power politics. Political Scientist and Philosopher Joy James paves the way for this line of thinking in her Foreword to Feminist Theorist and French Literature scholar T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*. On the politics of remembering black liberationist movements, James writes:

It is a current truism that a strange marriage (in fact, one in which battery is not an unknown feature) exists between feminism and black liberation politics, especially male revolutionary politics. Fortunately, much spoken and written work has addressed the sexism and misogyny of black of ‘Third World’ male radicals. Unfortunately, the critiques are occasionally Pavlovian in their dismissals of male revolutionaries, fighting racism and imperialism, as uniformly counterfeminist. These Pavlovian leaps, like binary polarities, mask the complexities of liberation struggles against the oppressed status of colonized peoples.⁷²

Here, James opens up a way to read the ‘collision’ between the Black Liberation and Women’s Liberation movements as a process through which male revolutionaries also came to struggle with masculinity and engage with feminist critiques of gender systems.

⁷¹ Ibid, 79.

⁷² Joy James, “Foreword,” in *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), ix.

James cautions readers not to read black “male revolutionary politics” as a monolithic bloc uniformly committed to rejecting feminism and excluding black women from leading organizations and defining liberationist strategies.

In this context, *Black is Beautiful* should not be seen as corroborative evidence indicative of sexism in black cultural nationalist aesthetics, but rather, as a commercial product made relevant by its tendentious claims on the patriarchal origins of black African identity. One of the major touchstones in this conflict was the 1965 publication of Sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.⁷³ The Moynihan Report famously conceived of the African “matriarchal” family structure as pathological and, moreover, an outcome of United States slavery.⁷⁴ This had the dual effect of framing matriarchy as an aberrant form of social organization tied to the abnormal circumstances of US slavery, and cleaving matriarchy from any basis in cultural heritage or African Diasporic identity.

Read in this light, *Black is Beautiful* could be read as a thematic complement to the Moynihan Report. Whereas the Moynihan Report presents matriarchy as a social aberration produced by US slavery, *Black is Beautiful* presents a utopian version of black Africa untouched by Western influence—and, by extension, Atlantic slavery—in which patriarchy is the norm. This rhetorical operation conflates African cultural nationalism with patriarchal sexism and implies, just as the Moynihan Report prescribes, that patriarchy is a social organization to which black people must *return* in order to restore their communities after slavery. Viewers of *Black is Beautiful* must be attentive to the ways

⁷³ Cole and Guy-Sheftall argue that the “popularity” of the Report contributed to the intensification of the “gender conflicts” of the 1960s. Cole and Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk*, 79.

⁷⁴ Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, (Washington, D.C., Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

in which its patriarchal agenda attempts to create a normative vision of gender hierarchy characteristic of 'true' Pan-African civilization.

In scholarship, the question of African matriarchy acquired a profound sense of urgency in the wake of the Moynihan Report. The 1971 edited volume *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality?* is a helpful primary source in this respect. The opening paragraph summarizes the issues at hand:

Recent political controversy has refocused attention on an aspect of the black experience that has long been the subject of scholarly attention: the structures and functions of the black family. Scholars have tried to show that the black family was either a product of social conditions in the United States or has strong traces of African cultural survivals; that the black family was or was not female-dominated: that female dominance was a source of strength or of weakness, that the black family was a pathological expression of the American family or a product of a viable black subculture. The purpose of this volume is to illustrate the major points of view concerning the existence, extent, and nature of a black matriarchy.⁷⁵

Perhaps less cited in the US context is Historian and Anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop's pathbreaking work on African civilization in *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, first published in 1959 by Presence Africaine, in French. Diop argues for reading Africa and Europe as distinct cradles of civilization: the former characterized by matriarchal and matrilineal social organizations, and the latter characterized by patriarchal and patrilineal social organizations. Diop's thesis on cultural authenticity allows him to explain the presence of African patriarchy as a mark of colonization by foreign elements: "It is found

⁷⁵ John H. Bracey Jr., "Introduction," In *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality?* Ed. John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 1. The chapter titles chart out the central schools of thought: "The Frazier Thesis," "The Question of African Survivals," "The Frazier Thesis Applied," "The Moynihan Report," and "New Approaches." Bracey is a Historian.

that the present tendency of the internal evolution of the African family is towards a patriarchy more or less attenuated by the matriarchal origins of the society. We cannot emphasize too much the role played in this transformation by outside factors, such as the religions of Islam and Christianity and the secular presence of Europe in Africa.”⁷⁶

As Diop’s text shows, the problematic of black matriarchy precedes the Moynihan Report by several years.⁷⁷ This problematic also illustrates what was utopian about *Black is Beautiful*’s vision of Pan-African patriarchy. Beneath its faux-ethnographic veneer, *Black is Beautiful* spoke to a homosocial hunger for a male-dominated, authentically African society. This hunger to see black men as cultural proprietors and sexual masters may have fed both white and black male audiences’ appetites. Yet, as I have argued here, it fed those appetites in different ways and for different reasons. To the extent that *Black is Beautiful* created a “shared cultural space” between white and black men by way of entertainment consumption, it relied upon the masculinist exclusion of women from its fraternal community.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: the Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Karnak House, 1989), 113.

⁷⁷ See Diop, *Cultural Unity*, 108 for the specific definition of matriarchy in his project. See also Ifi Amadiume’s Introduction for clarification that this matriarchal society does not mean the absence of conflict, but allows for the flexibility of gender roles and women’s ability to control political and social institutions. Ifi Amadiume, “Introduction,” in *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: the Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*, Cheikh Anta Diop. (London: Karnak House, 1989). Amadiume is an Anthropologist.

⁷⁸ “Listening to Motown records in the sixties or dancing to hip hop music in the nineties may not lead one to question the sexual myths of black women and men, but when white and black kids buy the same Billboard hits and laud the same athletic heroes the result is often a shared cultural space where some humane interaction takes place.” Cornel West, “Black Sexuality: The Taboo Subject,” in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), 302. West is a Philosopher.

PART 3: Blackness and Gender:

Politics and Palatability in *Sweet Sweetback's Badaaassss Song*

Sweet Sweetback's Badaaassss Song (hereafter, *Sweetback's Song*) is a fugitive tale set in urban Los Angeles starring director, writer, and producer Melvin Van Peebles as the titular character, Sweetback.⁷⁹ Raised in a brothel and groomed for sex work, Sweetback is introduced as a stud and a workingman. On one fateful night, Sweetback's manager asks him to go with two policemen to the local station in order to pass as a black male criminal so that the officers can close an unsolved murder case. Sweetback obediently goes with them. However, during the trip, the officers detain a young black revolutionary named Moo-Moo and decide to viciously beat him before continuing to the station. In a flash of passion, Sweetback uses his handcuffs to maul the policemen to near death and save Moo-Moo's life. So begins the central action of the film, in which Sweetback escapes across the US-Mexico border while evading LAPD and California state troopers in pursuit.

Sweetback's Song is often cited as the precursor of the Blaxploitation genre with the understanding that Melvin Van Peebles set the formula that commercial Blaxploitation films would later follow.⁸⁰ The debate on how to evaluate *Sweetback's Song* and the Blaxploitation genre in general has existed since the very beginning of the genre. This

⁷⁹ *Sweet Sweetback's Badaaassss Song*. Dir. Mario Van Peebles. (1971, New York City: Cinemation), Film. Van Peebles produced, wrote, and starred in the film. Although it makes use of elements from the art-house film aesthetic, Van Peebles had always intended for the film to be a commercially viable product. As Mark Reid notes, Van Peebles "intensified the eroticism of his film," making use of soft-core pornographic scenes in order to appeal to his commercial distributor, Cinemation, known for working in the soft-core feature market. Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 82. Reid is an American Studies scholar.

⁸⁰ This narrative has been disputed. Novotny Lawrence argues that the film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) may have been more influential than *Sweetback's Song* at setting up the pattern for Blaxploitation action films later taken up in *Shaft* (1971). Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Lawrence is a Film and Media scholar.

debate has generated a voluminous literature that continues to animate scholarship in the present day. Historian John Robert Terry provides a helpful outline of the controversy:

Within both the black community and academia, there has been much debate over the role of these films. Most would admit that Blaxploitation films, for a time, eradicated previous stereotypes of the submissive black character and provided some opportunities for black actors and black people working within the film industry more broadly. Others would counter, stating that studios controlled by whites profited the most off of the genre and that Blaxploitation replaced old stereotypes of submissive blacks with new stereotypes of hyper-sexualized, violent, anti-social blacks living in a fictionalized ghetto world characterized by vice and lawlessness.⁸¹

I do not attempt to resolve this controversy, nor do I claim to write a definitive interpretation. Rather, I draw upon Africana and Feminist Studies scholar C. Riley Snorton's *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* in order to understand the discursive politics undergirding the controversy over *Sweetback's Song* and Melvin Van Peeble's status as a black male filmmaker. With the help of Snorton's analytic of the glass closet, I seek to locate discourse on *Sweetback's Song* in the context of a panoptic regime in which black men's political identities are subjected to hypervisibility and pathologization.

Snorton develops the "glass closet" out of Eve Sedgwick's "epistemology of the closet." Whereas the epistemology of the closet focuses on the silences and censorships attendant to keeping one's homosexual identity hidden 'in the closet,' the glass closet refers to the ways in which black men are always already tagged with suspicion as sexually deviant figures who may date women publicly but secretly have sex with men (on the "down low"). This anticipation of sexual deviance works to confine black men (in a

⁸¹ John Robert Terry, "Towards the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power," *Madison Historical Review* 9 (2012): 80.

presumed sexual closet) and make them targets for hypervisible scrutiny by spokespeople for various black communities (hence, the closet is made of transparent glass).⁸² As we will see, I take Snorton's glass closet out of its original context (black communities' discourse on the AIDS crisis) and apply it to a form of suspicion that assumes black men engaged in revolutionary projects always already patriarchal and sexist, even if closeted behind the rhetoric of gender critique and sexual liberation.

African-American Literature scholar Mark Anthony Neal has set the standard for contemporary feminist readings of *Sweetback's Song*. Neal describes the eponymous hero as a "revolutionary character" that nevertheless "[paved] the way for portrayals of black masculinity...rife with many problematic elements, including unchallenged expressions of patriarchy, queer bashing, misogyny, and crude political ideas."⁸³ He continues on to read Huey Newton's review of the film for evidence of how the logic of Newton's Black Power politics "[spoke] volumes about the subjugation of the weaker bodies of the black community...to further the 'revolutionary' agenda of the ruling patriarchs."⁸⁴ Neal's readings of Van Peeble's and Huey Newton's politics puts into effect a series of rhetorical elisions that coalesce *Sweetback's Song*, the Black Panther Party, and Black Power into a single ideological complex marked by moral pathology.

⁸² "Throughout this book, I point to the relationship between down-low figures and the more general appearance of black sexuality in representation and make use of the 'glass closet' as a metaphor and analytic to describe how black sexualities are characterized by hypervisibility and confinement and subject to regulation and surveillance." C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 5. I argue that the 'glass closet' metaphor could be used just as well to describe the ways in which black men's politics are subjected to "hypervisibility, confinement, regulation, and surveillance."

⁸³ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 24.

⁸⁴ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 26.

It is not my intention to say whether or not Neal is justified to define *Sweetback's Song* in these terms.⁸⁵ Yet his argument, and the tradition of Blaxploitation critique to which it is indebted, bears certain rhetorical similarities to “down low” discourses that C. Riley Snorton analyzes in the context of the AIDS moral panic in the US national black community. The down low describes black men who identify as heterosexual but have sex with other men on the sly. Snorton understands the down low as “one in myriad discursive practices that link black sexuality with duplicity” that was “[c]oncretized as a term in the early 2000s.”⁸⁶ Popular crises over the down low expressed fears that black men who identified as straight but secretly slept with other men on the side could expose their women partners to HIV infection. This discourse brought together notions of moral corruption, physiological contamination, and dangerous black sexuality.

While the context may be different, Neal's critique of *Sweetback's Song* deploys rhetoric concerning a kind of moral and political contamination through which black male liberationists are rendered suspect.⁸⁷ The proliferation of political pathologies, “patriarchy, queer bashing, misogyny, and crude political ideas,” is suggestive of an ambiguity in Neal's diagnosis that works counter to his enumerations.⁸⁸ In this way, it is analogous to Snorton's discussion of a notable hoax article following black R&B singer Ciara: “From its trans(phobic) signification on Ciara's first crossover hit “Goodies” (2004) in its headline to

⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Wlodarz's makes an important contribution to this discussion with his analysis of the “militant queen” in *Sweetback's Song* and Blaxploitation film in general. “Perhaps most significantly, some black queers in Blaxploitation, like the ‘militant queen’ in *Sweet Sweetback* and Lindy in *Car Wash*, are presented in a surprisingly affirmative manner and become essential components to their respective films' complex visions of blackness, masculinity, and militancy.” Wlodarz, “Beyond,” 16. Wlodarz uses *Sweet Sweetback* to abbreviate the title of the film. I deliberately choose *Sweetback's Song* to place emphasis on the centrality of the film's soundtrack in my reading of the film.

⁸⁶ Snorton *Nobody*, 3.

⁸⁷ See Snorton, *Nobody*, 130 for a discussion of “suspect” in the context of celebrity gossip and suspected queer behavior.

⁸⁸ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 24

its apparent confusion about gender and sexual identity—she is simultaneously gay, lesbian, and a transvestite—the e-mail hoax seems to make use of every available form of homophobic and transphobic logic to heighten its sensationalist pitch.”⁸⁹

This is not to accuse Neal of being sensationalist in his own treatment of *Sweetback’s Song*. Rather, I suggest that the ease with which Neal concatenates patriarchy, homophobia, sexism, and tastelessness betrays his investment in a reactionary revision of history. As Greg Thomas puts it, “The geopolitics of empire may be best illustrated by the vilification of nationalism (or nationality) in now standard discussions of sexism and homophobia. The nationalism vilified is typically the nationalism of the colonized, not the colonizer who invents nationalism as a bourgeois form of rule. Hence, many people come to see *Black* “nationalism” as synonymous with *any given evil*...And where ‘Black nationalism’ is vilified, its Black popular culture is never far behind.”⁹⁰ Reading “vilification” as a form of pathologization, we can see how Thomas’s critique intersects with Snorton’s notion of the glass closet. Here we find evidence of a glass closet that places “black power bodies” under surveillance for pathological ideological commitments registered as evidence of moral corruption.⁹¹ Under these conditions, Black Nationalism is configured as a contaminated political position, always already suspect, that must be excluded from respectable domains of political activism.

⁸⁹ Snorton, *Nobody*, 136.

⁹⁰ Emphasis mine. Thomas, *Sexual Demon*, 130.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 129. This surveillance of “black power bodies” by black intellectuals in some ways reproduces the logic of COINTELPRO and state surveillance of Black Nationalist activity in general. The connection between black intellectual thought and statist discourse stoked controversy when bell hooks called black celebrity Beyoncé a “terrorist” during a panel discussion on 6 May, 2014 at Eugene Lang College. See “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,” (YouTube, 7 May 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjk0hNROvzs>

Black Nationalism is not necessarily synonymous with Black Power. Nevertheless, Thomas's critique speaks to the importance of how we define these terms and how these definitions shape the contours of memories of what Black liberation has meant throughout history. Terry argues that scholars who link Blaxploitation to Black Power use a static and limited definition of Black Power to make this claim. Terry defines Black Power broadly as "self-determination within the black community based on a sense of group solidarity and the valuation of blackness and black cultural products."⁹² He contends that scholars often unwittingly conflate their glosses of Black Power with the "almost cartoonish version" purveyed in Blaxploitation films.⁹³ As Terry puts it: "Black power is often remembered as something that was violent, male-dominated, and unreasonable—a black fantasy—when in fact it was a dynamic form of race consciousness resulting from constant negotiations of gender, class status, friendships, community affiliations, religious and political preferences, notions of freedom, and concerns about the position of black people in the United States and the world."⁹⁴

Both Terry and Thomas call for remembering Black Power as a dynamic and vibrant movement. I take this call as a point of entry into reappraising *Sweetback's Song* as well. Rather than rehashing critiques of sexism and homophobia in *Sweetback's Song*, I construct a different reading approach that centers on how the film destabilizes counter-insurgent assumptions about gender and sexuality in the context of Black Power and contemporary Black popular culture. As we will see, homosocial hunger provides a useful optic for

⁹² Terry, "Gendering of Blaxploitation," 81.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

disrupting the now standard anti-homophobic, anti-sexist readings of *Sweetback's Song* by insisting on more nuanced attention to how the film imagines relations between men.

Much deserved critique has been made of a particular scene, early on in the film, in which a young Sweetback is raped by a female sex worker. The child eventually seems to enjoy the sex and towards the end of the scene, an abrupt cut replaces the young Sweetback with the adult Sweetback, implying that having sex literally turned the child into an adult. This scene has been criticized on a variety of grounds: for its abuse of a child actor, for its heavy-handed patriarchal cliché, and for its crude political message in which a woman initiates a child into manhood.⁹⁵

The next scene, which Film Historian Amanda Howell describes as “yet another version of the origins of Sweetback,”⁹⁶ features a sex show and a transformation of its own that creates tension with Sweetback’s preceding “baptism” into manhood.⁹⁷ Howell provides a helpful reading of the scene, in which a “Good Dyke Fairy Godmother” transforms one of the unnamed actors into Sweetback. Notably, this performance is cut against dialogue between two white policemen and the owner of the brothel, a black man named Beatle, as they watch the show.

The sex show begins with an ostensibly heterosexual couple. One is clothed in a dress while the other wears a hat, beard, and jacket: their respective wardrobes are designed to shape our assumptions about their gender identities. As the music begins, the man removes his jacket and top to reveal that he is wearing a bra underneath, suggesting

⁹⁵ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 26.

⁹⁶ Amanda Howell, *Popular Film Music and Masculinity in Action: A Different Tune* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 78.

⁹⁷ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 26, in which Newton is quoted for describing the scene as a “[baptism] into his true manhood.”

that he is really a woman. After making out on the floor with their partner, the male impersonator kneels in prayer and invokes the “Good Dyke Fairy Godmother.”

Howell reads the moment of gender transformation as another instance of play-acting. She explains the scene under the assumption that the male impersonator—Sweetback—wore a bra to appear to be a woman. In Howell’s words: “[t]hanks to the Godmother’s (cinematic) magic, a bra is removed to show a muscular chest.”⁹⁸ However, on closer examination, we can see that Van Peebles visualizes this transformation using a rapid dissolve and superimposition, much as he did during the sexual “baptism” scene when Sweetback turned into an adult.



Figure 3.1: Sweetback Before Removing Bra. The Good Dyke Fairy Godmother is about to zap Sweetback (gender ambiguous up to this point), just before they remove their bra.

⁹⁸ Howell, *Popular Film Music*, 78



Figure 3.2: Sweetback Removing Bra (Before Transition). Sweetback has just removed their bra. The actress's female breasts are now visible.



Figure 3.2: Sweetback Removing Bra (After Transition). The Good Dyke Fairy Godmother has just zapped Sweetback. This is a different actor. His skin tone is darker and he has male breasts. Van Peebles uses a dissolve to transition between the stills from Figure 2.2 to Figure 2.3.

At 10:30, the Godmother says, “Zap, child.” The actor removes their bra [Figure 3.1], revealing female breasts [Figure 3.2]. At about the same time, the image transitions to a male’s chest [Figure 3.3]. This transition is matched with the audience gasping in surprise. We can also see that the male’s physique is more muscular and his skin appears darker. It is apparent from the screenshots that these are two different actors. At 10:40, the Godmother zaps Sweetback’s hat. He removes his hat and beard as a member of the audience calls out his name.

At 10:44, the scene matches with Howell’s description. Following the next zap, Sweetback removes a dildo he had been wearing over his penis. The sex performance and the music pick up again as an audience member can be heard saying “Come on Sweetback!”

Get it on, girl!” It is not clear who she is referring to: Sweetback or the unnamed actress (who has been a woman the entire performance). Other spectators chime in with words of encouragement, referring to Sweetback as “brother.”

Howell critiques this scene for its problematic masculinist politics. This is certainly a fair reading. The sex show presents Sweetback as a manly ideal. Not only is his physique desirable for woman, he is made out to be an object of desire for “dykes” who are stereotyped to dream of being men. However, Howell’s reading depends in part on misremembering the first moments of the transition scene. Her assumption that Sweetback has been a man the entire time causes her to skip over this brief, but important moment.

Howell’s lapse is instructive. It reveals how preconceived notions of a particular moment can mask more ambiguous footage. What allows her to assume that Sweetback is a man? Philosopher Judith Butler’s discussion of drag and gender performativity comes to mind. Performativity happens when we presume a ‘real’ gender, ‘opposite’ and ‘interior’ to the drag performance. These assumptions are founded on a performative routine: the instance of watching a drag performance catalyzes a process of knowledge making in which audiences ‘see’ a stable, enduring, ‘natural’ gender ‘underneath’ the performer’s facade.⁹⁹ In this way, our ability to read Sweetback as a man requires a repression of certain complicating images in the film.

Throughout this scene, footage of the sex show has been cut with footage of the two policemen and Beetle negotiating a deal. As Howell puts it, the cops choose him to “play the role of a suspect in the murder of a black man, a bit of politically motivated ‘eyewash’ for

⁹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 186.

police superiors going through the motions.”¹⁰⁰ While Howell passes over this moment, there is an important irony between the two threads in this scene. Just as the cops finally pressure Beatle into letting them take Sweetback with them, the Godmother offers Sweetback to the crowd to “try” and see for themselves why he has earned his reputation for sex. A white woman in the audience stands up and begins removing her shirt when the Godmother stops her and says that Sweetback is “for sisters only.”

At the same time, Beatle gives in to the cops. He tells Sweetback to “go with these gentlemen for the evening. See you tomorrow.”¹⁰¹ Beatle’s lines evoke a double-entendre, laden with sexual subtext. In this subtext, the cops triumph over “sisters only” because they get to take Sweetback for the night. Read in this manner, there is more to this scene than Sweetback’s own “gender variability.”¹⁰² This subtext reveals a deeper meaning: in this moment of exchange, white male cops push against with black women sisters. Sweetback is figured as an object of two conflicting and simultaneous hungers. He is offered up for exchange as a body only contingently defined by gender to fulfill two kinds of desires.

The gender variability, or contingency, that defines Sweetback in these two origin stories is suggestive of Diop’s writing on African civilizational history. Viewers first encounter Sweetback as an abandoned orphan, taken into the brothel’s community of women. They give him food, a name, a special power, an audience, and a livelihood. Their role in Sweetback’s life suggests that Van Peebles attempted to allegorize a nurturing version of African society prior to the colonial encounter. After Sweetback becomes a ‘man,’ the next scene has the police arrive and press for Sweetback’s body. In keeping with the

¹⁰⁰ Howell, *Popular Film Music*, 77.

¹⁰¹ *Sweetback’s Song*, 13:54.

¹⁰² Howell, *Popular Film Music*, 78.

allegory to African history, this scene carries echoes of saltwater slavery, in which West African soldiers (here characterized by Beatle, the owner of the brothel) brought their captives of war to European outposts (symbolized by the police) for trade.

Howell aligns *Sweetback's Song* with the counter-cinematic tradition with its use of a "multiple diegetic structure" that marks the visual and aural registers as two conflicting realities in the film.¹⁰³ The camera's gaze is knowingly implicated with Sweetback's sexual objectification and the white supremacist police, while the funk soundtrack aligns itself with the voice of the black community. As Howell puts it:

In one world of the film, the white dominated visualist or ocularcentric regime, Sweetback is an object of pursuit, silent, dogged, dangerous, and, to a great extent, alone. He is even isolated from the black community who are preoccupied with their own misery, their own exile, proscribed by poverty and white authority. This world—of white cops and black criminals—is characterized largely by silence, broken only by the film's rather stilted dialogue. This world is characterized by fairly conventional staging, camerawork, and editing, all of which signal...its alliance with the dominant forms of screen realism and storytelling. By contrast, in the other, black-dominated realm of the film, Sweetback is a subject with a history, a community, and motivations beyond the desires of the moment. Unlike the integrationist heroes of Hollywood, he does not fit neatly into a white dominated landscape but effectively transforms it by his actions and perceptions. The black dominated world of the film is centered largely on the aural rather than the visual; it is populated by a polyphonic combination of black music and voices that transforms a black man on the run into something—someone—more heroic...their diegetic space is identified with music, energy, motion, emotion, and a keen concern for Sweetback's wellbeing.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Howell, *Popular Film*, 86.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 87-8.

Since the visual register corresponds to the “anxious, desiring” white supremacist gaze of the police, the camera’s depiction of black characters should be seen as unreliable, confined to producing stereotypical images of urban blackness.¹⁰⁵ Rather than privileging the camera’s gaze, Howell argues for paying close attention to how the aural register in *Sweetback’s Song* destabilizes the visual register. In this analysis, the aural, authentic to the Los Angeles black community, exists in tension with the visual, a white supremacist distortion of the Los Angeles black community.

However, by casting the film as “unregenerately masculinist” Howell fails to press the implications of this dual diegesis in *Sweetback’s Song* and its critique of vision-centered narrative.¹⁰⁶ In surprising ways, the film’s dual diegesis anticipates black feminist critiques in the 1990s of the failings of visual representation and the recuperative potential of sound. Jennifer C. Nash offers a helpful exegesis. Of the founding figures in this movement, Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins and American Literature scholar Hortense Spillers, Nash writes: “Like Collins, Spillers indicates that visual culture can never function as the locus of black women’s liberation. Instead, a ‘truer sexual self-image,’ one that captures ‘the poetry of black female sexual experience,’ can only be located in ‘the domain of music and America’s black female vocalists.’”¹⁰⁷ Spillers’ and Collins’ critiques carry echoes of Van Peeble’s own critical approach to representing the urban, LA black community through his dual diegesis. Spillers, Collins, and Van Peebles are all invested in the notion that visual culture is an obstacle to black liberation, and that only musical expression can capture the truths of black experience.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Nash, *Ecstasy*, 42.

If Sweetback's masculinization is a process that does not necessarily end with the Good Dyke Fairy Godmother's intervention, then this masculinization occurs throughout the film in the context of surviving white supremacy. Sweetback negotiates sex with a woman in order for her to remove his handcuffs, wins a "sex duel" in order to gain passage through a biker gang's property, and rapes a black woman "'out of 'revolutionary expediency'" to escape a state trooper patrol.¹⁰⁸ I am not saying that *Sweetback's Song* is a feminist film. Nor am I arguing that *Sweetback's Song* should be held above Neal's antisexist critique. Rather, *Sweetback's Song* attempts, but ultimately fails, to engage critically with the politics of gender, community, and revolt. The singing chorus of the "true 'black community'" is not gendered.¹⁰⁹ Men do not lead this community. Nevertheless, *Sweetback's Song* fails to take its symbolisms to their full implications. It fails to take up the revolutionary potential of anti-gender politics. It privileges the fugitive folk heroism of his male protagonist in a major capitulation to the Moynihan Report's prescriptions: that in a male-dominated nation, black men must assimilate into the roles of manhood in order for their community to survive.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, I argue that *Sweetback's Song* defies easy categorization as an "unchallenged [expression] of patriarchy, queer bashing, misogyny, and crude political ideas."¹¹¹ When writers uncritically impose these political pathologies, they deny

¹⁰⁸ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 25, quoting Ed Guerrero.

¹⁰⁹ Howell, *Popular Film*, 88. On the same page, Howell mentions that they are referred to as the "Colored Angels" in Van Peebles' script.

¹¹⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," *United States Department of Labor* 1965. Accessed online 26 April 2016 at <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>

¹¹¹ Neal *Soul Babies*, 24

Sweetback's Song its place in a tradition of black aesthetic critique.¹¹² *Sweetback's Song* offers an attempt to articulate a different kind of hunger: not just the homosocial desire to see black men winning against white adversaries, but a hunger to defy the constraints of a heteronormative gender binary. In this sense, homosocial hunger may be a misnomer. I theorize *Sweetback's Song* as a film that attempts, but ultimately fails, to take homosocial hunger to its breaking point: where the distinctions between *homo* and *heterosociality* are nearly collapsed in the service of challenging the stable gender scheme of Euro-American empire.

Melvin Van Peeble's financial success with *Sweetback's Song* would help to usher in a new understanding of palatability for Hollywood (male) executives, hungry for money from both the black and white (male) box offices. Van Peebles was conscious of the potential for crossover appeal. In his words, "For the black man, *Sweetback* is a new kind of hero, for the white man, my picture is a new kind of foreign film."¹¹³ This shift in the terms of palatability taken up by Hollywood emphasized urban environments, action and sexual intrigue, and funk soundtracks to tap into popular male hungers for a new kind of black hero that negated the Poitier paradigm. *Sweetback's Song* also courted outrage from the black intelligentsia. It sparked a controversy over what male and female critics saw as tasteless politics and unpalatable aesthetics that have outlived the film by more than four decades.

Placing *Sweetback's Song* in opposition to the Poitier paradigm also allows us to situate *Black is Beautiful* between their respective paradigms. While *Black is Beautiful*

¹¹² Howell calls this an "aesthetic revolt against the Hollywood mainstream and its white-centered realities." Howell, *Popular Film*, 89.

¹¹³ Melvin Van Peebles, quoted in Howell, *Popular Film*, 85.

departed from the Poitier paradigm by showing black people having sex on screen, it did so with the objective air of scientific investigation. In some ways, the narrator of *Black is Beautiful* appears like an adaptation of Poitier's calm and professional address to white male audiences, made to fit the conventions of soft-core pornography. The narrator is never shown having sex, nor does he articulate any of his own desires. In this sense, while *Black is Beautiful* may invoke the figure of the stud, this stud is made secondary to the dispassionate authority of the narrator. *Sweetback's Song* articulates and responds to a different kind of hunger in which its stud is placed front and center.

Moreover, whereas *Black is Beautiful* teaches viewers how to consume its stud using the bourgeois language of ethnography, *Sweetback's Song* takes this knowledge for granted. *Sweetback's Song* claims to speak—through its soundtrack—in a popular, urban vernacular adapted for commercial film. At the same time, *Sweetback's Song* attempts to eschew utopian homosocial hungers for both patriarchal Pan-African identity and mutual white-black fraternal understanding. Its visualization of unavoidable racialized violence in urban settings comes hot on the heels of the 1968 nationwide Holy Week Uprising.¹¹⁴ If *Black is Beautiful's* project is to discipline the violent homosocial hungers between black and white men by means of fraternarchal reconciliation, then *Sweetback's Song* seeks to recognize, embrace, and take homosocial hunger to its self-annihilating conclusion.

¹¹⁴ "...[I]t is important to remember that the uprising was widespread. Between the evening of April 4, when James Earl Ray shot Martin Luther King, Jr., and Easter Sunday, April 14, 1968, cities in thirty-six states and the District of Columbia experienced looting, arson, or sniper fire. Fifty-four cities suffered at least \$100,000 in property damage, with the nation's capital and Baltimore topping the list at approximately \$15 million and \$12 million, respectively. Thousands of small shopkeepers saw their life savings go up in smoke. Combined, 43 men and women were killed, approximately 3,500 were injured, and 27,000 were arrested. Not until over 58,000 National Guardsmen and army troops joined local state and police forces did the uprisings cease. Put somewhat differently, during Holy Week 1968, the United States experienced its greatest wave of social unrest since the Civil War." Peter B. Levy, "The Dream Deferred: The Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Holy Week Uprisings of 1968." In *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City*, eds. Jessica I. Elfenbein, Thomas L. Hollowak, and Elizabeth M. Nix (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 5-6. Levy is a Historian.

In the next, and penultimate section, I introduce two Blaxploitation films in the wake of *Sweetback's Song*. *Shaft* worked to inaugurate the new politics of palatability in the Hollywood establishment by articulating a tempered combination of homosocial hungers and mutual antagonisms between white and black men. The other, *Lialeh*, sought to exploit this new politics of palatability by packaging it for the market for feature-length hard-core pornography films.¹¹⁵ These films revolve around their own articulations of the stud, adjusted to meet the conventions of their respective genres. In this period of refined commercialization, where Blaxploitation comes into its own under a recognized formula, observers might expect these entertainment products to create a more calcified articulation of black manhood. With the help of homosocial hunger and attention to emerging anxieties about class politics within the black community, I offer a more complex reading of *Shaft* and *Lialeh's* subtexts that envision blackness and gender in flux.

¹¹⁵ At the same time, reviewers of *Lialeh* in *Variety* noted that the film was attempting to package hard-core pornography for the black box office. For example, see Verr. "Pictures: Lialeh." *Variety* (Archive: 1905-2000) 273, no. 7 (Dec 26, 1973): 17. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1032471344?accountid=14509>.

PART 4: Between Black and White Men:

Homosocial Hunger and Class Anxiety in *Shaft* and *Lialeh*

Shaft is a Hollywood film that features a Blaxploitation twist on the police procedural genre.¹¹⁶ In this film, the titular stud hero John Shaft is a private detective working alongside the New York Police Department. Using his own methods and street smarts, Shaft works to protect the black community in Harlem from criminals and gangsters. The film revolves around Shaft teaming up with black revolutionary organizer Ben Buford to preempt an Italian gang's attempt to take over Harlem. The two protagonists slowly unravel the plot with the help of Harlem crime lord Bumpy Jonas, whose daughter has also been kidnapped by the Italian gangsters and must be rescued along the way.

Lialeh, released three years after *Shaft*, is a feature-length hard-core pornography film that does away with the police procedural story,¹¹⁷ but knowingly appropriates *Shaft*'s stud archetype to create Arlo, its own hero.¹¹⁸ In *Lialeh*, the titular character really plays second fiddle to the stud hero Arlo. The story revolves around Arlo as he manages an upcoming sex revue in a Harlem theater. Arlo crosses paths with Lialeh when she auditions for the lead part in the sex revue, yet the narrative is more concerned with Arlo's relationship with the theater landlord, a white man named Mr. Rogers. Arlo has been

¹¹⁶ *Shaft*. Dir. Gordon Parks (1971, Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Film. *Shaft* is a Hollywood Blaxploitation film. It is helmed by black director Gordon Parks (the renowned photographer) and financed by the white-dominated Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The film is based on a book of the same name written by Ernest Tidyman, a white man, who also collaborated on the screenplay. Tidyman published his book in 1970.

¹¹⁷ *Lialeh*. Dir. Barron Bercovich. (1974, Kenneth Elliot Productions), Film. *Lialeh* is a hard-core feature length pornography film written by Bercovich as well. I have not been able to find Bercovich's racial identification. *Lialeh* is notable for being the first feature-length hard-core porn film marketed to black (male) audiences and featuring black leads.

¹¹⁸ Nash, *Ecstasy*, 167 (note 29 of Chapter Two: "Speaking Sex/Speaking Race").

behind on paying rent to Mr. Rogers and must get out of his rent obligations for one more night in order to run the show.

Shaft and *Lialeh* feature plots that are both structured by homosocial hunger. In *Shaft*, the titular stud hero finds himself captured in a variation of the erotic triangle in which he is tasked with rescuing a black Harlem crime lord's kidnapped daughter from Italian mobsters. In *Lialeh*, the stud hero Arlo recruits the titular character to perform in his sex revue while also subduing Mr. Rogers, the oppressive and money-hungry owner of the theater. Both films use plot devices and the bodies of women to mediate relations of desire and rivalry between men. In this section, I read *Shaft* and *Lialeh* together as expressions of a new politics of homosocial hunger riven with emerging class anxieties about black identity. I draw inspiration from Historian Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" to explore how class antagonisms and black identity were registered in *Shaft* and *Lialeh* through the meta-language of gender.¹¹⁹

In "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," Media scholar Jon Kraszewski argues for the importance of analyzing class dynamics and transformations in relation to Black Nationalist movements in order to understand Blaxploitation advertisements and audience reception. He reminds readers that Black Nationalist politics were not the only forces influencing black subjectivities in the 1970s:¹²⁰ so were emerging anxieties about black identity and the emerging class divide between the emerging black

¹¹⁹ "[G]ender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It might be better to say, gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Gender is not the only field, but it seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power in the West, in Judeo-Christian as well as Islamic traditions. As such, this part of the definition might seem to belong in the normative section of the argument, yet it does not, for concepts of power, though they may build on gender, are not always literally about gender itself." Scott, "Useful Category," 1069.

¹²⁰ Presumably, Kraszewski is talking about black male audiences and black male subjectivities. Unfortunately, he does not specify which black audiences and subjectivities he is referring to.

middle class and the urban poor and working class.¹²¹ In particular, Kraszewski describes how the Nixon Administration's Black Capitalism Program "[generated] a sizable increase of money in black communities" and draws from Cornel West's observation that the "economic recession brought on by the oil crisis in 1973...devastated the black working class and poor and barely affected the expanding black middle class."¹²² He envisions the 1970s as a decade marked by growing wealth inequality within black communities.

Kraszewski also cites Sociologist Doug McAdam to describe how "black nationalist groups in general suffered severe setbacks from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s."¹²³ These setbacks included internal failures to achieve political consensus on main issues and "tactics of resistance," external threats from a conservative "law-and-order" US government, and shifts in national media attention away from black insurgency to coverage of "issues like the Vietnam War, the energy crisis, Watergate, and ecology."¹²⁴ In doing so, Kraszewski sets the stage for a general sense of anxiety within black communities "[c]onnected to the rise of the black middle class and the fall of black nationalism."¹²⁵

This anxiety helps to illuminate the structure of relations between men in *Shaft*. Kraszewski outlines how John Shaft is articulated as a hero, "a member of the black middle class who helps the poor."¹²⁶ Throughout the film, Shaft is motivated by a duty "to protect a black lower-class neighborhood from being caught in gang warfare."¹²⁷ Building on Kraszewski's analysis, I begin this section with an exploration of the ways in which *Shaft*

¹²¹ Jon Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements," *The Velvet Light Trap* 50 (2002), 50.

¹²² Ibid, 52.

¹²³ Ibid, 51.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 52.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 59.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

articulates and resolves black class and identity anxieties through the stud's interactions with Black Nationalist men. I then discuss *Lialeh* to explore how blackness, gender, and class politics frame Arlo and Mr. Rogers' climactic confrontation. I conclude this section by comparing the dynamics of Shaft-Buford and Arlo-Rogers' relationships to develop an understanding of homosocial hunger that accounts for class politics.

When we are first introduced to Ben Buford, the shot composition makes it clear that he is a synecdoche for Black Nationalists.¹²⁸ He is spot lit in a room with several other men, seated across a poster of Malcolm X saluting with the Black Power fist. The film sets up an explicit contrast between Shaft and Buford through their politics. When Buford calls Shaft "[Uncle] Tom," he refers to events prior to the film in which Shaft probably turned his back on black insurgency, possibly in connection with his current alliance with the police as a private detective. Yet it is Shaft who controls the scene. In an ensuing ambush from black mobsters, Shaft shows that he is in control of the situation by leading Buford out of harm's way. Towards the end of the scene, Shaft quips: "When you lead that revolution, whitey better be standing still, 'cause you don't run a damn no more!"

The action sets up a scheme in which the stud is aligned with middle-class blackness, and the middle-class black stud is portrayed as a true champion of his urban black community. Throughout the film, viewers repeatedly watch Shaft interact with various Harlem residents. He treats them with respect, dignity, and helps them with cash. It is significant that just before entering Ben Buford's apartment, Shaft talks to a young black boy who is standing outside, alone, shivering in the cold, and gives him cash in order to buy

¹²⁸ *Shaft*, 36:08.

a meal.¹²⁹ Buford, by contrast, is never shown interacting with everyday Harlem residents. Through Buford, the film implies that Black revolutionary activism is disconnected from the day-to-day concerns of members of the Harlem community.

In a later scene, shortly afterward, this line of tension is pushed to its conclusion. By this time, Shaft has taken Buford to his friend Dina's house as a safe haven. Buford instigates a testy exchange with Shaft in which Buford's dialogue makes him seem reckless and out-of-touch. Dina ends the conversation by saying: "Ben, you can have the girls room."¹³⁰ In this scene, Dina is made to function as a conduit and barometer for the differences in standing between Shaft and Buford. Shaft is in control of the overall situation, but Dina, the mother of the household, places Buford in the girls' room and later admonishes him to watch his language.¹³¹

Next, Shaft leaves Dina's house to take care of other business. He ends the night by calling his girlfriend in a phone booth [Figure 4.1]. The next scene takes place the morning after, in which Shaft enters the girls' room (at Dina's house) to wake up Buford [Figure 4.2].

¹²⁹ *Shaft*, 34:30.

¹³⁰ *Shaft*, 44:30.

¹³¹ I use "control" to denote which character holds power in the scene: both in terms of having the last word in terms of dialogue and in terms of priority in the visual composition of the scene.



Figure 4.1: Shaft's Girlfriend on the Couch. Shaft's girlfriend is wearing a pink nightgown. The night sky is blue in the background. She has just placed her telephone on the receiver. This scene is crosscut with Shaft standing in a phone booth, conversing with her. *Shaft*, 48:38.



Figure 4.2: Buford Sleeping in the Girls' Room. Buford is covered in pink sheets and backed by a blue wall. Shaft is standing beside the bed on stage left: he is about to wake up Buford. Shaft, 48:43.

Taken together, Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 evoke a shared color palette that establishes a parallel between Shaft's girlfriend [Figure 4.1] and Ben Buford [Figure 4.2]. Shaft's girlfriend's nightgown and Buford's sheets are pink. They stand out against a blue background. The actors also have matching postures. Both are positioned in the right of the scene, sleeping on their sides, with their heads facing to the left.

The visual grammar codes Buford as a woman in a way that defies the logic of masculinization and feminization. Buford's character articulates a particular gender that affirms, rather than troubles, Shaft's position as the stud. This formulation makes it difficult for us to say that the stud is coextensive with masculinity. If Buford's gender position serves to bring into relief Shaft's identity as the stud, then in a fundamental way,

'studliness' is dependent on a gender system that confounds a static male/female gender binary.¹³²

Throughout these scenes between Buford and Shaft, gender operates as a meta-language of power in the visual register. The visual grammar of the preceding shots shows how Buford is positioned as a woman in relation to Shaft, the archetypical stud. This is not the same as saying Buford is being feminized, because this would imply a stable "masculine" identity that Buford would have to lose over the course of the film. In other words, to "masculinize" or "feminize" implies that this is a modification of a stable gender substrate. I will have more to say about this point later. At this moment, I put *Shaft* aside in order to draw parallels with a related scene in *Lialeh*. I do so both to continue this line of thought and to open up a sustained meditation on what it means for gender to express a meta-language of power in the context of both of these films. I begin with Jennifer C. Nash's analysis of *Lialeh* in her book, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*.

In her chapter on "Speaking Sex/Speaking Race," Nash conducts a reading of the ways in which *Lialeh* was forced to compromise between the genre conventions of Blaxploitation films and hard-core pornography films. She describes this as a "collision" between "speaking race" to black (male) audiences and "speaking sex" in the language of hard-core pornography, and goes on to demonstrate how the film's commitment to black nationalist tropes oftentimes frustrated hard-core pornographic tropes when black characters refused to have sex with white characters.¹³³

¹³² The Shaft-Buford case helps us to see the limitations of using a static gender binary as a foundation for analysis. As Joan Scott writes, "We need a refusal of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference. We must become more self-conscious about distinguishing between our analytic vocabulary and the material we want to analyze." Scott, "Useful Category," 1065.

¹³³ Nash, *Ecstasy*, 59.

Nash's general argument is valuable, but I disagree with her recollection of the climactic scene in which Rogers confronts Arlo just before the sex revue to demand his overdue rent payment. Arlo begins by using sycophantic tactics and insists on serving Rogers coffee. Here is my transcript of the scene:

41:12 - Mr. Rogers' (R) scene with Arlo (A).

A: "Coffee?"

R: "No coffee."

A: "Sugar?"

R: "*No coffee.*"

A: "Cream?"

R: "*No coffee!*"

A: "Here's your coffee." [Arlo hands a cup of coffee to Rogers.]

R: "I said *no coffee*. I don't care how many people are waiting outside wanting to get their rocks off. I want my dough before the show starts. No bucks, no fucks."

A: "Why don't I turn you on...to *Arlee*?"

R: "Don't try to seduce me man"

A: "Mr. Rogers you're so uptight. I'm sure we can work somethin out!"

R: "Hey I'm no faggot man! ...heh... No offense if you are"

A: "Well you'll just have to wait"

R: "Well I'm not going to wait. And the cops are going to find out about this anyway"

A: "Man where do you think you're going?"

R: "Get your hands off me tar baby"

[Arlo slaps Rogers in the face]

R: “Oh!!! You dirty black motherfucker oh don’t don’t you do that again”

[Arlo slaps Rogers in the face again]

R: “Oh my face! Not my face. *Here*. I like it *here!*”

A: “You like it *there* eh?”

[Arlo slaps Rogers and grabs his buttocks, grunting]

R: “Ohh ohh yes ohhh ohhh yes!”



Figure 4.3: Arlo Seduces Rogers. Arlo tells Rogers that he is “so uptight” while loosening his necktie.

Nash’s recollection of the dialogue differs significantly from my transcript. As I argue below, Nash’s reading of the scene reveals her own assumptions of gender inflexibility that are imposed on the text, much like Amanda Howell’s reading of

Sweetback's gender transformation scene in the previous section. Here is Nash's description of Arlo and Rogers' altercation:

On the morning of the revue, Rogers comes to collect his money from Arlo, shouting, "No bucks, no fucks." Arlo attempts to stall Rogers by offering sexual access to one of the women in his cabaret. When Rogers refuses, Arlo sighs, "Mr. Rogers, you're so uptight, I'm sure we can work something out," and Rogers replies, "I'm no faggot, man! No offense if you are!" When Arlo implies that Rogers's 'uptightness' might be a sign of an inauthentic, or even queer, masculinity, Rogers quickly insists on the authenticity of his masculinity. Yet Rogers's 'real' masculinity is called into question moments later. When Rogers warns Arlo that unless he receives his payment, he will let the police know about the revue, the scene quickly turns violent: Rogers calls Arlo a 'dirty black motherfucker,' and Arlo retaliates by punching him in the face. Rogers seems stunned, resting his hands on his cheeks and crying out, "Oh my face, not my face. Here! [pointing to his buttocks] I like it here," gesturing that Arlo should slap Rogers's buttocks. Much like other scenes in the film, this initial moment of violence is transformed into something pleasurable. When Arlo strikes Rogers's buttocks, Rogers's moans—whether of pain, sexual pleasure, or both—fill the aural space of the scene.¹³⁴

First, the "tar baby" insult is missing from Nash's notes. Rogers calls Arlo a "dirty black motherfucker" *in response* to the first time Arlo slaps him. More important is the character "Arlee." Nash remembers Arlee as "one of the women" in the cabaret, implicitly reading this moment as Arlo's attempt to traffic in women to cement a bond between him and Rogers. Yet Arlee a feminization of Arlo's name, and moreover, just after Arlo speaks these lines, he places a hand around Rogers' shoulders, loosens his necktie [Figure 4.3], and tells Rogers that he is "so uptight." This suggests that Arlo himself is seducing Rogers using

¹³⁴ Nash, *Ecstasy*, 75.

the role of “Arlee.” The scene’s depiction of intimate touching between men is unusual for a hard-core pornographic film.

Nevertheless, at first glance, my corrections don’t necessarily undermine Nash’s concluding remarks on the scene:

While this scene celebrates black male triumph over white male dominance, it also troubles mainstream hard-core pornography’s fundamental promise that male bodies never seek pleasure from each other...Moreover, while Arlo’s participation in the scene *can* be read as one where a black man exposes white men’s effeminacy, it can also be interpreted as gesturing to Arlo’s own queer desires...Arlo willingly disciplines Rogers and seems to locate his own pleasures—certainly political, and perhaps even sexual—in the encounter. By placing Arlo’s pleasures in Rogers’s queer desires at the center of the scene, *Lialeh* suggests that insistently heterosexual black male pleasures might also be queer pleasures, a fundamental disruption of the insistent heterosexist logic that underpins the Blaxploitation.¹³⁵

I agree with Nash that this scene is disruptive. I disagree with her understanding of what, exactly, is disruptive about the scene. Nash locates the crux of the disruption exclusively in terms of sexual orientation, through the troubling of heterosexual and queer identities. If we read “Arlee” as a female persona of Arlo, this forces us to reconcile, rather than separate, the axes of gender identity and sexual orientation.

It is unclear whether Arlo had played the role of “Arlee” with Rogers on prior occasions. Nevertheless, there is an acknowledgement of perverse desire that allows Arlo to triumph over the landlord. This might seem homophobic, but it is also destabilizing for Arlo as well.¹³⁶ This scene indicates a gender discontinuity in Arlo’s own stud character

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Nor is this scene necessarily an instance of homophobia. In *Delectable Negro*, Woodard writes:

through specific articulations of sexual desire *and* gender identity between a black and white man that reverses the racial and class hierarchy between the two. This reversal is expressed through the meta-language of gender primarily through dialogue and nonverbal vocalizations. Arlo insists on serving coffee to Rogers before attempting to seduce him. This is a joke that draws upon a history of black domestic work by and through which black males were excluded from the cult of (white) manhood.¹³⁷ This gender dynamic is reversed when Arlo spans Rogers. Arlo's grunts and Roger's moans resemble the typical sounds of pornographic intercourse in which the female position moans and the male position grunts. The film implies that Arlo has triumphed over Rogers. While Arlo begins the scene in a position of disempowerment, he has eventually come out in a position of dominance.

Nash's analysis of the scene privileges nouns such as "male body" and "masculinity" in a way that cleaves gender identity from sexual identity. Her reading practice presumes the stability of a gender binary rather than unveiling the instabilities of this gender scheme. When read through the lens of gender as a category of analysis, this scene shows us instead how the use of gender as a meta-language of power destabilizes presumably "natural" identities. Arlo's proposition to turn Rogers on to Arlee is evocative of a gendered double-consciousness in which Arlo can make use of both male and female forms in order to outmaneuver a white adversary and class superior. If we say that Arlo feminizes Rogers, this presumes that Rogers is a man to begin with. The scene seems to be saying something

"Within black nationalist movements, dating from slavery to the 1960s, black men linked effeminacy and homosexuality with the white desire to culturally and spiritually consume black men. Even black women, in the late twentieth century, linked their discussions of mother hunger and self-consumption during slavery with violent acts of homoeroticism—references to male rape and oral violation." Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 9. However, in this scene, it seems like Arlo is consuming Rogers, not the other way around.

¹³⁷ See Note 10.

different: that Arlo has revealed something about Rogers' gender that exceeds the limitations of a simple heterosexualist binary.

In this way, Rogers and Ben Buford share in being neither men nor women. Likewise, Arlo's and Shaft's stud identities are coupled to Rogers' and Buford's positions in excess of the gender binary. As a consequence of these relationships, Arlo and Shaft cannot be categorized as simply "heterosexual" even if they are shown having sex with women. What kind of homosocial hunger are these films articulating between Shaft-Buford and Arlo-Rogers? We have reached a point where relying on race and gender can take us no further. What, then, of race, gender, and class?

Sustained in the Arlo-Rogers and Shaft-Buford relationships are different class and racial dynamics. Arlo-Rogers invokes questions of racial power not only because Rogers is white and Arlo is black, but because Rogers uses racially charged insults against Arlo, referring to him as a "tar baby." In terms of class, Arlo fits into the 'new' black middle class: he is invested in black pride, rejects assimilation into whiteness, manages a sex revue, but does not own the theater itself.¹³⁸ Rogers aims to control Arlo and is the owner of the property. In this sense, there is a relation of class hierarchy also woven with mutual dependency: Arlo brings crowds to the box office with his sex revues while Rogers supplies the capital.

Shaft-Buford carries racial and class charges in its own way. Even though both men are black, their articulations of blackness are very different. Shaft is a pragmatic assimilationist who respects the (white male) police chain of command, depends on them for information and support, and yet is street smart, highly independent, and refuses to

¹³⁸ This is in opposition to the 'old black middle class aristocracy' that was invested in assimilation to white bourgeois norms. See Thomas, *Sexual Demon*, Chapter 3.

debase himself for white (male) authority figures. Buford is a Black Nationalist who rejects cooperation with white people (implicitly, white men) and seems to be out of touch with reality (in such a way that Shaft's reality is aligned with the reality of the Harlem black community). Both men articulate different 'blacknesses' that are differently organized around white male institutions and spaces. As for their class dynamics, Shaft is a private detective (an entrepreneur of sorts) who nonetheless answers to the police establishment in order to keep his license. He also "lives in an expensive and well-furnished Greenwich Village brownstone apartment."¹³⁹ By contrast, Buford lives in a cramped, noisy, run-down apartment with sparse furnishings. His disconnection from and ineffectual impact on the lives of Harlem's poor black people suggests that Buford has chosen to renounce the trappings of the bourgeois lifestyle and fetishizes the Spartan 'lifestyle' of urban poverty. This allows *Shaft* to present the titular hero as both middle-class and authentically invested in the concerns of his black community, while his revolutionary foil is presented as a naïve activist who fails to understand how Shaft's pragmatic class politics are an asset to his solidarity with black people.

Arlo-Rogers and Shaft-Buford are designed to articulate a black middle-classness that maintains its commitment to black solidarity while also taking advantage of testy alliances with white male power brokers. These intersectional positionalities help us to understand the dynamics through which studs were articulated in the context of anxieties over the growth of the black middle class in the 1970s. These primary sources also allow us to see how homosocial hunger operates differently as the social and political contexts of Blaxploitation film change. *Shaft* and *Lialeh's* articulations of the stud were not simply

¹³⁹ Leab, *Sambo to Superspade*, 251.

responsive to black (male) audiences' hungers for triumphant black heroes. Through the Shaft-Buford and Arlo-Rogers dyads, these films also articulated new mutual relations of hunger between characters responsive to salient anxieties about black middle-class expansion and racial solidarity in ways that defied the limitations of the gender binary. These are homosocial hungers of another sort: in which black hungers for cross-class racial solidarity engender desires between black men that simultaneously destabilize the integrity of 'manhood' itself.

CONCLUSION:

Epistemologies of Hunger

Africanus Sexualis: Black is Beautiful, Sweet Sweetback's Badaassss Song, Shaft, and Lialeh are significant texts in the development of the Blaxploitation genre, but they are not necessarily representative of the genre or the state of the entertainment industry at the turn of the 1970s. Each makes particular articulations of the stud in response to changing social, historical, and financial contexts in the late 1960s and early 1970s United States. In each film, I have demonstrated how homosocial hunger drives these articulations, and how, in the wake of this hunger, each film bears traces of discontinuities and disruptions to the gender binary. None of this is to claim that these films were in any way 'resistive' to the notion of gender. Rather, it is to argue that the stud crystallized one way in which the "collision" between the sexual liberation and black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s produced different subjects of gender.¹⁴⁰

I read Cole and Guy-Sheftall's collision thesis as a sort of repressive hypothesis.¹⁴¹ This hypothesis sees the formation of Black Nationalist thought in activism and entertainment products as a repressive force censoring black women and discourses on gender at-large. Framed in Foucauldian terms, my project traces how discourse in this historical context acted to *produce* rather than to repress gender. I read the stud as a subject of gender and an effect of discourse, made possible by the convergence of black liberationist politics with the commercial film industry. To do so, I have attempted to

¹⁴⁰ Cole and Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk*, 71.

¹⁴¹ In its original context, Foucault used the "repressive hypothesis" to describe a certain understanding of power as a force that censored discourse on sex in Victorian society. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 10.

navigate between the “Scylla of reductionism and the Charybdis of aestheticism.”¹⁴² I focused on the dialogue and visual language of brief phrases, minor plot symmetries, throwaway jokes, and double-entendres, not to reduce Blaxploitation films to these minor moments, but to find the traces of homosocial hunger and gender discontinuity captured in these films.

I hope that the epistemology of hunger will prove useful in other historical, textual, and disciplinary contexts. In *The Delectable Negro*, Vincent Woodard revitalized an important lens for conceptualizing the linkage between power and identity in the United States. In a manner different from its original context, the notion that the United States is a ‘cannibal nation’ strikes me as just as relevant today as it was in slave society,¹⁴³ whether we speak of ecological destruction, commodity consumption and production, race-class exploitation, or modern-day slavery.

My development of homosocial hunger locates the production of gender in both the afterlife of United States slavery, and also as part of a global anti-colonialist politics that was particularly salient in the 1960s and 1970s with the formal end of colonization across the African continent. Accordingly, my analysis of gender in Blaxploitation film is deeply indebted to Greg Thomas’s argument that antisexist and antihomophobic critiques of anti-colonial political expressions cannot be separated from the politics of empire.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.” *October* 53 (1990): 265.

¹⁴³ The debate over whether the United States was a “cannibal nation” was a “prevalent nineteenth-century concern.” “Clergy, congressmen, popular novelists, and northern abolitionists, among others, passionately debated the topic of the United States becoming a cannibal nation as a result of its condoning and legally sanctioning slavery.” These critics of slavery were concerned with “returning to the nation a sense of honorable and noble purpose” but failed to take into account the “social consumption of the Negro within the nation at large.” Woodard, *Delectable Negro*, 63. I appropriate the term “cannibal nation” from this context in order to highlight the rituals of consumption and camouflaged dependencies routinized by the process of sustaining the United States’ global empire.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas, *Sexual Demon*.

My focus on homosocial hunger, as opposed to 'heterosocial hunger,' means that I have left under-examined the ways in which the erotic scheme of empire constitutes women as objects of male consumption. In a critical way, the advancement of individuals from 'males' to 'men' is predicated on the consumption of women's bodies via exclusive rights to women's sexual, emotional, and maternal labor (in essence, the logic of monogamous marriage). In other ways, 'females' advance to 'women' by consuming men in a patriarchal system of wealth accumulation, nuclear family organization, and surname identification (again, via monogamous marriage).

'Homosocial hunger' is also deeply indebted to Eve Sedgwick's erotic triangle and Gayle Rubin's traffic in women. While I have established my intellectual indebtedness to Sedgwick and Rubin earlier in this project, I have neglected to consider how homosocial hunger can change our understanding of Rubin and Sedgwick's concepts. Homosocial hunger allows us to see how the exchange of black people facilitated the development of a sex/gender distinction simultaneously with establishing relations between white men and women in US slavery. It is well documented that the acquisition, sale, and management of enslaved black people structured relations between whites. Enslavement engendered a whole system of relations that connected ship captains, auctioneers, overseers, police, legislators, speculators, planters, and their retinues of clerks, assistants, and other free laborers to one another. The wealth that planters could accumulate through slave ownership also structured relations between masters and mistresses to develop family lines of wealth and prestige. In myriad ways, the traffic in enslaved black people served as a conduit for hungers between white people: for matrimony, wealth accumulation, inheritance, wages, and social respectability.

Perhaps this erotic triangle could be linked to a notion of ‘homoracial hunger,’ through which white desires for one another were channeled through the bodies of black enslaved people, and through which black enslaved people’s desires for one another were constrained and shaped by the structures of white plantation patriarchy. The centrality of exchange in homoracial hunger points to a complementary analytic to the late Historian Stephanie Camp’s notion of the “geographies of containment” central to planters’ everyday control over enslaved people.¹⁴⁵ Focusing on hunger allows us to ask: who are the people involved in the process of exchange, and what sorts of hungers does this exchange mediate and engender?¹⁴⁶

Developing the erotic triangle for this context also allows us to theorize how exchange and control are *constitutive* of whiteness and blackness: to see how these racial positions are effects of discourse rather than categories of analysis to take for granted.¹⁴⁷ The erotic triangle could help us to understand how the traffic in enslaved black people connected to discourses that asserted the effeminacy of the ‘Negro’ race and pornotroping of black male and female bodies. At the very least, it suggests that genderisms, pornotropisms, and racializations are all deeply tied to geographies of control and exchange.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Camp describes the relationship between geographies of control and enslavement as follows: “[a]t the heart of the process of enslavement was a spatial impulse: to locate bondpeople in plantation space and to control, indeed to determine, their movements and activities.” Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁴⁶ For example: the hunger for wealth, or the hunger for escape from slavery.

¹⁴⁷ For a helpful analysis of race as an effect of discourse, see e.g. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, (New York: Verso, 2012). Karen E. Fields is a Sociologist. Barbara J. Fields is a Historian.

¹⁴⁸ See e.g. Fields and Fields’ discussion of sumptuary codes in Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 33.

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