

Reclaiming Images of Black Femininity

Female African American Filmmakers Confronting the 'Blaxploitation' Genre

By: Naomi Noir

Tracey Moffat's *Lip*, Etang Inyang's *Badass Supermama*, and Lisa Gay Hamilton's *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, all retake the Hollywood story of blackness and challenge its representations of race class and gender by retelling it through the perspective of a black woman. They re-speak the narrative, thus re-taking control over the story. All of these films use found footage to explore the representation of African-American woman in Hollywood film.

In *Lip*, Moffat uses images of white women being served by black women from classic Hollywood films. She lets the lines be spoken, with no voice over or altered lines of dialogue. The only addition to these stereotypical Hollywoodian images of black subservient women is the sound of Aretha Franklin singing *Chain of Fools*. Once the pattern of servitude has been established, Moffat goes on to show all of these black woman who may have looked compliant, now talking back, "giving lip". Franklin is now belting out the word "freedom". The black woman are smiling, they have had the last laugh; they may have had to play black subservient characters in Hollywood films, but always had lip.

Despite sexy and violent images of Boxy Brown in Etang Inyang's *Badass Supermama*, the opening shot is that of a moving carousel. Its vivid lights are seen as if through a child's eye, representing the innocence of youth when the image of self is still

pure and untainted by representations of self such as Foxy Brown as a black woman. Inyang begins by declaring her crush on Foxy. Though told not to identify with her, she does. Even though her body is not the ideal of Foxy's she feels that she can relate to her struggles: not being allowed to feel the trauma of rape. She asks Foxy "where are the women in your world? Where are your sisters?" She shows us the Badass Supermama beating up lesbians: women fighting women. "Whose fantasy is this?," she asks. Inyang wonders if she has to resist her or if she could take what she sees in her, her strengths as a black woman, not her weaknesses and make them her own? She claims her anyway, ending the film with a cleansing scene of the two women swimming together: both Badass Supermamas in their own way.

Through the footage that Inyang uses of Foxy and her reinterpretation of what she sees through narrative and self-reflection, she raises the problem of giving authentic representation of African American life and overcoming stereotypes. Here it is obvious that African-Americans lost more than their freedom as slaves, they lost control over their image as well. Distorted public images such as Foxy Brown as a violent and sexy black woman, so sexy in fact that her allure causes a lack of control and she is raped, directly affects the black woman's self-image. This distorted belief that sexually empowered women are "asking for it" goes back to the time of white plantation owners raping their slaves. Behind Foxy's desirability is a caution against rebellious slaves.

Foxy brown is the perfect example of a 'blaxploitation' film. "As the term 'blaxploitation' implies," writes Henry M. Benshoff, "these films exploited African American audiences in that they took money out of African American communities to fill white Hollywood's bank accounts" (America on Film, 86). Here Foxy's sex appeal is

displayed and sold like a slave on an auction block. According to Jesse Algeron Rhines, sex, violence, and dope are the hallmarks of the blaxploitation film (Black Film/White Money, 45). One might argue that it is through this violence that films like *Foxy Brown* can also be seen as revenge narratives, as Inyang shows us when foxy sets fire to the men who raped her. Rhines would disagree, arguing that “despite the black hipsters and ‘foxy’ women on screen, the blaxploitation period was not an example of African American filmmaking” because “much more often than not, whites were behind the camera reproducing their own point of view” (Black Film/White money, 45).

Beah: a Black Woman Speaks, however, is an example of African American filmmaking. The film chronicles the struggle of one African American actress that could easily represent all black actresses bound by Hollywood stereotypes of the blackness. Through juxtaposing the incredible talent and powerful words of Beah herself and the demeaning roles that she had to play in Hollywood films, Hamilton exposes the boundaries put on black women pertaining to the types of roles they are able to take despite their ability. “She’s been everybody’s mother,” Hamilton narrates, referring to her role as Mammy on the screen, while in the theatre where she could perform in front of a black audience she was a versatile and empowered actress who radiated with strength, both as a black person and as a woman.

This film goes beyond what it means to be a black woman in Hollywood, but what it means to be a woman in general. In one of the scenes from her play, Beah also speaks of white womanhood as enslaved, that it is only a matter of degree: “he purchased you, he raped me.” Yet, despite this powerful performance, and others such as starring in James Baldwin’s *Amen Corner* in 1964, Hollywood “still only offered her roles as maids

and old women.” Beah says at one point in the film that the “actor has the opportunity to catch the conscience of the audience- make them remember,” but what will people remember when they see the substandard roles that she played in Hollywood films?

Yet, Hamilton redeems Hollywood’s injustice through this film. Many times Beah will look directly into the camera, seizing the opportunity to be seen through the eyes of a fellow black woman. The last thing Beah says to the camera is: “the world that you want to live in needs you to create it, needs your input, needs to know what you have t say- the last word has not been spoken.” Indeed it hasn’t when black filmmakers such as these are taking distorted images of themselves and turning them around on the industry that created them in the first place. By reflecting their self-image as strong black women onto the screen they are taking back control of their public and self-image.