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**“Bye Felicia”: Fetishism, Black Media and White Audiences**

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After a night on the town in the American Southeast, I decided to share an Uber ride home with two young white women whom I had never met before. They had been drinking and were clearly in good spirits while rehashing the events of the night. At one point, the laughingly said “Bye Felicia” a few times, followed by another round of laughter. I had seen the saying on the internet, so I knew that they did not have a friend Felicia to which they were referring, but rather were discussing a passive aggressive exchange in which one young woman was dismissed or excluded. I always wondered about the origin of this statement, assuming it had come from *Mean Girls* or some other adolescent film but was surprised to learn it actually came from the 1995 film Friday.

I watched the scene from which the statement was taken and was interested to learn that the scene is a rather difficult and emotional scene, in which a young black woman, who is addicted to drugs is trying to borrow a car, from a young man named Craig, played by Ice Cube, to which she receives a frustrated “Bye Felicia”. What was once a scene demonstrating a struggle between two people in a difficult situation became reduced to a means to be humorously spiteful. This had reminded me of other conversations I had had with young white women, myself also a young white woman, in the American south, who when wanting to perform, rather than express, an intense emotion, such as anger or sexual desire, would slip into an exaggerated African American accent. I began to wonder about the relationship between white audiences and black performers, both in the literal sense, meaning how white audiences relate to black films, but also how white spectatorship positions African Americans as perpetually enacting “blackness”.

In order to consider this relationship, I began with considering the role of blaxploitation films as a cultural symptom that enabled a new conversation about race. Blaxploitation films, between 1970 and 1975, were films geared towards African American audiences, and featured an exclusive or predominant black cast. Most notably, Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song (1971) and Shaft (1971) gained fairly moderate success, with Shaft being remade in 2019 starring Samuel L. Jackson. Sweet Sweetback features a young black child who is orphaned until he is taken in by a brothel owner. He is given the name Sweet Sweetback because of the size of his penis, and goes on to be a performer at the brothel. When a man is murdered, the local cops decide to arrest Sweetback rather than returning to their superiors empty handed. The film follows Sweetback’s attempts to evade and escape the police while seeking refuge and assistance from the black community. In contrast, *Shaft* features a black detective who goes beyond the law, as represented by his white colleagues, a number of times in order to retrieve the daughter of a mobster, who has been kidnapped by Italian mobsters. Other popular blaxploitation films, such as Super Fly (1972) and Cleopatra Jones (1973) similarly involve the juxtaposition between law, order and decorum and the black protagonists who transcends and sometimes mock convention, exposing it as hypocritical or ineffectual.

These films, despite their popularity amongst African American audiences at the time, became controversial due to their representations of African Americans as overtly violent and sexual, with an adherence to drugs and crime, further propagating harmful stereotypes. However, they also allowed for a counter-narrative that, when juxtaposed against the more commonly depicted examples of cultural impotence and degradation of African Americans in film at the time, allowed for a cultural identity premised in independence and virility. Plenty has been written about both the importance of and harm done by these films in relation to the African American community, as well as why these films were a short-lived phenomenon. For my purposes, I will not recapitulate these insights, but rather provide an overview of the sociohistorical importance of these films and consider them in both their original context. In order to do this, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s theory of neurosis as a way to look at these films as a necessary symptom that points to cultural pathology that allowed desire to circulate for a group of people during a time when their subjectivity may have been overdetermined on their behalf.

The term blaxploitation can be elaborated on through a psychoanalytic lens, in which it can be said to account for the process by which any signifiers instantiated by and for the African American community are drained of their meaning in order to become instrumentalized. A Lacanian analysis of this form of cultural appropriation, coupled with Baudrillard’s understanding of commodity fetishism, beholds blaxploitation films as a necessary symptom of the black community in the 1960s and 70s, which allows for a meaningful engagement with what it might mean to be black at that moment. By necessary symptom, I mean a manifestation of the particular struggle that the social body is contending with. A symptom is necessary, from a Lacanian perspective, in that it helps one continue to exist without collapsing in on oneself. For example, sweating may be a necessary symptom to handling a fever, just as alcoholism may provide a retreat from an overbearing parent.

However, because of their relationship to an oppressed group and evoke notions of power and liberation, they become susceptible to the gaze of white audiences, which then sets up the parameters for a perverse relationship as understood by Lacan, in which black signifiers become fetishistic objects for white audiences, thereby rendering them devoid of meaning. Though blaxploitation films are considered a relic of the 1960s and 1970s, Guerrero (2009) argues that these films should best be understood as a “discursive cultural compost rather than a dead genre” (p.91), suggesting that they served as a foundation for contemporary black celebrity culture. From this perspective, the appropriation of signification from black films, both blaxploitation films and films which may have arisen out of them, can still be seen in white contemporary audiences and made popular on social media, through memes and in common parlance of white young adults and thus stripped of their potential as a symptom for African Americans in this particular sociohistorical moment.

***Brief note on Lacan***

Lacan argues for what he calls a return to Freud (Lacan, 2007) and does so by collapsing structural linguistics into Freudian psychoanalysis. He claim that the unconscious is structured like a language, meaning that the unconscious, desire and fantasy should be understood as finding representation in signifiers, and just as a sentence relies on the succession of signifiers for meaning, so too does the unconscious unveil itself in a chain of signifiers. These signifiers are read in the dreams of the analysand, slips of the tongue and the associations that become unravelled in the analysis. Freud’s Oedipus Complex is understood not as a literal desire to have sex with the mother, or for a young girl to literally want a penis of her own, but rather serve as metaphors for the ways in which a subject comes to understand his or herself through language and in relation to the Other, the primary caregiver through which desire is constituted by and becomes represented in all subsequent relationships. According to Lacan, a subject’s sense of himself in early infancy is intimately intertwined with this primary caregiver. It is not until about 6 months of age, when the primary caregiver begins work on associating the child with his name, usually by holding up a mirror and pointing at the reflection, or by attempting to differentiate his or herself with the signifiers “mom”, “dad”, etc.

Lacan (2007) claims that the subject at this point comes to assume an image or what he referred to as “an imago” (p.77), in which the primary caregiver deposits adjectives, such as “good boy”, leading to the subject to have an experience of unity within his body and separate from his primary caregiver. It is at this point in which the subject becomes a subject of language and the unconscious is formed. The experience prior to being a unified subject and all of the drives in conjunction with the mother’s body becomes repressed in order to maintain a stable notion of “I”. Lacan refers to this initial repression as castration because the child is cut off from the thing which has promised it pleasure, namely the satisfaction of his drives. The thing which effects this castration, or the Lacanian cut, is understood as the paternal metaphor or paternal function. Again, because Lacan is a Freudian analyst, he maintains the Oedipus complex, and the paternal function or metaphor is that which directs the Other’s desire elsewhere.

It is important to note here that in being a subject in language, if we accept this premise, the subject is ultimately alienated in language. This is because the subject comes to identify with the language of the Other, and subsequently attempts to make his desires correspond to the language of the Other. Depending on how one resolves the Oedipus complex will determine how one comes to respond to the desire of the Other. Neurotic structures tend to be structured around a question about castration. For example, the person with a hysterical structure, their neurosis circulates around whether they have the phallus or what the Other desires. Their desire is mediated by the Other, meaning that they always must make an object of themselves in relation to what they believe the Other desires. This navigation is done through language which is how Lacan comes to his theory of the four discourses, later adding a fifth. As Vanheule (2016) states, essential to Lacan’s theory of the discourses is that there is a desiring subject making an address to an Other, which is what creates and maintains the social bond. How one deals with being alienated in language, and thus how they will relate to others, corresponds to their subjective structure, which will then be exemplified in the particular discourse they inhabit or respond to. For example, the hysteric typically functions in the hysteric’s discourse and addresses her demands to the Master’s discourse. The Master’s discourse tends to function through an obsessional structure or obsessional symptom, which claims to know about the subject to which it refers, thereby making the subject into an object.

***Symptoms and Blaxploitation Films***

Blaxploitation films, as understood through Lacanian psychoanalysis, are a necessary symptom of the cultural milieu for African American audiences during the 1960s and 1970s. As Grigg (2001) explains, the neurotic symptom can be understood as an encoded message excluded from the Other’s, or in this case the dominant ideology’s, speech. By understanding the black community as being positioned within the hysteric’s discourse at this time, blaxploitation films and their contentions are not an answer to a community’s struggle, but rather a question which allows their own desire to circulate outside of the other’s, in this case white capitalist America, reach. Though the term “hysteric” is overdetermined in popular parlance, it is important to note here that the hysteric’s discourse is that which pushes back against the Master’s discourse, or hegemonic discourses which constitute the hysteric. To say it another way, the Master-Hysteric discursive relationship is the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic in the linguistic turn, in which both parties are needed in order for the other to exist.

Prior to the explosion of these films, Wright (2014) explains that the African American males in both film and society was thought to be powerless, lacking status or capital. The hypermasculinity, violence and sexuality in these films, which many scholars have considered and analyzed, can then be understood as syntonic with the hysteric’s assertion that the Master, in this case traditional representations of African Americans up to this point, cannot account for their subjectivity. Essentially, the hysteric refuses to be what the Master assumes her/him to be, but remains in relation to through the negation. As hooks (1992) explains, rap, and I think it could be argued that blaxploitation films as well, use narratives about power and pleasure to deny the pain of racism and instead can also function (though she is justly critical of the reliance on phallocentrism) as a ritual through which to gain recognition and a voice. Given that African Americans were constituted as inherently lacking and excluded from the dominant narrative of economic prosperity in 1950s America, these films can then be seen as a refusal on the part of the hysteric to be what the Other, in this case, white audiences demand African Americans to be. In doing so, they have the potential to subvert the status quo white identity and ideology. If the Master’s discourse requires a slave of which to speak about, and the hysteric refuses, the Master’s discourse no longer holds the proper signification to dictate who and what others are.

The question then becomes, what do the films do for the population they refer. As Guerrero (1995) suggests, these films rely on a representation of African American males as essentially black. That is, they engage with a particular aspect of the black male experience, mainly, his alienation in American society. In doing so, they speak to the divided nature of the subject. African Americans are interpolated into a society predicated on their otherness. Similarly, the hysteric according to Lacan, is always cast out and his or her identity is grounded in marginality. Films like Sweet Sweetback organize around a particular feature, specifically blackness, that the other does not have and then begin to generate meaning about what “blackness” might refer to in contradiction to the traditional interpretation that blackness was akin to lacking or impotence. The result, of course is then, an arena in which blackness can be deployed as excess, virility, dominance and ultimately, as actually having what the other, being white audiences, lacks. Though not a blaxploitation film, this idea can be seen throughout Jordan Peele’s 2017 thriller Get Out, when the protagonist Chris, an African American man dating a white woman, is told in a variety of ways that “black is in”, with blackness being equated with everything whiteness supposedly lacks, mainly fashion sense, sexual prowess and athletic abilities. As demonstrated in Get Out, and what I will turn to next, as long as racial and racial ideology is exhibited as tension between what one group has and the other does not, the Master-Slave dialectic is still deployed, which, I would like to argue, leads to a perverse relationship.

***A Perverse Relationship***

Amongst criticism about the representations of African American people as violent and hypersexual in blaxploitation films, there were also concerns about their involvement in capitalist exploitation, in which black audiences were pandered to for the purposes of turning a profit for white executives. This is the relationship I would like to turn to next because though blaxploitation films, at least ones traditionally understood as such, have waned in popularity, despite Tarantino’s odd gratuitous indulgence, there seems to be a more insidious form of exploitation happening between black art, and subjectivity, and white audiences. I would like to suggest that this exploitation is intrinsic to late-stage capitalism, following Baudrillard’s (1980) understanding of commodity fetishism and simulacrum, and relies on a distinctly perverse relationship between black artists and white audiences and profiteers.

Perversion functions differently than neurosis, according to Lacan, in relation to lack and relating to the other. For the purposes of our discussion here, lack should be understood as the unconscious absence that allows a person to become a subject, as opposed to an object of the other’s desire, unto themselves. While a hysteric’s neurosis revolves around a question pertaining to who they are in relation to the Other, perversion functions through disavowal of the inherent lack. The difference, especially in regard to the discussion here, is that hysteria allows for signifiers to shift and move, which affords space for an other’s subjectivity. Anxiety about fundamental lack compels the hysteric to respond to the Master’s discourse, demanding that new knowledge about him or her to be produced, only to be rejected once more. Though seemingly futile, this approach accounts for the existence of lack in the other and the inability to know the other to the point of saturation. For perversion, however, lack is veiled by a mediating object and utilized as a complete object. Through disavowal, the subject with a perverse structure still undergoes alienation from the Other, but undermines the paternal law that brought him there, and so functions with a belief that social norms are weak, facetious or fail to account for him. As a result, he suffers from excessive jouissance, Lacan’s term for the drives’ enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle to the point of suffering, and so must stage his own intervention of the law (Swales, 2012). As Rothenberg and Foster (2003) explain, the law is imaginary, never have been articulated properly in order to recognize the subject unto himself, and so the law exists as a set of rules and fantasies which limit or channel the desire of the Other.

***From Symptom to Fetish***

Blaxploitation films, even ones that drew ire from the community they were said to represent, such as Shaft (Briggs, 2003), may have been a necessary symptom through which a community of people could organize around. Symptoms, however, can sometimes be mistakenly regarded as a source of meaning unto themselves. Furthermore, in a perverse-hysteric relationship, or perhaps more appropriately, sadist-masochist relationship, the perverse structure, or sadist, may demand that the hysteric’s symptom be their mediating object, reducing the hysteric’s subjectivity to his or her complaint. If a symptom indicates lack, then perversion turns the symptom into a law, such as blaxploitation films feature aggressive African American males because African American males are aggressive, and the perverse subject can only ever relate to an African American male through the veil of aggression. As Sauers (2012) points out, blaxploitation films sparked a representational revolution, in which black masculinity goes from being impotent to “synonymous with machismo” (p.15).

From a Lacanian perspective, the subject rejects castration and claims to have what the other does not. While this may be liberating for those on the side of the hysteric, in a perverse relationship, black masculinity becomes the thing that can be possessed to disavow lack. Capitalism asks subjects to disavow lack by offering an abundance of commodities for all to consume yet relies on others to manipulate their inability to be satiated. The hysterics are said to be the masses that demand something different and so produce social change. However, by this analysis, increasingly the social change that hysterics set in motion becomes commodified and sold back to them, further obscuring fundamental, and necessary, lack. This is similar to Marcuse’s (1964) notion of repressive desublimation, in which capitalism continues to flatten out art, appropriating something that was once transgressive. Lacan’s assertion that it is the hysterics which make the demands for change, elaborates on Marcuse’s analysis by positing a relationship between subjects and the system that goes beyond a top-down oppressive power dynamic, and identifies a push and pull between the hysteric and the system he or she finds herself.

I would like to suggest that we see this perverse-hysteric relationship increasingly amongst black artists and white audiences, creating a more insidious form of blaxploitation that has transcended a film genre, the roots of which began in blaxploitation films. Though many of these films were directed and acted by African American people, the corporations which oversaw production were still run by wealthy white men (Gomery, 2005), something that continues to be true according to a recent diversity report on (Hunt, Ramón, and Tran, 2019). These white men ultimately got to decide if the films continued to be made, and ultimately decided they would no longer be when they failed to turn enough profit. This led to a number of black actors out of work who subsequently had to seek employment in movies with a predominantly white cast. This is where there is a change from subject to object and with the creation of a token black character who embodies the stereotypes exemplified in blaxploitation films. These characters come to be caricatures who offer very little to the plot, other than being a comedic device for the purposes of propping up the protagonist or another corpse in a horror movie. Guerrero explains that this tokenism creates a missing space in the representation of black males, in which their humanity is left out of the script.

Though I agree with Guerrero, I would like to reconsider this assumption and instead revisit tokenism, though insulting and reductive, it’s can also afford space for those in the hysteric’s position to voice a complaint and thereby say something about themselves. Lacan suggested that the hysteric was perhaps the closest to any sort of cure in the psychoanalytic sense because of this ability to voice a complaint and thus allow desire to circulate again. The potential of this becomes more apparent when we consider how things may have changed under late-stage capitalism with the advent of social media. To do this, I posit capitalism, and capitalist discourse, as a perverse fantasy, in which it simultaneously arouses dissatisfaction with lack, while asserting self-sufficiency and abundance (Tomšič, 2015). Lacan (1972) indicated that the capitalist discourse had pervaded society to such an extent that subjects were being shaped by it, suggesting that the Master’s discourse became the Capitalist’s discourse.

As there is no exclusive perversion discourse according to Lacan, I am suggesting that by looking at the Capitalist’s discourse as resting implicitly on a perverse structure, the ways in which it shapes relationships between subjects, as well as subjects’ relationship to their symptoms can be understood anew. Central to this is are two assumptions. First, that under capitalism, exploitation is going to be veiled as opportunity and enjoyment. Second, that whiteness, despite discourses about privilege, is experienced as lacking. This second assertion follows Straker (2004), as well as Eng and Han’s (2000), claims that whiteness as inherently powerful, is limited and can never quite live up to its own ideals due to an existential castration. This is evident as discourses surrounding white privilege and white guilt increase, so too does a form of blaxploitation that has left movie scripts and has come to play out in social media parlance.

Blaxploitation films, as a symptom of the hysteric’s structure, may rely on certain tropes that become represented in token characters, but it is in a perverse relationship, the “token” not only functions as a stand in for lack, which can afford space for a complaint, but rather comes to be handled as the subject’s entire being. To say this another way, as long as there is a notion of tokenism, there could at least have been a conversation about a lack of accurate representation, which then sparks initiatives to create films and art that speak to the absent humanity to which Guerrero refers. A lack means there is a space in which desire, and therefore subjectivity, to flow. This is not to say that African Americans should not be represented in popular films and television or that representation should not be a concern to people who have been historically marginalized and relegated to tropes. Rather, I would like to suggest that there may be a difference between representation and a proliferation of profitable tokenism that originates not on the side of the hysteric’s discourse, but the perverse capitalist discourse, which subsequently opens up similar conversations and questions that circulated in reference to Blaxploitaion films almost 50 years ago.

The relationship between white audiences and African American art, specifically hip hop has been considered by a number of scholars (Kitwana, 2005; McLeod, 1999; Rodriquez, 2006), with Kurt Cobain weighing in at one point before his demise (Blistein, 2018). Though I believe that there are many pertinent conversations to be had about hip hop and blaxploitation, I am instead interested here in the ways in which white audiences have been drawn to what has been considered black language and affect as represented on social media. By black language and affect, I mean those words, phrases and tones which have circulated, not only within African American communities, but in films and music traditionally directed at an African American audience. In a piece for The Guardian, Robin Boylorn (2015) states that words such as “bae”, “ratchet” and “on fleek” originated amongst African American communities and were born out of what she called “the beautifully eclectic black Southern laziness of the tongue”. The word bae, Boylorn continues, a term of endearment directed at a loved one, was made popular after musician Pharrell Williams said it in a song, in which Miley Cyrus made a cameo, leading it to be picked up by mainstream social media and used to refer to inanimate objects and especially, food, for example “pizza is bae”.

In an online video that was quickly picked up by many online news outlets, Victoria Princewell similarly argues against the use of “digital blackface” (Princewill, 2017). She uses this term to what she understands to be a 21st century take on the blackface minstrel show, in which white people on the internet use black emojis and gifs to parody their own affect. For example, the meme “squinting woman” is an African American woman hunched over holding her knees, apparently looking at something in the distance. The original picture comes from a woman’s Instagram account, in which she took pictures of herself in various positions, and then posted the one mentioned above, mocking herself with the description “When your knees crying after you’ve squatted for the gram” (Hathaway, 2018). Once it became a meme on Twitter, people, were sharing it with their own descriptions in order to dramatize a variety of experiences, such as being out of shape or being unable to read the chart at the optometrist’s office.

As Princewill suggests in the video discussed above, the most popular memes and reaction gifs, or gifs on social media that people post in reaction to something someone has said in lieu of a comment, are ones of black people being dramatic. For example, a popular reaction gif when you want to communicate that you are only involved in a Facebook conversation is because you want to watch people argue is a clip of Michael Jackson eating popcorn in his music video for Thriller. She goes on to say that when white people use these gifs on the internet, they are doing so in an attempt to perform an exaggerated blackness, or what blackness has come to be understood as through tokenism. Bell hooks (1992) explains that the commodification of Otherness offers the potential of new ways of experiencing that may be more intense or satisfying. Just as blackness was represented as being excessively sexual and aggressive in Blaxploitation films, Princewill suggests that digital blackface is used perform sexiness or sassiness. I would like to go one step further and also suggest that it is a way to perform sexiness or sassiness in a humorous way, rather than as a genuine attempt to convey a certain emotion. For example, as I mentioned earlier, during my graduate studies in the American south, I would frequently notice young white women donning a noticeable Southern black accent when they wanted to talk about being upset or angry, but in a way that demonstrated an attitude they had as opposed to actually communicating their anger in a serious way. It seemed that the accent, apart from being racist and classist, was deployed as a means to dispel tension. Korobov (2018) refers to this as “blackcent” which he claims is intentionally overdone in the name of irony. Having seen some of these young women get legitimately angry on occasion, I can say that they did not maintain this accent when they were not performing their anger, but rather embodying it.

Digital blackface, and this way of speaking, have to be considered in relation to the sociohistorical moment in America and in the context of the trajectory of Blaxplotation films to understand how it exemplifies a perverse relationship between white audiences and African Americans as fetishistic objects. Baudrillard (1972), among others, suggests that commodities can be acquired in order to contribute to the construction of a social identity. Tropes, slang, and behaviors come to stand in for experiences that could never quite be adequately symbolized in American culture, that is, what constitutes “blackness” and the meaning of those experiences is drained from the living bodies. As Baudrillard contends, this practice is unique to capitalist societies, in which signifiers are understood as a stand-in for a subjective or intersubjective quality, which are then appropriated and disseminated into popular culture to generate a profit. This means that these signifiers are not only sold back to the people they supposedly represent, in this case African Americans seeking empowerment and liberation from domination and exploitation, but they also become a commodity that white audiences can appropriate to satisfy their subjective interests. Meanwhile, the bodies and speech of those who have been appropriated can only exist within the dominant sphere as a cultural signifier, once more drained of humanity.

Lacanian psychoanalysis looks at manifestations of culture as symptoms of a complaint aimed at addressing the Other. Blaxploitation films seem to have been a way of addressing the ways in which black subjectivity had been construed as (and indeed societally compelled to be) weak or ineffectual. By exaggerating claims of sexual prowess, aggression, and a general savoir faire, African American artists and audiences were able to lodge a complaint and effectively state that the discourse did not account for their subjectivity. (See Zaretsky 2018 for a parallel non-Lacanian appraisal.) Capitalism, however, is as successful as it is because of its ability, so far, to fold in anything and anyone that may be on the margins. As a perverse structure, it strives to reduce all subjects to objects to be commodified and consumed. Blaxploitation then becomes a relationship rather than an event in film, in which black subjectivity is further signified within hegemonic discourses. The difference, however, as I have argued with “blackcent” and digital blackface, the complaint itself is now tantamount to an empty signifier itself.

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