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Black Action Heroines: From Coffy to Rebel

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The reoccurring images of Black women in film and television as angry and seductresses led me to discover that Hollywood purposely portray inaccurate images of Black people, specifically Black women. I also discovered that Hollywood studios would rather recreate past characters instead of creating new and innovative character developments and storylines for roles played by Black women. Since the inception of film, media have been reinforcing stereotypes of what society believes Black women to be. For instance, Black performers were presented as one-dimensional, displaying "the African American community with little complexity" (Sims, 2006, pg. 10), resulting in Blacks being misrepresented and underrepresented in Hollywood.

Consequently, Donald Bogle (2016) discusses the first Black images that appeared in films: tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck (p. 1). The tragic mulatto and the mammy are the first two onscreen images of Black women. As filmmaking continued Black women's roles eventually expanded, but the stereotypes remained and evolved. In 1970 the Blaxploitation movement emerged and challenged mainstream ideals about Black people and Black culture. As Campbell, Giannino, China, and Harris (2008) explain, "No longer were African American female actors relegated to the pervasive roles of the mammy, tragic mulatto and picaninny" (p. 21). These Black actresses were now in roles as action heroines. The Blaxploitation movement gradually ended in 1975, making the Black action heroines a distant memory. Since then, Hollywood has made attempts to revive the Black action heroine in film and television.

One attempt will come four decades later in form of a television series on the BET network, *Rebel* (2017), staring Danielle Mone Truitt as the title character as a private

investigator. While past Black action heroines show Black women as “superwomen,” Rebel delves into the challenges Black women struggle for inner peace and mental health. This research focuses on Rebel, a neo-Black action heroine representative of Hollywood’s attempt to tap into Blaxploitation lore. The paper begins with an examination of the historic representations of Black women in film and television, then leads into a brief discussion on the rise of the Blaxploitation movement and the first Black action heroine. The piece concludes with textual analyses of Blaxploitation films *Coffy* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and finally, BET’s television series *Rebel* (2017) as the title character takes after her predecessors as the modern Blaxploitation action heroine.

HEADING 2

THE BEGINNING

For starters, Hollywood did not provide consistent opportunities for Black women. Those who were employed were often assigned to roles that inaccurately presented Black womanhood "because of the unwillingness of studios to see them in other roles beyond mammy and the tragic mulatto" (Sims, 2006, p, 33). Therefore, Black women were typecast as mammies, tragic mulattos, and Sapphires, roles that reinforced commonly-held, racist stereotypes that have survived since slavery. This section will examine those three historic representations of Black women in film and television.

The Mammy/Aunt Jemima

In order to critically examine Black women as action heroines it is vital to discuss the representation of Black women pre-cinema. The mammy caricature was the main role Black women were relegated to during slavery. Angelo Robinson (2011) deconstructs the neo-slave narratives pertaining to Black women's roles as the mammy. He points out that the perceptions that led to the creation of the mammy were made by the dominant white culture in the 1830s. The name was given to Black women during slavery who served as surrogate mothers for white families. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) writes, "Mammy had no personal needs or desires. [She] was not a protector or defender of black children or communities. She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children" (p. 72). Enslaved Black women cared for White children as if they were their own and were maids and cooks for the White families while neglecting the needs of their biological children.

Importantly, the mammy image gained popularity after the Civil War and into the 1900s while appearing in minstrel shows. Christopher Sewell (2013) notes "…in the post-Civil War

period…the minstrel show became a place where stereotypes would manifest themselves in America's most popular form of entertainment" (p. 312). The show was centered on white entertainers who put on blackface makeup to mock slaves. The performances consisted of comic skits, dancing and musical numbers all performed in Black plantation dialect. Because the minstrel shows made a mockery of the Black experience by attacking "…the Black body and mindset, minstrelsy placed African Americans in a place that maintained their inferiority" (Sewell, 2013, p. 312). In minstrel shows, the mammy was depicted as a dark-skinned, overweight domestic with a hearty laugh. She was lovable to both Blacks and Whites, and in scenarios about the plantation family, mammy was portrayed as being faithfully devoted to her White family. Because of mammy's appearance and position in society, this caricature was not viewed as a threat to White women.

In 1914, the mammy caricature transitioned to film in a "blackface version of *Lysistrata*" (Bogle, 2016, p. 6) titled *Coon Town Suffragettes*. This is the first filmic portrayal of Black women as mammies. The *Suffragettes* displays a stereotypical representation that reinforces the idea of Black women as housemaids, in addition to revealing her independence and headstrong attitude. Bogle (2016) notes that this image of Black women was the starting point for similar mammy caricatures depicted onscreen in the 1930s (p. 7).

Perhaps the most popular performer to play the mammy caricature in film is Hattie McDaniel. In *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Bogle writes "[McDaniel] Mammy…feels confident enough to express anger toward her masters. She berates and hounds anyone who goes against her conception of right and wrong... Not once does she bite her tongue" (2016, p. 76). McDaniel's courage to personalize her character adding humor, creativity, and fierceness made

her “the first negro to win an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress” (Bogle, 2016, p. 78). Still, it is important to note that it was for playing a stereotyped version of Black womanhood.

Importantly, the Aunt Jemima is an extension of the mammy. Bogle (2016) describes her as “sweet, jolly, and good-tempered—a bit more polite than the mammy” (p. 7) and often referred to as a ‘”handkerchief head”’ (Bogle, 2016, p. 7). Nancy Green was the first Black woman to bring the archetype to life as the spokesperson for Aunt Jemima pancakes. She made her first public appearance as Aunt Jemima in 1893 “at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago” (Thompson, 2015, p. 206). In appearances as Aunt Jemima, Green sang songs, cooked pancakes and told stories of the South. An advertisement in the *Toronto Daily Star* where the caricature quipped, “I’se in town Honey!,” presented Aunt Jemima as an “’old Negro cook’ who…had been famous throughout the South because of her culinary secrets” (Thompson, 2015, p. 206). In the ad she is “heavy set, wears a checkered bandana, and is smiling as she serves four White Southerners a plate of pancakes (p. 206).

Louise Beavers was a popular actress during the 1930s who played the Aunt Jemima caricature. Bogle (2016) explains that she “had been carefully groomed by herself and the studios to fit into the mammy-aunt jemima category” (p. 54). She was “a big-boned, robust woman with skin…as smooth as chocolate velvet, and eyes bright, large, and wondrously naïve” (Bogle, 2016, p. 54). She played loyal servants in many of her motion pictures (Bogle, 2016, p. 54) like *Imitation of Life* (1934), which tells the story of Aunt Delilah (Beavers), and Miss Bea (Claudette Colbert), two poor widows raising their daughters while trying to make ends meet. Aunt Delilah raises her daughter, as well as Miss Bea’s daughter and takes care of the house while Miss Bea works. When the two encounter hard times, Aunt Delilah uses her secret pancake recipe to serve to the community (Bogle, 2016, p. 49). One day Miss Bea was given an idea on

how to double the profits by "boxing" the pancake mixture and selling it. She offers Aunt Delilah a 20% interest in which Aunt Delilah would be able to purchase her "own car and own house." Aunt Delilah declines the offer with hopes of keeping her lifestyle as it is and remaining the cook.

Both Thompson and Bogle discuss the sociocultural effect of the Aunt Jemima image. Thompson (2015) explains, much like the mammy, "Aunt Jemima…appealed to the American public's desire to imagine a harmonious relationship between Black women and White families" (p. 214). Similarly, Bogle (2016) points out that based on the relationship between Aunt Delilah and Miss Bea "…audiences were assured that differences between white and black, like difference between the rich and poor, could easily be done away with if everybody worked together" (p. 49). These two authors indicate that the mammy and Aunt Jemima caricatures were the bridge to connect Black families and White families.

The creation of Aunt Jemima reconfigured the mammy caricature; whereas, mammy stayed in the south, Aunt Jemima traveled and brought southern hospitality into homes across the world. Because these representations were not seen as a threat, Northerners passed a similar judgement on southern Black women and felt secure in their business endeavors as the newly freed Black slaves were relocating to the north. Though Aunt Jemima provided Northerners with a sense of comfort, the caricature had dire consequences for Black women. In essence, Aunt Jemima constructed them as joyful domestic laborers, and played the role in making jobs as cooks, chambermaids, and laundresses the most common positions available to them (Thompson, 2015, p. 215).

The Tragic Mulatto/The Exotic Other

The tragic mulatto was the second main role Black women were subjected to playing. According to Bogle (2016), the tragic mulatto's first appearance onscreen was in *The Debt* (1912), a short film which involves, “A white man’s wife and his black mistress [who both] bear him children at the same time…the white son and the mulatto daughter falls in love and decide to marry…[however] their lives [become] ruined not only because they are brother and sister but…because the girl has a drop of black blood” (p. 6). The tragic mulatto’s one drop of black blood made her a Black woman, despite her dominant European features.

Fredi Washington was biracial and “portrayed a black girl passing for white” (Bogle, 2016, p. 52) in films throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Her film representations ranged from playing a provocative role as a “light skinned Harlem slut” in *The Emperor Jones* (1933) to eventually the role that would “emerge [her] as the archetypal tragic mulatto” Peola in *Imitation of Life* (1934). Bogle describes Washington’s role as Peola as the most “complex character” in the film. In other words, Peola ashamed of her Blackness, began to pass for White and only identifies with her European background. Bogle (2016) goes on to say, “The explanation for Peola’s rebellion is that she wants to be white, not that she wants white opportunities” (p. 51). However, Peola’s life takes a drastic turn when her mother is on her deathbed and Peola begs for forgiveness and later starts to identify as Black.

The Exotic Other emerged from the tragic mulatto. According to Bogle (2016), Nina Mae McKinney is the first recognized Exotic Other, however Bogle uses the term ‘first black whore” (p. 25). McKinney played a character named Chick in an all-black musical *Hallelujah* (1929). In this role, she moved seductively in her musical performances. Sims (2006) writes, “Audiences were transfixed by [her] seductive and sassy moves…” and that “[she] served as a model” (p. 37) for the actresses after her. Unknowingly, she set the tone for the Exotic Other.

By the 1950s, sensual exotic characterizations soon gave way to overtly sexualized representations of Black womanhood. Dorothy Dandridge's role in *Tarzan's Peril* (1951) as an African princess who was held hostage by a tribal leader shifted her Hollywood's image. Bogle (2016) notes, "As [Dandridge] lay with legs sprawled apart, heaving and turning to break loose, it was apparent that never before had the black woman been so erotically and obviously used as a sex object" (p. 151). This marked the turning point for Dandridge as she would later change her style and behavior onscreen. In her role as the title character in *Carmen Jones* (1954), Sims (2006) writes that she has "animalistic quality[ies]," and that not only does she possess the ability to have men kill for her, "but she did not mind engaging in her own fights with other women" (p. 39). Bogle (2016) describes her behavior as "…master[ing] wildly uninhibited body movements…she tossed her hair about her head, made up her eyes darkly, dressed herself in a sheer low-cut blouse and a long, tight skirt, and then audaciously strutted" (p. 152).

Sapphire/Angry Black Woman

The misrepresentation of African Americans also continued in television. In the documentary *Amos 'n' Andy: Anatomy of Controversy* (1983), comedian George Kirby explores the history of the *Amos 'n' Andy Show* (1951), which was the first all-black-cast show on American television. *Amos 'n' Andy* was based on a radio comedy series that was created, written and voiced by two White actors, Freeman Gosden (voice of Amos and Kingfish) and Charles Correll (voice of Andy), who bought their characters to life using stereotypical Black dialect and behavior. The radio show's popularity led Gosden and Correll to sign a contract to bring the show to television. This resulted in a four-year search for the right actors to bring the radio characters to life. In 1950, Alvin Childress (Amos), Spencer Williams Jr. (Andy), Tim Moore (Kingfish), and Ernestine Wade (Sapphire) were all cast as the series' primary characters.

The *Amos 'n' Andy* sitcom aired from 1951-1953 and mainly featured storylines focusing on Kingfish's get-rich-quick schemes. Though Black actors were given an opportunity to display their talents, the show received a lot of criticisms because of its portrayals of Black people. Philip Kretsedemas (2010) writes that the Black men featured on the show engaged in coon-like behavior (p. 151). Wade's character Sapphire was also criticized because of her aggressiveness and for always emasculating her husband. For instance, the first episode of season one presented the manner in which Sapphire's and Kingfish's relationship would unfold over the course of the show. After Kingfish walks into the house, a voice yells out "Is that you George?" "Yes Sapphire, it is me" George responds. Moments later Sapphire enters the scene wearing a robe and hair rollers. George looks at her and says jokingly, "Honey I thought I told you not to come out of that rig until I got something in my stomach?" Sapphire snaps back "You just keep yo' big mouth shut!" Both characters are always at odds and it shows whenever the two speak to each other. Sapphire is quick-witted and matches George's demeanor. Her fiery personality is displayed throughout the entirety of the series. However, Sapphire is yet another construction of Black womanhood as it continued to reinforce stereotypes.

Significantly, the mammy, Aunt Jemima, tragic mulatto, and Sapphire are images that "oppressors have continually worked to justify the subordinated social status of blacks as well as outline and enforce their definition of womanhood" (Campbell et al, 2008, p. 21). The transitioning from Whites performing Black identity in minstrel shows to Blacks playing themselves onscreen may seem like progression. However, the characters that they often portrayed still did not always accurately represent the reality of the Black community, or Black women. But, these characters are foundational to better understand how and why Blaxploitation action heroines were important to the reconstruction of Black womanhood.

HEADING 3

BLACK EXPLOITATION

Researchers have closely examined the rise of the Blaxploitation movement and its cultural significance. Three factors contributed to the development of the Blaxploitation Movement: 1) the historic misrepresentation of African Americans in film; 2) the Civil Rights Movement; and 3) the financial crisis in Hollywood (Lawrence, 2008, p. 17). These contributing factors led Hollywood to partake in an exploitation of the Black community.

Lawrence (2008) writes, "As America moved through the 1950s and 1960s, the social, political, and economic climate vastly changed" (p. 17). In the 1960s, the film industry was forced to change how it portrayed Black people. For instance, while the Black community felt detached from their stereotypical images presented in film and television Hollywood "continued with its brotherly-love everything's-going-to-be-dandy escapist movies" (Bogle, 2016, p. 198). Additionally, Sidney Poitier is known as the first Black actor to win a Best Lead Actor Academy Award for his role in *Lilies of the Field* (1963), he was also known as the "integrationist hero" (Bogle, 2016, p. 58). In all of Poitier's films he is "educated and intelligent. He spoke proper English, dressed conservatively…his characters were tame; never did they act impulsively, nor were they threats to the system" (Bogle, 2016, p. 158). For the most part, Poitier was not viewed as a threat to America, but the Black youth was.

Bogle (2016) describes the 1960s as "the most important decade in the 20th century for black Americans" (p. 176). They were fueled by "black rage, black anger, and black power" (Bogle, 2016, p. 175). The Black Nationalist movement reached its peak with Black individuals no longer wanting to assimilate into the white American culture. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded a revolutionary organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, to

challenge police brutality. The Black Panther Party devised a ten-point plan to empower Black communities. The ten-point plan was a list of demands with one of the demands being that all Black males be "exempt from military service" (Sitkoff, 2008, p. 204). Along with that, BPP provided community-based programs, which one program continues on today, "free breakfast for schoolchildren" (Sitkoff, 2008, p. 204). The Black Panther Party advocated for the Black community on social and political concerns. The members wore black leather jackets, black pants, black berets, and donned afros.

As a result, the changing demographics no longer connected with America's traditional films. The older audience, who were the Baby Boomers became "fragmented," and didn't show concern for the usual "romance movies of the 1950s" (Sims, 2006, p. 54); and the younger audience who were "better educated" and challenged the status quo "did not connect with the films …[they] wanted films which focused on their concerns" (Sims, 2006, p. 52). Therefore, when television emerged as a viable form of entertainment, Hollywood box-office sales declined. The film industry, at this time, was struggling to keep its audience and had to find ways to bring in revenue. Movie producers began to shift their focus to a market "that had been overlooked since the inception of cinema" (Sims, 2006, p. 52), the Black youth.

According to Lawrence (2008), Blaxploitation films were created by "both black and white filmmakers between 1970 and 1975 in order to exploit the black film audience" (p. 22), and are defined by the following conventions:

> "Blaxploitation films feature a black hero or heroine who is both socially and politically conscious…[these films] feature a variety of African American supporting characters…[they] are set in predominately black urban spaces…whites are often cast as villains…blaxploitation heroes and heroines use excessive violence…the heroes and

heroines are sexually liberated…the films include contemporary rhythm-and-blues soundtracks…and finally, the blaxploitation films often contain plot themes that address the black experience in America" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 18-20).

These eight characteristics are featured in most Blaxploitation films. In order to appeal to its audience, filmmakers exaggerated the reality of Black people to make the storylines and characters relatable.

Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), a detective-comedy, was "the first film to prominently feature the characteristics that would come to define the movement" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 26). This film was released by United Artists, and is about two black detectives, Gravedigger Jones (Godfrey Cambridge) and Coffin Ed Johnson (Raymond St. Jacques) who are searching to find missing money after a preacher (Calvin Lockhart) "swindled $87,000 from poor people in Harlem" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 29). Because of the film's fresh outlook on Black life, it became a financial success making over $8 million (Lawrence, 2008, p. 40).

Melvin Van Peebles' independent film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), was distributed nine months after *Cotton* by Cinemation. This film chronicles Sweetback as he worked in a brothel as an adolescent to being the star attraction in a sex show years later. One night after being taken into custody by two white policemen as a favor to his manager, he witnesses those same cops beat a "young black militant." Sweetback, filled with rage, begins beating the police officers to death. The rest of the film follows Sweetback as he is on the run to Mexico.

Van Peebles explained that the reason he decided to create the Sweetback character was because he felt ashamed by the Black representations presented in film (*Classified History X*). He wanted a character with whom the Black Community could relate. Thus, he "drew from

white popular culture and from black mythology and folklore" (Reid, 1988, p. 26), creating a character that challenged all of the caricatures that defined Black men in the past. Audiences connected with Van Peebles' as *Sweet* "earned $10 million" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 44). Further, the Black Panther Party made the film required viewing for all of its members. *Cotton* and *Sweetback* led to the emergence of other Blaxploitation films like *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), *Blacula* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (1973) and a host of others. However, Black women did not play major characters in early Blaxploitation films. The rise of the action heroines changed how Black women were perceived onscreen and off screen.

HEADING 4

BLACK ACTION HEROINES

There were three representations of Black women in the media: the "stereotypical image of the emasculating superwoman," the "portrayal of Black women playing a supportive role in the movement" and the treatment of Black women as "sexual objects" (Johnson, 2012, p. 15-16). The arrival of the Black action heroine sought to challenge these images. Lakesia D. Johnson (2012) points out, "Early Blaxploitation films relegated black women to minor roles that supported the male protagonists" (p. 45). For instance, in the film *Shaft* women were viewed as sexual objects. The women do not engage in deep conversations and their characters are not fully developed; instead their presence was used to satisfy the male gaze. As a result, Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis felt ashamed by the misrepresentation of Black women in the media. They began using their platform to combat those negative images.

For instance, Davis was involved in organizations to fight for change for oppressed groups like the Communist Party and the Feminist movement. Her political involvement led to her working towards improving prison conditions which resulted with being active in the Soledad Brothers case. The case involved three Black male inmates charged with murdering a White prison guard. Davis was arrested and held responsible for buying the firearm that was used in the murder. She was being falsely charged with conspiracy to commit murder and kidnapping (Johnson, 2012, p. 17). She was acquitted of the charges, but "because of the notoriety of her case and the resulting free Angela Davis movement, [she] became an iconic figure" (Johnson, 2012, p. 17). Additionally, Davis was known for her beauty and intelligence, which often made her "a sexual object of black male desire" (Johnson, 2012, 35).

Cleaver, on the other hand, served as spokesperson and press secretary for the Black Panther Party and in her role, was photographed wearing all black, an afro, and sunglasses while holding a gun. Johnson (2012) writes that this image of Cleaver "combines feminine allure with the phallic symbol of the gun to directly challenge white police violence and position black women as potential threats to the racist status quo" (p. 36). Pam Grier, for her role in *Coffy* (1973) as the title character, was photographed with a similar attitude as Cleaver in the film's promotional poster. Coffy stands with an afro as she shows off her stomach with a gun positioned upright by her side. The photographs of both women "evoke fear of Black women with guns and use of Afrocentric beauty and femininity" (Johnson, 2012, p. 47). Hence, the rise of prominent leaders like Cleaver and Davis influenced the image of Black womanhood onscreen.

Pam Grier, the first recognized Blaxploitation action heroine, started her film career while in college. At the time she was in pre-med but had a passion for film. Upon graduating in 1967, there were only four film schools available to her, one of which she had to attend UCLA for it. She didn't get accepted into the film program but while there she joined a film student group and loved it. Roger Corman, who owned New World Pictures, offered her a role in a movie, but she declined due to school responsibilities. It wasn't until she experienced a third sexual assault that she changed her mind and accepted the role. Though, she wasn't confident with her acting skills, her role in a prison drama, *The Big Doll House* (1971), was the beginning of her acting career.

According to Eithne Quinn (2012), "When AIP approached [Jack] Hill to make *Coffy* in early 1973, Grier was already featuring in minor roles in several black action films" (p. 270) like *Cool Breeze* (1972) and *Hit Man* (1972). Hill wrote the role with Grier in mind, and both Hill

and Grier collaborated on the direction of *Coffy*. And in doing so "[Grier] projected shades of her African American women relatives' tough attitudes and no-nonsense business personas" (Sims, 2006, p. 15) into her roles. She represented the everyday woman.

Coffy (1973) stars Grier as the title character, who leads a double life. She helps to save lives while working as a nurse, but she also takes them while working as a vigilante as she "pursues and murders the drug dealer who is responsible for her younger sister's addiction to drugs." In the midst of finding a balance between nurse and prostitute, she "uses her brains, beauty, and connections to find the low-level drug dealer" (Johnson, 2012, p. 47). In the first scene, Coffy wears a revealing dress to lure in a pusher who may have information on drugs being sold in the community. Once the pusher gets in the car, she entices him by rubbing on his shoulder and saying, "You know just the words to turn me on, and I know what you want too, and you're gonna get it." She then asks him if he is the big-time dealer in the community, and he quickly affirms that he is. The scene cuts to them in the dealer's apartment as the half-naked Coffy attempts to undress him. She asks him to turn off the light and at that moment pulls out a shotgun, tells him that this is the end of his dope dealing days and fires.

Unbeknownst to Coffy, there is an entire drug cartel that would have to be dismantled in order to end drugs being pushed in her community. To achieve this, she uses her intelligence and her body as a way to get inside information. Lawrence (2008) writes that as Coffy continues her search for retaliation, she escapes danger twice by using seduction (p. 82). For instance, after her cover as a prostitute has been blown, she's ordered by Vitroni, the Mafia boss, to be killed by his gang. She lures one of the hitmen into having sex with her after he drugs her and then kills him with sharp metal objects that is hidden in her afro. Coffy's style ranges from patterned blouses and bell bottoms to revealing dresses. She also switches back and forth from an afro to straight

hair on occasions. Though her seductive physical appearances were the main attraction, her style and attitude resembled the Black women activists.

Tamara Dobson, on the other hand, was a fashion model before she began her acting career. According to Dunn (2008), Dobson "appeared in a few commercials and ads in Vogue" (p. 91) prior to winning the role of Cleopatra Jones at a national casting search. *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) was created by Max Julien and distributed by Warner Bros. This film tells the story of the title character, a CIA agent, attempting to protect the B & S House (a community home for recovering drug addicts) from a drug-queen. Jones shows off her diverse fashion with her colorful and stylish garments and martial art skills throughout the film. For instance, "when she is ambushed by several of Mommy's thugs in the airport as she returns from Turkey, Jones defeats them using her martial arts training" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 86) as her fur drapes around her neck and suit and headwrap remain intact. Additionally, while Jones works to remove drugs from the black community and reveal the misuse and abuse by those in power in the Los Angeles Police Department, she also must deal with the lack of trust of the Black community because of her role within law enforcement as well as the racial disparities within it (Lawrence, 2008, p. 84-85). Lawrence (2008)` points out that Dobson's character appears during the emergence of the Women's Liberation movement, which combats the notion of women being second-class citizens (p. 85). With Jones being graceful, yet assertive and combative she exemplifies that she can both appeal to men and defeat them at the same time.

Grier and Dobson's characters were vital to Black women on and off screen. Because of their characters success and storylines, other Blaxploitation action heroines emerged, such as Teresa Graves in the television series *Get Christie Love* (1974) as the title character and Jeannie Bell as Diana in *T.N.T. Jackson* (1974). Sims (2006) writes, "Grier, Dobson, Teresa Graves and

Jeannie Bell's heroines redefined beauty, sexuality and womanhood for a generation of movie goers and countless black actresses who followed their lead" (p. 129). These action heroines' influence can be seen in Rebel.

HEADING 5

REBEL

Rebel (2017) premiered on March 28, 2017 on the BET network. Set in Oakland, CA, it tells the story of Rebel, an ex-cop who becomes a private investigator after her brother is killed. There are several characteristics that make it apparent that Singleton is drawing from Blaxploitation.

Throughout Singleton's career, the late writer, producer, and director focused on creating films centering on the black experience. He was raised in South Central Los Angeles where he was exposed to crime, violence and the disparities facing the Black community. Singleton used his own experiences as well as experiences from others as inspirations for his storytelling. His directorial debut was the critically acclaimed film, *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), which follows three young boys as they journey through a passage of manhood in South Central Los Angeles. Singleton went on to direct *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), *Rosewood* (1997), and the fourth installment of *Shaft* (2000).

Shaft (2000) is a reimagining of the Blaxploitation classic, *Shaft* (1971). Singleton was introduced to Blaxploitation films when he was three after seeing a black detective onscreen. In an interview with Danny Leigh, a broadcaster and writer, Singleton, explained that he knew one day he would remake *Shaft*. He states, "I wanted to grow up and be that guy. I wanted to dress cool and get all of the ladies. It was always like one day I would make a Shaft movie" (The Guardian, 2000). Instead of remaking the film, he directed the sequel starring Samuel L. Jackson as John Shaft and as the nephew of the earlier films' Shaft.

Nevertheless, stereotypes continue to remain prevalent as the media portray distorted Black images. Singleton expressed how popular culture fail to portray Black actors/actresses in heroic roles:

> "I grew up on movies in the 70s… with Cleopatra Jones and all of the films of Pam Grier… and I realized that we don't have any black empowered heroes on any medium in television or on film. All of the sisters are really marginalized. We need to have something on television that our folks can watch and be like Oh my God! Thank God! There's someone that looks like me, that talks like me, that acts like me" (SAG AFTRA Foundation interview).

With his focus on sharing Black stories, Singleton used his platform to create the BET television series, *Rebel*. During an interview with *The Breakfast Club* (2017- present), he discussed the show explaining, "I really wanted to do something where I see a black woman putting that foot in the ass of the system." He describes Rebel as the female Shaft. Thus, by drawing from the past for inspiration, he created Rebel, imbuing the character with the skills and passion of Blaxploitation heroines.

Danielle Mone Truitt plays Rebel. Truitt explains that she collaborated with the writers about her character to make her relatable (SAG-AFTRA Foundation). She also reveals that she is a California native, and that being from Sacramento the role aligned with her personal beliefs. She notes:

> "…the dynamic of Black men and women dying at the hands of police is something I'm very passionate about…and in my own way trying to bring the community together to talk about what is happening in the world so that it's not just another hashtag…and then all of a sudden I'm given an audition notice to play a female cop from

> Oakland…that's brown skin with natural hair and her brother gets murdered by the cop and I'm like wait a minute, that's me!" (SAG-AFTRA Foundation).

Truitt, along with other stars of the show such as hip-hop artist and actor Clifford "Method Man" Smith and Giancarlo Esposito, contribute to the ongoing conversation by bringing awareness to police corruption.

Rebel's two-hour pilot opens with soulful music composed by R&B and neo-soul artist Jill Scott. The music makes it clear that Singleton is continuing the legacy of Blaxploitation. Most of the themes such as whites as villains, heroines as sexually liberated, excessive violence, and racial injustices are displayed in the pilot, and throughout the series the audience delves deeper into Rebel's life as the modern Black action heroine.

In the pilot, the audience is introduced to the complex storyline of the action heroine. The audience witnesses multiple factors that contribute to her hardships such as the loss of her mother and brother, her father's drinking problem, facing the reality of her colleagues in law enforcement and her emotional and sexual involvement with her husband from whom she is "separated." However, it is the murder of her unarmed brother, Malik, at the hands of the police that leads to her vengeful quest.

The action heroines' association with law enforcement is a reoccurring theme. Coffy's male friend is a cop but gets badly beaten when he decides not to do business with a gangster who is bringing drugs into the community. Cleopatra Jones is a special agent and Rebel is a cop turned private investigator. Rebel and Mack (Brandon Quinn), Rebel's former cop partner, show the dichotomy between race and gender lines in the police force. Both are on opposite ends of the spectrum: Rebel is a Black woman and Mack is a White man, and as such, they have different realities. Still, they both work as partners to protect and serve the community. However, in the

pilot Rebel observes what any White male officer may see when put in a position to shoot a Black male.

This scene is shot from four perspectives: the audience's perspective as they see a white male cop with his gun pointing at an unarmed black male and his knee-jerk reaction is to shoot him. The second perspective is that of Rebel: when she tells Mack to drop his gun and assures him that the situation can be resolved because it is her brother. When she realizes he is not complying, she shoots him in the leg to disarm him. Mack's perspective shows him struggling to maintain control. Rebel is yelling at him to put his gun down and is looking at the black man in front of him. He shoots but misses. Finally, the events unfold from Malik's perspective. As more police officers show up to the scene and see an officer down, Malik knows this is not going to end well for him. He is scared, and his first reaction is to run. He whispers "I love you sis" before being shot multiple times. Later in the episode, Rebel is told she would have to make a statement and was interrogated by her White counterparts. The conversation was based on her shooting her partner, instead of her brother.

Her brother's death motivates her to make a decision, which results with her being viewed as an enemy. To her, being enlisted in the army meant loyalty, respect, to be of service, and to have integrity. These are the same core values that are placed on law enforcement, but she is conflicted between being loyal to the badge or seeking the truth about the police officers who murdered her brother. It was during this time when she decided to quit the police force and become a private investigator. At the end of the episode, Rebel is shown channeling the Blaxploitation action heroines. She steps onto the scene with an afro, long red trench coat and a shotgun.

Throughout the first season, Rebel wears many costumes. Because she is the modern Black action heroine she illustrates the depth of Black beauty. She wears her hair in natural hairstyles ranging from an afro with a scarf tied around it to two French braids. Her clothes are simple: plain tank top with slacks, sometimes a cardigan or a black leather jacket to add flair to her attire. Though some Black women struggle with getting away from the European beauty ideology, others have embraced their coils and body types. Just like Coffy and Cleopara Jones mimicked the style of the 1970s, Rebel reflects the diversity of modern Black women.

Rebel's costumes also have specific meaning. In the pilot episode, in one scene she wears a green jumpsuit with brown army combat boots. This costume is seemingly her acknowledging the time she was in the military, a part of her life that haunts her. She has flashbacks of being in the midst of enemy gunfire, of exploding bombs and of people dying in combat. These memories are juxtaposed with images of her brother being shot and dying in front of her.

Rebel also follows Blaxploitation conventions by examining the titled character's sexuality. Lawrence (2008) writes that the Black action heroes and heroines "are desired by both black and white characters… [and that they exhibit] control of their sexuality, and…often dictate the circumstances of their erotic encounters" (p. 20). In episode 7, "Breaking Point," Rebel assumes control of a sexual encounter. She and TJ are sitting on the stairs in her apartment. TJ inquiries about her well-being, and Rebel responds by telling him not to worry. He then brings up another topic, and Rebel says "Babe, don't kill my vibe" and kisses him. This shows Rebel is in control because she redirects the conversation. Later in the episode, TJ observes the closeness of Mack and Rebel's relationship. He asks her if they ever had sex and Rebel indirectly tells him yes by stating "You were smashing Tarsha and I'm sure a couple of other bimbos too." Rebel justifies her sexual behavior based on her husband's past affairs. She inhibits control over her

sexual desires by enticing someone who sees her as desirable, which is Mack. Coffy and Cleopatra Jones had to deal with being desirable from their Black and White male counterparts as well. For instance, when Coffy was undercover, there was a brawl between her and the other prostitutes, which caught the attention of Vitroni. He was aroused by her exotic features and fearless personality and scheduled a late night meet up. And Capt. Crawford always wanted to remain in Cleopatra Jones' good graces. When the B & S House was raided, Jones and Crawford had a meeting where he assures her that he has everything under control. At the end of the film, it was a kiss on the lips given by Jones that reassured the audience on Crawford's position in the fight against racism and equality.

Much like Coffy and Cleopatra Jones, Rebel is a caregiver. These action heroines' concern for their siblings and community, according to Sims (2006), "parallels many black women's positions…as nurturers, caretakers, and, at times, disciplinarians" (p. 84); an example of this is displayed through Rebel's and Malik's relationship. After the loss of their mother they maintained a close bond. Their dad is portrayed as overprotective and has high expectations for his son; whereas, Rebel is the nurturer and has the emotional connection with him. One night, Malik is confessing to Rebel about quitting school as it's not helping him grow as a musical artist. Rebel sits on the side of him and puts her arm around his neck and tells him, "I ain't gone lecture you…but I will hit you with this the way mama would: if you blow that scholarship after everything I did for you to get into that music school, you gone be hella sorry." This symbolizes the closeness of their relationship. This can also be looked as Rebel taking the place of their mom and fulfilling the motherly duties as her mom would but still trying to maintain the role as the big sister.

Furthermore, Malcom X's "by any means necessary" expression immediately took its form in the Black community in the fight against White supremacy. In his speech, Malcolm X chants the words, "We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary" ("By Any Means Necessary," 2016). This chant sent the message to Black Americans to do whatever is necessary to defend and protect Black communities. Lawrence (2008) notes that the action heroes and heroines in Blaxploitation films embody the phrase by using "any means necessary to overcome the oppressive establishment" (p. 19). Both Coffy and Cleopatra Jones use their fighting skills, community connections and quick thinking to take down every antagonist who sets out to destroy and profit off the Black community. Rebel also illustrates how she uses the "any means necessary" approach. The pilot begins with Rebel acting out this expression. She walks into a bar and approaches a group of six White men and places her hands on her hips. She calls out to one of them and he responds aggressively asking "What do you want now?" His friend harasses Rebel by calling her "sexy." She pulls out a police baton, and hits the aggressive man twice as he falls to the floor. She then drags him across the bar with his arm shoved behind him. The audience then learns that the man had raped and tortured a woman. Rebel calls him an animal and says, "I'm going to make sure I put your trifling ass exactly where you belong." Rebel's fearless attitude, aggression and character assassination helped her defeat the aggressive man. This scene displays the type of behavior and attitude for Blacks to have that was described by Malcolm X. It symbolizes Blacks regaining their power and overthrowing the oppressive system. Rebel, just like Coffy and Cleopatra Jones, surrounded by drugs and racial tension confront the oppressive system.

Blaxploitation played a vital role in reconstructing the Black identity by changing the perceptions on Blackness and womanhood. Black women struggled with both race and gender expectations. Johnson (2012) writes, along with the images of the revolutionary activists, the films "affirmed the perception that black women were invulnerable, stronger than white women, and the physical equal of any man of their race... they were superwomen" (p. 46). The Superwoman mentality is a survival mechanism that has been passed down a line of Black women for generations. Black women project themselves as strong, self-sacrificing and free of emotion to cope with stressors in daily life. Coffy and Cleopatra Jones illustrate this idea. Coffy risks her life to seek out the dealer who got her little sister addicted to drugs. Although Coffy is not well-versed in any fighting style, her survival skills are tested on a daily. Cleopatra Jones, on the other hand, "is depicted as a strong woman who is more adept at hand-to-hand combat [and] gunplay" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 86). These Black action heroines express Black female power but dealing with internal struggles are not addressed.

At the end of the Pilot episode, Rebel shows how she copes with daily stressors by performing at a local community event as a spoken word artist. She reveals the internal struggles she faced and how she is on a path of self-discovery through her poem titled, Allegiance. Her vulnerability is refreshing and restorative to the Black community and women present. At the end of the poem she reads, "I pledge allegiance to Rebel" following by a raised fist. This poem represents a personal promise to put herself first and to follow her own rules. During a time when the Black community is challenging the negative stigma surrounding mental health, Rebel’s courage to discuss her internal battles encourages the Black community to normalize conversations about mental health challenges.

HEADING 6

CONCLUSION

Since the Blaxploitation movement ended, there have been roles available to Black women as leads in action films, such as Queen Latifa, Jada Pinkett Smith, Vivica A. Fox and Kimberly Elise in *Set It Off* (1996), Beyonce in *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002) and Zoe Saldana in *Columbiana* (2011). Characters that are more current like Rebel, Storm played by Halle Berry in the *X-Men* series, Lupita Nyong'o as Nakia and Danai Gurira as Okoye in *Black Panther* (2018), as well as Taraji P. Henson as Mary in *Proud Mary* (2018) give Black women hope for better representations. Yet, even with this new fond hope, Hollywood still struggles with consistently developing a full range of complex characterizations for Black women.

The representation of Black women in film and television is an ongoing conversation in Hollywood, academia, and across media platforms. The discussions include whether the images on screen are doing more harm than good to audiences, specifically young Black girls. Stephane Dunn shares a positive experience with seeing someone who looked like her in a role that didn't rely on the misconceptions of Black women. Dunn explains that she was seven years old when she saw *Get Christie Love!* (1974), a TV series about the title character who works as an undercover cop. She writes that even though she was unaware of the historical racial disparities of beauty that seeing someone in this role creates a desire to see more positive images of Black people.

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011), Melissa Harris-Perry writes, "African American women are standing in a room skewed by stereotypes that deny their humanity and distort them into ugly caricatures of their true selves" (p. 183). Seeing passionate Black women in the media are important because research shows that Black

girls internalize these images and develop their understanding of Black womanhood and femininity; thereby Rebel being placed in the present context shows that Black women and others are still working to change the representation of Black women in film and television.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Rebel appeared during a time when, once again, Black women are standing against the injustices in the Black community. Just as Angela Davis and Katherine Cleaver inspired the 1970's action heroines, Coffy and Cleopatra Jones; in 2013, three women (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter after an unjust shooting involving a teen boy, Trayvon Martin. This hashtag then became a social movement that Cullors described as "a call to action" that addresses police brutality and racism in the black community.

The Blaxploitation movement used Black people's struggles and revolution to tell its stories using the action heroes/heroines. Rebel does the same with mirroring the cultural issues that are continuing to show up in public discourse today.

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