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Book Review: “Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films

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“Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films. 2008. Stephane Dunn. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press. 192 pp. \$20 (paperback)

Reviewed by Chloe Wayne¹

The restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed...

(Hammonds, 1994: 134)

Coffy was based on my mom. She was a nurse in Colorado, she had been part of the civil rights movement and knew what it meant to save a community. I saw her stand up many times to drug dealers and pimps. My aunt was Foxy Brown: she had a temper, she could be bawdy, she wanted to be equal.

– Pam Grier (Wise, 2008: 98)

“Doubly jeopardized,” black female identity is often rendered partially invisible in race and gender studies—either it is subsumed into feminist discourse that unapologetically represents white women, or it is neglected in black histories that utterly privilege the male voice and body. To repeat what has been said innumerable times,² white males hold an oligopoly on the production of history. The petty underlings—representatives of *one* of those two golden, hegemonic traits—act as hangers-on, colluding with their masters for at least a partial stake. Thus, black feminist critics, along with their allies, are often faced with the task of filling glaring lacunae in popular and academic discourse on gender and race. We intervene, drawing attention to the ways our minds and bodies have gone unacknowledged (or at times, deliberately effaced), by coloring in white feminist discourse and protesting the distinct forms of patriarchy to which men subject us.

The politics of representation, however, is a difficult space to navigate. In articulating, affirming, and protesting the multifarious experiences and struggles of black women, their stories are certainly freed, but what about the frameworks and biases used to cause this rupture? For instance, the “politics of respectability” proliferated as a strategy among black Americans, particularly women, to resist unfavorable representation and subjection to negative stereotyping. However, as Farah Jasmine Griffin writes, “paradoxically, as black leaders attempted to counter racist discourses and their consequences, the politics of respectability also reflected an acceptance and internalization of these representations” (Griffin, 2000:34). Black women policed the bodies of other black women, and in a quest for subjectivity, suppressed dissent that did not fit within a white bourgeois morality, constructing new barriers to their own autonomy. Today, discussion of black female sexuality often revolves around the male objectifying gaze or construes “deviant” sexuality as compulsive and reactionary. Both tendencies privilege the hegemonic, normative perspective (male and bourgeois,

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² Though, as Hortense Spillers duly notes, “the persistence of the repeated [does not] rob these well-known, oft-told events of their power to startle” (Spillers, 2003: 209).

respectively), thus inadvertently “reproduc[ing] the ideological system that has up to now defined the terrain” (Hammonds, 1994: 134).

Stephane Dunn’s fascinating study of black female representation in blaxploitation-era film, “*Baad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*, is an important, overdue intervention into black cultural criticism and into the films themselves. She deftly interweaves analysis of Black Power politics, black popular culture, and race-gender intersectionality to illuminate oft-ignored subjects in blaxploitation films—the women, the “baad bitches” and supermamas, whose bodies are made hypervisible at the expense of their subjectivity. Termed “blaxploitation” for their gross, spectacular use of violence and sex to bring in their target audience (urban blacks), these films were fantastic mélanges of black radicalism, hypermasculinity, action plots, and racialized stereotypes that, while made to entertain and to wow, were undeniably political and critical. Though the peripatetic nature of her discussion occasionally makes Dunn’s arguments difficult to follow, she ultimately succeeds at highlighting the severe limits of a patriarchal, commodified blaxploitation “radicalism” and developing the ways black female representation has been marginalized and unproblematized in film criticism. However, considering the intended focus on rescuing these films’ women and heroines from objectification and invisibility, one cannot help but feel that Dunn herself is somewhat guilty of that which she critiques. At times, her well-intentioned explication of the harmful ways oppressive (white/male/capitalist) power structures mediated the representation of women excessively privileges the male perspective over that of black women—characters, actresses, and viewers—who are curiously quiet in the book.

This is not to say that Dunn does not challenge these dominant frameworks that actively silence, objectify, and negate black females. In fact, the author explicitly maps out her motivations for this undertaking: to “expand this scarce critical treatment by considering the distinct elements and implications of these supermama characters and films that generalized discussions of blaxploitation...have not yet adequately addressed” (34). Her specific task and concern is in-depth exploration and analysis of the “baad” bitches and supermamas and the politics of their representation. The first chapter immediately reverses the films’ directionality, thus making her agenda immediately clear: these films were made by men and for men, so she zooms in on the supermama spectators who view these supermama tales. Interspersing pithy tidbits of theory to enrich her discussion, her focus on the subjectivity of black female viewers addresses both the lasting legacy of heroines like Foxy Brown and the centrality of the *viewers’* reactions and interpretations in determining what filmic representations will *ultimately* mean. This consideration is an important one, as the “power of looking”—the sensuous experience of viewership as well as the rational, interpretive faculties—allows black women to wrest away the signifiers in the text, harness their own subjectivity, and create new authoritative and/or subversive meanings.

However, the rest of the book does not quite follow suit—Chapter 2 focuses on “racial patriarchy” in black politics of the 1960s and 1970s, and, though it offers mostly stock points of analyses, lays well-developed groundwork for the following chapters that get to the heart of representation in six prominent films: *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, *Cleopatra Jones* and its sequel, *Coffy*, and *Foxy Brown*. Her explication of the racialized nature of gender politics (as well as the masculinist and misogynist nature of racial struggle) in *Sweetback* and *The Spook*

illuminate the impact of violent patriarchy on female representation in the films. For the men involved, women are one-dimensional, just *physical* vehicles in a racial war that is utterly masculine. White women are used as tools by both black and white men to one-up their adversaries, and the black female characters are shabbily constructed from flat archetypes that relegate women to specific roles at male whim. Rampant references to the black phallus and the violent, brawny buck are stamped from page to page, but there is a curious invisibility of the black female body and a glaring absence of signifiers to summon any image of her. The reader is bombarded with grotesque images of Sweetback's corporeality, yet is left barely able to mentally picture the women discussed. Though this makes sense, to an extent, since Dunn is critiquing a film in which men predominate (and she is critiquing their predominance), I do not think it a stretch to expect more of a focus on the women in themselves, and not just in relation to the men that subjugate them. She, like the men she critiques, seems to engage the females only on a symbolic level ("Joy represents..." "the black prostitute signifies..."), as vehicles through which to engage in black male politickin', albeit without the same misogynist undercurrent.

Chapter 4 and 5 transition to the "supermama" films, and the prominence of Tamara Dobson and Pam Grier in the films themselves is reflected in her ample treatment of their respective characters. Her reverence for these actresses' contributions to black film and black femininity is made quite clear; she documents the ways in which these actresses negated negative depictions of female-as-object and the importance of these characters' centrality to the films. Though more critical of Grier's characters, she argues that these black female heroines—a beautiful, powerful, autonomous agent fighting against racism and patriarchy—purveyed a new "example of the potential of a new sensibility for shaping the black female presence in popular action cinema" (85). However, the underlying "problematic conservatism" of the depictions still reinforced white and male hegemony to different degrees. For instance, *Cleopatra Jones*'s eponymous character is glamorous and sexualized to appeal to men as well as women, but it avoids the pornographic treatment to which Pam Grier's characters are subject. Thus, the four films discussed do offer different gradations of female autonomy and empowerment, but Dunn rightfully problematizes the film industry's lingering stronghold on the heroines' depiction, as exemplified by their reinscription of racial patriarchy and the deliberate (hyper)sexualization of Dobson and Grier to attract viewership.

Even in these chapters, however, Dunn's advance toward a liberating analysis of the black female *subject* is cut short. Much of the discussion of Cleopatra, Coffy, and Foxy (and secondary female characters) revolves around the racist, masculinist stereotypes that their representation signifies—again, these characters are dissected in relation to the males *in* the film and *in charge of* the film. This leaves little room for the space opened up in Chapter 1 for the power of spectatorship on shaping meaning and the contours of representation, and it privileges the hegemonic narratives of overt black female sexuality as deviant and reactionary. Though Dunn is certainly correct in constructing Coffy's and Foxy's sexuality as contingent upon male hegemony, this stance positions them primarily as objects. Her discussion of Inga Marchand-turned-Foxy Brown borders on condescension, and her analysis of Grier's characters does not consider Grier's agency as an actress portraying the real-life women who inspired her (see epigraph). In eliding consideration and discussion of a volitional, self-conscious black

female sexuality that is overt, in focusing almost entirely on female objectification under patriarchal power structures, Dunn certainly sheds light on the black female subject, but stops just short of giving her proper voice.

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