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## Blaxploitation's Revolutionary Sexuality: Rethinking Images of Male Hypersexuality in *Sweetback & Shaft*

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Blaxploitation's Revolutionary Sexuality: Rethinking Images of Male Hypersexuality in

*Sweetback & Shaft*

by

Austin D. Cook

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Abstract

Where scholarship exists on the subject of black male hypersexuality in Blaxploitation film, consensus suggests these films perpetuate racist imaginings of black sexuality. This project reevaluates the significance of Blaxploitation's sexual imagery and argues against the traditional understanding of it. I assert that Blaxploitation's images of hypersexuality should be understood as revolutionary for the way that they re-appropriate racist images and repurpose them to serve antiracist ends. Specifically, I argue the movement's most prolific films, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Shaft* (1971), supply the two main strategies employed through Blaxploitation in defining the movement's revolutionary sexuality: one links Black men's sexuality to revolutionary politics and calls for disruptive acts of violence against the state while the other conceives of sex as revolutionary through its use as a means for changing the way that Black men are perceived and perceive themselves in media. Furthermore, in understanding these two films' deployments of revolutionary ideology through sex I engage close readings of their interracial sex scenes to explore the ways that the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality inform these subversive images.

My work builds off the research of Ana Kocić who argues that the Blaxploitation movement re-appropriates racist imaginings of blackness and transforms them into empowering depictions. My claims as to what makes the sexual imagery of the films subversive are further supported by the revolutionary philosophies of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. In order to uncover Blaxploitation's revolutionary sexuality, I also engage Stuart Hall's concept of

transcoding, Linda Williams's scholarship on interracial lust, and Eric Lott's work on blackface minstrelsy to explore how Blaxploitation artists create counter-hegemonic semiotics for mainstream audiences. By doing this, my project corrects traditional understanding of black sexuality within Blaxploitation and in doing so also broadens the possibilities for scholarship at the intersections of these topics by exploring ways that transcoded images can be utilized in covert subversive ways.

**Blaxploitation's Revolutionary Sexuality: Rethinking Images of Male Hypersexuality in  
*Sweetback & Shaft***

**Introduction**

When looking at the history of race relations in the United States, it is hardly novel to state that white Americans have held a vehement opposition to the possibility of interracial sexual relations. Nonetheless, it is necessary to remember the extent to which white patriarchy opposed miscegenation and to consider the means by which it operated for the ends of preventing miscegenation. In his work on the racialization of sexuality in America, Abdul JanMohamed explains that the United States has historically placed social and legal prohibitions on Black sexuality, based on its claim that Black men and women are subhuman, in order to support the subjugation of Black Americans (97). He goes on to note that this was done along the lines of racialized sexuality because the white supremacist system would inherently be challenged if Black men were able to permeate the color line and assert their humanity through miscegenation (JanMohamed 104-105). It is in the context of this systemic domination of Black bodies that the racist images of the Black "buck" were able to begin functioning and amassing cultural power. The stereotype of the Black buck more so than any other racist stereotype was designed to justify the subordination of Black men due to the racist fear of Black men's transgressing white patriarchy and having sex with white women. As images of the buck circulated in popular culture, the racist antagonism against Black men regarding a racialized sexual border became ingrained in the social imaginary.

Importantly, this opposition to the transgressing of the racial sexual border by Black men is as much grounded in politics as it is sexuality since crossing this border would necessitate resisting and threatening the racist political order that instituted it. The so-called Blaxploitation movement in film began in the 1970s as a response to a number of different political factors that were reacting to this history of race relations. The movement arose following the Civil Rights work of the 1950s and the rise of the Black Power groups of the 1960s, which led many Black Americans to more actively oppose ventures that did not support them. As historian Robert E. Weems explains, the film industry began its attempts to attend to the wants and needs of Black men and women for the first time because these audiences would not accept the traditional racist depictions of Blackness that had been staples of white entertainment for centuries (81). The Blaxploitation movement coalesced during the 1970s in response to the call of these movements, most especially Black Power. Blaxploitation films became characterized by their hypersexual Black heroes and themes of contemporary social issues facing Black Americans, largely surrounding systemic racism in the country. Through these themes, they confront this history of racist imagery in the United States and actively subvert it through their own images of Black men's bodies. Furthermore, I argue that the way in which these films form their sexual imagery follows the influence they take from the Black Power movements in order to create an image of Black male sexuality that is revolutionary at its core.

Most academic discourse surrounding the sexualization of Black men in Blaxploitation argues that these films merely perpetuate the racist stereotype of the Black buck. The buck is an image that has historically portrayed Black men as oversexed, aggressive savages whose bodies need to be controlled by whites. Scholars whose works inform most contemporary discussions of the Blaxploitation movement, such as Donald Bogle and Ed Guerrero, have grounded this

reading in the recognizable elements of the buck that often manifest in Blaxploitation's masculine protagonists: namely their hypersexuality, physical strength or aggressiveness, and perceived lack of self-control associated with promiscuity. To this point, Guerrero states that, through this stereotyping, "Hollywood developed more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen," (70) while Bogle argues that these films devolved into uncritical valorizations of buck-like pimps and pushers (Bogle 232, 236).

While Bogle and Guerrero's readings of Blaxploitation's stereotypical elements make sense and were necessary within their historical moment, it is important to build from their work and complicate our understandings of these films further. In further developing the discourse surrounding Blaxploitation, I argue that reading the movement's images solely insofar as they include elements of stereotype restricts our ability to understand and engage with these films. By limiting the reading of these films' depictions of Black men's sexuality to whether or not they contain elements of stereotype, scholars deny the possibility for these films to reappropriate stereotyped images and transform them in ways that subvert the racist origins of the stereotype.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I find it necessary to facilitate new readings of Blaxploitation that attend to the sexual imagery of the films in ways that these critics have overlooked. I propose a new perspective for reading the movement that allows for the exploration of Blaxploitation films in ways that make sense of their incorporation of the buck stereotype without reducing their meanings to perpetuations of white hegemony. These films take signifying elements of the buck stereotype and inscribe them with a different, antiracist, meaning. The filmmakers actively work to transcode traditional stereotyped images of Black sexuality, turning their negative imaginings of

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<sup>1</sup> This is important given the presence of practices such as what Karen D. Wimbley terms stereotypy. She explains stereotypy as a part of a Black womanist tradition that "illuminates the racial stereotype in representation in order to deconstruct the stereotype, negating it as a legitimate or authentic articulation of Blackness" (Wimbley 144).



hypersexuality and sexual ability in positive ones that subvert their original meanings, in order to forge a type of revolutionary sexuality that communicates a revolutionary politics in line with the Black Power movements that inspired the filmmakers.<sup>2</sup>

Through this transcoding, Blaxploitation lays claim to images of Blackness by reappropriating sexual imagery defined by white hegemony and reconstructing it in new forms of representation, taking negative elements of the stereotype and repurposing them to serve Black men. In her work on transcoding during this time period, Ana Kocić briefly explains that Blaxploitation transforms the Black buck into a “Black hero” by keeping the sexual and physical power of the buck while attaching these traits to “a ‘cool’ rebel, who defies any kind of authority and manages to win on his own terms” (88). In other words, this transcoding rearticulates the white supremacist image of the buck as a depiction of Black men as strong, intelligent, suave, and virile rather than unintelligent, violent, and out of control. Kocić’s examination of Blaxploitation’s transcoding is important, but she does not engage with the sexual elements of the images and their transformation to uncover the full implications of them. When studying racist archetypes of Blackness from American media, it is clear that most, if not all, of them place sexuality at the core because of white fears over miscegenation, whether it be the non-threatening sterility of the Tom figure or the overwhelming sexual appetite of the buck for white women. Therefore, when looking at Blaxploitation’s transcoding of the buck stereotype it is necessary to explore in great detail the way that Black male sexuality is represented within the films, especially in instances of interracial sex since that is where this imagery is the most overt. Furthermore, while Kocić examines the importance of Blaxploitation’s transcoding to a few

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<sup>2</sup> When I say that these films transcode stereotypes, I rely on Stuart Hall’s conception of the term, which he briefly uses *Sweetback* and *Shaft* to exemplify. In his work, Hall explains transcoding as the process of “taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings” (270).

specific contemporary films, her research does not attend to why this transcoding occurred or to its significance in its own historical moment.

In the 1970s, this transcoding was intended to be revolutionary in keeping with Black Power philosophy. In one of the quintessential works of the Black Power movement, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton explain that it is necessary for Black Americans to create images that define Blackness on their own terms in order to rebuke the ideological forces of their white oppressors (37). This is a concept that is echoed throughout a majority of the Black Power movements. Jeff Donaldson of the Black Arts movement and the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA) likewise asserted that it was necessary for Black artists to create images of Blackness that serve Black Americans, going so far as to say that “art or knowledge that does not respond positively to the cause of the Black struggle is a waste of valuable time and creative energy” (“The Role We Want for Black Art” 219). The creation of a new transcoded image of Blackness defined by Black filmmakers fits into this revolutionary ethos.

The AfriCOBRA’s manifesto provides further justification for seeing the sexual imagery of Blaxploitation as revolutionary. In the manifesto, the group outlined what an image must do in order to be considered revolutionary, declaring that it must “deal with the past...relate to the present...[or] look into the future” (“AfriCOBRA Manifesto” 80). Blaxploitation’s images of Black men’s sexuality meet all three of these criteria. They engage with past conditions by reclaiming images of Blackness that have historically been used against Black men, they deploy them in a contemporaneous socio-political setting to serve the conditions facing Black Americans at the time, and they present their transcoding as a means for effecting social change for the future.

In order to understand how this revolutionary sexual imagery functions, I turn to the movement's two major defining films: Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1970) and Gordon Parks Sr.'s *Shaft* (1971). These two films were both released to overwhelming box office success and became the films in relation to which every later film in the movement was defined. Thus, I emphasize these two films because their thematic and stylistic qualities can be felt throughout the rest of Blaxploitation in one way or another due to their cultural impact. Each of these movies also represents one of the two major modes by which revolutionary sexuality within the movement functions. *Sweetback* exemplifies a mode that overtly links Black men's sexuality to revolutionary politics and calls for disruptive acts of violence against the state. By contrast, *Shaft's* revolutionary sexuality acts in a more covert fashion. In films like *Shaft*, images of sexuality are revolutionary because they act as a means for changing the way that Black men are perceived and perceive themselves in media. I refer to the two modes of revolutionary sexuality defined by *Sweetback* and *Shaft* as the explicitly revolutionary and indirectly revolutionary modes, respectively. While both of these tendencies are revolutionary within the context of Black Power philosophy, in accordance with each film's revolutionary mode, the two construct their images very differently in order to pursue their divergent aims while remaining revolutionary.

We can recover contemporaneous conversations on these films that reveal the ability of these films to oppose traditions of white Hollywood through their sexual politics. In fact, the social memory of these films has been articulated and shaped through criticism in which their subversive merit has been hotly debated. Within the discourse of the film's contemporaneous critics, there exists a divergence in which the way these films have had their subversive merit either praised or condemned. Though, regardless of whether a critic comes out in favor of a

particular film or not, we see sexuality arise as a common theme by which these films' opposition to white hegemony is measured. The criticism of the movement that looms over much of modern conversations such as Bogle and Guerrero's arguments originated in contemporaneous discourse surrounding the films, particularly the negative responses. Thus, contemporaneous criticism helps elaborate on the significance of revolutionary sexuality. The conflict between favorable and unfavorable accounts of the movies helps explain why the revolutionary nature of these films has not been more widely recognized.

In the criticism surrounding *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, writers who heralded one film almost always argued that the other film worked against the best interest of Black Americans. Those critics that appreciated *Shaft* often chastised *Sweetback* and those who believed *Sweetback* to be the truly revolutionary film would similarly deride *Shaft*. For instance, Clayton Riley of the *New York Times* makes a point of condemning the politics of *Shaft* while praising *Sweetback*'s supposed authenticity. To this end, Riley pits them against each other, writing that "inevitably, *Shaft* will be compared to the title character in Melvin Van Peebles's cinematic triumph *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*" ("A Black Movie for White Audiences?" D13). In this way, Riley not only attests to the two competing modes of these films, but he also points to the fact that critics must seemingly take a side in an argument over which film successfully serves Black Americans better. This position reveals an underlying theme for much of the criticism surrounding the two films, an idea that only one of the two films can be truly revolutionary. This notion is contrary to my argument that both *Sweetback* and *Shaft* are subversive. However, this does make sense within context of my claim that each film belongs to a tangibly different revolutionary mode since those in favor of one mode's politics would likely view the other oppositionally.

The historical fixation on claiming that only one film is subversive while the other fails to serve Black audiences is a result of the divergent tactics that these films take in constructing revolutionary sexualities around miscegenation. This is something that becomes apparent once one examines the basis for these different critics' perspectives more closely. The reviews often center around each film's presentation of Black men's sexuality. In an article for *EBONY* titled "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," the social historian Lerone Bennet Jr. condemned *Sweetback's* revolutionary politics because of the way that the film ties freedom from the white power structure to sexuality (116, 118). On the other hand, Riley derided *Shaft's* sexual politics as "escapist entertainment" and a macho fantasy, writing "a swift fist and a stiff penis, that's the Shaftian way." ("Shaft Can Do Everything — I Can Do Nothing" D9) Instead, Riley lauded *Sweetback*, arguing that the film used its protagonist's hypersexuality to oppose images by whites that depicted Blackness as docile and sterile. He stated that "Sweetback, the profane sexual athlete and fugitive, is based on a reality that is Black" ("A Black Movie for White Audiences?" D13).<sup>3</sup> He later added that the character combatted the trend of unrealistic hero worship that was suitable for whites that sought only to connect to Black America via unchallenging images of Black men in media ("A Black Movie for White Audiences?" D13).

Such critical divergence on the two films' ability to contend with American racism in relation to sexual imagery help to explain why the revolutionary sexuality of these films went widely unnoticed. I argue that, in re-appropriating the traditional buck image and inscribing it with new meaning, the films became difficult to read at the time of their creation, because they offered new forms of old images that had significantly different meanings in their original forms. This then led to the array of divergent criticisms surrounding these films' sexual imagery. While

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<sup>3</sup> The title of Riley's article was made in reference to his displeasure with *Shaft*, not *Sweetback*.

it may seem counterintuitive, I turn to T.J. Clark's essay on Manet's *Olympia* to help explain this dynamic. The issues that Clark discusses in regard to critics' perceptions of *Olympia* bears a resemblance to what we see in the responses to *Sweetback* and *Shaft*'s sexual imagery. When arguing why contemporaneous readings of *Olympia* were so diverse, Clark asserts that Manet created a new and transformative representation of the traditionally depicted courtesan by tying ideas of class to the body in ways that subverted conventions of her image in European art, making it difficult for critics to interpret Manet's text (117-119). Much like critics of Manet's work had to wrestle with the meaning of his painting within the larger context of European art that is informing it, *Sweetback* and *Shaft*'s critics had difficulty recognizing the revolutionary meanings of the films because of the cultural context to which the critics responded to. Much like the critics of Manet's work overlook the commentary on class that it makes through its depiction of the nude because of its newness, as Clarke points out (118-119), the critics of *Sweetback* and *Shaft* similarly miss the revolutionary political meanings of their sexual imagery. The fact that these reviews shaped the discourse surrounding the films, which then informed contemporary understandings of Blaxploitation, means that it is necessary to deploy a revolutionary reading of these films to reconfigure how we think about these films today.

At the core of my study of Blaxploitation's revolutionary sexuality is an intent to shift the critical perception of the movement, from the current consensus on it to a new one that sees it as the carrier of revolutionary ideology that it is. Correcting the existing understanding of Blaxploitation is necessary on its own, but the realignment of our attentions toward the movement also holds greater stakes for how we engage with apparently stereotyped images in Black film. In recognizing the counter-hegemony of these films, we are able to move beyond seeing them as simple perpetuations of the white racist imaginary, seeing them anew as films that

challenge the presumed authority of that imaginary through the reappropriation of images originally invented to bolster white supremacy through the deployment sexual imagery, especially around interracial sex. As a result of this new way of seeing the films we are enabled to think about transcoding as a means of working to overturn the systems of repression.

### ***Sweetback's* Explicitly Revolutionary Sexuality**

*Sweetback* is important to my concept of revolutionary sexuality in Blaxploitation, not just because it is one of the earliest films of the movement, but because it is demonstrative of a number of qualities that characterize the explicitly revolutionary mode through its deployment of interracial sex. Films of this mode can be characterized by their attention to the sexuality in a public context and the way that they overtly connect sexuality to disruption against, or direct overthrow of, the state and its apparatuses. *Sweetback* embodies both of these qualities through its deployment of Black male sexuality and its filmmakers do not attempt to cover up the film's revolutionary aims. Throughout his career in media, Melvin Van Peebles has been transparent about the political nature of his work. Even before *Sweetback* was released, Van Peebles made it clear that he viewed it as the first true revolutionary Black film — a point that he has argued in nearly every interview that he has given about the film. While his endorsement of reading the film as revolutionary is useful for justifying an understanding of it as such, beyond that it is necessary to understand how Van Peebles conceptualized the revolutionary nature of his film.

In his book on the making of *Sweetback*, Van Peebles devotes a significant amount of space to discussing why he decided to make the film, which begins to connect his filmmaking to the philosophy of Black Power. He focuses on creating a project that fought the white images of Blackness that had colonized the minds of Black Americans (Van Peebles 66). Additionally, he

goes on to say that one of the aspects of the film that was necessary for him in creating it was making an image of the Black man triumphant so that Black audiences “could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other’s eyes, looking once again like they’d had it” (Van Peebles 67). This shows that the direction of *Sweetback* was first and foremost concerned with creating revolutionary images that countered the traditional white ones.

In keeping with the explicitly revolutionary mode, in *Sweetback* itself, the revolutionary intent of the director can be readily derived from its portrayal of Sweetback’s political awakening, since Van Peebles cast himself as Sweetback. While Sweetback begins the film unaware of the significance of revolutionary politics, even participating in a performance similar to a minstrel show in the beginning of the film, the fact that his becoming a revolutionary is presented as favorable character progression communicates that Van Peebles’s choice is done without a shred of irony. As Sweetback moves from letting police unjustly arrest him without resistance to killing officers to save a revolutionary from their racist attacks, Van Peebles frames the acts as a sociopolitical awakening that is built on Sweetback’s empathetic response to the suffering of Black men at the hands of a white power structure. Sweetback makes his revolutionary identity clear in the film when a man is sent to help Sweetback escape the United States on motorbike. Sweetback sends the young Black freedom fighter whom he saved earlier in his place, telling the man “He’s our future, Brer.” This makes it clear that Sweetback is now fighting for a revolutionary cause rather than just himself since his journey has led him to become a revolutionary himself. Thus, when Sweetback triumphs over the white power structure and the film informs the audience that Sweetback will be “coming back to collect some dues,” the revolutionary intent of this message is clear as it asserts that the awakening to political consciousness also means inevitably acknowledging the need for acts of violence against the



state. Similarly, Sweetback's sexual acts that he performs to help escape and outwit the police throughout the film are tied to this revolutionary charge. By making his revolutionary character a sexual performer by trade, Van Peebles immediately and explicitly ties sexuality to revolutionary consciousness. By placing himself unironically in the role of the revolutionary Sweetback, Van Peebles aligned himself with his character and thus with the revolutionary politics of the film.

While it is far from the only way in which these films deploy their revolutionary sexuality, instances of interracial sexuality within these films are where the transcoding of the buck stereotype is most overt since miscegenation has historically been a locus for racist anxieties. In his book on Black theater in the African continuum, Paul Carter Harrison, a playwright and professor who was attached to the Black Theatre Movement, explained that his adoration of *Sweetback* came from the subversive potency of its portrayal of Sweetback's sexuality. In reference to Sweetback's interracial sex scene, Harrison states that "[Sweetback] has determinedly leveled his organ like a dagger and thrust into the heart of every white man's fear" (145). Thus, I will use these instances of interracial sexuality in order to explain how the films construct their images of Black men's sexuality as revolutionary.

In *Sweetback* there are two key scenes of interracial sexuality that play off of one another to form the film's explicitly revolutionary sexuality. The first of these occurs just after the opening scenes of the film, while Sweetback is performing as a sex worker before he has begun his awakening to revolutionary political consciousness. This sequence is contrasted by a later sex scene that occurs once Sweetback has come to understand the racial injustice of the white power structure and has accepted the need for revolutionary action. By contrasting these two moments of the film, it becomes clear that as Sweetback himself becomes racially and politically awakened his sexual performance changes dramatically, as does its meaning.

The fact that the first of these scenes transpires before Sweetback's political awakening is significant because it gives the backdrop by which the change in Sweetback's sexual imagery can be measured. The scene begins by cutting from a medium close-up of two white police officers talking to Sweetback's employer, Beetle, as they demand that he let them arrest one of his male performers in order to make their chief think that they are making progress on a murder case. Importantly, the film cuts between them and Sweetback's performance in medium long shot as the sequence unfolds. Interspersed between these two are also shots where the camera is positioned among the non-police spectators. As a result, the sex show in which Sweetback performs is put on under the watchful eyes of the two officers as well as the interracial crowd that has come to see Sweetback. Through this scene, Van Peebles expresses the danger in adhering unquestioningly to the traditional forms of representation for Black men, because the racist stereotype that Sweetback perpetuates through his show enables whites to accept Black men's sexuality as a point of ridicule by willingly denigrating his own sexual imagery to a source of comedy. The consequence of Sweetback's uncritical adherence to Blackface-like imagery through his costume is emphasized as the film presents the white audiences' subtle mockery of him throughout the performance. Black audience members are shown with looks of arousal at the erotic acts while the white people watching (including the police) laugh at Sweetback's act. It is made clear that Sweetback's performances are largely played for comedic effect. The film cuts to white audience members laughing at the show. An important part of the comedy in this show is a costume worn by Sweetback's character that is meant to hearken back to minstrelsy. The fact that the film cuts to a close-up of Sweetback looking indifferent while wearing the costume communicates that, since he accepts his work as a racist caricature, he lacks the political consciousness to understand the ramifications of mediating images of Black men's bodies in this

way. This reading of Sweetback's complacency with the act is furthered when Van Peebles cuts to a shot of Sweetback kneeling before the audience after having sex, making him look subservient to it.

At the end of Sweetback's show, Van Peebles depicts the limits that white American hegemony places on expressions of Black men's sexuality by way of its policing the racial-sexual border. After Sweetback has finished his performance, the "fairy godmother" boasts about Sweetback's unrivaled sexual talent, letting the audience know that "Sweetback is the greatest! The absolute greatest!" In response to his own claim about Sweetback, the godmother then issues a challenge to the women of the audience, telling them that if there is anyone who doubts his confidence in Sweetback's sexual athleticism, they can test it with a free demonstration. Given the nature of the preceding act, the godmother's dare receives laughter from the people watching, including the police. However, despite the laughter, there is a clear interest to take the offer as a white woman almost instantly jumps from her chair and attempts to join Sweetback. To emphasize the white woman's yearning for Sweetback, the film zooms in on her as she gets up and begins undressing, making her rush to have sex with him the focus of the shot. Van Peebles specifically frames that part of the scene around the white woman's open desire for Sweetback, because it allows him to portray the backlash whites release against expressions of Black sexuality that transgress the racial-sexual boundary. Immediately after the woman begins moving toward Sweetback, a white man in the audience grabs her by the arm and yanks her back into her seat. Nevertheless, she persists. Jumping back to her feet, she begins to undress. In response to her eager lust for the Black man and the serious confidence in his sexuality that the godmother's challenge implies, a tonal shift occurs within the audience. At the threat of having white supremacy challenged by the white woman openly and willingly desiring a Black man, the white

men watching (including the police officers) turn sour. Black male sexuality as an overt source of pride and power is shown to threaten the white men and the power structure that their attitudes support. In addition to the man who violently reacts to the white woman's lust for a Black man, the police stop laughing and chatting with Beetle, instead turning hostile.

In this moment, the film attends to the officers' reactions in order to focus on the way that expressions of Black men's sexuality are policed through coercion and force, especially when there is a risk of miscegenation. As the woman begins taking her clothes off, the white officers realize that Sweetback's sexuality is no longer a joke but rather a serious threat to white authority which elicits their racist anxieties. The film cuts from the woman to a medium close-up of the deputies as the smiles drain from their faces, turning to scowls, making it clear that if Sweetback is allowed to transgress the racial-sexual border then there will likely be violent and legal consequences to the Black men putting on the show. Immediately recognizing the threat to their wellbeing that the white men's racist anxiety over the demonstration represents, Beetle and the godmother act to stop the white woman and guarantee their safety. Thus, realizing that he must alleviate the white men's anxiety to remain safe, the godmother stops the white woman from undressing, telling her that "the offer is for sisters only." He does this to play the offer once more as a joke, making the police and white audience burst into laughter by restoring the non-transgressive status of the Black man's sexuality.

Thus, the entire sequence becomes a representation of the ways that Black male sexuality is forced to navigate its images in ways that avert white racist anxieties, showing the fact that performances of Blackness are limited through the threat of coercion to those that support white hegemony. On its own, this moment of the film provides an interesting commentary on the state of the existing problem surrounding Black images to which the Black Power movements called

attention. But when put in dialogue with the later scene of interracial sexuality within the film, the brothel becomes a part of a larger project to create an image of revolutionary sexuality for Black men, which the director makes it the film's project to do.

While this is important on its own, to fully grasp how Van Peebles constructs revolutionary sexuality in this scene and its contrast, I must also discuss the legacy of Blackface minstrelsy that he engages with this performance since it is key to the scene's meaning. As Eric Lott explains, Blackface performances "arose from a white obsession with Black (male) bodies" and "ruthlessly disavowed its fleshy investments through ridicule and racist lampoon" (4). Thus, the ridicule surrounding Sweetback's sexual performance, in conjunction with his attire in the scene, makes it clear that minstrelsy plays an important part Van Peebles's use of the buck image. While it may not be identical to any specific character, Sweetback's costume is built around the same signifiers of characters from the Blackface dandy tradition such as Long Tail Blue or Zip Coon. Monica Miller explains that the Blackface dandy came as a reaction to Black Americans who dressed in fancy clothing as a means for displaying their wealth after abolition because of the racist anxieties surrounding Black liberation that they created in white Americans (97-98). Thus, when Sweetback's character enters the show, striding in with his cane while wearing a well-tailored suit and matching hat, the imagery is meant to conjure the image of Black wealth that was appropriated and ridiculed by whites through minstrelsy. By deploying this imagery in the broader context of his performance, the film doubles down on its messaging, using Sweetback's complicity in this minstrel sex to further illustrate his lack of political awareness.

Furthermore, by framing the potential transgression of the racial sexual border within the context of a minstrel performance, *Sweetback* is also able to emphasize the subversive nature of

redefining Black sexual imagery. Since the ridiculous elements of minstrel shows are meant to pleasure white audiences by alleviating their racist anxieties, it is necessary to think about how Sweetback's sexuality is made public by his performance. That is, because Sweetback's sexual imagery is made to be something for others to gaze at, whatever acceptance of stereotype or subversive merit his sex has is defined by how he makes the audience perceive his sexuality. Along these lines, it is necessary to remember that, as Eric Lott explains, while the minstrel shows' narratives were structured around deriding Black men's sexuality, the shows had "a strange dread of miscegenation" cast over them because of their focus on this very sexuality (25). Thus, when Sweetback's performance was reduced to a joke, his sexual imagery is read as denigrated because that is how his sexuality is being presented to the diegetic audience. However, once the white woman seriously attempts to have sex with Sweetback, Sweetback's sexuality becomes temporarily subversive because the white audience members' fear of miscegenation forces them to interpret his sexual imagery as such. Therefore, when a later scene deploys a public performance like this but contrasts it by having Sweetback disrupt the minstrel show's meaning by consciously playing with the audience's perceptions, it combats the racist anxieties over Blackness and miscegenation that originally defined both the buck and minstrel images that the film transcodes.

The contrasting scene occurs after Sweetback has radicalized himself and begun his escape from the United States and is used to show how sexual imagery can be deployed subversive within the sexual act itself. He has realized the socio-political implications of his representation of Black sexuality, namely its ability to either combat the racism of the white power structure or further it. The latter scene contrastingly displays the strength of new images of Blackness. The scene transpires during an encounter with a white biker gang that forces

Sweetback to accept a duel with their leader, The Prez/Big Sadie. The film emphasizes Sadie's seemingly overwhelming stature as it shows her in medium long shot as she displays her impressive physical strength, lifting a bulky motorcycle into the air, and throwing a knife to hit a point at the other side of the room. This straightforwardly makes Sadie look like an insurmountable opponent while the gang makes Sweetback choose the means for the duel. Once Sadie removes her biking helmet and he can see that she is a woman, however, Sweetback is able to choose a method for the duel that he knows will assure his victory: "Fucking!" Sweetback triumphs in the duel as Sadie reaches sexual climax and calls out his name in front of all of the white men in the audience.

However, by constructing revolutionary sexuality in these terms, the film limits itself in its potential to be a tool that can successfully serve all Black Americans. The public nature of Sweetback's duel turn his duel into a spectacle by which Sadie's sexuality is made to stand in for the white power structure so that, when Sweetback stands triumphantly over her, his white audience will signify a non-submissive image of Black sexuality in their minds. By framing Sadie as a symbol of the white power structure Van Peebles uses a white woman's body as a battleground by which Sweetback is able to fight white racism by proving his mastery of sexuality. Turning the white woman's body as a site for power struggle between Black men and white men is hardly novel or subversive. *Sweetback's* deployment of this trope maintains a racist and misogynistic tradition in line with the likes of *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Linda Williams explains that, in *Birth*, D.W. Griffith uses the racist fear of Black men raping white women as a justification for the Klan's actions within the film, stating "The ride of the Klan thus appears entirely activated by this assault on a white woman [by a Black man]" ("The Birth of a Nation" 248). While *Sweetback* differs greatly in its purpose for reifying white women's sexuality as the

battleground for a power struggle, it still maintains the same reactionary attitude in fully relegating white women's significance to how their bodies can be utilized by men to assert their own power. Furthermore, in choosing to lift white womanhood up to a higher status than Black women, the film's implementation of revolutionary sexuality implies the superiority of white women. This denies Black women the same potential for subversive imagery that it offers to Black men. The film privileges Sadie's whiteness in the way that reifies the virtue of white womanhood while forging its revolutionary meaning, doing so at the expense of Black women.

By presenting Black women as the teachers that help the Black man achieve his sexual tools for subverting white hegemony, Van Peebles attempts to make Black women significant within the construction of revolutionary sexuality.<sup>4</sup> However, he does so in a way that lessens the importance of Black women and their sexuality by making the sole role of their sex be to serve the needs of Black men. This is most readily apparent in the opening of the film where a group of female sex workers are shown attentively watching a young Sweetback (played by Van Peebles's teenage son, Mario) as they feed him, before one of the women leads him into her room to have him lose his virginity and literally become a man, transforming from Mario Van Peebles to Melvin Van Peebles. While this scene certainly presents these women as important to Sweetback's development, their brief roles in the film are nonetheless framed solely in terms of how they serve him. Furthermore, by making Sweetback's sexual liberation culminate in the challenge of a white woman, Van Peebles forms the image of Black female sexuality around preparing men to take on the greater challenge of white women, essentially confirming white supremacist claims of white superiority. Though, despite this weakness in the film's

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<sup>4</sup> In the Black Panthers' review of the film, Huey Newton himself praised the film in this regard, stating that "every time after [the film's opening scene] when Sweetback engages in sex with a sister, it is always an act of survival, and a step towards his liberations" (C).



revolutionary messaging, the other aspects of the film, and the duel in particular, still serve an important revolutionary function for Black men.

Sweetback's choice of weapon and terms for the duel are significant in regard to Van Peebles's ideas of forging a revolutionary sexuality for Black men. By choosing sex as the means for the duel, Van Peebles attacks what he constructs as a weakness of the white power structure in forcing white men to accept interracial sex. Despite white men's fears of a Black man having sex with a white woman, the terms that Sweetback chooses tacitly implies that neither the white men nor Sadie can object to Sweetback's choice because the connotation of denying the duel that they proposed would inherently suggests a belief that the Black man will win, thereby challenging their assumed superiority. Thus, Sweetback gives them no choice but to allow him to openly defy the system and antagonize them. Sweetback's ability to transgress the racial-sexual boundary enables him to further challenge racist imaginings of Black male sexuality through the terms of his duel. While Sweetback never explains what it means to win in fucking, the film makes it clear that, in order to win, one must make their partner orgasm while maintaining self-control over their own sexuality. The means of Sweetback's victory recasts Black male sexuality as about remaining cool under pressure, defying the traditional buck stereotype's definition of Black men's sexuality as uncontrollable.

The duel itself is framed through similarities to the earlier scene in the brothel in order to make explicit the ways in which Sweetback's performance has changed since adopting his revolutionary politics. As the duel begins, the camera positions the audience watching the film among the duel's spectators as it had in the earlier scene, in order to call attention to the gaze through which the white men are seeing Sweetback's performance. When he walks up to the makeshift ring, Sweetback is naked except for an out-of-place hat and bowtie which the script

explains the bikers put on him (Van Peebles 150), conjuring the same minstrelsy tradition that his costume from the earlier scene elicited. However, unlike when he was working at the brothel, Sweetback is now armed with a political consciousness that recognizes the importance of images and representation. Thus, once the duel has begun, the now revolutionary Sweetback casts off the racist costume as he begins having sex with Sadie. As Sweetback does this, the film emphasizes his open act of resistance, keeping it onscreen as a freeze frame that it imposes through double exposure over that of him and Sadie having sex. As Amy Rust explains, the freeze frame relies on the idea of authenticity that its photographic quality implies, which films often put toward suggesting a mastery of the image (63-64). When the white audience in the film sees Sweetback in the costume they put on him, they try to claim mastery over his sexuality through the perceived authenticity of black sexuality that minstrelsy tries to claim. By arresting the diegetic and extradiegetic audiences' attentions with Sweetback's casting off of the minstrel costume, while simultaneously casting his newly defiant sexual performance behind the image, Sweetback and the film challenge minstrelsy's supposed authenticity so that mastery of black sexual imagery can be reclaimed by and for black men. Therefore, by deciding to capture this moment of clear distinction between the pre-awakened and the revolutionary Sweetback through the freeze frame, Van Peebles defines the image as a site of counterhegemonic action in the film by using it to challenge the perceived authenticity of the minstrel image.

The freeze frame here also calls our attention to the role of the audience (both diegetic and extradiegetic) in forging Sweetback's revolutionary sexuality. In her work on the staging of interracial romance, Charlery Hélène notes that this type of double framing constructs sexuality as a "sight to behold" for white audiences within a motion picture in a way that reveals the gaze of a real-world white audience (Hélène 87-88). However, Hélène's observations here are

problematized in the context of *Sweetback* because the diegetic white audiences of the film cannot be understood as mirrors to the film's intended audience. Their specific prejudices against interracial sexuality, as demonstrated through both the brothel audience and the bikers' reactions to Black sexuality, are incongruous with the intended Black audience of the film. Therefore, to understand what Van Peebles is doing, we must modify Hélène's observations to account for this difference. Instead of using the diegetic audience to mirror the film's audience, Van Peebles uses the diegetic audiences' reactions to Sweetback's sex to act as a parallel to the typically presumed white filmgoing audience with its ways of gazing at Black bodies onscreen. Thus, rather than being a gaze with which the Black audience can identify, it is a white gaze that they can recognize and reject for its racism. This also further emphasizes the significance for the public nature of Sweetback's sexual performances in these scenes as it is necessary for the extradiegetic audience to be able to experience the gaze of the diegetic audience on Sweetback. Furthermore, the film's engagement with the extradiegetic audience acknowledges that the Black sexual imagery that *Sweetback* is transcoding is always already public. Van Peebles uses the diegetic audience to reveal to that, by nature of their mediation, images of Black sexuality, whether in film or the minstrel show, have always been presented as spectacles for the public to interpret and internalize. By showing the extradiegetic audience the public mediation of Sweetback's sexuality, he reasserts the importance of defining the image revolutionarily.

Thus, this freeze frame acts as a microcosm of the larger framework of revolutionary sexuality that is carried out throughout the film as it shows Sweetback resisting whites with full attention toward the way that images of Black men's sexuality can either be used to be complicit in the racism of the white power structure or combat it. For both the audience and now for Sweetback, the costume that he discards is more than merely a singular instance of racist action

towards a Black man. Sweetback, armed with a revolutionary political consciousness, now recognizes the action of wearing the costume as the creation of an image within the minds of the white audience that supports the tradition of representations of Black sexuality that build white supremacy. When he casts their image off, he enables himself to form his own image in their mind, one that is triumphant and capable of subverting white authority. The fact that he does this by casting off clothing meant to signify Blackface minstrelsy performances is significant to this. Eric Lott explains that the minstrel show is a “negotiated and rowdy spectacle of performer and audience” (10). Thus, removing the costume signifies Sweetback’s refusal to negotiate his sexual performance on the terms of his white audience, denying them the power of their Blackface image’s aesthetics. In doing so, he replaces the racist image in the minds of his white audience with a new one that undermines and replaces the old one, making the revolutionary image the one that appears to be authentic. Therefore, when Sweetback wins his duel, he is not merely succeeding for himself. Instead, because he wins by denying the whites’ racist imagining of sexualized Blackness, he is combatting the racist imaginary by performing Black male sexuality in a way that contradicts whites’ racist underestimation of him. In an act of cultural turnabout Sweetback trounces the white men’s racist perception of his sexuality by relying on their prejudice to make his act of revolutionary sexuality impactful because of its foil to their degraded imagination of Black sexuality, turning their racism against them. This is accentuated when Sweetback puts the hat back on himself after he has won before standing over the defeated Sadie. Now that he has redefined his sexuality in the public eye, he is able to wear the hat as a trophy, knowing that the audience can no longer read him as the racist caricature that the hat originally connoted.

When considering the way that revolutionary sexuality becomes formulated in *Sweetback*, it is apparent that the film attempts to carry the mission of Black Power forward through its overtly political images of Black men's sexuality. Since this film's tactics are characteristic of the explicitly revolutionary mode of Blaxploitation in the sense of its undisguised ties of sexual imagery to political revolution, *Sweetback's* revolutionary sexuality proves that a significant portion of the movement is indeed subversive. However, there is more to the movement than solely its explicitly revolutionary films. In order to fully justify that Blaxploitation as a whole is characterized by revolutionary politics it is necessary to look at the films of the indirectly revolutionary mode as represented by *Shaft*.

### ***Shaft's* Indirectly Revolutionary Sexuality**

When compared to the explicitly revolutionary charge of *Sweetback*, *Shaft's* politics may at first seem laissez-faire because the film never overtly urges for disruptive acts of violence against the state. However, the claim that *Shaft* is not revolutionary is far from the case. Though *Shaft's* political messaging is not overt, it nonetheless points to revolutionary politics in a different way and does so while similarly attending to the potent subject of interracial sexuality. Unlike *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and other indirectly revolutionary Blaxploitation films, never directly connect their sexual imagery to revolutionary action. Instead, they work to rearticulate perceptions of Black men and their sexuality for American audiences by shifting the meaning of Black male sexuality in film in ways that allow it to be represented differently from its traditional archetypal forms. In *Shaft* specifically, this is done in ways that tie sexuality to ideas of vulnerability and gender dynamics in ways that we do not see in *Sweetback* which maintains a more stoic masculinity. Unlike the explicitly revolutionary *Sweetback* whose defining sexual

moments are made public as means for proving the power of Black sexuality to the white power structure, Shaft conceives his sexuality's significance privately and indirectly. Within the film, Shaft uses his sexuality to prove himself to himself rather than to the white power structure. Instead, sex becomes a microcosm of the larger socio-political ecology in which proving one's ability in bed declares his ability to overcome the white power structure. The film clearly does this for its Black audience, rearticulating the filmic images of Blackness through a depiction of Black sexuality that is indirectly revolutionary.

As with *Sweetback*, to understand *Shaft*, we must also consider Parks's ideology and evidence of Parks's belief in the use of images for subversive anti-racist politics. Parks was never subtle about the centrality of racial justice to his work. In describing his first camera, Parks saw it as his "weapon against poverty and racism" (88). During his time as a photographer, he used this weapon to actively frame and control images of Blackness in ways that allowed him to form counter-hegemonies surrounding issues surrounding Black Americans. This is especially clear in one of his most famous contributions to *Life Magazine*, a piece on gangs in Harlem and one of their leaders, Red Jackson. Parks explains that it was important to him that the young Black men that he was representing through his images were seen with sympathy for the socio-economic position into which they were thrust, rather than through a stereotypical racist lens. To this end, Parks explains that he destroyed any photos of Jackson or the gang that he thought could serve that purpose so that they could never be deployed in a damaging way (139).

In discussing *Shaft*, Parks mentions a number of filmmaking decisions that he fought for (and won) against his white coworkers over the way the filmic images would be presented which help inform the film's indirectly revolutionary sexuality. Among the representational matters that Parks fought for is the decision to depict Shaft with a moustache since he argued that it would

allow the Black man to be seen as macho, which he claims would go against one of the “unwritten laws of the silver screen” (Parks 365). By shaping the image in this way, Parks actively participated in revolutionary image creation as defined by the Black Power movement by creating what he saw as “the first big romantic action hero [for Black youth]” (Parks 365). The concern with creating new representations of Blackness for Black Americans that Parks expresses in this statement fits in line with the type of image creation that Black Power movements argue for. This history of Parks’s work shows that he has always been keenly aware of the importance of revolutionary imaging and that he has actively engaged it to serve anti-racist ends. The classic story goes that while *Sweetback* is a truly revolutionary film because its freedom from the studio system allowed it to overtly signal its politically subversive message, *Shaft* and indirectly revolutionary films are simply white films with Black actors that were meant to capitalize on the success of *Sweetback* and are non-revolutionary by comparison (Wiggins 29, 44). However, as Parks’ beliefs show us, the idea that films of *Shaft*’s revolutionary mode are somehow less concerned with their messaging than *Sweetback*, or are sell outs in some way, is untenable.

Similar to *Sweetback*, *Shaft*’s means for counter-hegemony can be seen through its use of the interracial sex scene, especially when it is compared to an earlier scene of Shaft having sex with his Black girlfriend. To understand how *Shaft* constructs its revolutionary sexuality along interracial lines it is necessary to determine the function that sex serves for Shaft within the film. Shaft’s purpose for sex can be deciphered from his very first sexual encounter within the film. The first instance of a sexual relationship being shown in the film comes when a tired and worn out Shaft goes to his Black girlfriend Ellie’s apartment. This sequence is completely and intently attentive to Shaft’s desire for sex. The film opens this moment with an establishing shot of Ellie

walking into her apartment before cutting to a medium close-up of Shaft reclining naked in her chair as she enters. Shaft's nude anticipation of Ellie makes it clear that the sole purpose of his visit is sex. Ellie then begins to disrobe as the film fades to the two already having sex, cutting out any foreplay or awkward fumbling with clothes. By doing this, the filmmakers make the intercourse itself the sole subject of importance within the moment. This direct call to attend to Shaft having sex is linked to his disclosure that he has been worn down by the dehumanizing experiences he has face faced while navigating the white power structure. Shaft is not merely looking for sexual pleasure but instead for sexual healing. Unlike the traditional buck stereotype from which *Shaft* borrows, which asserts hypersexuality as a mark of a rampant uncontrollable sexual appetite, the film's reappropriated image of Blackness defines Shaft's sexuality as a survival mechanism for coping with the humiliations thrust on him by systemic racism. Unlike the importance of public sex which we see in *Sweetback*, understanding the construction of Shaft's sexuality as a private response to racism is key to this film's formation of revolutionary sexuality. It fundamentally undermines the stereotype's dehumanizing elements and reinvents them, engaging sexuality as a tool to resist the damage done by the racist white system.

Parks's formulation of sexuality is certainly more attentive to Black women than *Sweetback*, in the sense that, through their complicity in the healing black men, it makes them out to be coconspirators of sorts with Black men against white hegemony. However, like the Black Power movements from which *Shaft* borrows its philosophy, the film still sets its focus on the needs of Black men rather than Black women, meaning that it never puts Ellie's needs on the same level to which it elevates Shaft's. This refashioning of images to serve Black men is furthered as the scene continues and positions the camera to watch Shaft and Ellie already in the act.



In this scene the deployment of Black male sexuality is done in ways that are far subtler than anything we see in *Sweetback*. As the film's gaze transitions to the couple's having sex, the camera focuses on Shaft atop Ellie and zooms in to an extreme close-up of her shaking hands on his back in order to imply her sexual pleasure. The intimacy of the extreme close-up here locks the audience's attention on Shaft bringing her to orgasm while it pays no mind to Shaft's sexual climax, positioning the characters' bodies so that the camera can try to signify Ellie's pleasure through the movement of her hands on Shaft's back. This is similar to the duel in *Sweetback* as the film focuses on the Black lead's ability to remain cool, displaying his self-control and sexual prowess by showing him attending to his partner's orgasm over his own. It is significant that this scene is framed this way because it reveals the purpose that sex with Ellie serves for Shaft. The direction of this sequence communicates that Shaft is not necessarily needing to orgasm. Rather, what Shaft needs from the encounter is to restore his ego by proving his own sexual prowess to himself. This is because, by maintaining control over his own sexuality Shaft privately proves the original buck stereotype wrong and asserts to himself a new image of Black sexuality that reaffirms his confidence in himself. Thus, by remaining cool under passion and getting Ellie to climax before him, Shaft heals his ego and is able to return to the world feeling confident in his ability to deal with the white power structure once more. This is further emphasized by the fact that the film immediately cuts from Ellie's ecstatic reaction to a diner where Shaft confidently deals with the white police once more.

The sexual humor that Shaft uses to maneuver around the officer's questioning following this scene is similarly important to the subversive sexual politics of the film, as this sexual innuendo becomes a frequent tactic that Shaft linguistically employs to subvert the presumed authority of whites. An example of this is when Shaft disregards a white police officer that is

questioning him and asking where he is going, by replying “To get laid! Where the hell are you going?” Through this, he is leveraging his sexuality to dismiss and shut down white legal authorities that would otherwise exercise power over him, and he does so by playing off of the oversexed stereotype that whites have historically placed on him. The way that Shaft uses his humor allows him to subvert racist authority. While it is not something that we see within the context of *Sweetback*, the use of humor to cope with racism is not unique to *Shaft*, as Kevin Hylton shows (328). Hylton explains that humor is often used to relieve the “psychic harms” of racism and resist the suffering that it causes (340). This tactic certainly rings true for Shaft’s use of sexual humor around whites. While Shaft’s humor calls to mind the oversexed stereotype of Black men in order to fulfill its function, it operates as a source of power rather than making Black sexuality a point of ridicule, combatting attempts to emasculate him through white racism. Unlike in the brothel sequence from *Sweetback*, in which Black men’s sexuality is made into a joke at the expense of Black men, Shaft structures his jokes in such a way that they disarm white authority figures and remind them that he refuses to be subordinated to them. Shaft’s humor is defined by positioning racist perceptions of Blackness as the butt of the joke in order to uplift Black sexuality, contrasting the racist minstrel style of comedy that *Sweetback* fights against. Thus, his sexuality becomes subversive to an even greater extent. Not only is Shaft’s sex revolutionary because it allows him to revitalize himself and combat the damages of racism, but it also enables him to actively, though subtly, combat it in his daily life. Therefore, this use of witticism further inscribes within the film the idea that sexuality is the form and the battleground of revolutionary subversion, allowing Black men to fight back against instances of white violence.

Shaft's excursion into interracial sex, when a white woman named Linda returns to his apartment with him, is directly connected to a moment of white violence and the deployment of his sexual imagery is framed as a response to it. Midway through the film, after Shaft has discovered that his adversary is the white mafia, there is a brief sequence in which he smoothly outwits a couple of mafiosos who are trying to track him down. Shaft outsmarts the two and distracts them while he has officers rush to them to arrest the two mobsters. In response to their defeat at the wit of Shaft, one of the white gangsters breaks a glass, cuts Shaft's hand, and spits in his face before being hauled off. The film then introduces the interracial sex scene through an extreme close-up of Linda's hand caressing the cut on Shaft's hand as she tends to it, creating an immediate sense of intimacy for the audience. The fact that this shot is transitioned to from the scene of the white mobster lashing out at Shaft connects Shaft's desire for the intimacy of a private sexual relation to the damages he has suffered from white violence, just as in the sequence with Ellie.

However, Shaft's tryst with Linda is structured in a tangibly different way from the sex scene with Ellie, framing itself around Shaft's desirability rather than his sexual prowess. Furthermore, it is clear that this is tied to interracial nature of this encounter. While Shaft makes his want for sex clear when he is with Ellie, he instead plays it cool and aloof when talking to Linda. This becomes obvious in the medium shot following Linda's care for his hand, in which he is looking away from her as he drinks and responds to her attempts at conversation. This is followed by Shaft's leaving the eager Linda so that he can take a shower. While this aloof behavior is significantly different from Shaft's approach to Ellie, he is still seeking sexual affirmation from Linda as he had from Ellie. From the sex scene that follows, it is made clear that he is still looking to heal his ego by proving himself through his sexuality. The difference is

in the setup. Shaft sets Linda up to reassure his masculine ego in a different way that still relies on his playing it cool in order to prove himself to himself. It is clear that Shaft wants to have sex with Linda, but it is more important to him that she reveal that she desires him more as this necessarily defines his sexuality through opposition to the historical imagery of the Black man as a rapist or as uncontrollably lustful after the white woman's body. Shaft does not make himself immediately available to Linda, as he had for Ellie, because of Linda's whiteness. He creates a test where he can only be sure that he is actively desired if he is able to show that she is interested in him when he shows her indifference. Shaft frames the encounter with Linda so that she will come to him, affirming his sexual irresistibility and restoring his ego. This is not simply based on her desire for him as a man, but it is built around her as a white woman sexually longing for a Black man and contradicting the racist imaginings of Black men's sexuality in relation to white womanhood. *Shaft's* transcoding of the buck image communicates that Black men uncontrollably lust for white women. Therefore, by building his sexual test on his own self-control and her desire for him, Shaft makes his test a rebuke of the white power structure and its images when it succeeds. Thus, when the film shows her joining him in the shower, clinging to the shower door in medium close-up as she says that she "just couldn't wait" before an extreme close-up similar to the one that focused on Shaft and Ellie, we can see Shaft's psychic triumph over the emotional assault from life in a system that represses him. Similar to the way that Sweetback had to play cool in his duel in order to prove himself, Shaft must prove himself so that he can regain his confidence and reenter the world revitalized (as is evidenced by the film's next cut to his dealing with police in the precinct immediately following this sexual encounter).

Of course, Shaft's proving of himself is still done in relation to white hegemony, as his deployment of sexual imagery differs in the presence of whiteness, but it is done in a way that is

personalized and in private. However, just because Shaft's need to prove himself is personalized, rather than made into a grand display, does not preclude him from resisting racism through his act. This is most certainly why sex is significant for Shaft. What we see in this difference is a matter of how racialized sexual imagery is managed in these two forms of revolutionary sexuality. For *Sweetback*, the white woman is treated as a symbolic element of white power within the larger spectacle that the scene creates for the audience. Meanwhile, while *Shaft* acknowledges the implications of racial difference to the sex scene, it does so in a way that avoids privileging whiteness over Blackness. Because his sexual encounter with whiteness is made private, unlike the public display of *Sweetback*, Shaft's tryst with Linda is not forced to compete with the perceptions of a diegetic audience. Since Shaft is not beholden to white onlookers, he is able to avoid a reactionary approach to white womanhood in a way that *Sweetback* cannot due to the public nature of his performances. The privacy of Shaft and Linda's encounter allows the film to challenge the history of white antagonism towards miscegenation without solely relegating her significance to her whiteness. Linda Williams explains that the Black man/white woman interracial sexual formula is significant for the Black man because of "the jealous white man who represents the absent third party and has his masculinity (and mastery) put in jeopardy by his exclusion" ("Skin Flicks" 297). Thus, in Shaft's interracial sexual encounter, his ability to use sexuality as a means for healing himself from, and bolstering himself against, the white power structure makes the film's sexual imagery inherently revolutionary. The film has Shaft contest perceived white mastery by two means by challenging the white man's presumed authority through Shaft's desirability to a white woman and through his use of that desire to further resist white power.

Considering the role that exclusion plays in the interracial sex scene it is necessary to discuss the gendered dynamics of Shaft's resistance in this way. This is especially important because it is within these gendered dynamics that we can see *Shaft's* mode of revolutionary sexuality function in a way that is even more subversive than *Sweetback's*. As Williams goes on to point out, in addition to the absent white man, scenes such as these are "also haunted by the Black woman who loses a potential partner to the myth of superior white womanhood" ("Skin Flicks" 297). In other words, Shaft's revolutionary sexuality in the instance of interracial sex runs the risk of becoming tainted by the absence Ellie by making her insignificant once Linda arrives. However, *Shaft's* images are constructed with careful attention to the issue that Williams raises. Indeed, this concern is addressed by a later scene in which Shaft calls Ellie to check in with her and the two express their feelings for one another. In emotionally returning to Ellie in this way, the filmmakers undo the absence of the Black woman that is created by privileging the white woman. Furthermore, by returning to Ellie to deprivileging the significance of the white woman's sexuality and keeping his sexual relationships private, *Shaft* avoids reifying white women as a site to displace the power struggles between men since he does not invite their gaze. Although this is done solely on Shaft's terms, subordinating her position to him, Ellie's importance to Shaft continues to be attended to, whereas Linda is completely absent once she leaves Shaft's apartment. By treating Shaft's sexual partners like this, the film is able to maintain its revolutionary sexuality by deprivileging the white woman's body as a site of perceived superiority within interracial sex. Thus, *Shaft* is able to engage with revolutionary sexuality very differently from *Sweetback* when under the lens of interracial sex because of its mobilization of sexual imagery through private relationships. Shaft conceives of his sexual triumphs on an emotional level through his own vulnerability, allowing him to overcome the white power

structure in ways that have more nuanced gendered politics than *Sweetback* whose victories are physiological and whose sexuality is non-vulnerable. Through its construction, *Shaft* posits that a Black men's sexuality can be used to help one heal from the dehumanization brought by the white power structure as well as resist racism equally well whether a man's chosen partner is Black or white, where *Sweetback* views a Black man having sex with a white woman as a microcosm of racial-sexual politics in which the Black man must triumph over her to prove his ability to thwart the power structure.

While *Shaft*'s more progressive sexual imagery extends itself to attend, at least partially, to Black women in addition to men, the meaning of interracial sex in *Sweetback* is unable to fully escape from a reactionary image of racialized gender relations. For *Shaft* then, revolutionary sexuality in an interracial context can be understood as subversive in its attempts to destigmatize and defetishize the coupling of a Black man and white woman, redefining the sexual imagery by using taboos to subvert the system that created them. This element of dependency that fits into *Shaft*'s formulation of the Black hero fully contradicts the buck image that it reappropriates by connecting Black men's sexuality to the importance of self-awareness and care that is fully disregarded in the original stereotype. In doing this, *Shaft* charts a course for male hypersexuality in Blaxploitation that is significantly different from *Sweetback* but no less revolutionary in the way that rearticulates images of Black male sexuality. Indeed, this allowance of masculine vulnerability and the earlier attention to not over-privileging white women shows the indirectly revolutionary nature of *Shaft* through its gender relations. While *Sweetback*'s form of revolutionary sexuality becomes somewhat reactionary through its attachment to an unfaltering stoic masculinity and its reification of the white woman as symbol to be conquered in the pursuit of revolution, *Shaft* maintains its revolutionary nature by making room for more nuanced and

differing performances of masculinity and working against the notion of Black women's inferiority to white women. This makes it clear that, while both films are certainly revolutionary, the revolutionary politics of Black Power are adopted very differently in the sexual imagery of the explicitly and indirectly revolutionary modes.

Crucial to *Shaft's* formation of revolutionary sexuality in the context of these private relations is the intentional vulnerability that he shows through his interactions with both women. Not only does the private dick make himself physically exposed as he sits in the buff awaiting Ellie or as he lets Linda have full access to his apartment while he showers, but he also makes his own insecurities readily accessible to both women before he relies on them to help restore himself through sex. In Ellie's sequence, the camera sits behind Shaft, keeping him in a medium close-up while she is visually far from him, before she runs to him to check on his wellbeing, creating a visually and emotionally intimate framing. In this moment of intimacy, Shaft becomes emotionally accessible to her (and the extradiegetic audience) as he tells her that he has been feeling like a machine, which he says in reference to having to deal with the stress of dealing with the white power structure. By revealing this feeling to her, Shaft shows that he is willing to drop the machismo that he presents to other men, especially white men, in order to foster the sense of sexual intimacy that he needs. Furthermore, it structures Shaft's need for sex as a response to the racist humiliations that wear him down.

A similar moment occurs before Shaft has sex with Linda, making the articulation of male sexuality as vulnerable a theme within the film's articulation of revolutionary sexuality. When the film cuts from the bar scene to the two in Shaft's apartment, it immediately opens their encounter with an extreme close-up of Linda's hands on Shaft's as she tends to the wound given to him by the white mobster who spat on him. This initiates their sexual interaction with her



visibly tending to the damage done to him by racist whites. This moment further foregrounds their sexual intimacy through his willingness to be open and expose his emotions to women. These moments of vulnerability are brief but nonetheless significant in terms of constructing a different revolutionary sexuality. Unlike in *Sweetback*, these moments of emotional self-exposure are not directly connected to a call for political revolution. Instead, they work to rearticulate images of Black male sexuality in ways that positively represent Black men and in ways that work to shift cultural perceptions of Black men toward more varied expressions of Black masculinity. While male vulnerability may not be what immediately comes to mind when thinking about Black Power, the reappropriation and transcoding of images in this way remains true to one of the core beliefs of Black Power, especially when deployed along the lines of a subject as potent interracial sex.

Therefore, we cannot understand *Shaft* (or other Blaxploitation films of the indirectly revolutionary trajectory) as simply shying away from political subversion where films like *Sweetback* call for it. Instead, the indirectly revolutionary mode represents an alternative for achieving revolutionary goals by rearticulating hegemonic norms. These films may not openly call for political overthrow, but their images still actively work toward a re-articulation of American conceptions of Blackness and provide strategies for using sexuality as a form of resistance for Black men. While these films' potentials are limited by their devaluing of Black women and the racist misogyny they face as well as their use of white women as pawns, the films still reveal revolutionary possibilities for transcoding stereotyped images of Blackness. When we understand films like *Shaft* in this way, accepting the proposition that the hypersexuality of Black men in these films plays out simply as a destructive stereotype becomes unreasonable. Furthermore, the differences between *Shaft* and *Sweetback*'s sexual imaginaries

represent alternative politics and means by which this sexual subversion can be deployed. Given the way that these films deploy their revolutionary sexuality, it no longer makes sense to accept the traditional idea that these films were “[subtly] masked forms of devaluing African Americans” as Ed Guerrero mentions (70). Instead, we must understand Blaxploitation’s engagement with Black male sexuality for what it actually is, a means by which politically revolutionary ideology can be inscribed into popular media without detection from the dominant culture, to correct the existing understanding of the movement.

## **Conclusion**

By acknowledging both *Sweetback’s* and *Shaft’s* modes of revolutionary sexuality, the claims that these films uncritically perpetuate racist stereotypes of Black men become untenable. If these films merely bought into the racist imagination, recreating their original white supremacist connotations, then we would not see them actively overturning the buck stereotype’s meaning through transcoding. Furthermore, the fact that we see the clear influence of Black Power philosophy and its limitations in the construction of these films’ images makes it clear that these works have always been revolutionary at their core.

As I have touched on throughout my readings of the films, the full revolutionary potential of these films’ images is limited by the fact that they do not afford Black women or white women the same representational privileges that they do for Black men, often subordinating their importance to the men or to their white counterparts. Certainly, the underlying sexism of these films is a major problem and it is likely one of the reasons that the Blaxploitation movement has had its revolutionary politics overlooked. Shoniqua Roach has attended to the politics surrounding Black women in Blaxploitation through her research on the films of Pam Grier,

noting that characters like Grier's mobilize their sexuality in order to achieve "Black feminist vengeance, punishment and erotic agency" (9). Based on Roach's arguments, it is clear that a revolutionary sexuality similar to what I have explained in relation to men is possible for Black women in these films through their sexual imagery. However, films which featured Black women like Grier as their leads make up the minority of the Blaxploitation. In the movement as a whole, Black women simply do not have their images considered or constructed as carefully as men do throughout the movement, causing Blaxploitation to be far less subversive for Black women, despite some films breaking the mold to deliver their revolutionary potential to women as well.

However, we cannot reduce Blaxploitation to just its shortcomings. We must remember what these films succeeded in doing through their representations of Black men and their sexuality while also keeping in mind the ways in which it did not succeed. If the movement is only considered in terms of its sexism, then it becomes easy to overlook the revolutionary potential of these films' tactics. Simultaneously, if we were to pretend that this sexism is non-existent, then we risk praising these films in a way that perpetuates an erasure of Black women's issues. Therefore, it is crucial that when we think of Blaxploitation's revolutionary ethos, we must keep in mind both the ways in which the tactics of these films offered meaningful counterhegemonic opportunities to Black men as well as the fact that the strategies that were deployed were not always attentive to Black women.

It is also necessary to remember that *Sweetback* and *Shaft* do not exist in exclusion from the rest of the Blaxploitation movement in regard to their revolutionary sexuality. Both the explicit and indirect modes of revolutionary sexuality exist throughout the Black-led Blaxploitation films though their means for articulating this imagery may differ. To minimize the

scale of Blaxploitation's revolutionary imagery to just these two films would ignore the larger trend in film that they represent. If *Sweetback* and *Shaft* were the only two films to deploy revolutionary sexuality, they would still be important. However, if this were the case then they would merely be significant exceptions from the rest of Blaxploitation which would do very little to contradict existing scholarly and popular perceptions of the movement. Other Blaxploitation films, such as *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973) and *Gordon's War* (1973) which adopt the explicitly revolutionary mold or *Super Fly* (1972) and *Trouble Man* (1972) which follow the indirectly revolutionary trajectory, show us that the subversive charge of the movement belongs to more than just the two films that I have analyzed. Therefore, it is crucial to remember that *Sweetback* and *Shaft* are significant in regard to revolutionary sexuality because they represent a much larger group of films that share their revolutionary impulses.

In recognizing the revolutionary nature of Black-led Blaxploitation films it is necessary to remember what is at stake when we discuss their subversive capabilities. Throughout my arguments, I have made it clear that the images in these films are made to actively combat white hegemony and its racist imagery against Black men. By ignoring the subversion that these films bring against the white power structure, instead reading them as perpetuations of racist white images, one diminishes the work of hundreds of Black artists who were working to better the sociopolitical circumstances facing Black Americans and writes them off as aiding their oppressors in furthering their own disenfranchisement. This is something that we need to consider when discussing these films because we do not want to overlook the counterhegemonic implications of these Black artworks.

Furthermore, by acknowledging the revolutionary sexuality of Blaxploitation, we are enabled to engage with the movement, as well as the works that it inspired, in new ways. Since

we see the revolutionary charge of these films through their sexual imagery, the question arises of where else can the revolutionary influence of Black Power in these films be observed and how do the subversive politics of these films affect later films. Certainly, further research into these topics would yield information that could give us important insight into the further socio-political contributions that Blaxploitation filmmakers have had on Black cinema.

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