

How the Portrayal of Black Women has shifted from Slavery times to Blaxploitation
films in American Society

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Abstract

Women have long been negatively stereotyped in American society, usually portrayed as submissive and passive while at the same time seen as disobedient and pushy. These contradictory representations are doubly imposed on Black women. The knowledge that we have about Black women during Slavery shows two main descriptions: a sexual object for the master's pleasure or a 'mammy' figure that devotes all her time to her master's family instead of her own. Unwanted sexual harassment caused Black women to take on the de-sexualized role of the 'mammy' to try and get away from the horrible sexual acts committed against them. During the Blaxploitation film craze of the 1970's women seemed to gain more control over their sexuality, lives and destinies, at least in the movies. The 'strong Black woman' representation was prominent throughout Blaxploitation films and featured heroines taking control over their lives, as well as the things and people that mattered to them. This article seeks to examine the parallels and distinctions of representations of women during the slavery era with that of Blaxploitation films, while exploring how this the portrayal affects the shifting values, identities and ideologies of Black women.

Keywords: Slavery, Blaxploitation films, women stereotypes, Black women stereotypes, women in media

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Black Americans have endured numerous hardships since their involuntary migration and subsequent enslavement from Africa to America. Many scholars would say that the physical captivity of slavery has been transformed into a more mental captivity, in the way that mainstream American culture has systematically fostered racism and discrimination. The despicable imprisonment of African slaves in every way, especially physically and mentally, still affects Black American values, identities and ideologies to this day. These hardships and issues were and still are compounded within the lives of Black women. The representation of Black women throughout history has affected the way Black people, as well as American society, values, identifies and idealizes Black women in general. There have clearly been changes in these ideologies over time and they seem to become present after any type of representation in the media of Black women. This paper seeks to examine the parallels and distinctions of representations of women during the slavery era with that of Blaxploitation films, while exploring how this the portrayal affects the shifting values, identities and ideologies of Black women.

Slavery Era

There are not many slave narratives about women, but of the few, a deep comprehension and recognition of the emotional anguish and suffering is brought to light through their stories. A great example of this is the narrative by Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which she critiques racism, the institution of slavery and even patriarchy. Jacobs descriptively characterizes how it feels to be a slave girl

transforming into a woman rather than just the physical blunt imagery, usually characterized male slave narratives. Harriet tells her story through the alias, Linda, who is the main character and protagonist. Linda begins talking about her father dying and her life with her grandmother, who she was very close to. She explains that her father taught her and her brothers free will and to feel like they were human beings, although it was very dangerous for a slave. The more a slave possessed the notion of their own free will, the more likely they were to be disobedient, run away and be of no use to their owner. Slaves were supposed to think that they were less than human so that the masters not only had physical control over them but psychological control as well. This sense of all-consuming control was even more prominent for slave women due to the extra control slave owners had over their sexuality and paternity of children. Jacobs exemplifies this when she describes Linda being sexually harassed day in and day out by her master. He would write her sexually explicit notes about what he wanted to do with her, accost her and make her feel very uncomfortable being around him. She says “My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him” (Jacobs, p.24) which clearly embodies that sense of control mentioned previously.

Linda’s experience of sexual harassment by her Master and the jealousy of his wife is similar to experiences of many other female slaves, “she listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause” (Jacobs, p.23). The sense of free will instilled in Linda at a young age shined through her actions despite the harassment and abuse from both of her masters. She refused to become totally

victimized by her master and chose when and with whom she would have sex with. Although this person was not someone that she loved, she was in control of her own sexuality and body to a certain extent. This was very unusual for a girl during this era, much less a Black slave girl, and it really speaks about her determination to change her fate as a slave girl. The incidents in the life of Harriet Jacobs are extremely telling of what Black women were supposed to be like and her fight to define her own sexuality instead of letting her master or anyone else, for that matter, define it for her.

In Jacob's narrative she describes two opposing representations of women during slavery times and both are awful: one is a walking breeding ground and exotic sexual figures for their masters and the other is the insignificant 'Mammy' figure who had no control over their families. Both were objectified by their masters and hated furiously by the masters' wives. The Black girl was pitied as she was approaching puberty because of the inevitable harassment, degradation and force placed upon her sexually, especially if she happened to be beautiful. Masters had sex with their female slaves, impregnated them and then adhered to the wife's wish to separate her children by selling them to another plantation. This cycle happened continuously and frequently during slavery and as a result in many cases forced slave women to create a sense of non-sexuality. Slave girls and women willfully made themselves the least appealing, unattractive and undesirable to avoid the heartache of rape, children by their own master and then never seeing those children again. Now of course this tactic may have only worked maybe half of the time, if that, but it does explain the birth of the stereotypical 'Mammy' figure.

Mammies are “characterized as a loyal domestic servant to White people...[that] loves, takes care of, and provides for her white family over her own” (Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p.271). Black women may have over compensated in their devotion and sexually neutrality for fear of the previously stated repercussions, therefore creating the breeding ground for this stereotype to be born. However, the longevity of this depiction of Black women can be explained by the restriction of Black women to domestic service (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Long after slavery was abolished, Black women were still negatively portrayed as ‘mammies’ throughout the media. In the era of radio and even television there were many shows in which Black characters were not only stereotypical, but also portrayed as submissive, incompetent, sneaky and shrewish (Isaksen, 2012, p.756). In Isaksen’s (2012) article on racial formation theory acted out through radio, she talks about a radio show “featuring Aunt Jemima—who was played by a succession of three white women—who entertained listeners with breakfast recipes, minstrel songs, and housekeeping hints” (p.757). This perfect stereotypical ‘mammy’ influenced those listeners to actually believe that this was how Black women really were.

These portrayals created a shift in the values, identities and ideologies that Black women had for themselves. Black women became selfless and thought of their own families before themselves, which is ironic, because in order to do this, they had to take on these characteristics for the White family that owned them in slavery times or the White family they worked for during post-slavery times. Their priority became doing a good job at work to be able to provide and try to keep their own families together. For example, in Jacobs’ book, the grandmother is the stereotypical ‘mammy.’ She gains that

trust and respect of her White owners by selflessly caring for their offspring to better keep her daughter and granddaughter within the same slave-holding family. Jacobs depicts how self-sacrificing the role of a 'mammy' is, "...my mother had been weaned at three months old that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (p.6). During slavery times, the identity of a Black woman was directly related to the manner in which her owners treated her and their views of her. The freedom and sexual control that White slave owners had over Black women (that not even their own husbands could control) was something that was defined for them. Even how other people viewed Black women was decided by their more superior (or so they claimed) White counterparts through media such as radio and television. For example, 1920's radio shows such as Amos 'n' Andy, which was later turned into a television show, routinely rejected Black applicants because they were unable to properly speak the "Negro dialect" (Isaksen, 2012). In this way, racial formation theory was at work affecting the way Black women were depicted during enslavement and post-slavery times, therefore having an influence on subsequent values and self-identities.

Blaxploitation Films

The era of Blaxploitation films depicts interesting representations of Black women that are actually opposite of slavery times. This 1970's genre of film was a reaction to the race riots that were happening all over the country and the reality of civil rights laws passing but no real change occurring. Black people were restless and their sense of control over their lives seemed to wane right along with the civil rights movement by the

end of the 60's. This fueled the 'stick it to the man' mind-set that many Black people thus adopted, which was depicted in over 200 films from the 70's. These films were not only targeted to urban African-American audiences, but also written, directed, acted, scored and produced mostly by Blacks as well. They were characterized with the essential elements of sex, drugs, crime and racist depictions of Black and White people which was interestingly what the Black audience wanted to see (Demers, 2003). On the surface Blaxploitation films seemed like a degrading, oversimplified depiction of the ghetto and the Black experience. However, when you dissect the films and analyze the reasoning behind the characters' actions, morality and viewpoints, you realize that these actions, morals and viewpoints are those of real Black people all over the country and even harbored faint political messages.

Black women in Blaxploitation films have specifically been attacked for being seemingly objectified and overt sexuality/nudity. In these films, Black women are in control of their sexuality as well as not in control simultaneously. When the protagonist is male, the women in the films are usually shown as prostitutes, drug abusers and/or innocent bystanders with no tangible control over what is happening to them in general, especially sexually. Although this is similar to what Black women endured during slavery times, Black women also enjoyed a more implicit sense of control over themselves, including their sexuality. In films like *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*, the protagonist is "an agent of change rather than a passive recipient of action" (Demers, 2003, p.47) unlike the women in Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

These films also depicted women as having a high sense of self-awareness, almost mocking male sexual fantasy and using sexuality to an advantage (Demers, 2003). Some people may argue that the widespread success and acceptance of these films can be seen as a sign of Black women accepting the “sexually aggressive, uncaring Jezebel” (Woodard & Mastin, 2005, p.272) stereotype as truth. However, given the social issues that brought Blaxploitation films into circulation, the overt representations of sexualized women was almost refreshing. Black women felt empowered through the ‘kick-ass’ attitude of the heroines as they unconventionally took revenge over drug pushers, pimps and even cops that wronged them in some way. These films gave Black women a sense of control and sense of justice over their own lives and sexuality that they did not have during slavery times. In these movies, if the woman was a prostitute it was her choice. She had agency to choose a man for love, companionship or just lust which is completely contrary to the realities of the past, especially within slavery.

The Black people, especially women, reflected in these films resorted to their own ideologies of success and how it can/will be achieved by a Black person. The sense of injustice of the civil rights movement is replaced with a different sense of justice that does not necessarily follow the laws of the land. The protagonist of most of the films was usually depicted as a heroine/hero who struggles with the law/legality of their actions and their allegiance to the African-American community. The racial and class tensions were extremely thick in the 60’s and 70’s causing Blacks to find alternate solutions to these issues. These solutions presented themselves in crime, drugs and prostitution, in which poor Black people could become rich and ‘successful’ just like their White counterparts.

Instead of legally coming into money and being able to actually enjoy the rights that White Americans have, Black Americans were almost forced to do whatever they could do to make sure that they had a slim chance at the same wealth and rights. Blaxploitation films embodied this struggle between wanting to have that ‘American Dream’ that White people were able to achieve and not having more than a couple of means to an end. Crime seemed to be the only way to be ‘successful’ and the films really illustrated Black peoples’ shift in values from that of the civil rights movement. More precisely, the Blaxploitation films of the 1970 have created a freer, in-control sense of values, identities and ideologies regarding Black women. How Black women identify themselves clearly shifted with the release of these films. The ‘strong Black woman’ emerged and the feeling of being in control became more sought after and achieved. Black women did not want to sit by passively and let their worlds and important aspects of themselves, such as their sexuality, become regulated by someone other than them. These women began to value and idealize what the heroines in the Blaxploitation films represented to them. They could be strong, independent and in control just like the women in *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*.

During slavery, women were almost forced to express themselves as sexually neutral, unattractive and dedicated domestic servant. They were depicted as ‘mammies,’ loyal to their White owners or employers and placed the care of that family over their own. The portrayal of Black women as self-sacrificing, loyal servants to White people has drifted over the years, as radio, television and other forms of media reiterated this stereotypical woman to American society. Black women were trying to protect their

families, utilizing their selflessness in being loyal and dutiful servants in order to keep their children from being sold where they could never see them again. This selflessness was ironic because while they were protecting their immediate families by trying to keep them close, they also were giving their best love and affection to the families that they worked for. In essence, almost everything about what they did, valued, idealized and identified with was controlled either directly or indirectly by their owners.

When the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s emerged, Black women received a jolt of empowerment. The depictions of them were sexy, strong, independent with a 'take no mess' attitude. This was quite contrary to everyone else having control over a Black women's life, especially her sexuality. In these films the woman is represented as being in control of her own life, her own issues and especially her own sexuality. The heroines in the Blaxploitation films enjoyed a notion of freedom from control. They did as they wanted, reacted however they felt and had sexual relations with whom they chose, not the choosing of someone else. Black women wanted to identify with being strong and independent. They wanted to be in control of their lives and the female protagonists of Blaxploitation films showed them that it was acceptable to do this. It was acceptable to take ownership of your own sexuality and if you wanted, use it to your advantage. The sense of free will, independence and agency occurred due to the portrayal of Black women as observable, tangible elements of these very things in those films. The distinctive portrayal of Black women in Blaxploitation films to that of the slavery era shows how the shift in representations can affect the values, identities and ideologies for these women.

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