

## Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements

### Why Study Blaxploitation Advertisements?

**R**ecent critical treatments of blaxploitation films offer nuanced readings of the discourses structuring the genre's historical reception. Mark Reid, for example, contends that while black nationalist organizations and writers voiced their disdain for the genre, most black filmgoers, influenced by black nationalism yet unaware of its critique of blaxploitation, assumed the films to be authentically black and a source of pride (90). For Reid, there is no monolithic black spectator; each can resist, assimilate, or appropriate a text's message (69). Ed Guerrero argues that a rise in African American identity politics in the late 1960s, a near economic collapse in Hollywood, and the various responses of studios to a growing black film audience offered a dialectic that led to the rise of blaxploitation films. As more African Americans drew on nationalist discourses to protest the stereotypes in these films, Hollywood recovered economically and found it unnecessary to produce the controversial pictures (Guerrero 69–70). While Reid and Guerrero incorporate a black cultural studies approach to theorize issues of racial subordination and resistance, both writers nicely demonstrate Tony Bennett's founding words of historical reception studies: to approach texts by looking at the "reading formations that concretely and historically structure the interaction between texts and readers. . . . Such an interaction would be conceived of as occurring between the culturally activated text and the culturally activated reader" (12).

To account for the interaction Bennett puts forth, reception scholars have turned to film reviews, advertisements, posters, lobby cards, and so on to examine

discourses about films circulating in culture. Reid and Guerrero largely turn to polemics about and reviews of blaxploitation. Consequently, because many of the writings are based in black nationalist ideologies, much of our current understanding of blaxploitation and its audience has only been seen through the lens of this political movement. These arguments are thoroughly researched and politically necessary, but their limited archive of reception documents has narrowed our understanding of the genre's complexity. While Reid and Guerrero avoid essentializing the identity of the blaxploitation spectator, they also fixate on nationalism as the driving force behind black identity. We need to examine how items other than reviews structured the historical reception of blaxploitation in the 1970s. Perhaps other documents mobilized different influences on black identity to shape the meaning of these films for their audiences.

Given this, blaxploitation advertisements offer an interesting case study. While many of these materials marketed films with black nationalist tropes of violence and ultrasexuality, a good number of them sold blaxploitation as a genre concerned with black class relationships.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have overlooked this topic entirely in recent writings about the genre. It is commonly agreed upon that African Americans were the main spectators for blaxploitation in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> This essay takes this as a given. But instead of looking at how black identity, one based largely in nationalism, was involved in a dialectical process with Hollywood, this essay examines the heterogeneous identity at play within the genre's black spectators. In this way, class becomes important to studying blaxploitation and its audience not because it demarcates a subgenre that diverged in interest from other

films concerned with violence and ultrasexuality but because class—specifically the way it functions in blaxploitation advertisements—can help us reconceptualize the blackness of blaxploitation and its spectators in more dynamic ways. I situate the genre in a complex historical moment where three relatively autonomous influences on black identity operated simultaneously. Competing black nationalist groups were still popular but beginning to lose public interest and political power. At the same time, more African Americans were entering the middle class than ever before as the conditions of black poverty worsened. Adding to the mixture, anxiety about black identity functioned as a material force. Blaxploitation advertisements offered shifting articulations between these three autonomous elements to its audiences, constructing a loose framework for a heterogeneous group of African American spectators to make sense of the films by accepting or rearticulating specific connections in different ads.

### Articulation Theory, Black Spectator Identities, and Advertising Circuits

Saying that ads and spectators constructed multiple and constantly changing meanings for blaxploitation films fits, in some ways, with what scholars already have said about film promotional material: it pluralizes the meaning of a film for its audience. Barbara Klinger has put forth a model of cinematic digressions in which the film industry's promotional materials (i.e., advertisements, lobby cards, posters, behind-the-scenes documentaries, interviews, etc.) function as socially constructed intertextual relays that fracture the film and fetishize meaningful features. For example, different promotional materials for the same film may use its star, genre, director, or style as the main selling point. And these different strategies for selling or commodifying the text allow the spectator to follow numerous industrial intertexts in and out of the film (Klinger 11–13). In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman argues that studio promotional strategies avoid assigning a film one generic identity; rather, each movie poster conjures up multiple generic images to appeal to the largest audience possible. Altman notes that studios during the classical age of Hollywood used different genres within the same ad to appeal to three categories: male, female, and tertium quid (comprised of older and younger audience members). Today

Hollywood has more specific categories such as age, race, ethnicity, and so on, but it still uses multiple genres within one ad to appeal to several of these spectating groups (Altman 128–32). Both Klinger and Altman see promotional materials opening up the film text to a variety of meanings, although Altman is more insistent on how one poster allows for this heterogeneity.

Bringing articulation theory into this discussion keeps the focus of promotional material on the plurality of meanings, but it also offers new insights into spectator identities, specifically in regard to race. Altman's point about multiple spectator positions within one poster conceives of identity as a very stable and unified concept. For him, men will be drawn to certain genres, women to others, and, finally, children and the elderly to a different group. Identity is already stable before the promotional material addresses the spectator. With articulation theory, though, we can see shifting relations of black identities between and within promotional materials and spectators and, keeping in line with black cultural studies, avoid misreading black identity as a monolithic category. In "On Postmodernism and Articulation," Stuart Hall offers a succinct definition of an articulation: "an articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make the unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?" (141).

This model yields benefits for theorizing promotional materials and spectator identity, for it insists on two things: that articulated identity is comprised of parts and that those parts are joined in specific contexts. In this way, the advertisements become the "circumstances" that "forge connections" for spectators, preparing the elements of identity they will draw on to make sense of the film. In the case of blaxploitation, ads articulated shifting forms of nationalism, black class relations, and anxiety; spectators could choose these articulations or rearticulate them. These ads, then, provided one possible framework that spectators would position their reading of the film within or against.

This conception of advertisements and blaxploitation spectators also avoids the pitfalls of constructing a monolithic black spectator. A unified, singular category of black spectatorship simply privileges one form of subjectivity over others and consequently ignores certain segments

of black experiences. The word “experiences” here takes on two meanings. One is the “experiences” of a social group. For instance, to dwell on just a black nationalist identity in the spectators of the early 1970s would ignore the experiences of middle-class viewers. But “experiences” also means the experiences within a person. For instance, we cannot simply say that this person is a cultural nationalist and only a cultural nationalist. Such a person might—but does not have to—have relatives in the middle class and might participate in middle-class gatherings from time to time. While cultural nationalism might serve as the organizing principle behind this subject, this person might also construct a middle-class identity on specific occasions. Here I eschew taking the political edge off any form of black nationalism by casting it into a plural sea of black identities. In “Minimal Selves,” Hall claims that radical black thought and politics are possible, necessary, and effective but also a temporary grounding of constantly shifting identities (118).

Such a fluid conception of black identity becomes particularly important when considering the two primary exhibition circuits for these ads: inner-city movie theaters (Martinez, Martinez, and Chavez 15) and newspapers. Both the movie posters and advertisements had the same images and captions.<sup>3</sup> Movie theater posters are important to consider; any black spectator going to a blaxploitation film would encounter these materials outside the theater or in the lobby. In this way, the posters framed the movies for spectators before they watched the films. But far more important for this argument is the placing of blaxploitation film advertisements in city newspapers. The advertisements were often the largest in the movie section. Quite simply, they stood out. By placing the ads in a city paper, film companies guaranteed the ads would circulate in lower- and middle-class urban and middle-class suburban neighborhoods, three locations in which a city newspaper would be sold. The ads sold blaxploitation films to a heterogeneous black audience. While blaxploitation films were predominantly shown in urban theaters like Chicago’s Loop, African Americans living in cities were not the only spectators for this genre. As Guerrero notes, “[S]uburban, middle-class blacks would come to theaters in the city center for a night out” (84). In this way, urban and suburban African Americans would encounter these ads while planning an evening’s entertainment. Thus, articulation

theory can help address the way a relatively diverse group of black spectators made sense of these films within the shifting context of nationalism, class, and anxiety. The three elements certainly did not function in the same way in specific ads or spectators, but they did provide a framework in which spectators could comprehend the film. The framing of the ads within these three aspects of black identity allows us to see how some ads and spectators linked all or some of these elements.

### Black Nationalism, the Middle Class, and Racial Resistance in the Early and Mid-1970s

With this in mind, I want to take a more in-depth look at three elements influencing black subjectivity in the early and mid-1970s: the waning forms of black nationalism, the growth of the black middle class, and the prominence of anxiety. These are not the only or most important facets of black subjectivity in this historical moment, but they are the three most prominent elements that blaxploitation advertisements brought together.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, black nationalism was not a monolithic political entity. In *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975*, William L. Van Deburg offers a rubric of the movement, breaking it into territorial, revolutionary, and cultural nationalisms. While these branches shared certain goals and assumptions (like rejecting mainstream white values, earning sociocultural autonomy, and refusing to work within white American institutions), they also differed on what nationalism was and what nationalism did. Territorial organizations like the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Nation of Islam argued for a geographic separatism. CORE changed from an integrated civil rights organization to a separatist group and believed that African Americans should have a chance to run their own businesses. With control of their economic regions, blacks would cease to be subjugated people within America and in fact become a series of communities comprising a “nation within a nation” (Van Deburg 137–39). The Nation of Islam held that the government should repay the exploited labor of African American slaves by giving land to blacks (Van Deburg 140–41). Revolutionary nationalists like the Black Panther Party believed that simply creating a separate nation-state would not free blacks

from the tyranny of imperialism and exploitative economic conditions. Blacks could only end their exploitation by changing the economic conditions and mounting a socialist revolution. The Panthers advocated violence only as a means to achieve a socialist revolution and for self-protection against white institutional abuses (Van Deburg 155). They started free breakfast programs, created African American urban schools, and even ran black voter registration campaigns (Van Deburg 160). With their focus on race and class, the Panthers made alliances with other groups that were unhappy with the current socioeconomic system. A Panther poster invited “Yippies! Political Parties! Workers! Students! Peasant–Farmers! You the Lumpen! Poor People! Black People, Mexican–Americans, Puerto Ricans, [and] Chinese” to work with them to change the system (Van Deburg 162). In this way, the Panthers were willing to make cross-race alliances. Finally, cultural nationalists proposed that culture was the arena in which to fight for black power. For them, African Americans should embrace African clothing, languages, and hairstyles. The subset of nationalism also started the Black Arts movement, which demanded that black artists use a distinctly black aesthetic to address black topics for a black audience (Van Deburg 170–71).

Although diverse, black nationalist groups in general suffered severe setbacks from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Doug McAdam argues that black insurgency lost its nationalist impact then for several reasons: it lacked a consensus on protest-worthy issues and tactics of resistance;<sup>4</sup> a conservative backlash hit America, replacing liberalism with a law-and-order image; political pessimism overtook black insurgents; and the government aggressively repressed black protesters (181–229). Perhaps the most famous political group of the time was the Black Panther Party, and in 1974 the group changed from a nationalist to a local organization with its only office in Oakland, California. Many of its leaders had been killed, fled the country, or simply opted for a less politically focused life. Beyond these occurrences, McAdam traces how issues like the Vietnam War, the energy crisis, Watergate, and ecology stole nationalist attention from black insurgency (197).

While political fracturing between and within groups also lessened the solidarity and effectivity of nationalism, it did not obliterate nationalism’s public sentiments. For example, Nation of Islam members Wallace

Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan disagreed on tenets of Islam during the early 1970s. Wallace wanted to practice a more mainstream Islam that embraced both black and white practitioners. Farrakhan endorsed the Nation’s official stance of separatism. These disagreements clashed when Elijah Mohammed, the Nation of Islam’s leader and patriarch, died in 1975, leaving the organization to his son. Wallace quickly renounced the group’s separatist stance and admitted whites into the organization. Farrakhan, still aligned with Elijah, broke off and reformed the old Nation of Islam (Marable, *Black Leadership* 175). Black nationalist groups did lose power, but their sentiments remained in the public consciousness.

The erosion of various forms of black nationalism occurred at a time when certain socioeconomic changes increased the number of blacks in the middle class and simultaneously worsened the conditions of the black underclass. In the early to mid-1970s, more African Americans came into contact with middle-class whites in the workforce and in the suburbs. Charles T. Banner-Haley argues that the black middle class increased in the late 1960s because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (40). More working-class African Americans began entering college and moving into corporate, political, legal, and public sector jobs. Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams Jr. found that 26 percent of all blacks were in white-collar jobs in the early 1970s compared to 13 percent in 1960 (169). According to “A Decade of Struggle,” an article published in *Ebony* magazine, between 1969 and 1973 the number of African Americans in college rose 370 percent, and the median income for black families doubled from 1964 to 1974 due to expanding employment options, more educational opportunities, and more black wives entering the workforce (28, 26). This led to demographic shifts because a large number of blacks had salaries that allowed them to move to the suburbs. A 1975 *Jet* article entitled “Survey Shows Rising Contact Between Blacks and Whites” reports on a survey that showed that in 1964, 80 percent of whites polled said no blacks lived in their neighborhood. In 1974, that number dropped to 53 percent (10).

Richard Nixon’s “black capitalism” program also contributed to more blacks accessing and staying in the middle class. Nixon’s treatment of race was dubious. Peter Goldberg argues that Nixon’s “War on Drugs” campaign demonized black ghettos as a site of corruption and



played on white middle-class fears that these black problems could come to their neighborhood if unchecked (34–35). Moreover, McAdam shows how Nixon's law-and-order image drew on southern, racist politics. According to a 1968 *Newsweek* poll, only 25 percent of blacks felt that the Nixon administration would be helpful toward African American concerns (McAdam 196, 202). However, in the late 1960s, Nixon declared that while civil rights helped African Americans politically, America still needed to aid African Americans economically. On one level, this attempted to undercut the momentum of radical black separatist groups and their critique of capitalism and democracy, but Nixon's "Black Capitalism Program" did generate a sizable increase of money in black communities. Some of the program's subcommittees are worth noting here. The Nationalist Minority Purchasing Council increased purchases from minority firms from \$50 million in 1969 to \$12 billion in 1972. The total amount of government grants, loans, and guarantees to minorities rose from \$200 million in 1969 to \$472 million in 1972. Between 1969 and 1976 (President Ford assumed leadership of the program in 1974), minority enterprises expanded from 300,000 to 1.2 million (Stans 180–82).

At the same time as this upsurge, the conditions of the black poor worsened. Cornell West attributes this to the economic recession brought on by the oil crisis in 1973, which devastated the black working class and poor and barely affected the expanding black middle class (52). In an article entitled "Black Unemployment Rate Soared in Quarter of '75," *Jet* magazine reported that while the white unemployment rate was at 9.2 in 1975, the black unemployment rate grew to 25.7 (5). For an increasing number of African Americans, contact with middle-class whites became a part of life, yet for a large number of blacks, poverty remained a permanent fixture.

The final element that blaxploitation advertisements drew on was anxiety, one commonly connected to the rise of the black middle class and the fall of black nationalism. As is evidenced from my treatment of black nationalism and black class relationships, the terrain of black alliances, resistance, and social formations constantly shifted in the early and mid-1970s. The anxieties that addressed these shifts were neither directly caused by them, nor a direct reflection of them, nor inherently attached to them. Rather, in accordance with Raymond

Williams, the anxiety functioned as a material force, as "a major way in which reality is continually formed and transformed" (19). The anxiety contributed to the social construction of reality just as much as the erosion of black nationalism or the rise of the black middle class itself. Important to this project is the way blaxploitation ads did or did not articulate anxiety with other elements. But before addressing that topic, a few words are in order about the location, circulation, and operation of these anxieties.

Anxieties flourished in popular black periodicals. A quick glance through the magazines might lead one to believe that they catered just to the middle class and that these anxieties were familiar only to this audience. In *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*, Joseph Turow contends that advertisers ignore large parts of the population with less spending money in order to hone in on consumers with more spending capital. It should come as no surprise, then, that Turow argues that advertisers overlook and fail to represent the lower class (57). As a genre, popular magazines work with advertisers to appeal to middle- and upper-class readers. At first glance, popular black periodicals seem to demonstrate this, as most of the ads in the 1970s and even today promote a middle-class lifestyle. For instance, ads for Viceroy cigarettes and Johnnie Walker Red Scotch show men dressed in business suits endorsing the product. While the ads promoted a middle-class lifestyle, I would argue that black popular periodicals and their treatment of anxieties also circulated in the lower class for two reasons (there are undeniably more). First, these periodicals would attract African Americans from the lower class precisely because of their blackness. As Turow points out, magazines and advertisers have historically ignored African Americans (81).<sup>5</sup> Beyond being middle to upper class in image, mainstream periodicals are also white. Thus, the very fact that a periodical addresses a specifically black audience, regardless of its middle-class content, image, and aims, would more than likely draw in readers of the lower class. Second, magazine companies can enhance their profits by selling to the largest audience possible. These magazines appealed to readers of the lower class in the 1970s by including stories about class relationships and topics with a cross-class appeal.

For instance, *Essence* ran a monthly column entitled "Essence Woman." It focused on both classes by highlighting how a middle-class woman helped lower-class

blacks. The May 1975 column observes that Janet Singleton is the director of the Intercultural Education and Resources Center, a minority recruitment center at California State University in Hayward. The writer notes that Singleton “meets regularly with [the] department chairman and college administrators in order to assess the financial needs of low-income, disadvantaged students and to formulate program designs that attempt to remedy some of the academic deficiencies of IERC clients” (Stiles 27). A profile of Barbara Thompson shows how the IRS worker helped disadvantaged minority women (Stiles 27). To buttress this philosophy of a black giving back to the community, *Essence* ran a series of “How to Succeed”-type articles that dealt with earning a college degree while working, bargaining for a promotion, not waiting to go to college, and applying to medical and law schools.<sup>6</sup> The magazine details how blacks are to succeed economically and then help those who have not been able to do so.

While the *Essence* column believed the black middle class would help the lower class, *Sepia* articles injected anxiety into stories about class relations. In some instances, the magazine simply expressed disgust at the new middle class for not helping the urban poor. In “Washington’s Snootiest Private Club,” we learn about Washington’s Foxtrapp Club, the latest place for D.C.’s black middle class to go. The writer quotes the owner as saying, “We have created a place where everybody can’t come in. Sure that’s a hell of a thing for the 70s after the equality of the 60s. But we are changing the way people dress and the way they think” (Wells 21). The writer rejects such a philosophy, noting it can hurt the black community as a whole. To him, the club is a “make-believe world” (Wells 20).

But *Sepia* often anxiously measured how successful African American business people helped lower-class blacks. For example, three paragraphs into the article “Nation’s Only Black Scheduled Airline,” the writer finishes praising black entrepreneur Warren Wheeler and exclaims, “Of the airline’s 27 employees, a dozen are pilots, mostly white” (Glassner 18). Wheeler bemoans, “I always have in the back of my mind that I want to hire blacks, but when a group of people apply, I usually end up giving the job to the most qualified applicant. . . . The fact is, very few qualified black pilots are available to employ. . . . I believe in hiring people on merit” (Glassner 20). Wheeler also wants his stockholders to be

black but admits all are white. The article leaves the reader with a sense of racial obligation unfulfilled and a feeling that Wheeler’s middle-class status helps whites more than blacks.

Even when an economically successful African American clearly gives back to the poor community, *Sepia* finds a way to hold off on that information, to bring an anxiety to the article and make it seem like the person is having trouble negotiating a new class and race. Take the article “Only Black-Owned Department Store.” It reports on Curtis Sisco’s Philadelphia department store, the first one owned by a black man. At the end of the seven-page article we find out that Sisco advises black businesses in their initial phases and helps poor minorities start businesses. But before we get to that, we come across a boldface header screaming, “Two-thirds of customers are still white” (Lear 27–28). The anxiety continues in the article as Sisco has to defend why two thirds of his employees are white, and he claims that while he wants to hire more blacks, all the white employees worked at the store when he bought it. It would be unethical to fire them (Lear 28). *Sepia*’s chronicles of black success always bring up the new middle class’s obligations to the poor in anxious ways and, depending on the story, relieves or upholds those anxieties.

With his cross-class appeal and relatively high economic income, Arthur Ashe became a favorite target for anxieties. A *Sepia* article entitled “Arthur Ashe vs. His Blackness” asks of Ashe, “How much obligation does a black star have to his race? Does a man’s skin color bind him to his people and dictate that he enlist in their struggles for equality?” (Stewart 82). Ashe never saw himself as strictly a champion for black equality but claimed he supported black struggles by playing tennis in South Africa and contributing to the African Student Aid Fund (Kinser 56–57). Still, many questioned Ashe’s economic success and racial loyalty. A *Jet* magazine article entitled “Superstar Arthur Ashe: Top Winner on WCT Tennis Tour for ’75,” charts how much he made each year on the tour and highlights Ashe’s class status more than his athletic ability (Kinser 52–57). This contributed to the belief that Ashe had the money to help the black community, and his negligence affected how people perceived his race. Black and white critics referred to him as white (Kinser 54–55). *Jet* magazine quoted white tennis star Billie Jean King as saying she was “blacker than Ashe” (Kinser 54). What becomes particularly fascinating is that

critics did not simply label Ashe an Uncle Tom, the stereotype of a white-pleasing black. Here an African American is transformed into another race because of the anxieties surrounding his economic success and racial loyalties.

While anxiety commonly figured into the periodicals' discussions of class relationships, it also spread to treatments of an eroding black nationalism. While this was not an explicit textual strategy to draw in readers of the lower class by including stories about them, it does suggest that readers would have been familiar with anxiety migrating to other specific topics. *Jet* magazine interviewed Wallace Mohammed after he transformed the Nation of Islam into an integrationist organization. The interview provoked many angry letters to the editor. Mohammed's claims clearly raised anxieties. *Jet* magazine published a follow-up article entitled "New Muslim Leader Charts Interracial Future of His Nation" that claimed, "Muslim supporters [are] feeling that their heroes have let them down" (Simms 15). A year later, former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver granted *Sepia* an interview before voluntarily returning to the United States to serve a prison sentence. While Cleaver had previously advocated black men using rape to subvert white power, he now rescinded many of his radical views and posited that separatism simply accepted racist white notions that demanded blacks leave the United States. Instead, Cleaver argued that blacks and whites could work together and that whites have already accepted blacks in the United States. For him, the United States offered more freedom than nondemocratic countries, and the police, whom he once called pigs, were now necessary elements of social harmony (McFadden 69–78). The tone of these articles constructs a complex positioning of popular black nationalist thought in the mid-1970s. On the one hand, the articles report on the death of these political movements, yet they also invoke nostalgia for the days of nationalism and an anxiety about the passing of it.

While current treatments of blaxploitation place the genre at a cultural moment synonymous with black nationalism, I contend the environment these films grew out of was much more complex. More specifically, the erosion of nationalism, the rise of the middle class, and the prominence of anxiety would become three elements that blaxploitation posters and advertisements would articulate and rearticulate.

### Articulations of Class and Anxiety in Blaxploitation Advertisements and Spectators

Class became a major way to sell blaxploitation to its audience. While black nationalism was a major component of articulations and rearticulations of race and identity in blaxploitation advertisements, I want to focus specifically on articulations of class and anxiety first. This is necessary because writings on blaxploitation almost exclusively ignore the issue of class. Reid mentions it briefly, only to note that blaxploitation's low production values often offended middle-class critics and that the protagonists of the films often were lower-class heroes who confronted authority figures of both races (90). I contend that blaxploitation advertisements concerned themselves with the new black class relationships. The ads for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), *Fox Style* (1973), and *Black Caesar* (1973) show the variety of ways that ads could articulate black class relationships and anxiety. Still, this hardly determined the way a spectator understood the genre. As stated earlier, these ads circulated through various lower- and middle-class neighborhoods and were read by members of both classes. Audience members with different class backgrounds encountered the ads. Not all members of the lower class had anxieties toward the middle class, and not all members of the middle class embraced their social positions. Takes on the middle class invariably differed in each class. This impacts a discussion of blaxploitation spectatorship, for audience members could accept an ad's articulations of class and anxiety or rearticulate elements within the ad.

The advertising campaign for William Crane's *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* sold the film by articulating class and anxiety.<sup>7</sup> This film is about Dr. Henry Pride, who grew up in Watts, a lower-class neighborhood, and moved to Beverly Hills. Although Henry is upper class, his acquisition of money and subsequent move because of it resembles the new middle class's journey to the suburbs. Moreover, the film constantly questions how Henry can remain loyal to the lower class in much the same way popular discourses questioned the black middle class. In this way, even though *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* and many other movies I address deal with upper-class characters, the focus on new money, moving to different neighborhoods, and helping the poor in these films frames them within contemporary discourses about the middle class's ability

to combat racial subordination. As *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* opens, Henry is working on a cure for liver disease and also volunteering at a free medical clinic in Watts. Early on, one of Henry's patients comments that Henry thinks he is white now that he has moved from Watts to Beverly Hills. When Henry injects himself with his experimental cure for liver disease, his patient's comments become literal. The "cure" turns him into a white monster who then goes on a killing spree in Watts.

One of the most popular ads for the film uses and reworks the split structure of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to articulate anxiety to the new black middle class. Stevenson's novel is about a Victorian doctor who tries to separate the good and evil within him into two different characters, the good Dr. Jekyll and the evil Mr. Hyde. Although Jekyll fails at his quest and eventually turns completely into Mr. Hyde, the novel's afterlife in public culture has fixated on Henry Jekyll as a character divided between the good doctor and the evil monster. This advertisement for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* plays with this division in its headline, which reads "By Day He Heals, by Night He Kills." The ad here conjures up a split between a benevolent doctor who helps the community through medicine and an evil monster who harms the community through violence. Yet the advertisement hardly accepts this clear-cut binary and instead shows the true source of Henry Pride's monstrosity to be his class status. Dr. Pride's bust takes up most of the ad. The right side of it is very clear. Henry wears an expensive suit, and a road with a Rolls Royce driving down it loops around his right shoulder. If Dr. Jekyll was the respectable, outstanding, nonhorrific part of the Jekyll-Hyde split, Henry Pride is hardly this. A black woman on the right side of the ad screams in abject terror as she stares at Henry in a business suit. In this way, the left side of the poster—which focuses more on literal monstrosity—metaphorically represents Henry's new class status. In the lower left corner is an image of Henry near the bodies of two dead white women, and above this is a larger shadow of the same image. The ad overlays the words "A Nightmare Within. A Nightmare!" on top of the shadow. Although Stevenson's novel wanted to separate good and evil into two different people, the advertisement for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* highlights monstrosity within the heart of the new black middle class.

While that ad highlights the horrific culture (i.e., cars and suits) of the middle class, another ad showcases the

monstrosity of Henry's job itself. Like the first ad, this one plays up Henry's split nature. The right side of the ad shows Henry in a laboratory working with a beaker. The other side shows the face of a black monster, the image of Henry with the bodies of two dead white women and the shadow of the same image. The ad clearly labels Henry's middle-class job on the right as the most horrific part of the ad. Underneath the image of Henry working the phrase "The Fear of the Year Is Here" appears. In this way, the ads for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* that depict Henry as just a black character always conjure up images of horror by placing a monster on the left side but then emphasizing the real horror of the film to be on the right, which always relates to the middle class.

But by far the most interesting and most popular ad for the film depicts Henry Pride as a racially divided character (figure 1). A huge image of Henry's face takes up most of the ad. The left half of his face is black, the right half is white. In typical style for the ads, the left side presents the literal embodiment of the monster, again showing Henry with two dead white women and a larger shadow of the same image. On the right side of the ad we see Henry working with a beaker and test tube and another image of Henry falling off the Watts Towers, from the final scene of the film. Thus, the ad equates Henry's job with the white side of his face. In this way, the ad articulates anxieties similar to those associated with Arthur Ashe's economic success. Henry's job has turned him white, and the ad doubts the new black middle class's ability to help the urban poor. Moreover, the Watts Towers were built in 1954 as a symbol of ethnic diversity. Henry's whiteness is the opposite of the Watts Towers' purpose. Unlike the diversity they embody, the ad codes Henry as an African American who rises in class and forgets about his lower-class upbringing. He is not able to come into contact with new neighborhoods and remember his roots.

Although the ads for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* doubt the black middle class's ability to help the urban poor, the most popular advertisement for the film *Fox Style* does not. The ad articulates the film with black class structures in a way that supports the middle class's ability to combat racial subordination. The bust of the lead, Black Fox, appears in the upper half of the ad, and the ad uses numerous signs of money to code Fox's class status. He wears a business suit, a private jet flies across the ad, and an oil well appears in the left corner. The headline also





Figure 1. This advertisement for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* articulates class with anxiety by suggesting that Henry's middle-class lifestyle is making him white. Courtesy of VCI.

announces Fox as a man of money. It reads, "They call him the Black Fox. . . . He cleans the scene and makes his name in the money game." Below this amalgamation of wealth, a black woman in a bathing suit smiles, her joy registering her approval of Fox's class status. Below the title of the movie it reads, "A Positive Black Film." The film itself is about a poor black man from the country who goes to the city and strikes it rich. Throughout the film he struggles to maintain his connection with his country background. In this way, Fox's recent move and new money mirror the trend of blacks rising to middle-class status, moving to the suburbs, and trying to maintain a connection with the black urban poor. Although the film raises and negotiates these tensions

by showing Fox grappling with his new and old life, the ad fixates on the ease with which Fox can become a millionaire. In this way, the advertisement is pro-middle class, although the film itself raises doubts about this issue.

Unlike those for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* and *Fox Style*, some ads avoided an explicit statement about the new black middle class and used the topic as a selling point without commenting on it. *Black Caesar's* most popular advertisement did just this, simply articulating an interest in class with the film. The most prominent ad depicts what it takes to rise in class. The very bottom of the ad shows five armed black men in working-class attire. Above them are several scenes of ghetto violence. The next tier presents what it takes to move from the ghetto: money. There are several gambling tables, a gun-wielding black man in a business suit, and several bikini-clad women (whose significance I will address in a later section). Finally, above all of them is the film's lead, Tommy Gibbs, dressed in an expensive suit and carrying a gun. The byline of the ad reads, "All Hail, Black Caesar. Godfather of Harlem." While the line that declares Tommy the godfather of Harlem suggests he can fulfill his obligations to the lower class, Tommy's blank facial expression leaves the audience wondering if Tommy is a heroic leader or a treacherous villain. The ad, then, sells the film as a story about the rise of the black middle class, leaving the resolution of these conflicts to the film itself and/or the spectator. No matter what stance the ads took, though, they all used class as a key way to sell blaxploitation to its audience.

As much as the ads construct or avoid a specific statement about class by choosing or not choosing to articulate it with anxiety, the ads do not entirely determine the way black spectators encountered the text. The ads could suggest a certain articulation of race to a spectator. That is, a viewer could watch *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* and interpret it as a vehicle for black class anxieties. But just as easily, the spectator could refuse the articulation of class and anxiety, instead interpreting the film differently. If one approaches the films only with the rubric of black class relationships and anxiety, these alternative interpretations might seem odd. For instance, how else could a spectator choose to read a film about a middle-class monster? But the matter becomes more complex when we bring black nationalist tropes into a discussion of blaxploitation spectators.

### Shifting Articulations of Black Nationalist Tropes, Black Class Relations, and Anxiety in Blaxploitation Advertisements and Spectators

Black nationalist tropes were a hallmark of blaxploitation film advertisements. I intentionally use the words “tropes” and “codes” in this discussion to address the way advertisements used black nationalism as a selling point. The ads hardly endorsed the political ideas behind the movement; instead, they fixated on images of violence and sex associated with revolutionary nationalism while omitting the movement’s critique of capitalism and arguments for socialism. There is the temptation to separate the ads that feature black nationalist tropes from the ones concerned with class, for both Reid and Guerrero claim one of the genre’s organizing principles is an ultraviolent black male lead.<sup>8</sup> Given this, it seems as if the black male lead negotiating middle-class life marks a clear departure from the other types of heroes in the genre. But a closer investigation shows the advertisements complexly articulated images of black class relations, black nationalist tropes, and anxiety to pluralize the ways that audience members could make sense of blaxploitation films.

Before looking at these flexible articulations, I want to spend a little time exploring how ads sold blaxploitation films through black nationalist tropes. As argued earlier, the political stances of nationalist groups were hardly monolithic, and while the popularity and power of nationalism began to fade during blaxploitation’s life cycle, the ideologies of these groups remained in the public consciousness. Blaxploitation films often drew on tropes of violence and sexuality commonly associated with revolutionary nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party. The headline for a popular *Superfly* (1972) advertisement reads, “He’s got a plan to stick it to The Man” and clearly picks up on the movement’s black-white conflict. The film’s hero, Young Blood Priest, stands next to an expensive car holding a handful of cash and a gun. In the background is another image of him fighting a white detective, drawing on a common trait of the Black Panther Party: using violence to combat the racism of white institutions. Violence against white law officials also shows up in a popular advertisement for Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971). The advertisement depicts a variety of scenes from the film. One of the

most prominent images shows a cop car on fire and a white detective standing next to it. The ad clearly endorses blacks protecting themselves against corrupt policemen in much the same way the Black Panthers did.

Blaxploitation advertisements also used the Black Panther Party’s gender codes to sell these films. As Robyn Weigman argues, the Black Panther Party subverted nineteenth-century rape narratives that held black men to be ultrasexual and a threat to white women. These stories were largely inaccurate and denied blacks political power in a postslavery world by branding them as criminals. Nevertheless, Weigman argues that black nationalism turned this myth on its head by advocating black male sexuality as a source of political power. Eldridge Cleaver, for example, claimed a black man raping a white woman was an act of political empowerment (Weigman 90–95, 107). Numerous advertisements joined the black hero’s violence to his sexual advances on white women. Jack Starrett’s *Slaughter* (1972), starring Jim Brown, displays a huge image of Brown firing a shotgun in the center of the ad (figure 2). Surrounding him are images from the film in which he either attacks white men or makes out with white women. Here the hero’s ability to overthrow white institutional power links both to his use of violence and to his sexuality. A popular ad for *Truck Turner* (1974) depicts a bare-chested, heavily armed African American male surrounded by three white women. *Superfly*’s ad is also of interest. It includes a black woman in a bikini draped across the side of the hero’s car. Although the image lacks a black-white sexual conflict, it also suggests that part of the hero’s power, which he uses to defeat white authority figures in the background of the ad, comes from his sexuality.

While many ads highlighted the film’s protagonist through revolutionary black nationalist tropes, others created multiple topics for spectators to articulate. For instance, the ads for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* clearly mark the protagonist as a person who has failed to balance his new class status with his obligations to the black lower class. However, the ads also present him as having murdered two white women. In this sense, he embodies the gender codes of revolutionary nationalism that promote sexual violence against white women as a way to combat white institutional power. What is particularly fascinating about this is the fact that Henry attacks no white

## Jim Brown is 'SLAUGHTER'



Figure 2. Displaying black nationalist tropes and images of class mobility, this *Slaughter* advertisement sells the film to its audience through a variety of discourses. Courtesy of MGM CLIP + POSTER.

women in the film itself. When Henry becomes Mr. White and goes on killing sprees, he kills only black women. Nevertheless, the ads marketed Henry through ultrasexual tropes of black nationalism as well as through anxieties about black class relationships. The spectator could ignore the anxiety and class relationships and read *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* as a film endorsing ultrasexual gender codes. Likewise, the spectator could articulate the anxiety in the ad to black nationalism and not to black class relationships. This type of interpretation would resemble articles bemoaning Wallace Mohammed's admittance of whites into the Nation of Islam or Eldridge Cleaver's rescinding of many of his radical antiwhite views. There is some play here as spectators work within

these articulating elements, choosing to accept the ads' articulations or rearticulate the elements themselves.

There were three ways that advertisements offered audiences access to a film through black class relations and black nationalism. One was to include those traits within specific advertisements themselves. Not only did *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* do this, but *Fox Style* and *Black Caesar* did this as well. Certainly the bathing suit-clad woman in the *Fox Style* advertisement evokes images of the black superstud that black nationalism promoted. Fox is not only a man of money, he is also a man of sexual prowess. As mentioned earlier, the ad for *Black Caesar* presents what it takes to rise from the lower class to the upper class, and it shows that Tommy has climbed this path while withholding any explicit judgment on whether he has remained loyal to his lower-class roots. On another level, Tommy displays the gender codes of revolutionary nationalism quite explicitly. The scantily clad women in the ad relate his sexuality to his ability to rule the streets. He is sexually active, and he is in charge of Harlem. The advertisements for *Superfly*—already discussed as an example of an ad with black nationalist tropes—also highlights the film's protagonist as someone who has risen in class. Priest has a handful of cash and a classy car, two markers of wealth. *Slaughter's* ad—also discussed earlier—not only displays black nationalist tropes, it also conjures up images of wealth and class mobility with gambling tables, luxury sports cars, and exotic beach locations. Moreover, the ad's text blends *Slaughter's* class status with black nationalist codes. It reads, "Jim Brown is 'Slaughter.' It's not only his name it's his business and sometimes—his pleasure!" The word "slaughter" here relates to the hero's middle-class status as a businessman, but it also relates to his taking pleasure in sexually "slaughtering" white women.

While the ads for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*, *Fox Style*, *Black Caesar*, *Superfly*, and *Slaughter* articulate traits of the middle class and black nationalism in the same ads, the ads for *Blacula* (1972) and its sequel, *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973), separate each trope into distinctly separate ads and films. For instance, an ad for *Blacula* shows the protagonist through revolutionary gender tropes by having him bite the neck of a white woman, and the headline reads, "Blacula. Deadlier than Dracula." The ad places *Blacula* in conflict with his white adversary, Dracula, and the measuring stick that shows *Blacula* to

be the more powerful of the two is the white woman he attacks. However, an ad for *Scream, Blacula, Scream* fetishizes Blacula's royal status. Before Dracula bit him in *Blacula*, Blacula was an African prince named Mamawalde. An ad for *Scream, Blacula, Scream* highlights Mamawalde's class status by declaring, "The Black Prince of Shadows Stalks the Earth Again!" While the ad contains one white woman, it sets her off from a large group of black characters on whom Blacula is casting a spell. The upper class uses supernatural forces to harm all of the black characters in the advertisement. The ads for the first film articulated Mamawalde as a figure of black nationalism; the ads for the second film rearticulated Blacula as a character concerned with black class relationships and anxiety.

Audiences could also articulate ideas found in other advertising campaigns to a different film. For instance, the advertisements for *Shaft* define him only as an ultraviolent black man. In one ad he jumps through a window and fires a gun. Another ad has the following images: one of Shaft firing a gun, one of Shaft leaning out of a helicopter, and one of Shaft running. The ads capitalize on violent tropes of revolutionary nationalism, yet an examination of the film itself suggests that Shaft is middle class. He lives downtown and has a private office in midtown Manhattan. The plot revolves around him solving the kidnapping of a black Mafia member's daughter in order to stop a Mafia war. White Mafia members from outside the city have kidnapped a Harlem godfather's daughter, and a huge war will ensue on the streets of Harlem if Shaft does not rescue the girl. Shaft despises the criminality of the black Mafia but finds the girl to protect the streets of Harlem. In other words, Shaft wants to protect a black lower-class neighborhood from being caught in gang warfare. While the advertisements for the film did not highlight Shaft as a member of the black middle class who helps the poor, these ideas were prominent in so many other advertisements of the genre that audiences could articulate them to *Shaft*, allowing them to make sense of the hero as a member of the new black middle class. Many advertisements placed ideas in public culture that blaxploitation concerned itself with the reliability of the new black middle class. Even when a specific ad campaign did not highlight its film's hero as a member of the middle class, audiences could still make sense of him as one.

## Conclusion

This study of blaxploitation advertisements has made a plea for film scholars to revisit this largely neglected genre. Reid and Guerrero have offered arguments on the relationship between black nationalism, Hollywood, and blaxploitation, and they've used reviews and polemics to theorize the interaction between blaxploitation films and their audience. While I agree with their analysis of those specific reception documents, I also contend that by turning to other documents of reception, the relationship between the blaxploitation text and spectator becomes more complex. As I've shown, black nationalism was never one thing but varied between different nationalist groups. During blaxploitation's life span, black nationalism was still popular but was losing considerable power. As this happened, the black middle class blossomed and often moved to the suburbs, while the lower class's conditions of poverty worsened. During these political and socioeconomic shifts, anxiety also functioned as a material force for black spectators. Blaxploitation advertisements found numerous ways to articulate these three elements. Black spectators of the 1970s encountered these ads in newspapers and theater lobbies, and the ads, a textual strategy that sold the films to the audience, influenced the way audiences comprehended blaxploitation films. Audiences could accept or rearticulate the specific connections the ads made.

Yet there is still work to be done on this genre. Many ads and films lack an explicit black-white conflict and instead show graphic depictions of black-on-black crime. What are we to make of that? Moreover, blaxploitation films with female leads have been almost entirely ignored in critical discussions of the genre. This seems odd, considering the films emerged when black women were joining nationalist organizations and feminist movements and, to a large extent, both organizations ignored the concerns of black women. What is the relationship between these films with black female leads and the positioning of black women in society and culture at the time? Moreover, what is the relationship between contemporary audiences and blaxploitation parodies, pastiches, homages, and remakes like *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *Shaft* (2000)? Additionally, how have video stores impacted the reception of blaxploitation? Now we will have to consider white spectators as well. While blaxploitation played



in primarily black theaters in the 1970s, now white viewers commonly rent these films. Blaxploitation advertisements can certainly help us chart the importance of these overlooked films, but I eschew pigeonholing all writings about blaxploitation into historical reception studies. Perhaps other methods and theories can also help us address one of the most understudied genres.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Barbara Klinger. This essay grew out of a reception study on *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* that I wrote for her "Fast Forward: Contemporary Theories of Spectatorship" class. Her insights on that project specifically and reception studies in general were invaluable. I would also like to thank the blind reader and the University of Wisconsin editorial board at the *Velvet Light Trap*. They offered extremely helpful, clear, and kind revision suggestions. I am also grateful to Tonia Edwards and Jim Kendrick for their bibliographic suggestions. Finally, I would like to thank Sue Kraszewski for her conceptual and editorial help on this project from start to finish.

1. The advertisements I examine come from newspapers published in cities where these films played. Each advertisement was published in most or all of the papers running the ads. The exact number of cities these ads ran in varies because of the different ways blaxploitation films were distributed. For example, MGM made *Shaft*, and the film received a nationwide distribution. Dimension Pictures distributed *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*. While the film played for over two months, it was only aired in seven cities (Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.), which is fairly common for low-budget blaxploitation films.

2. With the advent of video stores in the 1980s, the audience for blaxploitation expanded to include a larger number of white viewers. No study exists on how and why video stores affected the reception of this genre, although it would certainly make for a fascinating paper.

3. I discovered this while conducting research for this project. I looked through movie sections of newspapers in the 1970s, and I also read *What It Is . . . What It Was: The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures*, which contains blaxploitation movie posters. The ads and the posters are the same.

4. In *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, Manning Marable traces the rise and fall of black nationalist hegemony. For Marable, the 1972 Nationalist Black Political Assembly in Gary, Indiana, represented the blossoming of nationalist thought in black politics. The convention brought together four thousand revolutionary nationalists, cultural nationalists, black capitalists, and integrationists in an effort to create a black political party. Nationalist sentiments dominated this convention, offering a collective vision of black political praxis (Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* 122). But as Marable shows, this unity had collapsed by 1974 as groups disagreed on issues such as Marxism and Pan-Africanism. The Nationalist Black Political Assembly had fewer than three hundred members in 1977 (Marable, *Race, Reform* 137).

5. Turow goes on to explore various power struggles as advertisers and media companies established niche markets based on race and ethnicity in the 1990s (81–88).

6. See Ainsworth 51; Brockman 24; Friedman 76; Robinson 66; Taylor 33; Williamson 66–67.

7. I analyze several advertisements for *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*, *Shaft*, and the *Blacula* films. I have chosen to do this because each ad offers something new to my argument. For other films, I analyze the most popular advertisement for each film. In these cases, the less popular ads revealed nothing new and simply reconfirmed my argument, hence their omission.

8. Both writers see the hero's violence as an inauthentic representation of black nationalism.

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