

FROM HEADSCARVES TO AFROS: REDEFINING AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMININITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN SELECTED 1970s BLACK ACTION FILMS (published in *Ethnic Media: Taking Control*, vol 3 eds. Guy T. Miess and Alice Tait: Kendall/Hunt Dubuque, Iowa, 2005 pages 213-229))

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s, movie audiences witnessed the emergence of a new genre that provided African-American actresses with their first opportunity to move beyond the confines of domestic and seductress roles. This chapter presents the views of actors and actresses who starred in the popular and successful Black action films, as well as the perspectives of the directors and studio executives responsible for their development. It focuses primarily on the voices and performances of two Black actresses, Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson, who created a new type of onscreen heroine that helped to redefine African-American femininity.

For African-American actresses, the genre offered a drastic change from the historic representations of the mammy and the Jezebel stereotypes that had routinely defined the range of roles available to them. The chapter examines three highly successful Black action films and explores the contributions that their stars made to the evolution of Hollywood's portrayal of African-American women by the way they interpreted those roles. The films are *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*. Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson are the stars who created those memorable characters and, in

the process, redefined popular culture's concepts of beauty, sexuality and womanhood for onscreen African-American women.

The Rise of Black Action Films

Between 1970 and 1975, the American film industry bombarded audiences with films starring African-American actors that gave little regard to fully-developed characters or story lines. These films, first labeled *blaxploitation* by Beverly Hills NAACP Chapter President Junius Griffin, were reviled by leaders in the African-American community and attacked by film critics and trade publications (Guerrero, 1993).¹ However, Black actors and actresses have taken issue with the negative, exploitative connotations of the term. For example, Fred Williamson (1998), who appeared in several films in the early 1970s, argues:

The term "blaxploitation" means absolutely nothing. I can't imagine who was being exploited If they can call my films blaxploitation, then why didn't they call Burt Reynolds's films white exploitation? Burt was hot at the same time that we were making our films. He was making all those movies about running moonshine whiskey through the back Southern woods and they never called his films white exploitation. (Martinez, Martinez and Chavez, 1998, p. 94)

David Walker (1998), editor and publisher of the magazine *BadAzz MoFo*, says, "The term was often used in a negative way. While I do believe the term blaxploitation is racist, the term exists. It serves as a marker or a milestone for this era in the history of film. To denounce it or deny it isn't going to make it go away" (p. 54). Walker offered two defining characteristics of blaxploitation:

The first is the era itself, roughly from 1970 to 1979. The other definition is the genre. It is the films that were produced within that era that deal with a Black subject matter. It doesn't necessarily have to be a film that is produced and directed by Black people but it had a running Black theme or a predominately Black cast, or dealt with issues that, at least as Hollywood perceived it, were African American in nature.

(p. 54)

Roger Corman (1998), director of many B-movies, who was also involved in a number of Black action films, explains: “I think the term ‘blaxploitation’ denigrates and somewhat trivializes the films, many of which were quite serious in their intent—the intent being to show Black people in a position of strength, not in the traditional subservient role” (p. 50).

Gloria Hendry, star of several Black heroine roles, (1998) says:

I resent the term blaxploitation. Who in the heck started that? . . . I resent the term blaxploitation or Black exploitation. All films are exploitation. . . . You need to ask what was happening to us as Black Americans at that time. . . . Pam Grier, myself, and Tamara Dobson were basically the three females playing the action roles for these movies. How often do you see a Black female lead in an action movie? (p. 108)

Thus, the debate notwithstanding, out of respect for actors, directors, producers, crew members and many others involved with the genre, I prefer to use the term *Black action films*.² Actors in Black action films claim to have made positive contributions through their work. Grier (1998), the “Queen” of the genre, maintains:

In the ‘70s we reaped the rewards of the ‘50s and ‘60s. . . . It was a time of freedom and women saying that they needed empowerment. There was more empowerment and self-discovery than any other decade I remember. All across the country, a lot of women were Foxy Brown and Coffy. They were independent, fighting to save their families, not accepting rape or being victimized. I just happened to be the first one that these filmmakers . . . found to portray that image. (p. 53)

In response to criticism from the NAACP and others about not being responsible role models by acting in these films, African-American actress Carol Speed (1998), who starred in *Abby* (1974), argues that being a role model is “a heavy burden to put on an artist. I don’t think anybody should carry that burden” (p. 170). Grier (2002) adds:

Even though I was doing a movie that was considered a B-movie, I thought it was

Gone With The Wind. I thought it would win an Oscar. I think if anyone doesn't approach their work on that level, they won't achieve what they're looking for, whether it's great success or just acknowledgment, because you're half-stepping. I went in doing the best work I could, which frightened them, because they didn't expect me to. (Rubin, 2002, p. 4)

Not surprisingly, she grew weary of the genre. But, because of her films' success, Grier saw her roles as an entree to mainstream movies: "I've done enough of [these films] and have proven myself to be a big enough box office attraction that I'm not going to do those films anymore and I'm going to pick the roles and the films I want" (quoted in *Jet Magazine* 1975, p. 58).

Many cultural critics, such as Lerone Bennett, Jr., a senior writer for *Ebony* magazine, and Dr. Alvin Pouissant, a prominent African-American psychiatrist, have denounced Black action films. While the African-American actors and actresses who appeared in the genre do not argue that they are great art, many share Grier's assessment: "They allowed a lot of people to get into the film business as actors and actresses and they allowed a lot of people to make money to feed themselves and their families" (quoted in *Jet Magazine* 1975, p. 55). "If I hadn't done them, there's a chance that I never would have been able to enter the business" (quoted in *Jet Magazine* 1975, p. 55). Dobson agrees and bristles at critics who see Cleopatra Jones as merely "a karate-chopping, pistol popping terror" (quoted in *Essence* 1976, p. 48), saying:

It's like anything else that's experimental. You go through phases until you find the right situation where a character works for you....Cleopatra Jones gave me a chance to work. She was not only gracious, but strong, clever, intelligent and sexy. I enjoyed it and it opened the door to a career I think will blossom. (p. 48)

During that time, films such as *Coffy* (1973), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) not only provided work for African-American actresses, but also *redefined* the manner in which those roles might be portrayed by creating characters that presented

African-American actresses in a different light. In some respects, the film industry offered even more opportunities for African-American directors and producers in the 1970s than it does today.

Black action films emerged after the success of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1970, which aroused a flurry of criticism from Bennett, Pouissant, the NAACP and countless others for its portrayals of African-American men as hustlers, pimps and tricksters and African-American women as prostitutes. Van Peebles revolutionized the film industry by producing *Sweetback* without Hollywood support, but rather with the assistance of financial backers such as entertainer Bill Cosby. He used more African-Americans in the crew than other filmmakers had. The movie cost \$500,000, but grossed over \$10 million at the box office and ushered in a wave of interest in similar films. Van Peebles had tapped into a market that the film industry had ignored: young, urban African Americans who readily identified with Jim Brown and later Richard Roundtree, Fred Williamson, Ron O'Neal and other African-American actors and actresses.

Perhaps, not realizing how groundbreaking her roles were, Grier (1975) remarks, "My movies were the first they had done with a strong woman character, not to mention black" (quoted in *Ms. Magazine*, 1975, p. 53). Some 29 years later when *Onion Magazine* asked her, "When you were making *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, did you have any conception that you were creating a powerful new female archetype, this sort of iconic, larger-than-life figure?" Grier answered, "No, not at all. You never know how people are going to respond. I just wanted to try to do interesting work. I was surprised and humbled by the legacy of it" (Rubin, 2002, pp. 1-2). Despite her modest response,

Grier's characters reinvented the action narrative and redefined onscreen portrayals of Black women.

What was revolutionary about these films was the way in which they elevated African-American actresses to the status of action heroines. *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones* presented a new image—the female savior—that was later co-opted by mainstream films with the success of Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley in the *Aliens* series. The story lines of these films centered on dynamic, civic-minded female characters that were as strong and capable as their male counterparts. These three films will be examined later to show how they contributed to the creation of an alternative image of African-American femininity.

The first well-known producer of Black action films was American International Pictures (AIP), one of the largest independent studios. Headed by Samuel Z. Arkoff and Jim Nicholson, AIP produced a large number of Black action films between 1972 and 1975, following the success of Van Peebles' *Sweetback* and Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1972). Arkoff (1992) explains: "In Hollywood, moviemaking trends come and go with the speed of a quick fadeout. Sometimes, American International Pictures set the trends that the majors followed. At other times, we recognized a fad and seized upon and rode to success" (Arkoff, 1992, p. 200). AIP released *Slaughter* (1972), an action movie starring African-American actor Jim Brown and Stella Stevens, followed by Fred Williamson's *Black Caesar* (1973) and Grier's *Coffy*. The studio also produced horror films featuring African-American casts, most notably *Blacula* (1972), starring the stage-trained Shakespearian actor William Marshall as an African prince whom Count Dracula turns

into a vampire. Aware of the political and racial accusations hurled at Black action films, Arkoff (1992) says:

Because of the times--a period in which public schools in cities like Boston were desegregated and some black militants were resorting to violence—all of us making these black action pictures felt we were treading in a delicate area. Nevertheless, as sensitive as we tried to be, the black films in general, including our own, came under repeated attack. (p. 201)

Then as now, there were few highly visible African-American studio executives. Even the most racially-sensitive White studio executives failed to understand or overlooked the multi-faceted nature of the African-American community when making Black films. For instance, in her book, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* ((1995)), Jacqueline Bobo discusses the negative reception Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, (1985) received in the African-American community a decade later for his portrayal of Black men.

While African-American critics like Bennett, Griffin, Roy Innis and Jesse Jackson targeted the studios, they saved their harshest invectives for African-American actors, actresses, directors and crew members. However, those professionals saw the genre as an opportunity to end the tradition of stereotyping African Americans simply as maids, entertainers, bucks and seductresses and to launch an era of positive Black screen characters. Williamson (1998) notes, "At the time we made our movies, heroes were needed more than they are now. They were still arresting more than four Black people on a corner because they said they were instigating a riot" (Martinez, Martinez and Chavez, 1998, p. 92). "In my films, I was trying to say, hey we're tired of seeing the train porters, the waitresses, the maids, we're tired of seeing that. There's another side of us that is real. There are tough guys, we can be tough, we can be the Eastwoods" (p. 92). In

essence, the Black action genre gave African-American audiences their own action heroes and heroines. But, while many actors like Williamson were comfortable in Black action films, others, as discussed earlier, saw them largely as a stepping stone to more fully-developed mainstream African-American roles. Although not as well known as Grier and Dobson, Hendry observes “when I was doing those films, I was hoping that they would open another door. I just knew that I wanted to work; I knew I wanted to be in films. I knew that *Souder* was good and so we were all striving to be like Cicely Tyson and Sidney Poitier . . . instead of being the low-budget actors”. (p. 70)

Yet, African-American actors could not escape the harsh reality of racism in Hollywood, after years of playing one-dimensional servants, porters, musicians, pimps and prostitutes the opportunities to expand were limited, despite the progress being made by the Civil Rights Movement outside the media industry.

Ultimately, Black action films suffered from the overproduction of sequels and simplistic copies of the new action heroine at the expense of character and plot development. In the process, many African-American actresses were unable to move beyond the genre. Dobson’s *Cleopatra Jones and The Casino of Gold* (1975) was a disaster at the box office. Grier made two more films, *Friday Foster* (1975) and *Sheba Baby* (1976), attempting to duplicate the formula of her success in *Coffy*. *Friday Foster* was based on a comic character and was a major disappointment in its effort to portray a strong Black action heroine, while *Sheba* presented a sophisticated version of Grier’s earlier characters. Neither film did well at the box office; and by the time Grier made *Sheba Baby* in 1976, audiences clearly had lost interest in the genre. Although Dobson subsequently starred in a few films, she soon faded into obscurity.

On the other hand, Grier recognized early on that these films would make studios such as AIP wealthy, but that the genre could not survive as African-American audiences grew weary of formulaic story lines and character developments. She comments, “The white people who control this business thought Black exploitation films would make money, first of all and they thought these were the kinds of films Black folks wanted. So they said ‘Give the niggers what they want’” (“Pam Grier expands her film career,” 1975, p. 58). Once they saw the grosses, they wanted to do every one of them like that. I was angry. You can’t give people the same thing all the time (quoted in *Ms Magazine*, 1975, p. 53).

AIP exploited the genre. As a studio with a history of producing mass-marketed, formulaic films strictly for profit on a shoestring budget, it eventually moved on to martial arts films, which were made inexpensively overseas, further cutting their production costs. Thus, the era of Black action films faded as quickly as it had begun, with many African-American actors and actresses unable to move beyond the genre; some were compelled to leave the film industry altogether.

A New Kind of Role for African-American Actresses

Until the 1970s, with few opportunities to portray multifaceted roles, African-American actresses were essentially confined to variations of two roles—*mammy* and *Jezebel*—with a disturbing regularity.³ In his film *Birth of a Nation* (1914), D.W. Griffith presented the earliest negative onscreen depiction of an African-American woman by having a white actress, wearing blackface and exaggerated African-American features, play what later became known as the mammy figure. Although the film has been widely hailed as groundbreaking in cinematic history, the caricatured depiction of

African Americans laid the foundation for subsequent depictions of African-American women. Donald Bogle (1973) described the mammy as a “big, fat, and cantankerous fiercely independent woman with a bossy disposition” (p. 9). Hattie McDaniel won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar and became typecast for her portrayal of a mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Dorothy Dandridge made cinema history when she received a Best Actress nomination for her portrayal of a seductress in *Carmen Jones* (1954)—a classic Jezebel character. Both actresses were immediately typecast—a plight that befell many African-American film actresses until the 1970s.

Then, the directors of Black action films and the executives who produced them unwittingly created a different character for Black actresses. It evolved from the creative collaboration of Roger Corman and Jack Hill, who worked at AIP. The pair sought ways to capitalize on the urban African-American market. Corman entered the genre with *The Big Doll House* (1971), starring Pam Grier in her first film for AIP.

The new action heroine character expanded opportunities for Black actresses and changed cultural expectations about film portrayals of Black femininity but not without a struggle. For example, Grier (1976) explains: “I was not just going out doing blatant violence.’ . . . A lot of serious moments which showed the motivation for the violence were cut from her early films, she reveals, so all you saw was shoot-em-up. Bang bang!” (quoted in *Ebony Magazine*, 1976, p. 34). Hill (1998), the director of *Foxy Brown* reveals a similar struggle “the people at AIP had nothing but contempt for the audience they were making movies for. Not just the Black audience but the whole audience that they made movies for. They didn’t understand Black pictures. . . . I had to really fight to

keep elements in the picture that I felt the audience would respond to". (Martinez, Martinez and Chavez, 1998, p. 139)

In varying degrees, both Grier and Dobson tried to shape their characters to redefine African-American femininity (i.e., beauty, sexuality and womanhood.) Grier had specific ideas about articulating a strong image in her films. She stated:

I wanted to show in films what we are doing when everyone says things are getting better. . . . I showed this in the pictures and it was just so ugly and people saw it and said Wow! That's really the way it is. And all of a sudden there was a kind of violent reaction to it. It kind of sparked people. They kind of woke up because they saw it 20-feet tall, our lifestyles up there on that screen. (quoted in *Ebony Magazine*, 1976, p. 35).

By voicing concerns over the deletion of scenes she felt were crucial, Grier noted the studio did not particularly like her outspokenness "they don't like me but they want to work with me because I make them money. They don't like it that I talk about the cheesy way they work. . . . They think I am being ungrateful because they discovered me and made me a star". (quoted in *Ms. Magazine*, 1975, p. 53).

While Black actresses were well aware of the Black action films' limitations, Grier used her box office draw to change AIP's image of her as merely a "Black sex goddess" (quoted in *Ms. Magazine*, 1975, p. 53). First, as Hattie McDaniel had one with the mammy, Grier ignored the limitations of Coffy and Foxy Brown and made these characters her own. Second, she was very vocal about the studio's treatment of her story lines. Third, she formed her own production company with the objective of creating her own films. In these ways, she substantially helped redefine the stereotypical definitions of African-American women. In previous years, studios and directors defined African-American actresses' beauty. After the success of their respective films, Grier and Dobson gained a measure of control from producers and studio executives and broke the

stereotypical mold with their portrayals of characters that defied the Eurocentric model of beauty⁴, sexuality and womanhood.

THREE GROUND BREAKING FILMS

Pam Grier in *Coffy*

Prior to *Coffy*, Grier appeared as a supporting actress in a few American International Pictures movies. But it was the movie *Coffy* that catapulted Grier to stardom. *Coffy* is the main character in the who is seeking revenge on the drug dealers responsible for her younger sister's vegetative state. From the opening scene where she forces a drug dealer to inject himself with a lethal dose of heroin, it is clear that Grier's heroine is determined to avenge her sister's tragedy. By profession, *Coffy* is a operating room nurse in a local hospital and has seen her share of tragedies. Although Carter Brown, her police officer friend, tries to get *Coffy* to understand that it is in her best interest to work within the law, *Coffy* ignores him. Brown is severely injured when he learns that his partner is involved in police corruption.

To enter the inner circle of "Vitroni" the crime lord, she adopts a series of call girl disguises to infiltrate a flamboyant character names "King George who works for Vitroni, the major crime leader in the area. To find King George, *Coffy* tracks down a former prostitute named Priscilla who used to be the top girl in his organization. She is no longer involved in King George's call girl operation because of a facial scar. After obtaining information from a reluctant Priscilla about King George, *Coffy* adopts a fake accent and introduces herself to him. He is smitten with her and invites her to join his organization. He tells her to appear at a party the next night where he unwittingly introduces *Coffy* to Vitroni.

Coffy and Meg, a woman who also works for King George get into a physical confrontation. Unbeknownst to Meg, Coffy has hidden razor blades in her Afro thus when they fight, Meg's fingers are badly cut. Coffy fends off the other women at the party who try to attack her much to the amusement of Vitroni and other members of the party. Vitroni thinks King George is responsible for the damages inflicted on his crime operation and orders him to be killed.

When one of Vitroni's henchmen recognizes her from a party she attended with her politician boyfriend Howard Brunswick, Vitroni invites Coffy to his hotel room. There, he plays along with Coffy's act. Unbeknownst to Coffy, Brunswick has been on Vitroni's payroll for quite some time. She is surprised to see him conducting business with "Vitroni" even more surprised, when he pretends not to know her. Then, Vitroni orders the gangsters to kill Coffy. They are unaware that Coffy substituted the heroin stash for sugar in Vitroni's hotel room before she attended King George's party. When Vitroni's men give her a dose of heroin, they do not realize that she is pretending to be sick. They order her to get into the car, she feigns interest in one of the gangsters, then pulls out a hairpin and stabs him in the jugular. , She escapes as the two other men chase her onto the freeway. One man is run over by a car while chasing her and the other crashes when she throws a rock at his car window. Coffy flags down a motorist to obtain a ride back to "Vitroni's house. She meets Vitroni again and promises not to kill him, but shoots him when he gives her information about Brunswick. In the above scenes, Coffy proves adept at using her Finally, she returns to her boyfriend's house who convinces her

that he still loves her and would never do anything to hurt her. Coffy feels very betrayed and kills him.

Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown*

Pam Grier's *Foxy Brown* was made in 1974 following the success of her heroine *Coffy*. While their occupations may differ, a common characteristic trait in all three heroines is their strength and willingness to go beyond the boundaries of the law to seek retribution for their loved ones. *Foxy Brown* is no different than *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones* in wanting to protect her loved ones and community. Her brother "Linc" owes a large sum of money to local gangsters and if he does not find a way to repay them faces certain death. *Foxy* knows that her boyfriend "Mike Anderson" is actually a narcotics agent named "Dalton Ford" who has undergone plastic surgery so that the local crime lords cannot identify him. However, "Linc" discovers Anderson's secret and spills this information to the gangsters as payment for his debt. Ms. Kathryn's henchmen murder Ford and *Foxy* discovers that her brother told Ms. Kathryn Dalton Ford's real identity. Although she is very upset with Linc, *Foxy* decides to seek revenge against Ms. Kathryn's organization. For his part, "Linc" is killed by the henchmen and *Foxy* decides it is time to destroy this organization. She goes undercover as a call girl to obtain inside information and meets "Ms Kathryn" the ring leader and "Steve Elias", Ms. Kathryn's boyfriend.

As a call girl, *Foxy* befriends a young, confused prostitute named "Claudia" who wants to leave, but is afraid of "Ms. Kathryn". After helping "Claudia" escape and rejoin

her family, Foxy is captured and taken to Ms. Kathryn's drug manufacturing house where she is tortured, raped and injected with drugs. She is able to escape using a razor blade which she carefully places in her mouth, unties her hands and sets the house on fire with the two henchmen in it.

Foxy makes her way back to the neighborhood and meets with her friend "Oscar" who leads a neighborhood watch organization. She makes an appeal to the organization to help her destroy Ms. Kathryn's business. At first, they are reluctant because they feel Foxy is only seeking revenge for her loved ones. But, she convinces them that she wants justice for everyone who has been harmed indirectly or directly by drugs and other crime in their neighborhood. Foxy puts a plan into place and the organization agrees to assist her. She finds out about Ms. Kathryn's shipment and charms a pilot at a local club to allow her to come along when he delivers the goods. Foxy puts her plans into action. Oscar and other members of the neighborhood committee meet up with her and they kill "Ms. Kathryn's" gangsters. But, Foxy saves her plans for "Ms. Kathryn" until the very end. Steve Elias is waiting for this shipment and when he sees Foxy, he tries to run. But, she along with the organization captures and castrates him, placing his testicles in a jar for Ms. Kathryn.

Then, Foxy pays a visit to Ms. Kathryn who believes she has the upper hand. She does not realize that Foxy is hiding a small gun in her Afro and orders the men working for her to kill Foxy. However, Foxy has other plans and kills both gangsters with the small gun before facing Ms. Kathryn. She places the jar with Elias' testicles on Ms. Kathryn's table who is horrified, cries out and grabs a gun to kill Foxy. Foxy moves out

of the way, and shoots her in the arm. When Ms. Kathryn begs Foxy to kill her, Foxy replies “death is too easy for you, bitch” (Foxy Brown).

Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones*

Grier established herself as a leading actress with this role with the goal of moving beyond Black action films to mainstream roles. The actors understood the power dynamics of the film industry and used the genre as an opportunity to move towards roles that were more culturally rewarding. In a 1975 *Jet Magazine* interview, Grier stated “these Black exploitation films that I’ve been in and a lot of other Black actors and actresses have been in have been trash, on the most part, but they allowed a lot of people to get into the film business as actors and actresses and they allowed a lot of people to make money to feed themselves and their families (p. 57). By 1975, African-American actresses had made inroads in the film industry, however, many like Grier and Tamara Dobson were still struggling to find roles that moved beyond the pervasive stereotypical imagery of African-American women as domestics or conniving seductresses.

In contrast to Grier’s *Coffy*, Tamara Dobson’s *Cleopatra Jones* was made with a mainstream studio, a larger budget and in some ways, a better script. The opening scenes in *Coffy*, *Cleopatra Jones* and *Foxy Brown* are crucial to establishing how these heroines become the mediators between the studios and the directors by portraying characters that have a strong onscreen persona. And while her 6’2” former fashion model herself, her depiction of a heroine who appears larger than life received even more attention. A 1973 *Ebony* interview notes that Dobson was chosen out of 2500 women and spent weeks training with a dialogue coach and working on her stunts (p. 48). Dobson is Cleopatra Jones a CIA operative who works undercover as a fashion model to infiltrate and banish

crim organizationse specifically drug rings. Similar to Grier's *Coffy*, Cleopatra Jones comes from a neighborhood filled with crime, poverty and despair. Cleopatra is driven to eradicate crime in her community and give younger people an alternative, with the help of her boyfriend "Reuben" who runs a community center for young people.

Shelly Winters' "Mommy" is the major drug leader in the city, who and discovers that Cleopatra destroys the poppy fields in Turkey that directly affect her business. To eliminate her, she sends gangsters to meet Cleopatra at the airport who is returning from her mission to destroy the poppy fields. When that fails, she arranges to have drugs planted in the community center and subsequently, raided by the police who try to close it. Cleopatra becomes more determined to put "Mommy" out of business for good. Seeking to keep Reuben's, Cleopatra tracks down Tiffany who is affiliated with Doodlebug, a flamboyant character who works for "Mommy's" organization. Doodlebug decides to distance himself from "Mommy" when he discovers that Cleopatra is on her trail and is killed for being disloyal. Afraid that "Mommy" will try to kill her, Tiffany runs. Cleopatra is able to find her before "Mommy" and her organization can get to her, but they are taken to a salvage junkyard where "Mommy" and Cleopatra meet for the first and only time. Cleopatra skillfully ends "Mommy's" reign of terror with karate moves. She kills "Mommy" and her remaining henchmen are arrested. As the movie ends, Cleopatra drives away for the next assignment.

Audiences had not seen heroines like Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones onscreen before. Thus, the Black action heroines of the 1970s offered alternative role models for African-American women looking to explore their femininity. The Civil Right Movement of the 1960s had introduced Black women to a new type of leader,

women like Angela Davis and Barbara Jordan, who inspired an expanded definition of African-American femininity that prompted changes in concepts of ideal physical appearance and beauty, as well as a redefinition of acceptable forms of behavior, demeanor and employment. Not all African-American women responded to Grier and Dobson's characters with positive affirmation, but these actresses developed a new type of character that differed vastly from previous cinematic stereotypes of African-American actresses. Grier and Dobson brought the character to life and gave her a persona. They accomplished this by reinventing traditional notions of African American beauty, sexuality and womanhood onscreen.

Redefining Beauty

In the 1960s, the Afro became a powerful symbol for many, insofar as it came to represent liberation. Black Nationalism offered one alternative image of African-American femininity by praising women who wanted to return to a natural hairstyle rather than submit to the Eurocentric beauty standards of long straight hair, delicate physical features and lighter complexions.⁵ The Black Panther Party showcased many women wearing Afros and the media attention that the charismatic Angela Davis received helped make *Black is beautiful* a popular mantra in the African-American community.

The Afro came to signify an alternative construction of African-American femininity—well beyond simply a hair style--that empowered and uplifted many African-American women. Cedric Robinson (1998) suggested that Black action films “appropriated and re-presented Angela Davis” (p. 5), but many African-American women most clearly identified with the hair style. Bringing that image to the screen, even in an

exploitative format, enabled audiences to see the beauty of African-American women as more varied and nuanced than the stereotypical mammy and Jezebel. Black is beautiful meant all shades, all features, all sizes of African-American womanhood could be portrayed with respect.

In *Foxy Brown*, Grier intentionally changed her hairstyle frequently reflecting the changing definitions of beauty associated with African-American women. In the opening movie credits, Grier moves with ease from a short bob, patterned after Dobson's Cleopatra character, to long, flowing, straight hair and finally to an Afro. Grier's interpretation of *Foxy Brown* thus represented the glamorous side of African-American women that had often been denied on screen and their eagerness to escape traditional stereotyping. Despite objections from director Jack Hill (1998), who thought that her costumes and hairstyles did not fit the role, Grier, like other contemporary African-American actresses, fought to gain control over her onscreen images, a significant breakthrough considering their former powerlessness. Later, Hill recognized: "Pam had much more control because now she was a major star. That is why she is wearing all these glamorous outfits and makeup and stuff which I thought wasn't really right for the movie at all" (Martinez, Martinez and Chavez, 1998, p. 138).

For many years, African-American actresses had to alter their hairstyles to fit the roles as defined by the White establishment's stereotypes. McDaniels' mammy character wore a headscarf so that audiences could not even see her hair in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), in contrast to Dandridge's *Carmen Jones* (1954), whose hairstyle was straight, nearer to the White conception of what a beautiful seductress should look like. Black action films showed an array of African-American actresses with different skin hues and

hairstyles--a striking contrast from film tradition before *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*.

Foxy's hairstyle changes served not only as a fashion statement, but also as an affirmation that the length and texture of an African-American woman's hair does not determine her beauty. This is true of Dobson's Cleopatra Jones, who also chose to feature the Afro. By the 1970s, of course, hairstyle options for African-American women were limitless, and a valid argument can be made that Grier and Dobson were making more of a fashion statement than a social or political critique. Regardless of their motivation, Grier and Dobson altered the traditional movie portrayal of African-American female beauty through those characters for the entire world to see and, thereby, expanded the boundaries on what is beautiful for future Black actresses.

The politics of hair and skin color are issues with which African-American women in general and many actresses in particular have had to contend for decades. For example, a brown-complexioned Josephine Baker, who mesmerized audiences in Paris and elsewhere with her beauty, charm, humor and flirtatious sensuality (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992, p. 143), had a difficult time in the film industry during the 1920s because she did not fit an image that could be easily categorized. Producers had no roles for an actress who was too beautiful to look the part of a mammy, but who also was not light enough to play the tragic mulatto, a character that was sympathetic because of her White blood, yet could not live in the White community because of her African-American heritage (Bogle, 1973, p. 9).

Redefining Sexuality

Blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s sang and behaved on stage in a manner that suggested they were comfortable challenging racial and gender barriers. Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey received outright scorn for their refusal to conform to stereotypes of African-American womanhood. Both Smith and Rainey celebrated their liberation and sexual freedom, as did both Grier and Dobson in their characterizations of action heroines. Hazel Carby (1987) has suggested that female blues singers “articulated a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of song” (p. 12). In her book *Black Pearls*, Daphne Duval Harrison (1988) argued that these singers “introduced a new different model of black women—more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive” (p. 282).

In essence, Smith and Rainey created a new public discourse about African-American femininity that Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson took up in the 1970s.⁶ Grier’s Coffy and Foxy Brown embody a strong, empowering sexuality that is difficult for other characters to ignore. Similarly, Dobson’s Cleopatra Jones is a towering presence, evoking a strong sexual persona that expands the character rather than reducing her to the stereotypical Jezebel.

In these films, Grier deliberately uses the sexual stereotype to her advantage, reclaiming and transforming African-American female sexuality. For example, when Coffy first appears onscreen, she is wearing a skimpy, short dress and high heels, the signifying costume of the prostitute as victim. But she quickly transforms from victim to avenger when she forces a drug dealer to inject a lethal dose of heroin as pay back for her

sister's death. Similarly, as Foxy Brown, Grier is introduced to the audience as she relaxes in bed with her boyfriend, a familiar female image. Suddenly, however, she jumps out of bed, puts a gun in her bra strap and rushes to the aid of her brother. Both actresses create characters that surpass stereotypical limitations imposed on film women, without denying their sensuality.

In the opening scene of *Cleopatra Jones*, Dobson dramatically strides off a helicopter to oversee the destruction of Turkish poppy fields, exuding the sexual confidence that is the trademark of all three heroines. Here she is: a striking, statuesque, African-American woman wearing a long fur coat, towering over the male officials whose eyes take in her every move. It is clear in this scene that Dobson's character represents the authority figure, while the male characters surrounding her are subordinates. Dobson's authority and sexuality dominate the screen and represent a significant redefinition of racial and gender roles because she is doing a job that has been traditionally reserved for White men, flaunting her sexuality but not relying on it. Throughout their films, Grier and Dobson invest their characters with an awareness of the power of their own sexuality and the self-assurance to use it to their own advantage.

Redefining Womanhood

The roles of Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones redefined womanhood in several crucial ways. First, in a sign of the social and political progress African Americans had achieved by the 1970s. All three women have cordial relationships with law enforcement officials and other traditional representatives of authority, centers of power that historically oppressed African Americans and bastions of male dominance. They move effortlessly between the African-American and White communities and

effectively communicate their concerns for African Americans while using their positions of power to help the community. For example, the neighborhood committee in *Foxy Brown* and the charity house in *Cleopatra Jones* created environments that suggested alternatives to drugs, crime and despair. All three films offered a running commentary on the destructive effects of drugs on the African-American community.

Second, a protective, almost maternal instinct balances the tough exteriors of these women. For example, in *Foxy Brown*'s repeated physical defense of her brother, Grier demonstrates that strong African-American women maintain and transform traditional feminine traits. Her concern for her brother despite his drug use parallels African-American women's positions in the family as nurturers, caretakers and, at times, disciplinarians.

Third, each heroine demonstrates the social, political and economic mobility that the Civil Rights and Women's Movements made possible. They reflect a social scene their audiences were experiencing, freed, to some extent, from race, class and gender constraints.

In terms of social and economic mobility, Tamara Dobson's *Cleopatra Jones* is a government agent working to eradicate drugs posing undercover as a model. Interestingly enough, *Cleopatra*'s occupation, penthouse, designer wardrobe and sports car with personalized tags have led at least one critic to compare her to James Bond (Tasker, 1993, p. 23). Grier's *Coffy* is an operating room nurse who takes care of her comatose sister.

Coffy is a career woman who feels as comfortable in a nurse's uniform as she does in formal attire entertaining her politician boyfriend's business partners. *Foxy*

Brown's occupation is not revealed. Cleopatra Jones has the social poise to show up at a motorcycle race in a red turban, a fur coat, a low-cut red blouse and high-heeled boots, while driving a motorcycle. These new African-American screen women are not afraid to take risks and know how to remain composed under any social circumstances.

These are physically fit and self-assured women. They are able to take and mete out their share of physical abuse; but their violence is a matter of self-defense or used in a just cause. Although some may argue that violence should not be encouraged, these heroines use the violence that surrounds them to radiate the strength and abilities that help to redefine African American femininity in a dynamic and positive way. In these films, both Grier and Dobson portray empowered women who were in control of their careers and their lives.

All three-action heroines also physically confront White female villains, whose negative portrayals underlined the multifaceted aspect of African-American womanhood. For example, when Coffy tries to obtain information from an uncooperative source, she brandishes a broken bottle in a woman's face. It is a frightening scene that demonstrates that physicality and fearlessness are defining characteristics of action-driven story lines. But, more importantly to this discussion, it also exhibits some interesting dynamics of female characterization that develops when the source's lover, a very masculine-looking, heavysset African-American woman, enters and threatens Coffy. This scene is a rare contest between African-American women. Women who are victimized by their lovers and used as objects on display for the male characters around them, providing a plot foil for this new Black action heroine, surround Coffy.

Finally, in each of these films, the action heroine has a strong social consciousness and a desire to help her people and community. Coffy's consuming passion is to right a wrong--to avenge those responsible for putting her sister in a coma and shooting her friend. Cleopatra helps her boyfriend keep his rehabilitation center open and stop heroin from entering the country. Foxy wants revenge on the criminals who murdered her brother and her boyfriend. As played by Grier and Dobson, Coffy, Foxy and Cleopatra reflect the activism of real African-American women such as Angela Davis, Elaine Brown and Shirley Chisholm. While these characters focus on symptoms of society's problems (drug dealings and deaths) rather than the underlying racist power structure per se, the films clearly show that the battle to save the community can be led successfully by powerful, caring African-American women.

Robinson , p. 5 argues that Angela Davis' image is co-opted by the producers of *Foxy Brown*. In the last scenes, for example--arguably the strongest in terms of presenting Foxy Brown as a strong, empowered heroine--a poster of Davis hangs in the background, next to a "Black is Beautiful" poster. Here, Foxy implores the neighborhood committee to take an active part in social justice, saying, "I want justice for all people bought and sold." Clearly, the producers of *Foxy Brown* **wanted** to capitalize on the image of an African-American activist who believes strongly enough in her convictions to sacrifice her career as a professor in the California university system and, ultimately, her freedom. Davis served as the perfect model for Grier's Foxy Brown and Coffy and to some extent Dobson's Cleopatra Jones. Thus, the presentation of empowered Black action heroines who maintain their femininity has had a lasting influence in the film industry that is seen today with the proliferation of films starring Black and White

actresses as action heroines, ever expanding characterizations of African Americans in movie roles and increasing opportunities for Black actresses like Halle Barry and Vivica A. Fox to continue to redefine African-American femininity and empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the opinions of cultural critics, such as Bennett and Pouissant, and film scholars Ed Guerrero and Donald Bogle (1973), who suggested that black women could find little to identify with in their adolescent-male-fantasy-oriented roles, Black action films enabled African-American actresses to explore a new genre of film that subsequently would be co-opted by mainstream, popular cinema. The negative aspects of violence, drug abuse and weak characterizations in these action films were countered by the strength, beauty, sexuality, complexity and humanity that actresses Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson breathed into characters like Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones.

For a few short years, Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones represented empowered women modeled upon such African-American activists as Angela Davis and Shirley Chisholm. For example, by wearing natural hairstyles, these Black actresses created fictional heroines who defied the dominant ideology that African-American women must look “European” in order to be considered beautiful. Despite the criticisms directed at them for reinforcing sexual stereotypes of African-American women, Grier and Dobson used their opportunities in the 1970s to play empowered, liberated women in order to get other acting roles. They particularly appealed to some African-American women because their characters rejected the dominant culture’s ideals of African-American beauty, sexuality and womanhood. These films have never received critical acclaim, but they were not meant to. They were produced to capture a niche market, and

they did that extremely well for several years. Film critics and scholars have remained concerned about the genre's exploitation of African-American women, but Grier and Dobson's characters redefined beauty, sexuality and womanhood for a generation of movie goers and countless Black actresses who followed their lead.

The onscreen struggles of characters like Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones are quite similar to those that African-American women still endure on a daily basis. Ultimately, Black action films provided an inspiring image of African-American femininity that gave African-American actresses their first opportunity to showcase their talents in a non-stereotypical manner, eventually leading to the creation of action heroines on television and in mainstream cinema.

According to Grier, "The masses enjoyed it. They enjoyed seeing a female hero" (Rubin 2002, p. 7). Clearly, audiences in general respond positively to action heroines, whether they appear in popular film or on television, as witnessed by the phenomena of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley or Halle Barry's Bond girl. It is only fitting then that homage should be paid to the African-American actresses who made this possible. In essence, their portrayals of Coffy, Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones traded headscarves for Afros, a symbol of servitude and denigration for one of liberation, sensuality and the redefinition of African-American femininity.

Endnotes

¹ Frank Beaver (1983) offered one of many definitions of Blaxploitation: “commercially minded films made to appeal specifically to the interests of black audiences” (p. 37).

² I do not know where the term originates, but Mark Reid (1988) uses this term in his article.

³ Two other common stereotypes of African-American actresses include “Sapphire” and the “Exotic Other,” who is commonly referred to as the tragic mulatto.

⁴ See Donald Bogle’s (1973) *Toms, coons, mammies and bucks: An interpretative history of Blacks in American films* for the definition of tragic mulatto, which was the standard of beauty applied to African-American actresses by studios and directors. Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge fit the studios’ criteria of beauty, but they had great difficulty earning roles in Hollywood. They faced a similar dilemma that plagued darker skin actresses, such as Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters: typecast because of their color and features. I call this the “butterfly syndrome,” taken from an excerpt of Lena Horne’s autobiography *Lena* in which she explains that she felt like a butterfly on display in many films.

⁵ A number of books have recently emerged in which beauty standards, specifically hair and complexion, are discussed at length. See Nolie Rooks’ *Hair raising: Beauty, culture, and African American women* (1996), as well as Juliette Harris’ and Pamela Johnson’s *Tenderheaded: A comb-bending collection of hair stories* (1997). See *The color complex: The politics of skin, color and hair in the African-American community* (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992) for a more in-depth analysis of this discussion.

⁶It is important to emphasize that *before* Black action films the concept of the action heroine was virtually non-existent in mainstream Hollywood films. My focus is on mainstream films produced specifically in Hollywood by studios. Many “B” movies have action heroines particularly if one examines the Martial Arts Films in the late 1960s and early 1970s from Hong Kong, but for the purposes of this article, the discussion is limited to the American Film Industry. *The Queens of Blaxploitation: Genesis of the Action Heroine in Popular Cinema* will offer a more in-depth analysis of my argument here and is forthcoming by McFarland Press (2005).

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I'm an American whose parents come from Haiti. I've also lived and worked in the UK and France. I grew up middle-class in a town that is still 85% white. I've have had graduate courses in black studies with William Julius Wilson and spent 7 yea 2. Afro-American women.

3. United. Statesâ€”Race relations.Â Rethinking empowerment also led me to incorporate new themes in this edition.Â Stewart also challenged Black women to use their special roles as mothers to forge powerful mechanisms of political action. â€œO, ye mothers, what a responsi-bility rests on you!â€ Stewart preached. "African-born and Caribbean-born brothers and sisters have realized that the police don't discriminate on the basis of nationality -- ask Amadou Diallo," said Professor Charles J. Ogletree Jr., who teaches at Harvard Law School and has warned colleges and universities that admitting mostly foreign-born blacks to meet the goals of affirmative action is insufficient.Â "The Africans tend to be quite industrious and entrepreneurial and often take advantage of opportunities that might have been here for others before," said Kim Nichols of the African Services Committee. "We're talking about very profoundly different cultures," Kathleen Newland said. â€œFrom Headscarves to Afros: Redefining African-American Femininity in 1970s Selected Black Action Films.â€ In *Ethnic Media: Taking Control*, vol. 2, eds. Guy Meiss and Alice Tait. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2005. _____. â€œFrom Mammies to Action Heroines: Female Empowerment in Black Popular Cinema.â€ Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 2000. Sitkoff, Harvard. Roles have been defined for black women and black men and the socialization of black women vs. black men is intriguing. As Iâ€™ve come out as genderqueer I have found it difficult to imagine disassociating myself from black womanhood. So much is tied to a black womanâ€™s identity.Â Thereâ€™s a lot of empty rhetoric, good intentions, and horrible actions under the guise of being educated as an anti-racist. Whose Anti-Racism is it anyway? And just what does it mean to be anti-racist anyway?Â Documents Similar To Selected Notes from an Afro-Genderqueer. Carousel Previous Carousel Next. Visible: A Femmethology, Volume One.