THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BLACK FEMALE REVOLUTIONARY AND NEW NARRATIVES OF JUSTICE

DISSERTATION

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By

Lakesia D. Johnson, A.B., M.A., J.D.

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Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Judith Mayne, Adviser
Professor Valerie Lee
Assistant Professor Terry Moore

Approved by

Graduate Program in Women's Studies
ABSTRACT

My project investigates the ways that the representation of Black female revolutionary activists and cinematic representations of revolutionary women emerged during the 1970s and produced images and narratives of justice that have informed the artistic work of Black women over the past 30 years. While these iconographic images are primarily products of the 1970s, they contain key elements that provide the foundation for a rearticulation of new revolutionary narratives of justice by contemporary Black female artists.

My analysis begins with Black revolutionary icons, Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver, and the various historical discourses that informed the circulation, consumption and meaning of their images. Photographic images of these prominent Black female activists circulated in the sixties and seventies and produced narratives about the primacy of Black male experience as representative of the Black liberation struggle. They also produced a narrative of Black womanhood that emphasized their subordination, while simultaneously creating an image of Black women as dangerous and threatening to the status quo. This mythological, Amazonian image of Black womanhood would soon
develop into filmic images and be popularized in the genre of blaxploitation films, featuring actresses like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson. These films reflected anxieties about gender, race and sexuality that were visually articulated on and through the bodies of these Black women and would later serve to inspire generations of Black female performers to create their own narratives of justice through the visual media.

While visual images of iconic figures like Angela Davis and Pam Grier are primarily analyzed in relationship to a particular articulation of Black revolutionary consciousness during the 1970s, I focus on how these visual images are linked to a legacy of revolutionary Black feminist rhetoric, representation and critique that continued in the literature of Black women in the eighties. Revolutionary imagery and Black feminist rhetoric embedded in the work of Black female writers and poets, such as Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, provide a space for a more complex and nuanced articulation of Black female revolutionary womanhood. More specifically, their use of the image of the Amazon and the willingness of Lorde and Walker to explore a Black female experience that included both strength and vulnerability would become crucial to in the development and visual articulation of revolution that emerged in work
of Black women in the early nineties. The work of Black female artists such as Erykah Badu and Me'shell Ndegéocello are examples of the ways that young Black female musicians have appropriated and rearticulated Black feminist revolutionary rhetoric, iconography and aesthetics from the 1970s to explore what it means to be a Black female revolutionary. Through an analysis of the visual aspects of performances by Badu and Ndegéocello, my research illuminates the multiple ways that images of Black female revolutionaries continue to play a key role in the articulation of Black feminist liberation politics.
For Mama
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VITA


1991.....................................................A.B., Smith College

1995.....................................................M.A., The Ohio State University

1995.....................................................J.D., The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Women's Studies

Studies in:

Visual and Narrative Culture.................................Judith Mayne

Black Women's Studies........................................Valerie Lee

Sexuality Studies................................................Terry Moore
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My dissertation asks how representations of the strong, revolutionary Black woman function in relationship to contemporary social and political movements and provide important interventions to address what was not being addressed in those movements. In keeping with feminist analyses of the complex relationship between images and their social contexts, I examine not only the obvious points of connection between images and sociopolitical movements, but also the ways that visual culture articulates issues that are either repressed or marginalized. Therefore, my analysis combines textual analysis (with a focus on spectatorship), discourse analysis and intertextuality, as ways to understand how images of Black female heroines work within a network of existing discourses about Black womanhood and the fight for racial and gender justice.

My study begins with the seventies and ends with a discussion of visual representations from the nineties. However, my work would be incomplete if I did not briefly explore the important role of Black revolutionary foremothers who were active prior to the 20th century, who would leave lasting images that preceded the work that is the focus of my study. These women include but are
not limited to important activists such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells and Harriet Tubman.

Throughout the 17th, 18th, 19th centuries Black women were feverishly working on behalf of Black people within an American legal and social context which refused to give them full citizenship. Black feminist scholars such as Darlene Hine Clark and Beverly Guy-Sheftall have documented the numerous accomplishments of such women. The visual legacies that Black female activists left behind provide us with important narratives about being Black and female within hostile and oppressive contexts that demanded strategic and aggressive activism to achieve freedom. The visual legacies of these women have not only helped to document their contributions, they have also inspired young Black women to create new visual images that pay homage to their legacies.

Popular representations of Black these revolutionary foremothers are not only associated with their fights to end the enslavement and lynching of Black people. Their public images were crafted to create a narrative about Black women that emphasized their piety and purity in the face of dominant narratives that presented Black women as oversexed animals, who deserved the brutality that they faced in slavery and during reconstruction. Despite the fact that public speaking was seen as inappropriate for "upstanding" women and discouraged by many in the Black community, these women continued not only to publically voice their opposition to racism and sexism, but also visually crafted images of
themselves as a way to provide messages about Black womanhood that were essential to the progress of the race.

Dealing with numerous messages within our society that associated Black women with loose sexual morals and depravity, these women relied on formally staged portraits to project an image of Black womanhood that was compatible with notions of true womanhood such as piety and purity, characteristics that were exclusively attributed to white women. These portraits say we are Black and we are women and we deserve the same respect and honor as white women. These images are crucial in helping us understand how Black women managed to negotiate the numerous hurdles that block justice and serve as inspiration for young women who are trying to establish their roles in the continuing struggle for the survival of the race.

Visual images are a part of the construction and enduring legacies of Black female activists. For example, photographs of famous female abolitionist Sojourner Truth played an important role in her work to uplift the race and to counter existing discourses about the immorality of Black women. The image of Sojourner Truth is part of a legacy of visual imagery of Black women that contributed to discourses about Black female activism for the struggles for gender and racial equality.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins analyzes the life and work of Sojourner Truth as a model for understanding how Black women have framed and pursued the struggle for justice (Collins, Fighting Words 228). Collins ends her discussion
of Black women's search for justice with a sustained analysis of the life and work of Sojourner Truth. Collins identifies speaking truth as a key feature of Black women's empowerment and pursuit of justice. According to Collins, by "proclaiming truth, Sojourner Truth's actions invoke a Black women's testimonial tradition long central to naming and proclaiming the truth" (237). This tradition of testimonial provided an important narrative of justice and included a body of visual narratives through which activists like Truth fought against the subjugation of African Americans.

The historical legacy of Sojourner Truth is constructed by not only her activism and speeches, but also a set of dominant messages about her that focus on her body. Although she captured her audiences with her speeches, in the popular culture she is connected to an imagined Amazonian, masculine woman who had to bare her breasts to prove that she was a woman worthy of the consideration accorded to elite white women. Kimberle Crenshaw argues that in Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman," Truth used her own life to reveal the contradiction between the ideological myths of womanhood and the reality of Black women's experience [and] provided a powerful rebuttal to the claim that women were categorically weaker than men were. Yet Truth's personal challenge to the coherence of the cult of true womanhood was useful only to the extent that white women were willing to reject the racist attempts to contradiction—that because Black women were
something less than real women, their experiences had no bearing on true womanhood (Crenshaw 326).

Crenshaw's reference to Truth's speech and her use of her body to prove the fallacy of assumptions about what it meant to be a woman in the 19th century takes us once again to a discourse that puts the visual centrality of Black women's bodies in the struggle for gender and racial justice.

According to Nell Irving Painter, Truth used photography to fashion herself as "the image of a respectable, middle-class matron but, perhaps, also that of a woman advertising her suitability as a model of civilized comportment for the freedwomen refugees in Washington, D.C." (Painter 483-485). Painter suggests that Truth was not only fashioning herself as part of a process of proving her humanity to Whites, she was also concerned with the consumption of her image by other Blacks. According to Painter, "the transparency that many saw as the identifying characteristic of photography would seem to allow an unmediated view of the subject, and that characteristic may have made photography all the more attractive to Sojourner Truth" (Painter 486).

The use of the formal portrait was an important part of affirming one's status within an imagined middle-class American culture that was conspicuously white. In American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture, Shawn Michelle Smith discusses the ways that photography was used by W.E.B Dubious during the Paris Exposition of 1900 to proclaim the true status of Black people as American citizens. According to Smith, "visual culture s not a mere
reflection of a national community but one of the sites through which narratives of national belonging are imagined …[and] not only represent but also produce the nation" (Smith 158). The following postcard featuring a formal portrait of Sojourner Truth is a perfect example of how Black women fashioned images of themselves to reinforce their status as respectable women who deserved the full protections and benefits of American citizenship. They countered the narrative of Black women as sexually deviant and thus unworthy of protections against rape and other indignities perpetuated on them by white Americans. As a result, visual images supported the insistence by Black women that justice in America was exclusively reserved for white people and exposed the hypocrisy that was used to justify the systematic lynching of Black men in order to protect the virtues of white womanhood.
The caption below this postcard of Truth reads, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance." It clearly shows that Truth understood that the public desire to consume her visual image was an important part of what she had to do to support the campaign to end slavery. It also suggests some discomfort with the public exposure that came with the circulation of this image. However, she
was willing to do this because it is clear that there is a close connection between the representation of Black women and their struggles to achieve justice in the United States.

Visual images matter. Currently we are inundated with images of young Black women exposing themselves in mainstream video that have overtaken our popular understanding of Black womanhood. This is why looking back is such a crucial exercise. Photographic images of Black female revolutionary icons have been recycled and reused to construct a discourse about the position of Black women in the fight to end racial and gender oppression. Art, poetry, music, photography and numerous texts recycle the image of the Black revolutionary woman. While grounded in a particular historical and political moment, these images are being used to articulate dialogue about justice and the role that Black women played in the civil rights movement, as well as the role they should play in fighting oppressive institutions and structures today.

My textual analysis of Black female revolutionary icons Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver as artifacts that are being recycled and reused by contemporary artists illustrates Susan Sontag's approach in On Photography. Sontag emphasized the ways that photographs become artifacts that when recycled and reused produce new and shifting meaning (Sontag 16). This is true of photographic images of Cleaver and Davis that circulated in newspapers, magazines and other popular media outlets during the seventies. Chapter 2 explores how these media images of Black revolutionary womanhood functioned
intertextually along with filmic representations in the 1960s and 1970s to reinforced notions of Black women as sexualized representations of Black revolution. These visual representations reinforced male dominance and racial stereotypes, while simultaneously allowing a space for a reimagining of the image of the Black female revolutionary that has informed the work of Black female artists today. The circulation, consumption and recycling of images of Davis and Cleaver produced important narratives about the appropriate role of Black women in the struggle to end racial inequality, as well as continued to resonate in the artistic work of Black women in the eighties and nineties.

Work on African American film and film stars highlight an analysis of racialized images within Hollywood cinema, while giving little attention to the specific ways that these films could function for women. In Chapter 3, my analysis of cinematic images of Black women in blaxploitation films, featuring the Black female heroine, focuses on how these texts functioned in complex ways for various groups of "critical audiences" (Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* 157). Drawing on Patricia White's method for understanding the role of the character actress in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, I explore the potential ways that Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson not only reinscribed certain roles and stereotypes, but also served as models of empowerment and desire for lesbian spectators. They provided an opportunity for Black female spectators and artists to deconstruct, redefine and rearticulate Black feminist politics using images of Grier as iconographic
artifacts. As part of my analysis of blaxploitation films featuring Pam Grier, I analyze films by Quentin Tarantino and Etang Inyang as examples of how Grier's image continues to transform and take on new meaning for distinct groups of spectators.

My approach emphasizes negotiating both dominant and oppositional readings, paying attention to the role of spectators in the production of textual meaning through processes of identification and reading against dominant narratives promoted by the cinematic apparatus. According to Judith Mayne "...a purely dominant reading would presume no active intervention at all on the part of the decoder, while a purely oppositional reading would assume no identification at all with the structures of interpellation in the text" (Mayne, Cinema and Spectatorship 93). Negotiating both dominant and oppositional readings is important to my study because of the numerous contradictory elements embodied in the image of the Black female revolutionary.

Another central aspect of negotiating the meanings of images of Black revolutionary women is pleasure. "Narrative and visual pleasure need and should not be thought of as the exclusive property of dominant codes, serving solely the purpose of oppression" (De Lauretis 68). I argue that while many of the images of Black female revolutionaries reinscribed existing stereotypes about Black women, they also provided an opportunity for Black female spectators and artists to deconstruct, redefine and rearticulate Black feminist politics using these iconographic artifacts. While images of icons, like Angela Davis and Kathleen
Cleaver, served very specific purposes within the contexts in which they were created, the meanings of these visual images have changed over time as spectators and artists have recycled and circulated these images within different contexts. The circulation, consumption and recycling of these images in the 1970s produced narratives about Black women, revolution and justice that continue to resonate in the artistic work of Black women in the 80s and 90s.

The iconographic images of Black female revolutionary women, while becoming relatively obscure in 1980s visual culture, remained a central and important trope in the work of Black feminist activists, artists and scholars. Chapter 4 focuses on the literary work and images of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde as important bridges between the 1960s and late 20th century appropriations of revolutionary iconography by young Black female artists. Lorde and Walker contributed significantly to the rhetoric and imagery of revolutionary Black womanhood by constructing literary images of Black womanhood that functioned intertextually to intervene in debates about Black women that were central in the eighties. For example, Walker's critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* and the representation of Walker as a radical and angry Black woman who was participating in the castration of Black men, provides an interesting case study. While numerous scholars have discussed the numerous ways that Alice Walker's work contributes to the rich tradition of Black feminist literature, I read her use of the Amazon as a device that
resonated with readers. In addition to studying specific parts of her written text, I also consider the filmic adaptation of her novel as part of the visual iconography of Black female revolutionary women that continues to circulate today. My analysis of specific scenes from Steven Spielberg's popular film *The Color Purple* (1985) illustrates its importance and influence on Black female performers, such as Erykah Badu.

In addition to Alice Walker, I analyze the work of Audre Lorde as an example of how revolutionary rhetoric worked in the 1980s to provide the foundations for the reemergence of visual representations of the Black female revolutionary in the 1990s. Audre Lorde is a particularly interesting person to explore in terms of revolutionary iconography because while relatively few mainstream media outlets were discussing her work in the 1980s, she is a central and iconic figure within the feminist movement. In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, Michelle Wright argues that Audre Lorde's deployment of the trope of the Black mother was key to how her work intervened in the discourses of Black Nationalism that negated Black female subjectivity (Wright 143). In addition to this intervention, Lorde's work contains crucial theoretical and representational work that places the Black lesbian body within discourses about racial and gender justice, which systematically ignore the role of Black gays and lesbians. Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* explores lesbian desire and creates a world where Black lesbians have always existed, within a context where there is an explicit denial of this fact. Like
Walker, she also uses the image of the Amazon in her text, which helps to construct a compelling and influential image of Black lesbian subjectivity. Lorde's work is also an important reference point for my analysis of the artistic performance of Me'shell Ndegéocello in the 1990s.

Chapter Five explores the performances of Black female musicians Erykah Badu and Me'shell Ndegéocello as examples of the ways that Black women have appropriated and rearticulated Black feminist revolutionary rhetoric, iconography and aesthetics from the 1970s and 1980s to produce new images and narratives of justice in which Black feminist rhetoric and politics are central. My analysis of the 1990s focuses on several Black female artists who have appropriated images and rhetoric of Black revolutionary feminism. Erykah Badu uses imagery from the filmic adaptation of The Color Purple as inspiration for the video for her first hit song, "On & On." Similarly, she draws on the work of other Black female writers to inspire her videos. In addition, I analyze Badu's appropriation of Black revolutionary iconography in photographs and posters, as embodying and reengaging a version of Black revolutionary glamour that pays homage to Black female revolutionaries such as Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver.

Like Badu, Me'shell Ndegéocello has contributed to the visual articulation of Black revolutionary iconography through her star persona, as well as through various albums that analyze oppression based on gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Several of her singles integrate speeches by Black feminists, such as
Angela Davis and June Jordan, into songs that position Ndegéocello as "a revolutionary soul singer." In addition, her status as an openly bisexual woman, who embodies and performs an interesting version of what Judith Halberstam refers to as "female masculinility," is an important part of understanding her work. I analyze her work as an extension of the efforts made by lesbian feminist authors like Audre Lorde to represent a complex picture of Black lesbian subjectivity. Through my analysis of Ndegéocello's and Badu's visual performances of Black revolutionary iconography, as well as their utilization of revolutionary rhetoric in their lyrics, I connect them to the visual legacy of Black female representation that is the subject of my project.

My research adds to the existing literature on Black women and representation and provides a critical way to understand the visual and narrative iconography of the Black female revolutionary across a variety of media texts and historical contexts. Through an exploration of the visual and discursive narratives that are produced by the circulation of Black female revolutionary icons and rhetoric, my project emphasizes the ways that images produce a variety of discourses that circulate around and on the Black female revolutionary body. In addition, I provide another way to understand how these discourses and counter-discourses created by contemporary Black feminist artists fit into an existing legacy of Black feminist activism and literature that will have a lasting impact on how we view Black women and define Black womanhood.
CHAPTER 2

PICTURING THE REVOLUTIONARY BLACK WOMAN: PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF KATHLEEN CLEAVER AND ANGELA DAVIS

This chapter explores the discursive narratives that are produced by the circulation of Black female revolutionary icons and rhetoric. My research emphasizes the ways that visual images of revolutionary Black women produce a variety of discourses that contribute to the construction of a Black female subject. I analyze photographic images of Black female revolutionary activists Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis as examples of the ways that visual representations within the media participate in the development of a discourse about Black women and their role in the civil rights movement. There were various characteristics associated with the Black female revolutionary body during this time.

During the 60s and 70s, Black women were constructed as evil femme fatales central to calculated efforts to overthrow the United States government. In the cases of Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis, the photographic representations were similar to the eroticization of Black women in
blaxploitation films featuring actresses like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson (discussed in Chapter 3), that reflected persistent anxieties about female strength and the threat it posed to male dominance. Representations of these important Black female revolutionaries function simultaneously as complex icons appealing to a range of spectators. Susan Sontag has argued that photography is a particularly powerful way to possess a reality that cannot be contained (Sontag 163). She argues:

Photography does not simply reproduce the real, it recycles it—a key procedure of a modern society. In the form of photographic images, things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings, which go beyond the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false, the useful and the useless, good taste and bad. Photography is one of the chief means for producing that quality ascribed to things and situations which erases these distinctions…The photographic recycling makes clichés out of unique objects, distinctive and vivid artifacts out of clichés (174-5).

The circulation and recycling of images of Angela Davis suggest that spectators are engaged the process of containment and possession that Sontag’s approach highlights. Even more interesting are the potential discourses about racial justice that are articulated in these representations. These depictions constructed Black women as mediators between the Black community defined as male and the larger white society.
Exploring photography is a productive way to understand the cross-fertilization of diverse discourses about Black females and their role in the struggle for racial and gender justice. Photographic images of Black female revolutionary icons have been recycled and reused to construct a discourse about the position of Black women in the fight to end racial and gender oppression. While images of icons, like Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver, served very specific purposes within the contexts in which they were created, the meanings of these visual images have changed over time as spectators and artists have recycled and circulated these images within different contexts. The circulation, consumption and recycling of these images in the 1970s produced narratives about Black women, revolution and justice.

Photographs are a part of the construction and enduring legacies of Black female activists. For example, the mythical image of Sojourner Truth is part of the legacy of visual imagery of Black women that contributed to discourses about Black female activism for gender and racial equality. It is an important point of reference if we consider that Truth and other activists like Angela Davis were constructed not only by their rhetorical work, but also by the visual imagery attached to their legacies. This is partially because dominant discourses about Black women have historically emphasized physicality. Whether one considers the historical inspection of enslaved Black women for their potential as breeders or the public display of Sarah Bartmann also known as "The Hottentot Venus", it is apparent that physical scrutiny has played an important part in the
construction of Black womanhood. For example, Sojourner Truth is not only known for her famous speeches, she is also connected to an imagined Amazonian, masculine woman who had to bare her breasts to prove that she was a woman worthy of the consideration given to elite white women as part of the cult of true womanhood. The continued importance of one's public image would remain an important part of the activism of Black revolutionaries.

For example, Angela Davis has expressed concern about the construction of her image in the media. Davis explains that she had to fight hard to destabilize her predominant media image. She explains:

The photograph on the cover of my autobiography, published in 1974, was taken by the renowned photographer Phillipe Halsman. When I entered his studio with Toni Morrison, who was my editor, the first question he asked us was whether we had brought the black leather jacket. He assumed it turned out that he was to recreate with his camera a symbolic visual representation of black militancy: leather jacket (uniform of the Black Panther Party), Afro hairdo, and raised fist. We had to persuade him to photograph me in a less predictable posture (Davis, "Afro Images" 27-28).

Davis is also remembered not only for her activism on behalf of prisoners, she is permanently linked in the international consciousness with the natural hairstyle. In the mainstream imaginary, she is represented as the iconic Black revolutionary
woman whose physical appearance is constructed through an understanding of blackness that emerged from Black Nationalist rhetoric about racial pride.

Natural hair was an essential part of expressing racial pride and played a prominent role in shaping the iconography of Black revolutionary femininity and beauty during the 60s and 70s. This focus on hairstyle suggests that Black women and their hair are inextricably linked to ideas about racial freedom and autonomy from Eurocentric cultural expectations. During the Black Power Movement of the 60s and 70s, the Afro was worn as a symbol of African American pride, strength and revolutionary politics and has recently reemerged to represent what Angela Davis calls "revolutionary glamour" (Davis 24). This link between fashion and racial politics has been explored by numerous scholars, such as Juliette Harris, Pamela Johnson and Noliwe Rooks. In Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture and African American Women, Rooks analyzes advertisements for Black hair care products during the turn of the century as part of dominant ideologies about race and beauty. Recalling her memories about the Afro and Angela Davis, she states:

For example, although some may be unclear about who Angela Davis was and the particulars of why she was incarcerated, we remember her Afro—a halo of natural hair framing her face—and her closed fist raised in the Black Power salute. The Afro was understood to denote black pride, which became synonymous with activism and political consciousness. This sentiment moved sharply
against the prevailing integrationist ideology and evidenced a belief that the gains of the Civil Rights Movement were not broad-based enough (Rooks 6).

Images of Angela Davis and her raised fist are a staple of American popular culture and its images of assertive and dangerous Black women. In *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, Janell Hobson argues that "...beauty becomes a significant site for political resistance and aesthetic transformation in which black women, whose beauty has been contested in dominant culture, strive to redefine their womanhood, and, possibly, their humanity" (Hobson 7). Depictions of Black revolutionary women have the potential to position Black women as overcoming the shackles of oppression or at least being strong enough to do so. They constitute a rich interaction of numerous approaches to Black femaleness that blends markers of masculinity and femininity. For example, many depictions of revolutionary women during the 60s and 70s relied on common fashion markers of femininity such as skirts and high-heels. They also often depicted women with children, an artistic move that is part of a long history of linking women to the expected functions of nurturing and domesticity. The primary marker of masculinity that was utilized in these images was guns. Many of these images served as a way to reconcile the revolutionary message of Black power politics with dominant messages about femininity. These images sent the message that one could still be a strong revolutionary and a "real" Black woman.
The Black Panther party used images of women as well as other visual images and the media to raise consciousness among African Americans and to project an image of Black people and masculinity that was threatening to white Americans (Doss 245-6). The images and rhetoric of the movement privileged the experiences of Black men and prescribed a strict role for Black women that emphasized the separation of Black revolutionary politics and gender politics. Kathleen Cleaver has experienced this enforced split and tension between revolutionary activism and feminism and the tension that exists between the two. She explains:

At times, during the question and answer session following a speech I'd given, someone would ask, "What is the woman's role in the Black Panther Party?" I never liked that question. I'd give a short answer: "It's the same as men." We are revolutionaries, I'd explain. Back then, I didn't understand why they wanted to think of what men were doing and what women were doing as separate. It's taken me years, literally about 25 years, to understand that what I really didn't like was the underlying assumption motivating the question. The assumption held that being part of a revolutionary movement was in conflict with what the questioner had been socialized to believe was appropriate conduct for a woman. That convoluted concept never entered my head, although I am certain it was far more widely accepted than I ever realized (Cleaver 233).
Generally, Black women were not associated with the use of armed resistance during the Black Power Movement. Citing a 1969 survey, Kathleen Cleaver notes:

In fact, according to a survey Bobby Seale did in 1969, two thirds of the members of the Black Panther Party were women. I am sure you are wondering, why isn't this the picture that you have of the Black Panther Party? Well, ask yourself where the image of the Panther Party that you have in your head came from? Did you read those articles planted by the FBI in the newspaper? Did you listen to the newscasters who announced what they decided was significant, usually, how many Panthers got arrested or killed? How many photographs of women Panthers have you seen? (Cleaver 234).

The notable exceptions to this lack of images were Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown (James 97). Joy James also observed that all of these women, with the exception of Assata Shakur, were in some way romantically linked with a Black male revolutionary. These relationships promoted "an image of black female militants as sexual and political spectacles" (98). According to Tracye Matthews, "sex and women’s bodies, in particular, [were] viewed as commodities to be exchanged in service of the revolution" (Matthews 280). This is apparent in the representations of revolutionary Black women. According to James, that as "former radical activists and current radical
academics-intellectuals, Davis and Cleaver have become public "historians"
analyzing past revolutionary movements. If we look closely at the photograph of
Kathleen Cleaver below, we see a clear example of the ways that representations
of Black female revolutionaries functioned as part of a campaign to promote fear
and trepidation.

Figure 2: Poster of Kathleen Cleaver

The black and white photograph features Cleaver dressed entirely in
black, wearing an Afro and sunglasses. She is grasping a gun in her right hand,
while she poses with her left hand on her hip. She looks directly into the camera
with a slight smirk. This photograph 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. While this poster is a part of a common practice during the 60s and 70s of posing feminine women with guns, it is further complicated by a very specific message about Black female strength within the larger struggle for racial justice.

Cleaver is marked as a potential threat not only by the gun she is holding, she is also marked as a threat because of her marital relationship with Eldridge Cleaver. This poster was created as part of a tactical and symbolic challenge to police raids on the apartment that she shared with Eldridge Cleaver, who as an ex-convict could not legally possess weapons. According to Cleaver, soon after the photo was taken, she left the country and had no control over the use of the image (James 103-104).

It appeared on a cover of the Black Panther Newspaper and later circulated as a poster. Cleaver functioned as the ideal Black Panther wife, who not only supported her man in the struggle, but blended fashionable femininity along with the ability to fight alongside him on behalf of the community. Her short skirt and her pose emphasize her femininity, while her leaning on the gun suggests that she has the confidence and ability to use it if needed. While the gun clearly stands as a warning to potential intruders, the slight grin on her face and her stance at the door are reminiscent of a wife welcoming guests into her home.
In this way, Cleaver serves as a mediator between home as a sanctuary for the male revolutionary and the liberation struggle that is raging beyond its boundaries.

Cleaver's dual role as wife and liberator is reflected in the following covers from *Jet* magazine. The cover of the February 26, 1970 issue announcing her acting debut in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) defines her as the "outspoken wife of self-exiled Black Panther leader" (Figure 3). The emphasis on her status as panther wife is less prominent in the December 2, 1971 issue which heralds the return of Cleaver, "the Black liberator" (Figure 4).

![Figure 3: Cleaver on the cover of the February 26, 1970 issue of *Jet*.](image)
The earlier cover (Figure 3) appears to be a picture that was taken of Cleaver while she was giving a speech, whereas the later photograph appears to have been posed specifically for the cover. Despite its emphasis on Cleaver's action as a liberator, this photograph of Cleaver with a closed mouth deemphasizes her role as activist and instead highlights her construction as a
representation of the movement. The closed mouth suggests silence. This less active depiction of Cleaver obscures her active role as an orator and activist on behalf of Black people. In fact, the absence of a background associated with activism, such as a protest or a gathering of other activists, further emphasizes her function as an image rather than as a leader and vital part of the Black revolutionary struggle during this period.

Kathleen Cleaver's ability to symbolize the movement is poignantly illustrated in her cameo role in Zabriskie Point, Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film about radical youth protests during the 60s in America. According to Beverly Walker, Antonioni's decision to use actual members of The Black Panther Party added authenticity to the film (48). The opening scene takes place in an auditorium on a college campus, where students are planning an unspecified protest. However, there are specific references to the struggle of Black people against police brutality. Kathleen Cleaver is seated at the front table facing the audience. Her Black male comrade talks confidently as she listens intently for most of this opening scene. She makes one statement during the scene. Antonioni uses close-up shots that focus on the various individuals in the room. He also does this with Cleaver. She serves as the focal point in the scene, as she is positioned at the center of the table surrounded by other activists. She is visually central in this depiction of student struggle, while simultaneously remaining silent when compared to the other people in the scene. This further illustrates the ways that Black female revolutionaries were often used as show pieces for the
movement, primarily present to be seen not heard. Despite the fact that these women were quite outspoken and active in the daily activities of Black Nationalist organizations, their visual representations reinforced their roles as spectacles of the movement.

Angela Davis is the single most important figure in Black feminist revolutionary iconography. Activists, students and faculty laud her as a major influence in their careers. Rosa Linda Fregoso proclaims Davis' influence on her career: "She was one of the handful of militant, public figures—a woman warrior—whom I sought to emulate. Though I never became the brave woman warrior she did, Angela Davis was someone I aspired to be like" (Fregoso 213). Similarly, Joy James says about meeting Davis:

When I was introduced to Davis... I remember thinking that this was the first time I had met power, courageous insight, and the particular beauty and grace of a black woman who remained committed to social justice despite the costs that radicals were, and are, made to pay in this society (James, "Angela Davis: A Life Committed" 2).

Both of these quotes not only point to the importance of Davis as a radical Black feminist activist, they also point to the visual imagery tied to her persona. Fregoso's reference to the "woman warrior" and James' reference to Davis' beauty and grace are indicative of the dual image of Davis. Davis' image and her former fugitive status as well as her capture, trial and campaign for prison reform have
shaped a generation's thinking about revolution and Black women. Her image is an important part of this legacy, which is illustrated by the numerous representations of her in popular culture. In the various mediums in which Davis is depicted, we see a haunting or ghostly presence of the captured Davis, which stands in sharp contrast to the "real Davis" who is alive and well teaching, writing and continuing her work for social justice. The remembered Davis is far less threatening than her present incarnation.

Spectators who consume and circulate Davis' image are engaged in a type of fan culture that celebrates her not just for her concrete work as an activist for prison reform, but also in part because of the image that was generated during what were her most "visible" revolutionary moments. This is evidenced by the persistent reliance and circulation of images of Davis in her 1970s incarnation. The older less glamorized version of Davis seems to hold less appeal today. This is in part due to the ways that new "fans" of Davis have a glamorized view of revolution that draws upon superficial notions of what it means to be involved in the struggle for racial justice. Davis is positioned as a type of "mother of the movement" who is depicted as watching over the masses of new "revolutionaries" who worship her. Young women and girls who wear T-shirts that depict Davis in an angry state are participating in the consumerization of revolution as well as engaging in what could be considered a fan culture that supports the star-like and celebrity quality of Davis' public persona. Bell hooks comments on the ways that Black Nationalism has been commodified and
"reinscribed and marketed with an atavistic narrative, a fantasy of Otherness that reduces protest to spectacle and stimulates even greater longing for the 'primitive' " (hooks, Black Looks 33). Angela Davis has also reflected on her visual image and its relationship to Black Nationalism. She says,

Today, of course, young people are explicitly inspired by what they know about Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. And I find myself in a somewhat problematic position because my own image appears now and then in visual evocations of this nationalist impulse that fuel the advocacy of revolutionary change in hip-hop culture. These days, young people who were not even born when I was arrested often approach me with expressions of awe and disbelief. On the one hand, it is inspiring to discover a measure of historical awareness that, in our youth, my generation often lacked. But it is also unsettling. Because I know that almost inevitably my image is associated with a certain representation of Black Nationalism that privileges those particular nationalisms with which some of us were locked in constant battle (Davis 322).

Davis points to what is problematic about the presentation, recycling and consuming of her image without a full understanding of the connection between these images and the larger historical struggle from which they emerged. Despite the risks of historically detached consumption, there is a process of negotiating revolutionary rhetoric and ideology through the
visual that can be productively linked to the historical circulation of these images during the 70s.

In depictions of Davis during the 1970s, there is negotiation of Davis as a threat and as an icon of revolutionary beauty. Her intelligence is an important part of the threat that she poses to the status quo. She was constructed as the mastermind in a plot to facilitate the attempted escape of the Soledad Brothers, George Jackson and several other inmates at San Quentin State Prison who were accused of killing a prison guard during a prison riot. The attempted courtroom escape of these men resulted in the death of a federal judge and Jonathan Jackson, George's younger brother. Angela Davis was accused of conspiring with Jonathan to free his brother because the gun that he used was registered in her name. Her construction as mastermind was consistent with stereotypical images of other Black female activists like Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown who were accused of being the brains behind radical Black activism. This stereotyping of the Black woman reinforced racist societal beliefs about the inherent inferiority of Black men and the emasculating nature of Black women.

In addition to the fear provoked by Davis' brains, there is also a fixation on her physical beauty. Images and articles about Davis serve to unite the image of the radical revolutionary with brains and the beautiful Black jezebel. The press coverage of Davis visually marks her. The discourse contained in the press and her visual representation suggests an attempt by the media and the larger dominant society to use the gaze to decipher what is contained in Davis' brain.
The focus on her beauty and physical appearance is symptomatic of a desire to possess and fully invade the recesses of the person that is Angela Davis. To a large extent, there is a mystery about Davis (the person) that escapes both her hyper-visibility and the circulation of her image. The only gate to her inner self is in her writing which for some reason is inadequate to capture her essence. Thus, the visual stands as an alternative method for gleaning important information about Davis the woman and the revolutionary. There is a complex negotiation of fear and pleasure in these images.

Davis became an iconic figure of Black revolutionary struggle despite the fact that most of her activism took place while she was working in other organizations like SNCC and the Communist Party USA (James 204-205). One of the most infamous pictures of Davis is her FBI Most Wanted poster, which was released in 1970 and circulated nationally and internationally (Figure 5). The poster contains two shots of Davis side by side. In both photographs, she has an Afro. It is this hairstyle with which she would be forever associated in the American imagination.
Unlike posters that were produced and circulated within mainstream popular culture that demonized Davis, African American publications offered very different depictions of Davis, the iconic revolutionary.

Jet's May 6, 1971 cover features Davis wearing glasses and her signature large Afro. She is facing the camera although she appears to be focused on something next to the camera. The headline reads "Angela Davis Case Puts Justice on Trial." Cordell S. Thompson's story includes several photos of Davis, as well as a narrative about her role in the fight for racial justice. Thompson begins
his piece by describing the iconic symbol of justice, the Greek Goddess Themis.

He explains:

In her left hand are scales on which the conflicting claims of antagonists are weighed, and she is blindfolded to prevent her from favoring one over the other. In the right hand she holds the double-edged sword of justice, with its tip blunted so that when she brings down the sword on a target it is tempered with mercy” (Thompson 44).

This statement is followed by a discussion of the quest for justice as it relates to the Black man in America. Whereas the Greek goddess stands in as a representation of western and specifically American ideals of justice, the text positions Angela Davis as an iconic figure of justice for the imprisoned African American male. According to Thompson,

at this stage of the Black man's travail in America, perhaps no one person symbolizes what Blacks consider the injustice done to Blacks in America's legal and judicial system than former UCLA philosophy instructor Angela Davis, in jail awaiting trial in California in connection with the courthouse shootout in San Rafael, Calif., last Aug. 7, in which four persons died, including a judge (45).

He emphasizes that the trial of "the beautiful Miss Davis means many things, but on one thing there is much agreement: that she is a 'political prisoner' "(45).
Thompson emphasizes that the Black community is supporting Davis because she is Black, not because she is a Communist. He claims that "... Blacks see Communism or Marxism as only offering Blacks a philosophy that deters from nation building "(Thompson 49). This contributes to the fragmentation of Black feminist activists who are forced to choose one movement over the other, in contrast to a more intersectional approach.

Thompson also quotes a statement by James Baldwin to Davis that connects the bodily sacrifice of Black female revolutionaries with the success of the movement. Baldwin says "...We must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impossible with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber, for if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night" (49).

Another very important part of this article focuses on the grieving mother of Jonathan Jackson, the younger brother of prisoner George Jackson, who allegedly took orders from Davis as part of his attempt to free his brother in the infamous courthouse shootout. Mrs. Jackson makes it clear that her son would never take orders from a woman. The caption on page 48 reads "Mother Says Son Was A Man, Needed No Woman's Advice." She says, "I knew my son better than anybody, and I know that he wouldn't let anybody tell him what to do unless he wanted to do it himself, and I know he wouldn't let any woman tell him what to do. That I know"(49). By reprinting this quote, Thompson uses the strength of Black masculinity as proof of Angela Davis's innocence. In other words, no real
Black man – which Jonathan presumably was- would have taken orders from a woman. Therefore, Davis cannot possibly be considered the mastermind of a conspiracy to free The Soledad Brothers from prison.

The idea of the overpowering Black woman as mastermind and brains behind the aggression of Black people during the Black Power Movement was a narrative that would persist in the cases of famous Black revolutionary women who were pursued by the authorities. For example, Assata Shakur was repeatedly referred to as "the soul of the Black liberation movement." These types of statements about Black women associate them with a tradition of emasculation and sinister motives that cause Black men to behave in violent and aggressive ways.

Jet's November 18, 1971 issue, "A Revealing Report on Angela Davis’ Fight for Freedom," shows Angela Davis on the cover of the magazine seated at a table in the courtroom. She looks serious and sad as she contemplates the case against her. The table is covered with files and legal books presumably being used by the defense. The opening of Robert DeLeon's article features a picture of Davis with her mouth open, as she speaks out at a Los Angeles rally in 1970 (12). Pictures of Davis, like the one below with her mouth open, not only reinforce the angry Black woman stereotype, they also show a fixation on her mouth as a potential source of knowledge. When Davis opens her mouth in a picture, we do not hear a sound and it is this silence, along with the presumed speech calling for activism that circulates around her image.
Figure 6: Angela Davis in November 18, 1971 Issue of Jet

Below this picture is another famous photograph of Davis standing next to Jonathan Jackson at a protest calling for the release of The Soledad Brothers (12). While many stories about Davis frequently picture her in pants or from the waist up, there is a shot of Davis entering the courtroom in a dress that is cut just above the mid-thigh. She is entering a courtroom for a hearing requesting bail. In addition, there is short section with the caption "Moore Assails Use of Unopened Letters in the Trial," which includes a brief discussion of the prosecution's use of an unopened letter to George Jackson from Davis in which she declares her love to him along with some political discussion (17). The juxtaposition of photos of Davis and Jackson linked them as "lovers" and constructed Davis as a woman
who, because she was desperately in love, would do anything to save her lover from prison. Michele Wallace laments depictions of revolutionary women who sacrifice themselves for the love of a good black man. She highlights the "theatrical" function of these narratives in the case of Angela Davis. She states,

It is the use of [Davis'] image by the Black Movement that I rebel against. Angela Davis, a brilliant, middle-class black woman, with a European education, a Ph.D. in philosophy, and a university appointment, was willing to die for a poor, uneducated black male inmate. It was straight out of Hollywood—Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart. For all her achievements, she was seen as the epitome of the selfless, sacrificing "good woman"—the only kind of woman the Movement would accept. She did it for her man, they said. A woman in a woman's place (Wallace 165-6).

This narrative would be highlighted and further glamorized in Hollywood's fictionalized account of the political activism and love affair between George Jackson and Angela Davis, *Brothers* released in 1977, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Another feature on Davis in *Jet* reinforces Davis' role in the struggle in terms of her activism and sacrifices, while simultaneously emphasizing her image as a symbol of iconic revolutionary beauty. *Jet's* February 24, 1972 front cover features Davis. The headline reads "A Look at Angela Davis From Another Angle: Her Jail Cell." In this feature, the editor sits down for an interview with
the incarcerated Davis. The cover features Davis with eyes slightly downcast. She appears to be taking a break from speaking. Her hair frames her face as she looks down with her shoulders hunched over. Managing editor Robert A. DeLeon serves as the interviewer for this exclusive interview with the incarcerated Davis. Throughout the article, she is referred to as Miss Davis, which emphasizes her single status.

The feature also includes an exclusive photo gallery featuring six photographs of Davis (Figure 7). The caption for these photos reads: "A Gallery of Moods of Angela Davis." This title suggests a desire to penetrate the inner world of the activist through the visual. It is not clear from the various shots that there is a definite separation of moods indicated by the various poses. Under the title, there is a paragraph that reads: "The many months of life behind bars have taken their toll. Despite it all, Angela Davis maintains a kind of beauty and can still manage an occasional smile" (DeLeon, "A Look at Angela Davis", 10).
What is interesting about this series of photos is the desire to capture the beauty of Davis as the quintessential Black revolutionary woman, as if she is really concerned with how beautiful she looks. The need for Black women to represent the movement through their aesthetic beauty is privileged. This article laments the ways that the year and a half imprisonment had caused Davis to age (DeLeon, "A Look at Angela Davis", 8). Despite this initial fixation on Davis' physical beauty, DeLeon eventually shifts his focus from Davis' "...physical characteristics [which] have seldom gone unnoticed" to her intelligence and her many intellectual accomplishments (8).
Another picture in the exclusive interview shows Davis standing in front of a flag that was sent to her by Black prisoners in Korea (See Figure 8 below).

The caption for this photograph focuses more on her fashion than the political implications for Black international solidarity that the gift evokes. The caption reads "Miss Davis, wearing heavy sweater and boots, stands near flag sent by Black prisoners in Korea" (13). This statement accentuates the extreme need for the public discourse surrounding Davis to be fixated on her physical beauty and in many ways privileges it over other aspects of her political persona.

The DeLeon prison interview illustrates the familiar trope of Black woman as sacrificial lamb for the struggle. Davis does not focus on her suffering. Instead,
she cautions the readers not to focus on her alone. She reminds readers that there are "many brothers who are much worse off than I am" (DeLeon, "A Look at Angela Davis" 9). This statement is a perfect example of how rhetoric during the 1960s and 1970s refocused attention away from the suffering of Black women at the hands of an oppressive government.

Pictures of Davis after her release from prison also shed light on how images of Black revolutionary icons function as part of a wider discourse about Black women and justice. The May 16, 1974 issue of Jet includes a follow-up story by Robert A DeLeon about the work for prison reform that consumed most of Davis' time. She comments on her depiction in the mainstream media:

The problem is that before and during the trial, the white press projected an image of a raving militant talking about burning and violence; there were pictures of me with my mouth wide open all of the time. Well, now they are finding trouble justifying that image through the work we're doing so they just don't cover the activities of our organization (DeLeon, "Angela Davis Works" 13).

In the article that chronicles Davis' activities to increase awareness about political repression, there is still a considerable interest in her personal and romantic life. The last paragraph of the article questions Davis' dating life:

"And if that's what you're all about, there's not much time left for other things. You know," Miss Davis revealed, "I've been out on a date maybe twice—two times – since I was acquitted. And I like to
party, I like to go to the movies but I just haven't been able to do it because the other things are just so much more important" (DeLeon, "Angela Davis Works" 18).

While this statement clearly shows Davis' priorities, it also reiterates the narrative of the sacrificial nature of the political struggle of Black women and it also privileges the availability of the Davis as an object of Black male desire. This construction of Davis as an object of desire would be continued in Warner Brother's film *Brothers* (1977).

*Brothers* was written by Edward and Mildred Lewis and directed by Arthur Barron. The film is a fictionalized account of the incarceration of George Jackson and his relationship with Angela Davis. The film primarily focuses on the injustices faced by David Thomas, an inmate who is unfairly imprisoned, who develops a relationship with a revolutionary college professor. David Thomas (representing Jackson) is played by football player and blaxploitation star Bernie Casey. Professor Paula Jones (representing Davis) is played by Vonetta McGee, another well-known blaxploitation actress.

Some critics of the film were disappointed with the selection of these actors to represent such important Black revolutionary activists. In a review in the April 18, 1977 issue of *Time*, Christopher Porterfield is generally negative about the film. What is most striking about his review is his critique of the performance of Vonetta McGee. He is particularly concerned with the ways that the Paula Jones character played by McGee "drifts in and out with all the serenity
of a model in a soap commercial and with none of the biting intellectuality of Angela Davis" (Porterfield 82). Porterfield is correct that overall Professor Jones' beauty and grace are far more emphasized than her intellectual prowess. For example, in a critical scene that depicts the meeting of the main characters, the dialogue and camera are used to glamorize Professor Jones. As Professor Jones and a senator tour the prison with the warden, David and his cellmates use a mirror to watch Professor Jones saunter down the cellblock. Romantic calypso music, which would later become the couple's theme, plays in the background as David projects Paula's image through a tiny mirror. He leans over to his cellmate played by Ron O'Neal, another well-known blaxploitation actor, and says that Jones is "a real foxy lady." As she approaches his cell, David says "Hey Professor Jones." Paula responds, "Hey brother." He then continues to explain how he has been admiring her picture on the cover of her book and that he has learned a great deal from her writing. While it is clear that David acknowledges Professor Jones' intellect, the dialogue in this scene clearly privileges her visual attractiveness. This happens in the scene when David tries to capture her image in the mirror as she walks through the prison and when he comments about admiring her picture before he discusses her work.

As the film continues, Professor Jones realizes that David is the brother of Joshua, a young high school student who seeks her help in exposing the injustices of the prison system in California. They begin corresponding via letters and there is a scene where she comes to visit him for an interview. David is
shackled and Paula is reprimanded by the guard when she attempts to touch his hands across the table. This is the extent of their physical contact, but the sexual tension between the couple is heightened by the calypso music that plays in the background during their visit. Shortly after this scene, Thomas tells one of his fellow inmates that "Sister Jones gave [him] a jones." This dialogue illustrates the persistent fascination with "penetrating" the mystery of Angela Davis that I discussed earlier. The film also shows the extent to which the emphasis on her beauty and the visual objectification of Davis was/is an essential aspect of understanding her role as an important Black female revolutionary icon. Despite the plethora of famous blaxploitation actors in the film, the writers of *Brothers* claim that the film should not be considered an exploitation film, like other Black-themed urban movies being produced at the time (Cocchi 5). John Cocchi's interview with the couple claims that the letters that were used in the film were the actual letters that George Jackson and Angela Davis sent to each other and that "Davis liked [the] film" (5). Whether or not these claims are true, it is evident that the revolutionary iconography that circulates around Black female revolutionaries like Davis and Cleaver has a crucial connection to the filmic representations of strong, Black women who were depicted in and popularized by blaxploitation films featuring actresses like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson that I explore in the following chapter.
In Chapter 2, I examined the circulation of images of Black revolutionary icons such as Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver as examples of the ways that images of Black women served primarily as representational objects to bolster an image of Black Nationalism that privileged the experiences of Black men in the 1960s and 70s. If it is true the Black women's bodies were sexually commodified and used in the service of Black revolution (Matthews 280), then it is crucial that any analysis of the iconography of Black revolutionary women consider how these images function in relationship to other representational forms that highlighted the Black female revolutionary body. Blaxploitation films and their crucial role in the construction of Black revolutionary womanhood during the 1970s is inextricably connected to Pam Grier, the most well-known and celebrated actresses of the genre.
Pam Grier began her acting career in low budget women-in-prison films, which later led to her starring role in *Coffy* (Jack Hill 1973) and her most famous role in *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill 1974). Grier's performances in these films, her star persona and large fan base cemented her place as one of the most celebrated Black female actresses within the genre. While the decrease in the popularity of blaxploitation film initially had a negative impact on Grier's ability to move beyond the super heroine figure with which she is associated, she has nonetheless continued a relatively successful career as a film star and most recently as a member of the cast of the cable television drama *The L-Word*. Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Badasss Supermama* (1996) by Etang Inyang are two examples of films that pay homage to Pam Grier as an iconographic figure from the blaxploitation film era. Through an analysis of these films, I will explore the multiple and complex ways that these screenwriters/directors construct and memorialize an image of Pam Grier's star persona. Both films draw heavily on her infamous portrayal in *Foxy Brown*. In addition, they both provided insight into how race, gender and sexuality impact and inform the consumption of Pam Grier's star persona by various types of spectators.

For example, if we examine the movie poster from *Coffy*, we can see the ways that Hollywood films featuring Black female revolutionaries were used to negotiate anxieties about the increasingly more militant Black civil rights movement and the women's rights movement.
Blaxploitation films and the promotional materials used to promote them, such as posters and press kits, were part of a process of containing Black female activists and as a result relied on some of the same conventions. These conventions include a process of sexualization that ameliorated the potential threat posed by Black revolutionary women. They also suggested the danger posed by such women.

Figure 9: Promotional Poster for *Coffy*
In the poster from *Coffy*, not only is Grier represented in a sexualized manner, her hand on her hip and her facial expression clearly represents a warning similar to the poster of Kathleen Cleaver discussed in the previous chapter (Figure 2). Both posters evoke fear of Black women with guns, as well as reinforce the role of Black women as spectacle in the Black Power Movement of the 60s and 70s. They also use femininity as part of this construction of Black female revolutionary potential. Grier is identified as "the Godmother of them all," which plays on the discourse about Black women as calculating masterminds behind the movement.

In *Coffy*, Grier plays Coffy, a lone vigilante, who pursues and murders the drug dealer who is responsible for her younger sister's addiction to drugs. Coffy uses her brains, beauty and connections to find the low-level drug dealer and exposes a Black councilman as part of a plot to allow the white kingpin of the drug racket to continue bringing drugs into the community. Similarly, *Foxy Brown*, one of Grier's most well-known films, director Jack Hill, continues his focus on vigilante justice by a Black woman in an urban setting. The plot of the film revolves around Foxy's attempts to get revenge for the death of her boyfriend, an undercover cop whose cover has been compromised by Foxy's brother. After her lover's death, Foxy goes undercover as a prostitute for Miss Katherine, the ruthless drug dealer and pimp who is responsible for her boyfriend's death. Inspired by her role in *Coffy*, Foxy uses her feminine wiles and beauty to facilitate her ultimate act of revenge.
Black female characters in films like Coffy and Foxy Brown are often positioned as negotiators between various binary oppositions. They negotiate the spaces between the people and the nation; between gay and straight and feminism and Black Nationalism. Such a process of negotiation is apparent in the star persona of Pam Grier, the actress most closely associated with the blaxploitation genre.

According to Randall Clark, blaxploitation films were primarily designed to shock and titillate audiences and usually relied on seven major conventions (Clark 5, 152). These conventions include: 1) a cool and aloof protagonist; 2) an urban setting; 3) violence; 4) sexual encounters with Black and white women; 5) white villains; 6) superficial acknowledgement of the problems of the lower-class Blacks and 7) a throbbing musical score (152). The popularity of the genre has been attributed to the success of Melvin Van Peeble's famous independent film, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971), which piqued Hollywood's interest in attracting a black audience. Blaxploitation films glamorized urban "ghetto" culture and elevated the "pimp/outlaw/rebel [to the status of] folk hero" (Bogle 236).

It is significant that this genre allowed Black men to assert themselves in violent and sexually aggressive ways. This was a direct response to historical attempts to suppress Black male sexuality through violence and intimidation. This intimidation began in slavery, continued in the brutal and often sexualized nature in which Black men were lynched. Blaxploitation film allowed an
unhampered exploration of Black male sexuality embodied in the characters in the film, as well as a celebration of the perceived “hyper masculinity” of Black male stars in blaxploitation films.

Unfortunately, many of these films reinforced stereotypes and myths about the hypersexuality of Black people. Sweetback was followed by a series of Hollywood films such as Shaft (Gordon Parks, Jr. 1971), Superfly (Gordon Parks, Jr. 1972) and Bucktown (Arthur Marks 1973), which were designed to exploit the Black audiences' enthusiastic response to the new genre of Black themed action films (Bogle 238). Early blaxploitation films relegated Black women to minor roles that supported the male protagonists. These early films were later followed by a series of films featuring Black female heroines that expanded on the existing stereotypical roles designated for Black women in Hollywood, such as Cleopatra Jones (Jack Starrett 1973), Get Christie Love! (William A. Graham 1974) and TNT Jackson (Cirio Santiago 1974).

Many scholars have documented the long history of stereotypical roles reserved for Black actresses in Hollywood. Donald Bogle focuses on two major stereotypes depicted in early films featuring Black actresses, the mammy and the tragic mulatto (9). In "Fatal Beauties: Black Women in Hollywood" Karen Alexander highlights how the strictures of Hollywood limit the ability of Black actresses to be successful without playing stereotypical roles (53).
Jacqueline Bobo describes the limited and demeaning images of Black women that have historically permeated mass culture. According to Bobo,

[B]lack women have been presented as sexually deviant, as the dominating matriarchal figure, as strident, eternally ill-tempered wenches, and as wretched victims. This last characterization is seen in the ubiquitous depictions of black women as domestic servants and in the latter-day representations of 'welfare' mothers (Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers 33).

Themes of deviance and domination are central aspects of films featuring the Black female heroine. Donald Bogle sees blaxploitation films featuring the Black woman heroine as producing a hybridized stereotypical image. He argues:

These macho goddesses answered a multitude of needs and were a hybrid of stereotypes, part buck/part mammy/part mulatto. On the one hand, each was a high-flung male fantasy: beautiful, alluring, glamorous voluptuaries, as ready and anxious for sex and mayhem as any man. They lived in fantasy worlds—of violence, blood, guns, and gore—which pleased, rather than threatened, male audiences (Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mammies, & Bucks 251).

Bogle claims that both Dobson and Grier simultaneously functioned as "Woman as Protector, Nurturer, Communal Surrogate" while having the sexual appeal of the "old-style mulattoes" (Bogle 251-2). What is interesting about Bogle's
discussion of this hybridized image of Black womanhood is the ease with which he uses the "brutal black buck" as a constituent part of the good Black female heroine. The conceptualization of Black female heroines as "part buck" illustrates the persistent association of Black female strength with a performance of masculinity. The movement of Black female characters between performances of masculinity and femininity in blaxploitation films is an important part of understanding how the Black female revolutionary character is contained and recuperated by the genre. According to Yvonne Tasker,

The 'macho' aspects of the black action heroine-her ability to fight, her self-confidence, even arrogance—are bound up in an aggressive assertion of her sexuality. Simultaneously it is this same stereotypical attribution of sexuality to the black woman, which generates anxiety around her representation (Tasker 21-22).

While blaxploitation films contain Black female bodies within a limiting and confining space, the crossing of sexual and gender boundaries in this genre causes an instability that allows for a more complicated reading of the function of these characters. However, these points of instability do not erase the ways that the genre contained and recuperated the body of the Black revolutionary woman. Consequently, my analysis of the images in these films emphasizes the importance of highlighting the contradictions within the genre, not resolving them.
The Black female heroine in blaxploitation films served as a way to make "real" revolutionary women more palatable to the masses. In other words, if fugitives like Angela Davis or Assata Shakur were constructed as enemies of the state, then many of the images in blaxploitation films functioned to remove the perceived threat that these revolutionary activists posed to the status quo. In many blaxploitation films, these women were gorgeous objects contained within an inner city environment characterized by violence, crime and drug abuse. They affirmed the belief that Black women were "... not only emotionally callous but physically invulnerable---stronger than white women and the physical equal of any man of [their] race" (Wallace, Black Macho 138). In addition to reinforcing the image of the emasculating Black woman, these movies simultaneously recuperated her through a process of eroticization and fetishization.

The eroticization and fetishization of the Black female body in blaxploitation films makes the threat of Black female violence less scary. For example, in most of Pam Grier's films her characters are constructed to exude sexual availability. This is true within the narratives of the films, as well as in the ways that the camera is used to frame her body.
If we rely on early feminist film theory, which focuses on the ways that the cinematic apparatus functions to structure the viewer's perspective from the male gaze, there is strong evidence that Grier performances were very much structured in terms of male pleasure. According to Laura Mulvey,

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly...Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 62).

Clearly, the cinematic apparatus positions Grier as the object of the gaze. In many of her films, the establishing shot that introduces her emphasizes the display of her body. *Foxy Brown's* opening sequence features Grier dancing in a bikini and a tight leather outfit. Within the diegesis of the film, there are numerous gratuitous opportunities for her character to undress and/or otherwise solicit the gaze of other characters in the film. In scenes like this, the Black female heroine's latent danger is minimized by her erotic persona. The objectification of the Black female body in this way is a crucial part of the containment and recuperation of Black female revolutionary icons.

Yvonne Tasker's study of women in action cinema highlights the extent to which representations of active heroines compensate for their power by emphasizing traditional feminine sexuality and availability (Tasker 19). The perception of sexual availability is an important aspect of Grier's performance in
Foxy Brown. This includes sexual availability to the men within the film, as well as visual pleasure experienced by audience members. The camera invites the audience to enjoy the sexual appeal that Grier embodies. This is particularly important if we consider that, the masses of her fans were "predominately black, inner-city, adolescent" males who crammed into movie theaters to see her in all of her glory (Guerrero 98). Despite the fact that young black males were a huge part of her fan base, the pleasure of watching Grier was not limited to men.

Characters played by Grier were often gazed upon by women within the narratives of her films. Part of this is a natural extension of her early women-in-prison films in which she and other women were often positioned as objects of a voyeuristic gaze and lesbianism was explicitly acknowledged in the plots (Mayne, Framed 132). In Foxy Brown, Grier's character is given the once over by Miss Katherine, the head of a prostitution ring. As they discuss her potential as a member of Miss Katherine's operation, shot-reverse-shot is used to show Miss Katherine "checking out" Foxy. This is an example of the complex ways that the juxtaposition of African-American women and white women provides the potential for the reading of same-sex desire into the film (White 152-4).

Another important part of Grier's performances in these movies is the way that the lead character shifts between two opposing images. In Foxy Brown, as dangerous revolutionary Foxy, Grier wears pants or less revealing clothing. When Grier plays sexy Foxy, she wears revealing, ultra-feminine clothes. Grier wears her Afro wig when she is her most fierce. As I alluded to in the previous
chapter, the Afro was worn as symbol of African American pride, strength and revolutionary politics in the 60s and 70s, which has recently been recycled to represent what Angela Davis calls "revolutionary glamour" (Davis 24). In contrast, when Foxy wears her straight long wig she is in undercover mode, hiding the true Foxy as a means to trick her enemies into letting down their guard. This is done through a process of hyper-sexualization where the character moves between two personas, her sexy siren persona and her revolutionary persona. This happens frequently in Pam Grier's most famous films, Coffy and Foxy Brown. Within the narratives of her films, Grier shifts between various performances of femininity, which are linked to her strategic use of disguises to trick her enemies. These strategies of disguise are similar to the filmic performances of femininity discussed by Mary Ann Doane in her analysis of the femme fatale (49). The "seductive power of femininity" is apparent in Grier's performance of femininity. Grier's parody of white femininity is combined with the mythology of the black woman as sexually insatiable to lure her victims into her trap. The parody of white femininity is crucial because it relies on the stereotypical image of white women as weak and harmless (Figures 10 and 11). This harmlessness is made apparent through fashion choices, which include a wig, dress and high heels that are used to masquerade the stereotypical dangerousness that marks the Black woman – big Afro, pants and a fearless attitude (Figure 12).
Figure 10: Promotional Photograph for *Foxy Brown*
Various narratives within blaxploitation films highlight an attempt to ameliorate anxieties provoked by the Black revolutionary female persona. George Lipsitz contends that "the racial crises of the 1960s in the U.S. gave rise to
'genre anxiety,' to changes in generic forms effected by adding unconventional racial elements to conventional genre films"(209). Anxieties about societal upheavals fueled by the demands of male and female Black civil right activists are apparent in blaxploitation and sexploitation films of the 1970s. It is no accident that these films gained popularity during a time when revolutionary Black women, such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, were being pursued and criminalized by the government and the mainstream media culture. Just as photographs of Angela Davis during this era shaped public opinions about her culpability, they also led to a mobilization in her defense (Davis 26). Pam Grier's most famous movie, Foxy Brown, was released in 1974, the same year that Elaine Brown, the first woman to Chair the Black Panther Party, took over after Bobby Seale resigned and Huey Newton was exiled to Cuba (LeBlanc-Ernest 320). This was a time of considerable upheaval for the party because women in the movement were taking more of the leadership roles. The prominence of women during this time within the Party, as well as the larger feminist movement, perhaps made the country ripe to pursue the new and improved more palpable revolutionary women highlighted in blaxploitation films featuring female leads.

These films reflected and produced anxieties about the consequences of Black female aggression. They also contributed to existing narratives about feminists and Black revolutionaries that reinforced mass paranoia about the potential dangers facing middle class "American" values because of radical feminists, Black men and Black women taking up arms. While media
representations emphasized the threat to the mainstream from outsiders (feminists, Black militants, etc), filmic depictions effectively contained these "others" within economically depressed and criminal inner city neighborhoods and corrupt "Third World" countries.

In *The Big Bird Cage* (Jack Hill 1972), a women-in-prison film set in the Philippines features Grier. Grier plays Blossom, a revolutionary who works with her boyfriend, Django (Sid Haig). Blossom is obsessed with guns and keeping her boyfriend, Django from cheating on her with white women. The story centers around a concentration camp where enslaved women process sugar. Terry (Anitra Ford) is a young White woman who has been captured and enslaved as a result of her involvement with the revolutionaries. Blossom and Django steal from the wealthy to help support their revolutionary plot to free the women being held captive at the work camp.

This film illustrates the process of masquerade in the opening scene where Blossom seductively sings and dances for wealthy Philippinos (mostly men). She is accompanied by her band, which includes several men. In this scene, she is in deceptive mode. She wears a long curly wig and her clothes are sexy. She mesmerizes her audience in order to distract them and leave them off-guard when she gives her fellow band members the signal to rob the place. This scene is a perfect example of the ways that masquerade employed by Black female characters work to hide their "revolutionary tendencies."
Despite the fact that "revolutionaries" are depicted in *The Big Birdcage*, there is no sustained critique of the prison industrial complex or other societal institutions. These activists are far away from any chance of influencing or disrupting American politics. This literally removes the threat of revolution from the United States to a location presumably that needs revolution. The role of Black revolutionary iconography in this situation is striking because not only is the Black female revolutionary removed from the United States; her compatriots are not Black men. By separating Black women from a unified struggle for Black people that includes Black men, we visually remove the anxiety that is precipitated by the idea of the armed struggle of Black people against white supremacy, capitalism and exploitation in the United States.

Another example of a film that effectively separates the Black female heroine from the Black community is *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett 1973), featuring Tamara Dobson as the main character. Cleopatra Jones is a special agent for the United States government. The opening scene takes place in Turkey where Jones has just succeeded in destroying the opium supply that belongs to Mommy (Shelly Winters). Mommy is the major source of drugs that is devastating Cleo's neighborhood. Through her work as both a secret agent and as a supporter of a local drug program to help fight drug addiction, Cleopatra Jones becomes a major target of Mommy's revenge. The plot revolves around their battle against each other.
During a time when many Black women were struggling to make ends meet and had a considerable level of distrust of the system and the status quo, it was surreal that a character like Cleopatra Jones could exist. Unlike Grier's character in *The Big Birdcage*, Cleo's separation from the community is not literal as the bulk of the narrative takes place within a predominantly Black neighborhood. What separates Cleopatra Jones from the imagined Black community depicted in the film is her symbiotic relationship to an established world order that is conspicuously white and male. Cleo is a secret agent for the federal government. Despite her professional affiliation with the United States government, Jones maintains ties to the Black community through her Black male love interest who works with her to fight drug addiction. This is another example of the ways that Black female revolutionary iconography insists on the availability of Black female revolutionary bodies that service a revolution defined by heterosexual Black men.

Blaxploitation films reinforce the notion that Black women are a threat, while simultaneously redirecting the focus of their aggression onto othered whites – whites who are drug dealers, prostitutes, lesbians, and those who participate in interracial dating. These characters play a regular part in blaxploitation films and they are almost always the primary targets of the heroine's rage. This is a subtle form of scapegoating which suggests to the Black audience, to whom these films were primarily targeted, that the system of governance in the United States is not the problem. They suggest that the real
threat comes from Black criminals and “deviant whites” who join them in their rampage on the Black community. In addition to encouraging racist and sexist scapegoating, these stereotypical characters support classist assumptions about inner city communities.

In addition to occupying the boundary between the status quo and marginalized communities, Black female heroines in blaxploitation films often negotiate their needs as Black women with the needs of the Black community defined almost exclusively in terms of heterosexual Black men. Fighting white dominance is defined as complete allegiance to the Black Nationalist project, sometimes at the expense of one's individual needs and desires as a woman. In this space, Black women are forced to serve as protector of the Black race through a disavowal or sacrifice of her own needs. This theme is highlighted in another scene from Foxy Brown.

Foxy comes to the local Black community organization to ask for help with bringing down the drug lord that has wreaked havoc on the Black community. As Foxy waits to hear the decision of this all-male council, she is seated in a room. There are posters in the room that reference women in the Black Power Movement. Specifically, there is a drawing of what appears to be a woman who resembles Kathleen Cleaver or Angela Davis. In addition, there is a nude poster of a Black woman that ushers Foxy into this male-dominated space. In this way, the Black female body serves as a bridge between androcentric Black
Nationalism and a formulation of nationalism that is more attuned and responsive to the needs of Black women.

In the room where the men are gathered, there is another poster of what appears to be Angela Davis. It is important that this poster is in the background and is overshadowed by the male council. Again, the depiction of Black Nationalism privileges a male perspective, while diminishing the existence of Black revolutionary women who were actively engaged in every aspect of the Black civil rights struggle during the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, the presence of the picture within the context of this film further solidifies the importance of Davis as an iconic symbol of Black revolutionary activism during this time. The mise-en-scène of this scene illustrates another way that the iconography of the Black revolutionary female in blaxploitation films work to simultaneously contain and reify the image of Black female revolutionaries.

In "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," Cedric Robinson reads blaxploitation as a misrepresentation of Black liberation. He also argues that these films misappropriated the images of real revolutionary women, like Angela Davis (5-6). His reading of blaxploitation film is similar to that of other critics who have focused overwhelmingly on the ways that Black Nationalism has been commodified and "reinscribed and marketed with an atavistic narrative, a fantasy of Otherness that reduces protest to spectacle..." (hooks, Black Looks 33). Along with this distortion of Black Nationalism is an
idealized view of black revolutionary women as sacrificial lambs and vehicles for the struggle.

The central role of Black women as sacrificial lambs is presented vividly in the film through the action that motivates Foxy's revenge. Foxy is being held captive by two white men in a shack in a remote area. She is tied to the bed and is bruised and struggling to get free. There is a scene where one of the men attacks Foxy and sexually assaults her. Despite being drugged, beaten and raped, her escape and final act of vengeance is framed in terms of her desire to make the criminals pay for the death of her boyfriend. In Foxy Brown, rather than constructing the murders of the white men in the film as part of a rape revenge scenario, the narrative minimizes the suffering of the Black female character who is raped in favor of a narrative that privileges justice for the Black male character. Sara Projansky's analysis of the intertextual relationship between postfeminism, rape narratives and specific visual texts provides an interesting way to read the rape scene in Foxy Brown. According to Projansky,

[Rape narratives] help organize, understand, and even arguably produce the social world; they help structure social understandings of complex phenomena such as gender, race, class, and nation. Additionally, they help inscribe a way of looking, the conditions of watching, and the attitudes and structures of feeling one might have about rape, women and people of color (Projansky 7).
Projansky reads the rape revenge scene in *Foxy Brown*, which results in Grier's character burning her rapists alive and ultimately castrating the leader of the drug cartel, within the context of the larger revenge plot to avenge the death of her boyfriend (60-61). She does not explore how the rape scene functions in relationship to the historic denial and minimization of the real rape of Black women. More specifically, her analysis emphasizes the revenge that Foxy pursues on behalf of her love, without exploring the possibility that this scene could be read as a vindication for all of the years of sexual abuse that Black women have suffered at the hands of White men.

The narratives in many blaxploitation films deny the pain of bruised, enslaved, and raped women. There is little recognition of the harm caused to these women. Instead, there is an emphasis on the role of Black women as mediators between the Black community (male) and the larger white society. They also reinforce a narrative that encourages Black women's bodily sacrifice for a movement that does not necessarily highlight her needs or concerns.

In addition to mediating between Black and white, Black female revolutionaries are contained through their juxtaposition with white female characters in the narratives. Mary Ann Doane's psychoanalytic analysis of *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk 1959) emphasizes the interconnection between "the hypersexualization of the black woman, her association with an unrestrained promiscuity which left the white woman free to occupy the pedestal of sexual purity" (Doane 243). While Doane's discussion is primarily
focused on an analysis of the genre of the "woman's film" and the 1959 version of Imitation of Life, her point is significant to a textual analysis of the ways that representations of Black women and white women in films featuring Grier work in the construction of the binary oppositions of white femininity and black femininity. Her analysis reinforces scholarship by African American feminists who critique the ideals of white femininity and beauty by which Black women have been historically judged.

Most blaxploitation films featuring a Black female heroine have a white female villain or nemesis. These depictions serve to diminish any potential political affinity that may exist between black women and white women, while simultaneously realigning Black women with a struggle focused exclusively on race consciousness. For example, in both Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown, each Black female lead has a white female enemy. In Cleopatra Jones, Shelly Winters plays a ruthless lesbian drug lord, who wreaks havoc on an urban neighborhood. In Foxy Brown, the protagonist's white female nemesis controls a brothel that provides the ammunition used to convince prominent officials to "go easy" on drug offenders. It is significant that these films were released during the height of the second wave of the feminist movement, which was overwhelming associated with white women, despite the fact that women of color were engaged in feminist activism. Therefore, it is not surprising that these films represented white women as pathological and criminal.
The construction of a binary relationship between the image of the black female heroine and the white female villain was part of a larger historical discourse about feminism as being incompatible with antiracist goals. The blaxploitation film's emphasis on racial tensions and the fight to overcome racism and poverty reinforces the strict separation of the goals of Black liberation and feminism. This narrative theme is repeated in the films featuring Pam Grier and reinforces the strict division that presumably exists between the goals of Black women and white women.

In her role as the Nubian slave Mamawi in *The Arena* (Steve Carver 1974); Pam Grier is portrayed as a wild, untamed, exotic other. This is juxtaposed with Bodicia (played by Margaret Markov) who is depicted as a principled and morally superior slave. Set in ancient Rome, the film focuses on the abduction of women to work as gladiators. The crowd has lost interest in seeing men fight and are enthusiastic about watching women fight to the death.

Consistently throughout the film, with the exception of the last battle scene, Mamawi takes an individualistic attitude. The narrative emphasizes distrust between Mamawi and Bodicia that normalizes conflicts between Black and white women. Throughout the film, Bodicia contends that the enslaved women should be united in their common plights as captives. The idea that "sisterhood is powerful" is echoed in Bodicia's comments to her fellow woman warriors in the film about unity. In contrast, Mamawi consistently separates herself from the other enslaved women. In fact, she is the first woman to kill
another woman at the urging of a bloodthirsty crowd. She is remorseful, but she sees her choice to kill as a matter of survival given that the authorities threaten to kill her if she does not kill her defeated opponent.

Closely related to the conflict between white and Black women in these films is the ways that Black women are used to contain the threat of lesbianism. Black female characters in many blaxploitation films display open hostility to lesbians, usually depicted as white. In particular, the perceived corrupting influence of lesbians on Black women is a concern that is reflected and produced in films featuring Black female heroines. Black Mama, White Mama (Eddie Romero 1972), one of the first films featuring Pam Grier, has a female prison guard who pursues inmates sexually. Grier's white female co-star from The Arena, Margaret Markov, plays a white female revolutionary who ultimately submits to the guard's advances. Lee, the character played by Grier, resists the advance and is punished as a result. In order to retain her status as a strong Black female, Grier's character could not submit to the advances of a white woman. Judith Mayne points to the important connection between racial plots and lesbian plots in women-in-prison films from the 1970s. She argues that in the films Black Mama, White Mama and Caged Heat,

[T]he women-in-prison plot relies on not just the coexistence of discourses of race and discourses of lesbianism, but also on profound connections between them. In both films, the opposition of black women and white women is eroticized, albeit in different
ways. The lesbian plot requires the racial plot, and the racial plot requires the lesbian plot (Mayne, Framed 138).

This is an example of what Audre Lorde calls "the red herring of lesbian baiting" used to obscure the simultaneity of racial and sexual oppression (Lorde 42). According to Suzanna Walters, "women-prison films elaborate fully the creation of the marginal subject. Marginalized by gender, stigmatized by sexual preference, physically preyed upon—these women are most assuredly the marked other" (Walters 106). Thus, white women are coded as lesbian and Black women are coded as not lesbian.

Another example of this denial of Black lesbian existence and the demonization of white lesbians occurs in the famous bar scene in Foxy Brown. In this scene, a fight ensues after Foxy's Black female friend is approached by a white lesbian in the bar. This is important because the scene highlights the overwhelming presence of white lesbians as a threat to the two heterosexual Black female characters in the scene. Foxy's friend is particularly vulnerable because she is clearly intoxicated and Foxy is the only one who can rescue her from being the prey of the butch lesbian that pursues her. The absence of Black lesbians in the bar denies Black lesbianism, as well as the existence of a multicultural lesbian community. I further explore this absence and its potential impact on Black lesbian spectators later in my discussion of Etang Inyang's film Badass Supermama (1996).
In rare cases when Black lesbians are depicted in blaxploitation films, they are masculinized. In *Coffy*, Coffy seeks out the white female prostitute, whose former pimp, a Black man, is her next target. Before letting Coffy in, she comments that her "old man" just left and will be back soon. Ultimately, a confrontation ensues and Coffy threatens to cut her with a broken bottle if she does not tell her where he keeps his secret supply of drugs. The prostitute’s "old man" and pimp – a black woman – enters and accuses her lover of cheating. She then proceeds to chase Coffy from the scene. This visual representation reinforces and strengthens a "culture of dissemblance" that makes it acceptable for Black lesbians to be considered traitors to the race (Hammonds 491).

The women's liberation movement was a considerable threat to the status quo, as was the possibility that women of all races would identify with and participate in this movement. Narratives about white female criminality and lesbianism in blaxploitation films served several functions. First, they reinforced the notion that Black people and more specifically Black women could not and should not trust white women. This idea diverted attention from the larger white patriarchal system, which was the primarily responsible for the subjugation of Black women. Second, they served as warnings about the dangers of allowing women to have unbridled access to and power in the public sphere, while simultaneously warning about the temptations of same-sex attraction in women-only spaces. Finally, because Black women rarely played lesbian characters in blaxploitation films, the existence of Black lesbians was denied.
In addition to the various ways that blaxploitation films contained and recuperated the Black female revolutionary, the star images of the lead actresses in these films are an important part of understanding how Black female revolutionary iconography as a means of containment and recuperation of Black women activists. Because Pam Grier is most associated with the genre, her career is particularly illustrative. Grier’s filmic career began during the 1970s when she starred in low-budget exploitation films produced by American International Pictures (Bogle, Encyclopedia 398). Grier’s star image can be best understood in terms of Richard Dyer’s concept of "structured polysemy." According to Dyer, polysemy refers to "multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies...This polysemy is structured"(63). Grier’s star image allowed a variety of audiences to derive a variety of meanings and pleasure from her performances, within certain boundaries.

Pam Grier's early performances and success within the historical genre of the exploitation film is an important part of understanding how her star persona functions as part of the containment and recuperation of the Black female revolutionary. It is also important to consider how promotional materials and interviews worked in conjunction with her filmic performances and added to existing discourses about Black and women's liberation.

In the August 9, 1973 issue of *Jet* magazine, Grier is featured on the cover. She wears a red blouse that is unbuttoned and tied just above her waistline. She stands facing the camera with her hands on her hips and her mouth opened.
slightly. In this photograph, she embodies her most famous filmic characters, Coffy and Foxy Brown. This conflation of Pam Grier with her on-screen image and her responses to questions about her personal life and desires all come together to contribute to the larger discourse on revolutionary Black women that was circulating during the time. There are several areas of interest highlighted in the Jet interview that are particularly relevant to my earlier discussion about the ways in which blaxploitation film negotiated various anxieties provoked by the Black revolutionary female figure. For example, the interviewer asks "What attracts you about a man?" ("Pam Grier Finds Fame" 59). This question assumes and affirms the public assumption that Grier is heterosexual. This is very important because of Grier's early film career in which she played lesbian characters. Like many of the films discussed earlier, the series of questions seeks to contain and claim Grier for a Black heterosexual demographic. More specifically, the questions focus on her appeal to the Black male audience. Through emphasizing her sexual interest in and availability to Black men, the article contains the heavy association of Grier with her earlier lesbian roles while simultaneously assuring the masses of Black men that Grier likes average Black men.

When Grier says that "what comes out of [a man's] head" is what attracts her, the interviewer is concerned and asks if Grier only dates "intellectuals"("Pam Grier Finds Fame" 60). Grier reassures the interviewer and the audience that she is not exclusively interested in intellectuals and would date "teachers, postmen,
truck drivers or cab drivers" ("Pam Grier Finds Fame" 60). Not only does her response assure Black men that she is straight, it also assures the readers that she does not allow class concerns to influence her decisions about which men to date.

Another important part of this interview focuses on Grier's relationship to feminism, in an attempt to make sure that Grier's allegiance is to the Black liberation struggle and not women's liberation. After discussing why she believes that marriage is not necessarily important, Grier is confronted with the question: "But you're not into women's lib..."(60-61). She responds,

"No, but I can dig where they're coming from. It's just that Black women were doing their thing way back in history. The race wouldn't have survived otherwise..."(61)

Grier continues with a discussion of Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden*, a book based on interviews with women about their sexual fantasies. Grier uses her discussion of this book to illuminate why she thinks Black women are stronger than white women and by extension why Black women do not need the women's liberation movement. Grier explains her thoughts about the women's movement:

[Nancy Friday] interviewed quite a few sisters. They were much freer than the white women she interviewed. Black women were thinking and talking about that long before the white women were about to...because they were stronger in many ways. But Black women never talked about it around men or older women because of the religious thing ("Pam Grier Finds Fame" 61).
What is striking about this conversation is the way that Grier's response simultaneously affirms women's liberation, while distancing herself and other Black women from the mainstream association of feminism with white middle and upper class women. She also reinforces the myth that Black women are inherently stronger and freer than white women, which in turn emphasizes the notion that Black women do not need feminism.

Another way to understand the multiple functions and meaning of blaxploitation films featuring Grier is through attention to spectatorship. Numerous scholars, such as Judith Mayne, Patricia White and Jacqueline Bobo have tried to make sense of female spectatorship in light of the overwhelming evidence that classic Hollywood cinema addresses the male spectator. Rather than viewing the cinematic apparatus as constructing and stabilizing the viewer into an unchanging and predetermined relationship to the screen, feminist film theory has tried to account for the ways that female spectators negotiate the cinematic apparatus. Based on critiques of her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey revised her analysis of female spectatorship to consider the possibility that female viewers can shift between passive identification and a more active identification, which she had previous defined as masculine (Mulvey, "Afterthoughts" 72). In her study of the female fans of actresses of the 40s and 50s, Jackie Stacey emphasizes the diverse methods for understanding processes of identification employed by audiences in relationship to star images (Stacey 159). Judith Mayne's analysis of spectatorship in Cinema
and Spectatorship emphasizes aspects of contradiction and paradox, and the importance of paying attention to the ways that spectators negotiate cultural texts (92-93). Teresa de Lauretis contends:

If it is taken for granted that relations between meanings and images exceed the work of the film and the institution of the cinema, then it must be possible to imagine how perceptual and semantic contradictions may be engaged, worked through, or redirected toward unsettling and subverting the dominant formations (68-69).

Attention to the ways that Black men and women, as well as other "interpretive communities"(Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers 22) respond to Pam Grier is important in understanding the function of her star persona and the cultural meanings of her films. While Donald Bogle argues that most black women found it difficult to relate to the Black heroines in blaxploitation films (Bogle, Encyclopedia 251), others have asserted the multiple ways that women derived pleasure from Grier's work. Bogle's assumption that black women could not relate to the characters in Grier's films assumes that black female spectators could not possibly find other points of pleasure beyond identification with the heroine. It also ignores the actual evidence that there were black women who were in some ways drawn to these images. According to Patricia Hill Collins,

During the early 1970s, when films such as Shaft and Superfly presented African American women as sexual props for the
exploits of Black male heroes, Pam Grier's films signaled the arrival of a new kind of 'bitch.' As a 'Black Bitch,' Grier's performances combined beauty, sexuality, and violence (Collins, Black Sexual Politics 124).

Collins sees filmic characters such as Foxy and Sheba as fluctuating between derision and admiration. A key part of this admiration is contingent on the Black female heroine utilizing her "...looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities"(Collins 124). What is compelling about this use of one's femininity in the service of the community is its relationship to Black Nationalist rhetoric that privileges the survival of the entire race (defined by the experiences of Black men) at the expense of Black female self-determination. In response to Bogle's reference to the celebration of the white man's castration at the hands of Foxy, Collins responds:

Apparently, in 1974, Black men were not intimidated by Grier's depiction of a strong Black woman, as long as she was on their side. Grier may have established a template for a new kind of 'Black bitch,' but contemporary Black popular culture's willingness to embrace patriarchy has left the 'Black bitch' as a contested representation (125).

Other Black female scholars, such as Stephane Dunn, acknowledge the allure, power and desirability of the star image and characters popularized by Pam Grier, while simultaneously recognizing that many of her roles failed to
challenge institutions of patriarchy and white supremacy that reinforced
negative depictions of Black women (Dunn 71). Bogle contends that some white
feminists lauded Grier as a heroine (Bogle, Toms, Coons 252). He assumes that
Grier's appearance on the cover of Ms. Magazine in 1975 could only be attributed
to her popularity among white feminists, despite the fact that Black women were
very much involved in the feminist movement and may have been inspired by
the heroic role that Grier played in these films. Cultural critic Lisa Jones argues
that despite the negativity of these depictions of Black womanhood:

Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown raised Hollywood's threshold of
black female visibility. Whatever you say about Cleo and Foxy,
they are not shuffling mammies, teary-eyed mulattoes, or boozy
blues singers. They talk back" (Jones 85).

Jones' analysis is important because it highlights the complex ways that Black
female spectators negotiate and redefine the star image of Pam Grier. According
to Gwendolyn Foster,

Pam Grier [is] a telling example of a mimic woman, whose
appearances in seventies blaxploitation film are immersed in the
Other's authorial voice and space. Nevertheless, Grier effectively
exploits the agency of the exploitation film that seeks to capture
her…Pam Grier's 1970s films exploit Pam Grier, but Grier exploits
the narrative zone in a characteristic display" (Foster 174).
Foster's reading of Grier's work as a type of mimicry provides a way to understand how Grier's performance and star persona might open a space for Black female spectators to gain empowerment and pleasure from her work. If Grier can effectively negotiate the restricted space of the blaxploitation genre, the same is certainly true for Black female spectators, who must grapple with the many contradictions that her star persona and performances embody.

The pleasurable negotiation of the negative stereotypes and the empowering aspects of these images are facilitated in various ways. First, blaxploitation films provide an example of Black women displaying a level of agency unfettered by the control of others. Second, despite using sex and violence to achieve their goals, these female protagonists are skilled strategists who identify their targets, devise a systematic plan of attack, and implement that plan. Finally, these characters serve as vehicles for Black women to escape into a world where they can experience the liberation of embracing that, which is wild, untamed, and dangerous within them. By using an "oppositional gaze" (hooks, Black Looks 199), African American women can create new meanings that deconstruct, recreate, and redefine these images and their impact.

In addition to being a clearly attractive and alluring star to female viewers in general, raises the important way that reading against the grain can significantly impact the meaning and function of a work. Evidence of Grier's lesbian following is apparent in films directed by lesbians, such as Cheryl Dunye and Etang Inyang. In addition, her casting as Kit in the
lesbian drama, *The L-Word* further emphasizes her importance as a cultural icon among lesbian spectators. Patricia White's analysis of lesbian spectatorship in her book, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, is an important resource for understanding how lesbian spectators subvert classic heterosexual narratives through a complex process of finding potential points of same-sex desire and lesbian subjectivity in mainstream films that privilege heterosexual spectators.

Such an alternative reading and production of meaning is apparent in Etang Inyang's filmic homage to Pam Grier, *Badass Supermama* (1996). A close reading of this film provides evidence of the ability of Pam Grier's star persona to be appropriated for the desires of a Black lesbian spectator. Such a reading would challenge Jennifer DeVere Brody's suggestion that Pam Grier's portrayal of *Foxy Brown* is less conducive to a queer reading than Tamara Dobson's portrayal of *Cleopatra Jones* (93-96). It would also refute the assertion made by Black male film scholars that black women could find little to identify with in Grier's films (Guerrero 99).

Inyang makes her identification with Grier clear when she asserts in the opening of *Badass Supermama* that she, like many young girls, was "searching for a mirror, a true reflection of [herself]." While she readily admits that she "had a crush" on Foxy, she also admits that Pam Grier's performance as Foxy Brown "scared the shit out of [her]." This mixture of desire and fear is an important aspect of the appeal of these films.
This tension between wanting to be Grier and wanting to possess Grier is another important aspect of Badass Supermama. Kelly Hankin argues that Inyang's film explores her frustrated identification with and desire for Grier, as well as her examination of the sexism within blaxploitation films (83). In addition, she sees Inyang's "celluloid" plastic surgery of Foxy Brown into the remake Badass Supermama as "an act of unwavering cinephilia" (113) that provides another way to understand Pam Grier's star image as transcending the blaxploitation box to which she has largely been relegated.

By explicitly using her voice within the film to read Foxy Brown against the grain, Inyang asserts her authority to claim Foxy and Grier as her own, both as a role model and a lover. In addition to using her voice to interrogate Grier and her film, Inyang inserts her own body into the clips that she uses from Grier's films. This is an insertion of the Black lesbian subject into a filmic narrative that in many ways disavows Black lesbian existence. Inyang positions herself as a member of the audience in a theatre gazing at Foxy Brown. Through this device, she reminds the viewer of the central role that Black women play as spectators of Hollywood cinema. While engaging with disturbing images of rape, torture and women battling women, Inyang tells us that she needs to "reinvent what [she] sees" in order to embrace Foxy and Grier as her own. Through her authorial role as director and her position as a fan and spectator, Inyang carves out a space where Black women can construct their own versions of Black womanhood. Pam Grier's multiple and shifting star persona facilitates this reimagining of the Black
female super heroine. The fact that Inyang is a larger woman, but nonetheless embodies the Foxy narrative is also a way of countering the hegemonic consumption of Grier as sex symbol. Her insertion of herself into the famous bar scene in *Foxy Brown* is a meditation on where a black lesbian fits in when all the white women in the bar are lesbian and all the straight women are black. This is particularly crucial because Inyang's primary object of desire, Grier, is constructed as violently against lesbians in this visual text. She is the character that rushes in to save her friend from the advances of a butch white lesbian. She is also the heroine in the story. She is the figure in the text that Inyang wants to identify with. As a spectator, she must negotiate the simultaneous acknowledgement and denial of her identity.

Identification is also apparent in Inyang's decision to do a parody of Foxy Brown, by donning an Afro wig in her film. It is significant that she chooses this representation of Grier's image to emulate instead of wearing a straight, long wig, another incarnation of the Foxy Brown character. Perhaps by embodying the more "authentic" African American persona of Foxy, Inyang identifies with the strength, power and independent aspects of the character and its revolutionary potential.

Inyang does this through inserting herself, a lesbian-identified Black woman, into the filmic narrative. She seems to cower in the corner as the women fight each other, black against white, gay against straight. However, through the insertion of her dialogue she pleads with the forces that define lesbian identity
and African American identity as mutually exclusive. She is foxy, but she is also lesbian. She is "down for the struggle" but she does not advocate fighting among women or the perception that the women's movement is a white women's movement. Her text shows the ways that desire is negotiated simultaneously with a critical evaluation of the medium of blaxploitation and the construction of characters like those popularized in the films featuring actresses like Grier. Inyang adds to the construction of Grier's star persona and includes a more complex text from perspective of a Black lesbian spectator.

To further explore the differences between the ways that male spectators and female spectators, particularly lesbian spectators, consume Pam Grier's image, a comparison between the use of her image by Quentin Tarantino and Etang Inyang is instructive. Both directors appropriate her star image and persona into their work. Like directors of her earlier films, Tarantino uses these techniques in his Grier tribute film, Jackie Brown.

Tarantino's desire as a "superfan" and "recycler" of icons of mass memory (Willis 197) drives his use and depiction of Pam Grier's performance and star image in Jackie Brown. Pam Grier plays Jackie Brown, an airline flight attendant who is stuck between a rock and a hard place. She has been caught by federal agents smuggling money from Mexico for Ordell (played by Samuel Jackson), a dealer of illegal guns. She devises a plan to avoid prison and steal Ordell's money. Her bail bondsman, Max Cherry, played by Robert Forster, assists her. Tarantino sees himself as part of a process of reigniting the career of Pam Grier,
and other actors who were popular during the blaxploitation era. His project is fueled by his enjoyment of Grier and the blaxploitation genre. In an interview about the film, he shares his admiration of Grier:

I've just been a big fan for a long time. She is truly a great icon, and she holds a very special place in cinema history. When the blaxploitation phenomenon was going on in the '70s, you had Jim Brown, probably their single biggest star, and they would always say about Brown that he's sort of the black Clint Eastwood. Fred Williamson had the mantle of the black Burt Reynolds; Jim Kelly was the black Bruce Lee. But Pam Grier wasn't a black version of anybody, because there had never been a heroine who specialized in doing action movies, a full-on woman who didn't try to act like a man. Not until women in Hong Kong movies started doing kung fu did that kind of role come up again (Peary 199).

Sharon Willis contends that Tarantino is "both the phantom presence within and a commercial performance extratextually" to his work (196). His film reveals his desire for Pam Grier. While he does not appear in Jackie Brown, he is nonetheless an important presence in the film. For example, his voice is used as the computerized voice on the answering machine located in Jackie's bedroom. More importantly, Tarantino uses the camera and the plot of Jackie Brown to capture and claim Grier.
In the opening sequence of *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino tried to emulate early Grier films, like *Foxy Brown*, that encourage the audience to revel in the beauty and power that she embodies. This scene asks the reader to invest the lead character with the same beauty, grace, power and strength that is associated with Grier. The camera follows her as she walks confidently through the airport. According to Tarantino, "the first half of the opening credit establishes Pam Grier's power and strength. He says,

The second half establishes the reality of Jackie Brown's character...After the bad-ass opening credit sequence, two minutes later she's serving peanuts. It starts off as this mythical superhero figure, and then by the end of the credit sequence we've brought it back down to earth" (*Jackie Brown: DVD Collector's Edition* 2002).

In many ways, Tarantino tries to represent a "real" Black woman facing a horrible dilemma. However, his practice of memorializing the star persona of Pam Grier and his nostalgic use of elements from the blaxploitation genre, leave the fantasy of Foxy Brown intact. This connection between Tarantino's film and the genre is illustrated in the promotional poster used to market the film. In this poster, we see a reworking of the visual markers that were used in the posters for *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*.
However, there are major differences between Foxy Brown and Tarantino's lead character. Jackie works in conjunction with white men. This is a huge departure from Foxy Brown. While Grier uses her feminine wiles to trick white men and ultimately to triumphant in her blaxploitation films, as Jackie she works with Max Cherry, a White man, to escape the clutches of the federal agents and Ordell, a Black man. In this way, Tarantino uses the narrative structure to recuperate the radical Black female superhero for white men. There are numerous scenes where Max watches Jackie from a distance. When Max comes to post Jackie's bond, the camera moves in slowly as he watches her approaching him. The scene is accompanied by a track of the romantic soul
classic "Natural High." This song is used throughout the film to signify Max's growing attraction to Jackie. In the original screenplay, the film was to end with a kiss between Pam Grier and Robert Forster (Tarantino 230). Presumably, this scene implies that their relationship continues. However, in the ending of film, Tarantino uses a shot of Jackie kissing Max and driving off into the sunset. This change suggests that given the historical reception of Pam Grier's strong and independent roles that such an ending would be more palatable to spectators who remember her early performances.

An examination of the star image of Pam Grier illustrates the polysemic nature of star images within the structure of Hollywood cinema and the ability of a star's persona to take on a multiplicity of meanings in various contexts (Dyer 63). This facilitates the ability of the filmmaker and spectator to embrace Pam Grier and her characters (with all of their contradictions) and to make them their own. Directors, such as Quentin Tarantino and Etang Inyang have used their films to pay homage not only to the genre of blaxploitation, but specifically to an important actress in the genre. Grier's star status, as well as her popularity among different categories of spectators remains an important part of understanding the iconography of the Black revolutionary female.
CHAPTER 4

LITERARY LEGACIES OF THE BLACK REVOLUTIONARY FEMALE IN THE 80S: ALICE WALKER & AUDRE LORDE

The iconographic images of Black female revolutionary women, while becoming relatively obscure in mainstream visual culture, remained a central and important trope in the work of Black feminist activists, artists and scholars during the 1980s. In this chapter, I trace the connection between the visual regimes of Black revolutionary womanhood and the myriad ways that literary production by Black women in the 1980s continued and expanded upon the visual imagery produced in the 1970s. I analyze the work of writers, such Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, as contributing significantly to the rhetoric and imagery of revolutionary Black womanhood. Both writers construct images of Black womanhood that function intertextually to intervene in debates about Black women that were central in the seventies and eighties. My analysis in this chapter centers on the ways that both Alice Walker and Audre Lorde use images of Black revolutionary women in their texts to intervene in and negotiate Black Nationalism and feminism, as well as serve as a cultural catalysts for the
production of young Black female artists in the 1990s. The aesthetic choices and images constructed by Lorde and Walker, as well as their influence as iconic figures in Black feminist thought provide important literary and visual legacies. This chapter analyzes several images and scenes in Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Walker's *The Color Purple* and its filmic adaptation, as important references and transmitters of Black feminist thought. Both writers provided important lenses through which Black women could negotiate feminist activism along with Black Nationalist activism. In addition, both authors have contributed significantly to the rhetoric and imagery of revolutionary Black womanhood. Their work spoke to Black women, and more importantly for the purposes of my study, it allowed a visual image of revolution to emerge that has remained salient in the work of Black female artists today.

It is also important to keep in mind that the construction of both Lorde and Walker are an essential part of understanding why their written work would serve as a catalyst for the reemergence of interest in representing Black females visually. For example, there was a very public controversy surrounding Walker's critically acclaimed book *The Color Purple*, which constructed Walker as a radical and angry Black woman who was participating in the public airing of "the dirty laundry" of intra-racial rape, incest and domestic violence in the Black community. Within the feminist community, she was heralded as the quintessential Black feminist, partially due to her unabashed willingness to claim feminism, redefined as womanism, in the face of mounting criticism from Black
critics, many male, who saw her work as incompatible with the Black liberation struggle (Walker, *In Search* xi).

Many scholars have discussed the numerous ways that Alice Walker's work, more specifically *The Color Purple*, contributed to a rich tradition of revolutionary Black feminist literature. This would eventually lead to a filmic adaptation, as well as a Broadway version of Walker's novel. This was a very controversial given the fact that Steven Spielberg directed the film. Audre Lorde's construction of herself as a "warrior poet" was a part of her active resistance to the marginalization of Black feminist lesbians. Lorde's radical critique of feminism and Black Nationalist politics inspired many Black lesbians to break the silences that rendered them invisible within these movements. Her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, is a key example of how her writing worked to produce iconic representations of Black lesbian activism and rhetoric that would follow in the 1990s.

During the 1980s, the growth of popular interest in Black women's literature, as well as the growth of Black feminist criticism, played an important role in this process of passing on the visual legacy of Black womanhood. Both Alice Walker and Audre Lorde as part of a tradition and legacy of revolutionary iconography during the 80s. This is particularly relevant when we recall the persistent circulation of mass produced images during the 1970s of public figures such as Angela Davis and filmic characters like Foxy Brown. While less visible than the earlier images of Black female icons discussed in the previous chapters,
Black women in the 80s were faced with the emergence of other stereotypes and discourses about "dangerous" Black womanhood.

Fear of "the welfare queen," who would suck the life out of governmental social services, or the "successful" Black woman who had been co-opted into the system at the expense of Black men, were additional images that had to be deconstructed and countered in work by Black feminist activists and authors. For example, the very controversial confirmation of Clarence Thomas and the construction of his sister as a welfare queen and Anita Hill as an angry Black professional woman who was attempting to sabotage the career of an accomplished Black man illustrate the prominence of these stereotypes. Toni Morrison's *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* provides a variety of essays by scholars that explore the ways that Black women were stereotyped and demonized during the confirmation process. Wahneema Lubiano explains that "the welfare queen" has become "...the shortest possible shorthand for the pathology of poor, urban, black culture" and "the black lady" is "the one whose disproportionate overachievement stands for black cultural strangeness ensures the underachievement of the black male" (Lubiano 335).

Literature was an important part of countering these stereotypes. Novels by Black women created portraits of Black revolutionary womanhood that would have a tremendous impact on young Black women who were struggling with how to define themselves as workers for racial and gender justice. It would also
serve as a way to bridge and mediate the gap between visual imagery in the 70s and the visual self-fashioning of Black womanhood that would emerge in the early 1990s.

The portrait of Black women in Black women's literature has been discussed at length by Black feminist critics, such as Barbara Smith and Ann DuCille. Numerous other scholars have critically examined these texts as part of a rich canon of Black literary production in the 70s and 80s. Anthologies, such as Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color, Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology and All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies emphasized strength as the defining feature of revolutionary Black womanhood reflected in this literature. Whereas works by Audre Lorde and Alice Walker also emphasize strength, the portraits of Black womanhood in their work actually produced complex visual imagery of Black revolutionary womanhood. In other words, their depictions served as a bridge between literary and visual culture.

Literary critiques by scholars such as Barbara Smith have analyzed the work of Black women as providing an important standpoint that had been previously ignored by Black men and white women. She questions whether traditional literary theory can be used to understand the work of Black women, such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker (Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" 159). She also specifically calls for a Black feminist criticism that not
only addresses sexism, but also the heterosexism and homophobia manifested in the criticism of Black feminist literature. She explores how through reading against the grain or between the lines one can find multiple meanings within a text. For example, her controversial reading of Morrison's *Sula* as a lesbian text, which was denied by Morrison, emphasized how the emphasis placed on intimacy between women was privileged over heterosexual relationships in the novel (Smith 165). She also suggests that homophobia and the invisibility of Black lesbians accounts for the inability of some readers to read the relationship between Sula and Nel as an erotic one, despite the sensual and intense way that the language in the text makes such a reading possible (165). Like Smith, I employ a Black feminist criticism to understand how characters in texts by Alice Walker and Audre Lorde work not only on a written level, but also allow for a visual imagining of revolution that has remained salient in the work of Black female artists today.

The visual aspects of Alice Walker's work are particularly important when we consider the extent to which her work and the work of other Black women have been easily translated into the visual medium. Many have been inclined to take this work and make these compelling portraits visible, allowing the texts to be consumed visually by some who may not have read the original novels. For example, the adaptation of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, into a film and a Broadway play suggest the extent to which Black women's literature evokes and compels visualization. Part of this is a function of our cultural
obsession with Black female bodies, particularly the sexualized Black female body, but also our general inclination toward visual media as opposed to written media. The inclination of producers such as Oprah Winfrey to visually represent these fictional works suggest that the invisibility of Black women that texts such as The Color Purple tried to overcome actually worked not simply on a written level, but also in the realm of the visual. These texts yell, "See me!" and filmic adaptation provided that opportunity. In addition, as we will see in the following chapter, these texts serve as an important bridge in the continued development of a Black feminist consciousness among Black women performers and spectators during the third wave.

Unlike the filmic representations of Black women in blaxploitation films from the 70s that denied the vulnerability of Black women, the works of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde function as conduits between second wave and third wave feminist performance that introduce a nuanced and complex portrait of Black female strength tempered by vulnerability. Black female characters in blaxploitation films, such as Foxy Brown, could be beaten, drugged, raped and emerge seemingly with no scars ready to continue the battle to avenge the death of a Black man. In contrast, Walker and Lorde produce characters whose pain in the face of abuse is salient. In others words, the strength of these characters coexists with vulnerability in a world that often views Black women as invulnerable to the harsh realities of oppression. Walker clearly rejects the myth of the Black superwoman and does not sugarcoat the real consequences of
revolutionary struggle on the lives and bodies of Black women. Specifically, she creates portraits of severe suffering and sacrifice, as well as a candid exploration of sexism and homophobia in the Black community. In addition, both Walker and Lorde celebrate strong Black women without falling into the same trap as many depictions of Black revolutionary women in the 1970s that valorized Black women as sacrificial lambs for the cause of Black freedom as defined by the experiences of Black men.

In addition to writing empowering images of Black women within their work, both Lorde and Walker constructed themselves as being important actors in revolutionary activism. For example, Audre Lorde calling herself a "warrior poet" suggested a certain orientation and determination that emphasized her willingness to fight for the struggle against all forms of oppression (Lorde, Sister Outsider 42). In this way, her rhetoric as well as the images that she created in her work spoke to and portrayed an aspect of Black womanhood that was more focused on strength and the willingness to demand that their voices be heard. In her essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she states:

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live...And the visibility
which makes us most vulnerable is that which is also our greatest strength." (Lorde, Sister Outsider 42)

Lorde makes it clear that resistance to silence is an important part of moving into the visual. Through writing and vocalizing their resistance, Black women writers challenge their invisibility. When they speak one does not only listen, one is prompted to look.

Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple, has two important characters that illustrate key elements of Black female revolutionary iconography, Shug Avery and Sofia. The visual is an important part of how these women influence and ultimately help to liberate Celie, the main character, from her resignation that she has to suffer the oppression imposed on her by her husband. Celie watches them and learns. Bell hooks argues that Walker's The Color Purple is a revolutionary text because it "...has as its central goal the education for critical consciousness, creating awareness of the forces that oppress and recognition of the way those forces might be transformed" (hooks, "Reading and Resistance" 292). The main character Celie moves from total oppression to revolutionary resistance. The novel facilitates this through two characters, Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie's daughter-in-law. Walker contrasts these two characters that refuse to conform to conventional standards of femininity with Celie, and is explicit about the fact that Celie is not a fighter (21).

Walker draws on revolutionary iconography and the notion of the Amazon to construct the character of Sofia. We first encounter Sofia when Harpo
brings her home so that his father, Mister, can "have a look at her" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 30). This is a gesture toward the visual scrutiny of Black women as potential wives and mothers. Sofia and Harpo are in love, but her pregnancy is the catalyst that allows the marriage to proceed. She and Harpo march hand in hand up the road to the house, with Sofia in front "like going to war" (30). This is the first time in the text that Walker constructs Sofia as a fighter. This is followed by a description of Sofia's physical appearance. Celie explains:

Harpo so black he think she [Sofia] bright, but she ain't that bright.

Clear medium brown skin, gleam on it like on good furniture. Hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits. She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork (Walker, *The Color Purple* 30).

A visual description that emphasizes Sofia's dark skin color and her demeanor is linked to her lack of submissiveness to male authority and will later be attributed to her Amazonian nature. As the novel develops, we learn that Sofia will not submit to Harpo's attempts to control her. Harpo is distraught because he believes that his wife should submit to his authority. Celie advises Harpo to beat Sofia (36). Harpo's attempts to control Sofia through violence result in physical altercations where Sofia and Harpo are described as fighting "like two mens"(37). Later in the text, Sofia confronts Celie about her advice to Harpo. This
confrontation emphasizes Sofia's construction as an iconic revolutionary Amazonian woman. Sofia says:

   All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncle. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men…I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing…I used to hunt game with a bow and arrow, she say (40).

The image of Sofia using a bow and arrow conjures up the image of an Amazonian warrior. Walker could have used a gun, but instead she chooses to associate Sofia's defiance with a warrior sensibility that is rooted in a female community. When Sofia decides to leave Harpo, her sisters come to retrieve her and her belongings. Celie writes, "Sofia right about her sisters. They all big strong healthy girls, look like amazons" (Walker The Color Purple 67).

   In addition to Sofia, Walker's description of Shug Avery, Mister's mistress and famous blues singer, and Celie's fascination with her and their ultimate love affair are essential parts of the novel. Walker's treatment of their romantic triangle critiques discourses that emphasize the beauty of Black women as objects of male desire and engages an explicit discourse about same-sex desire. Female desire for themselves and each other are emphasized in several parts of the text. Celie is fascinated with Shug. When Shug comes to town, Celie is as excited as her husband about seeing Shug. Celie describes the pink flyer
announcing the return of Shug as "burning a hole" in her pocket (24-25). This
fascination is not new, in fact, Walker shows us the seeds of Celie's fascination
with Shug early in the text.

Celie overhears her father and Mister discussing the availability of her
younger sister, Nettie, for marriage. In the process, Shug Avery is mentioned.
When Celie asks her mom about Shug, she shows Celie a photograph that Celie
clings to and sleeps with at night (6). Walker's introduction of Shug through the
visual is extremely important because it highlights the strong bridge between the
written and the visual that this novel allows. In addition, later in the text Celie
dresses like Shug to prevent her father from raping her sister, Nettie (7). She
sacrifices herself by imitating the visual representation of Shug. Both these scenes
emphasize seeing and performance as essential aspects of Celie's attraction and
fascination with Shug. They also reinforce the important function of the visual
and the later emergence of Celie's revolutionary consciousness within the text.

Later in the book, Shug comes to stay with Celie and Mister because she is
ill. Celie is fascinated by her and is eager to take care of her needs. She thinks
that it is ridiculous that Mister is afraid to bathe a woman with whom he has
fathered three children (49). Celie eagerly volunteers to nurse her husband's
mistress back to health. While she is bathing her, Celie studies Shug's "long black
body" and thinks that she has turned into a man. Shug tells her to take a good
look and poses for Celie (49). Celie's desire for Shug is clear. As she washes Shug,
her hands tremble and she feels like she has been praying (49). When she
prepares and serves Shug breakfast, she thinks "If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth"(51). Shug drinks coffee, smokes and looks at white women in a magazine (51). Again, Walker uses the visual to further explore Celie's attraction to Shug and as a way of critiquing white standards of beauty. She does this by juxtaposing Shug's reading of white women's magazines and Celie's thoughts about Shug's beauty. Celie observes:

She is busy looking at a magazine. White women in it laughing, holding they beads out on one finger, dancing on top of motorcars. Jumping into fountains. She flips the pages. Look dissatisfied. Remind me of a child trying to git something out of a toy it can't work yet (Walker, The Color Purple 51).

This scene highlights the importance of the magazines in the construction of feminine beauty. It also suggests the inability of Black women to gain much from focusing on mainstream Eurocentric images of femininity. This is further emphasized in the following scene when Celie washes and combs Shug's hair. Celie says that Shug "got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair [she] ever saw, and [she] loves every strand of it. The hair that come out in [her] comb [she] kept" (53). Through Walker's description of a very common practice among Black women and girls, she pays homage to bonding rituals among Black women and celebrates natural hair, a very popular practice among Black revolutionaries during the 70s when The Color Purple was originally released. Celie's careful
attention to grooming Shug would eventually "scratch a song out of her head" (53) that she would later dedicate to Celie.

After Shug recuperates and is able to perform, she performs at Harpo's juke joint. She sings a song by Bessie Smith, another famous blues singer that Shug claims to know (Walker, The Color Purple 72). This reference to Bessie Smith is important because she, as well as other blues singers, like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey were rumored to have been sexually involved with women. Celie describes how jealous and hurt she feels when Shug looks at Mister (73). She wants to have Shug look at her in the same way. Shortly thereafter, Shug calls Celie and sings the song that she scratched out of Shug's head (73). Again, looking and visual performance are emphasized in the novel.

Shug teaches Celie to love herself through the visual. Shug and Celie discuss sex and the fact that Celie does not enjoy sex. Celie knows nothing about the sexual aspects of her body and Shug cannot believe that Celie is afraid to look at herself (77). Shug encourages Celie to look at her vagina using a mirror and explains the pleasure that can comes from stimulating her clitoris (77). Shug says "It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? (78). Later that night, Celie masturbates as she listens to Shug and Albert having sex (77-78). Later in the text, Celie and Shug become lovers (113-114). Walker makes their love relationship and building of a life together a central aspect of her book.

In the filmic adaptation of The Color Purple, Walker along with Steven Spielberg and Quincy Jones visually brings to life the characters in her book.
There are scenes of beauty, such as young Celie and her sister playing patty cake in the field, and there are scenes of brutality and horror, particularly the scenes where Celie is sexually and physical abused. Walker played a central role in the process of adapting her novel into a film. This is documented in the special features portion of the 2003 DVD release of film. Walker explains that she was not satisfied with her initial attempt at writing the screenplay and decided not to use it. Instead, she decided to go with a screenplay written by Menno Meyjes. However, Walker was on the set daily and had an important impact on the film.

The desire of spectators to see The Color Purple suggests several major things. First, it suggests that there is a compulsion to see the characters, specifically the Black female characters that Walker constructs. This is because the narratives that she creates contribute complex portrayals of Black life and Black womanhood that are otherwise unavailable to the masses. Her characters are revolutionary, but not in the same way that revolution had been articulated in the rhetoric of the sixties and seventies. For Walker, Black revolutionary women are "real women" who bleed, have doubts about their strength, and are suicidal and sometimes homicidal. Her engagement with this complex aspect of Black female experience is also addressed in other novels such as Meridian.

For example, in the film there is a wonderfully revolutionary moment where Celie is shaving Mister. She had just been slapped by Mister, while she was in the process of secretly reading letters from her sister that Mister refused to give her. The tension in the film is heighten by the sounds of African drumming
and singing, and is juxtaposed with an initiation ritual in Africa that involves the cutting of marks on the faces of male and female initiates. What makes this scene particularly revolutionary is the ways in which we are encouraged to watch the warrior within Celie emerge as she methodically prepares the knife to shave mister. The camera focuses on the visible anger on Celie's face and the methodical way that she sharpens the knife. She has been warned several times throughout the film that she had better not accidentally cut Mister. However, this is the first time in the film when we see Celie transformed from a scared child into a potentially dangerous woman. Because of her discovery of his most harmful treachery, keeping her from her sister, and her realization that she has the power to free herself from Mister, she is able to perceive the razor not as grooming tool, but instead as a revolutionary tool to escape her oppressor. The negotiation of the desire to kill and humanistic values comes to a head as we see Shug running through the fields to stop Celie. Shug, Mister and Celie's lover, intuitively senses Celie's rage and homicidal intent. As tension builds in the scene and Celie raises her hand to "shave" Mister, Shug grabs her hand at this critical moment and prevents the slaughter. This would not be the last time that Celie would confront mister with a knife.

At one of several dinner scenes in the film, Shug announces that she, her husband and Celie are leaving. Mister asserts his male authority as husband and forbids Celie to leave. He and his father laugh and joke about the foolishness of Celie thinking that she could leave her husband. This jovial interaction is
abruptly interrupted by Celie, who stabs her knife into the table and threatens her abusive husband by holding the knife to his neck. The knife is a symbol of male power and the subordination of women throughout the novel. Celie is no longer using a blade to shave her husband or to chop food for feeding his family. Instead, she uses the knife as a warrior to draw a very clear boundary between herself and the authority of her husband. The camera tightens in on the fear in Mister's eyes as Celie asserts herself. This awakening of the warrior in Celie facilitates a "revolution" within the familial unit, as Sofia regains her voice and the fiery spirit –illustrated by her laughter – that the racist justice system as beaten out of her. Squeak (Harpo's mistress) affirms her right to be called by her real name, Mary Alice and her determination to leave with Shug and Celie to pursue a singing career. In the novel, when Mister threatens to slap Celie at the dinner table, she stabs the knife into Mister's hand (Walker The Color Purple 200).

In the filmic adaptation, the men are stunned into silence and the women's voices emerge. This is a turning point for Celie and the other women in the film. They have found their voices and strength while seated at the dining room table. This brings to mind the kitchen table, a site of dialogue and consciousness-raising for Black women that has been discussed by Black women scholars and celebrated in the creation of companies such as The Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. Shug and Celie's relationship facilitates her ability to move to a revolutionary space where she can imagine her own freedom.
An earlier scene in the film that highlights the power of women and lesbian desire occurs in a scene where Celie plays “dress-up” and tries on one of Shug’s dresses. In this scene, the red beaded dress associated with being a loose woman who sings worldly music becomes an important symbol of revolution. Because Shug is a rebel who walks to the beat of her own drum and refuses to conform to the puritanical standards around her, Celie donning her dress is an important visual moment in the film. Through wearing Shug’s dress and being forced to reclaim her smile in the mirror, Celie is transformed and is able to see her own beauty and desirability as a woman. Using the mirror as an important device in this scene, the director allows us to experience the beginnings of a process of transformation of Celie into a revolutionary figure in the text. Celie becomes Shug for a moment, or at least she sees the reflection of her potential as a revolutionary reflected in the mirror. That this scene is followed by a tender kiss between the two women is important because it symbolizes a women's only space where the love of women is a revolutionary catalyst. The strong negative reaction of some audiences and critics to this very small expression of same-sex love and tenderness shows the revolutionary nature of the scene. It highlights the "uses of the erotic as power" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53) and it suggests the power of women's "play" in the process of consciousness-raising that is so crucial to the personal revolution that Celie must go through in order to survive.

Although both Walker and Steven Spielberg have been criticized for downplaying the intensity and serious nature of Shug and Celie's relationship,
which was more explicit in the book, the visual image created in this scene, as well as the mise-en-scène created through lighting and the playing of blues music, make a powerful visual statement. It allows the power of female love to be reflected not only to Celie as Shug holds her in front of the mirror; it also allows the audience to see the revolutionary potential of this simple act. The fact that one of the most revolutionary women in the novel and film is a dark blues singer is important given the historical legacy of the blues singer documented in Angela Davis' book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Davis asks:

What can we learn from women like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday that we may not be able to learn from Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell? If we were beginning to appreciate the blasphemies of fictionalized blues women—especially their outrageous politics of sexuality—and the knowledge that might be gleaned from their lives about the possibilities of transforming gender relations within black communities, perhaps we also could benefit from a look at the artistic contributions of the original blues women (xiv).

The association of blues singers with willful and independent female sexuality that challenged interpersonal emotional and physical violence within male/female relationships, as well as the celebration of same-sex love, is a prominent feature of Shug's construction in Walker's novel.
One drawback to the adaptation of texts such as *The Color Purple* is that it takes the vision of one or a few and links it back to a text in ways that do not necessarily accurately depict the author's visions. However, the visual adaptation of a text allows these cultural productions to function intertextually. They reference each other in an ongoing play between the visual and the written and through this process work to extend the narrative of Black women's battle against racism, sexism, classism and homophobia into the third wave. Consequently, we see that the revolutionary iconography did not disappear; it simply morphed and expressed itself in a new form. The importance and resonance of the material among Black women, as well as the mainstream attention that some of these texts received, allowed them to pass on remnants of revolutionary iconography and rhetoric that would inform the work of late Black female performance artists.

Walker's critically acclaimed novel and the filmic adaptation had a profound impact on the written and visual legacy of the Black revolutionary woman in popular culture. In addition, it cemented her image as a radical and revolutionary activist, who received praise as well as criticism. The strong Black women in the novel and the film, particularly Sofia and Shug, represent an important part of who Walker is and what she stands for in terms of radical, revolutionary Black feminism. In an online transcript featuring an on stage interview with Amy Goodman during the 30th anniversary of Media Alliance in 2006, Amy Goodman asks Walker, "You write in *The Same River Twice*: 
Honoring the Difficult 'What I have kept, which the film avoided entirely, is Shug’s completely unapologetic self-acceptance as outlaw, renegade, rebel and pagan.' Do you see yourself that way?” Walker responded:

Oh, absolutely. Yes. Why wouldn't I be? I know I'm very soft-spoken, but I have endeavored to live my life by my terms and that means that I am a renegade, an outlaw, a pagan... A rebel, oh yes.

Oh yes, and there is no reason not to rebel. I learned that really early. There is no reason whatsoever ("Alice Walker: Outlaw" 6).

Walker continued the interview and explores the ways that the harsh criticism she received for the book and the film hurt her. However, she recognizes that it is something that no longer bothers her (6). Walker's characterization of herself as "soft-spoken" and visual images which seem to depict a serene public image sharply contrast Walker's historical status as a radical, revolutionary civil rights activist. In other words, the most well-known visual images of Walker do not appear to match the markers of revolutionary iconography that were prevalent during the 60s and 70s. However, her activism, writing, her unapologetic stances and her visual image are consistent with the changing iconography of Black female revolutionaries that emerged in the 80s.

On the cover of one of most influential book of essays, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose, Walker wears the classic Afro, which was starting to wane in popularity during the 80s (Figure 14). However, her Afro would later be replaced by dreadlocks, a style that was associated with
radicalism within the mainstream imagination, especially during the conservative era of the 80s. On the cover of *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, she rests her face against her finger suggesting that she is in deep thought. This pose represents her role as a scholar and a thinker, but does not seem to capture the radical, pagan, rebel with which Walker identifies. This is one of the more serious pictures of Walker that has been widely circulated. In many shots of Walker, she smiles warmly in the camera and in no way depicts the angry attitude depicted in representations of Black female revolutionaries during the 60s and 70s.

In a photograph that circulates widely on the internet, Walker wears a crown of flowers (Figure 15). This picture captures a less threatening aspect of Walker's persona that seems to obscure the threat of her radical threat to the status quo. However, it accurately captures an important part of Walker's humanist values and her genuine peaceful nature. The existence of both images of the radical revolutionary and the humanist add a more complex narrative about what it means to be a Black woman active in the fight for racial justice. It counters the stereotypical image of Black female revolutionaries who are angry and dangerous and instead emphasizes that revolutionary activism, peace and humanistic values that are important aspects of the Black feminist project that Walker represents.
Figure 14: Cover of Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

Figure 15: Walker with Crown of Flowers
In addition to Alice Walker, the work of Audre Lorde is an example of how revolutionary rhetoric worked in the 1980s to provide the foundations for the reemergence of visual representations of the Black female revolutionary in the 1990s. Audre Lorde is a central and iconographic figure within the feminist movement. Lorde clearly represented herself as a radical revolutionary Black lesbian. Her frank and biting commentary on the feminist movement and the Black civil rights movement, as well as her resolve to resist erasure, is apparent in her poetry and essays.

In *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, Claudia Tate uses psychoanalytic literary theory to understand Black subjectivity and textuality. More specifically, through her analysis of several novels by key Black writers from the Harlem Renaissance, she illuminates the various ways that artists and cultural consumers negotiate desire and what she calls "the protocols of race" (Tate 190). Her framework emphasizes the complexities of meaning production and a close consideration of "the distinctive signifying properties" of the text and "specific emotional and experiential histories" of readers (180). Her discussion is particularly important to understanding the ways that Lorde negotiates lesbian desire and political agency within her writing as an affirmation of a complex and complete Black lesbian subject. She is a clear example of the ways that literature as a vehicle allows Black women to pass on the legacy of revolution through the
construction of important portraits that will be used by future artists to construct
important visual contributions to the legacy of Black feminist activism.

Within feminist communities, particularly after her death, Audre Lorde is
often depicted as “mother, lesbian, nurturer." This was partly due to the fact that
Lorde’s visual image in many ways obscured the very revolutionary aspects of
her work. Two pictures in particular capture the essence of what Lorde has come
to represent. The first is a well-known picture of Lorde that has been utilized as a
poster and has been imprinted on T-shirts as well (Figure 16). It is clear by the
number of times this poster has been displayed that it carries tremendous weight
in terms of its strength as an iconographic artifact that would continue to have
sway in the consciousness of Black women and particularly those who identify as
lesbian and/or feminist.

In the colorful poster featuring Lorde, her raised hands are reminiscent of
a ruler who is waving to their subjects. Her stance is powerful and one could
imagine several on-lookers applauding her presence. Coupled with her African
inspired clothing, this picture clearly illustrates her importance as a symbol of
triumph. It also suggests a certain reverence for her as an important activist for
the rights of oppressed people.
The cover shot of Lorde on her book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* is another photograph of Lorde that has been circulated widely on the internet.
and has been used as a postcard (Figure 17). Like the poster, she pays homage to African fashion by wearing Kenté cloth draped around her neck. She stares directly at the camera and holds the side of her eyeglasses, in a gesture that suggests that she is about to impart wisdom to a group of students she is teaching. In no way does this photograph warn of the biting and radical commentary contained within its pages. Her image in the photograph produces a cognitive dissonance for those who understand Audre Lorde's life, warrior spirit and the radical legacy of her poetry and essays.

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde infuses her identity as a Black, lesbian, feminist, disabled poet and cancer survivor into her reflections and memories of her childhood and growth into womanhood. Lorde's attention to revealing lesbian desire within a variety of contexts allows her to construct a space where Black lesbians always existed. She compares her struggles with the loneliness of being Black and gay with an Amazonian past. She says,

> I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt.... There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour (Lorde, *Zami* 176).

This connection between the Amazon and Black lesbian identity is a consistent theme in *Zami*. 
In her discussion of her mother, she emphasizes her "difference" which was another complex way that she expands the idea of Black lesbian identity. In her biomythography, her mother is constructed as a superwoman (Lorde, Zami 15). Lorde's description of leaving her mother's home at the age of seventeen is illustrative of the way that she associates her mother's difference with an inherited warrior sensibility. She explains:

I made an adolescents's wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, close to my own strength, which was after all not so very different from my mother's. And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving. How to cook the foods I had never tasted in my mother's house. How to drive a stick-shift car. How to loosen up and not be lost.

Their shapes join Linda and Gran'Ma Liz and Gran'Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time they were all warriors (104).

Lorde's references to warriors throughout her text are not only associated with an inheritance she received from her mother and other female ancestors, it is also linked to the women she encountered throughout her life. These women included friends and lovers.

Certainly, Lorde's outspoken critiques of homophobia and racism make it possible for Black women negotiating the borders between race, gender and sexuality possible. Her construction of herself as a "warrior poet" and "sister
outsider” conjures up images of the Dahomey warriors, to whom she refers to frequently in her work.

The image of the Amazon would also emerge in Zami when she falls in love with a woman named Eudora, who has lost a breast due to breast cancer. Lorde describes her love and reverence for Eudora’s body:

Kneeling, I pass my hands over her body, along the now-familiar place below her left shoulder, down along her ribs. A part of her. The mark of the Amazon. For a woman who seems spare, almost lean, in her clothing, her body is ripe and smooth to the touch. Beloved. Warm to my coolness, cool to my heat. I bend, moving my lips over her flat gentle stomach to the firm rising mound beneath (169).

During her own battle with cancer, Lorde again references the strength of the Amazons when she wonders how fifteen year old girls could endure the painful removal of one’s breast (Lorde, The Cancer Journals 28). Like the mythical Amazons, the missing breast allowed Lorde and her characters to pull their metaphorical bow against oppression.

Lorde’s insistence that Black lesbians be recognized by the Black community is important as we seek to understand how performers like Me’shell Ndegéocello visually represent themselves in their work. The performance of lesbian identity becomes a clear affirmation of the historical presence and continued importance of lesbian understandings of literature and representations.
of Black women. It is clear that characters like Afrekete in Lorde's *Zami* had an impact on how Black lesbians constructed themselves during the nineties. Lorde explains that Afrekete "taught [her] roots, new definitions of our women's bodies-definitions for which [she] had only been in training to learn before"(250). Lorde explains that all the women that she had ever loved a "print" on her life. Her definition of the Zami embraces a complex concept of lesbian identity and womanhood. She explains:

> Zami. A Carracou name for women who work together as friends and lovers. We carry our traditions with us...Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance. *Ma-Liz, Delois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.*

One *home* was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood (255-6).

In the final pages of her biomythography, Lorde solidifies Black lesbian identity as an important part of her lineage and heritage. In addition, she connects with a women-centered community that not only includes those who take women as lovers, but those who sustain other women spiritually and physically.
Afrekete, an anthology of lesbian writing edited by Linda Villarosa, is an important example of Lorde's legacy as a revolutionary activist among young Black women. In fact, the idea promoted by Lorde and most associated with her legacy, "Your silence will not protect you," has been extended into the realm of the visual. Filmmakers like Etaq Inyang and musical artists like Me'shell Ndegéocello use their visual representations to say: "Your invisibility will not protect you." This brings us back to the ways that visual culture becomes an important space of negotiation for Black women who are building on the traditions of the activists and writers of the 80s and 90s who used the written word as a means of affirming their identities as Black female revolutionaries. Through her poetry, essays and her construction as a warrior that Audre Lorde maintains an important link between the 70s and the 90s. What does it means to have been a Black lesbian feminist who had the benefit of having Audre Lorde as a role model?

Both Audre Lorde and Alice Walker function as icons on multiple levels. That is, their influence on the iconography of Black revolutionary womanhood happens on two levels. First, their work provides the imagery that allows for a visual articulation of Black revolutionary womanhood. Second, it also provides a clear articulation of a Black feminist consciousness during a period of decline in mass involvement in the feminist and Black Nationalist movements. Finally, it positions both authors/activists as the embodiment of revolutionary iconography. In other words, the use of their personas as evidence of a radical
Black feminist and lesbian consciousness provides for a salient reference point for young female performers trying to negotiate sexism, racism, homophobia and other "isms" that hinder the progress of oppressed groups. The internet makes the circulation of the work and imagery of Lorde and Walker more accessible to a wider audience and it emphasizes the visual as a means of gaining knowledge.

Both revolutionary writers and activists created a bridge with their work and their personas. They not only represented Black womanhood, but also constructed a visible image of Black womanhood that resonated with Black female artists who were developing their own sense of Black power and feminism. In many cases, this could be read as a romanticized and superficial rendering of Black feminist activism, but it also holds the potential for a working out of Black feminist problem solving and narratives of justice through the visual. Young Black women have begun to embrace revolutionary visuality and share it more freely because people like Walker and Lorde provided the foundation. Whereas we see Black women writers negotiating revolution while juggling various ideological movements, we see artists today using the visual to help them negotiate and define themselves as Black revolutionary women.
In the previous chapter, I argued that during the 1980s Black feminism was able to continue and prosper during the era's conservatism within and through the literary work of prominent activists such as Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. More specifically, I analyzed their work as being an important and essential part of bridging the gap between Black feminist politics in the 60s and 70s and the emerging work of Black female artists in the growing and increasing popular rap and hip-hop musical industry. Through works such as *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker was able to influence numerous young Black women, like Erykah Badu, who began to tell their own stories about Black womanhood and revolution. In fact, Badu used the filmic adaptation of *The Color Purple* as inspiration for the video for her hit song "On & On" (Kaplow 108). Likewise, the important cultural productions of Audre Lorde in her poetry, essays and biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, brought attention to Black lesbian identity, politics and desire within the context of a Black liberation and
feminist struggle that had in many ways rendered the experiences of Black gays and lesbians invisible. Lorde's work would serve as a model for young female artists like Me'shell Ndegéocello who through her music demanded that her identity as an out bisexual Black woman not be used as a basis to diminish her commitment to the liberation of Black people.

African American women artists, such as Ndegéocello and Badu, who came of age during the conservative period of the 1980s, use their musical productions to construct their own versions and cultural performances of Black revolutionary politics that continues the legacy of Black feminist struggle against racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. They accomplish this through a process of drawing on images from the past, as well as, performances and rhetoric from the cultural nationalist and black arts movements of the 60s and 70s. Both artists use an intersectional analysis of oppression that places them squarely in the tradition of Black women theorizing about revolutionary ways to liberate the Black race from various types of oppression. For artists like Badu and Ndegéocello, what I define as "revolutionary performance" involves a type of performative posturing that suggests or explicitly advocates a plan for the liberation of Black people from injustices caused by capitalism, racism, sexism and homophobia. As cultural producers, Badu and Ndegéocello use music to move a revolutionary agenda forward and raise revolutionary consciousness among their listeners.
My analysis helps us to understand this present moment of cultural production and how Black female spectators use music to negotiate the various forces that feed them negative images of Black womanhood. This is a process whereby Black female cultural producers reflect on and reveal aspects of their own personal struggles as Black women, as well as a vision of what the Black community can and should do to prosper within the American context. By drawing on the iconographic legacy of Black female revolutionaries, these women are engaging in a process of producing a vision of Black progress that is not dependent on finding one great messiah (like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X). Instead, they draw on images of Black female leaders who, while they have gained iconic status, were and are still ordinary women who took a difficult stand in the face of tremendous odds and make a positive impact on the world.

Badu and Ndegéocello imagine and articulate a new version of revolutionary politics that gained popularity among fans of the genres of rap and hip-hop that emerged in the 80s and 90s. The growing performance of revolutionary politics within rap and hip-hop is closely related to the genre of neo-soul (which emerged in the 90s), another space where young black people, especially Black women, would give voice to a new narrative of justice that built on revolutionary iconography. This chapter focuses on the work of two neo-soul R&B singers, closely affiliated with rap and hip-hop culture, which emerged in the mid 90s, Erykah Badu and Me'shell Ndegéocello. Both Badu and
Ndegéocello's work engages and utilizes revolutionary iconography and rhetoric to negotiate the culture environment of hip-hop and to construct themselves and their music as a means of nurturing revolutionary consciousness.

While early scholarship on rap and hip-hop music focused almost exclusively on Black male performers, recent scholarship by Tricia Rose, Gwendolyn Pough, Imani Perry and Patricia Hill Collins has emphasized the importance of understanding how young female artists use rhetorical strategies as part of negotiating their places within hip-hop culture. In addition to the rhetorical strategies used by Badu and Ndegéocello in their songs, my analysis explores the visual realm as another way that both artists negotiate a Black feminist sensibility in their performances. In other words, both artists struggle with balancing the revolutionary rhetoric that they borrow from the past with messages of strength and independence that are consistent with Black feminism.

With the increasing availability of visual technologies and the expansion of the internet as a source of information, it is important to understand how visual texts work with other texts to produce multiple meanings and narratives for numerous communities. I am concerned with the way that the visual images and messages that emerge from the work of artists like Badu and Ndegéocello are important to an understanding how we think about justice, revolution and the intersections of race, gender, nationalism, sexuality, and classism. This process of analyzing the interaction of revolutionary images and rhetoric is essential to bridging the gap between visual and literary Black feminist
performance and cultural production. It also documents a legacy that has a profound influence on how the past, present and future generations of Black feminist activists and scholars image themselves and the work they do.

In *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Patricia Hill Collins points to ways that some African American women have bypassed academic venues in favor of reaching the masses (Collins 161). More specifically, she discusses how young women in the hip-hop generation "who do manage to find feminism increasingly carve out a space that simultaneously accepts and rejects the tenets of feminism and nationalism. Specifically, they may be transforming the core feminist ideology that the personal is political in response to the challenges that confront them "(162). She highlights the choice of educated Black women to use popular media such as film, music video and spoken-word poetry to express their feminist politics (191). She is enthusiastic about the direction that she sees young Black female performers heading in terms of the ways that they can positively revitalize feminism (195 -6).

The revitalization of feminism is evident in the work of a generation of young women, like Badu and Ndegéocello, who came into their own during the rise of rap and hip-hop culture. They have used their work to not only declare the "personal is political," they have visually carried on the legacy of Black female representation that preceded them. That is, through their visual representations and performances they pay homage to Black revolutionary women like Angela Davis, while simultaneously negotiating a popular and
political cultural movement (hip-hop) that is rife with misogyny and the general degradation of women.

The visual representations and lyrical choices that I discuss in this chapter are a part of the revolutionary iconography of the Black womanhood. The rhetoric and visual imagery used by these artists places them within Black feminist theorizing about revolution, justice and Black female identity. In addition, their cultural productions illustrate the ways that they negotiate the various contradictions within the popular cultural traditions of rap, hip-hop and neo-soul.

Despite the consumerist culture in which these artists exist, scholars such as Tricia Rose contend that "commodified cultural production is a deeply but crucial terrain for developing politically progressive expression at this historical moment" (Rose, Cultural Survivalisms 263). This is true for Black women who historically have been marginalized and objectified in the hip-hop industry (261). There are strong messages within this music about the place of Black women, both in their communities and the world.

According to Imani Perry, masculinist performance was an important aspect of the performance of rap music and was an important way for Black women to position themselves as legitimate rappers within a fiercely competitive male world (Perry 156). She also argues that "the visual landscape of women hip hop artists represents the contested terrain of the black female body in the music, and made it clear how fraught with sexism and objectification hip hop is, even
for the feminists or self-articulating women in the culture" (Perry 156). She also notes that many of the women who were challenging the previous mainstream conceptions of female beauty promoted by mainstream culture, such as Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah and Erykah Badu would find it necessary to draw on mainstream expressions of female beautification and sexuality that involved sexual objectification (156). This produced a dilemma whereby these performers negotiated their own need to express their sexual agency with dominant stereotypes about the promiscuity of Black women.

The adoption of visual imagery and lyrical performance of blackness in the work of Badu and Ndegéocello is based on a fairly stable and political definition of blackness that developed out of the Black Nationalist movement during the 1960s and 1970s. As I emphasized in Chapter 2, much of the visual representations of Black women within the Black Nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s privileged the experiences of black men over those of women and objectified women in the service of the movement. While Black women were clearly depicted as armed insurgents, they also were often depicted wearing feminine clothing that in a practical world would be hard to negotiate in armed struggle. As a result, the depictions that many male artists constructed for publications like The Black Panther Party Newspaper, while suggesting an egalitarian approach to women standing side by side in the struggle to defend the race, also reinforced standards of feminine beauty that were popular in the mainstream media regarding the attractiveness of women as objects of desire for
men. The use and modification of these elements are an important part of my analysis of the visual imagery and lyrics in Badu's and Ndegéocello's work.

In this chapter, I explore images of Badu and Ndegéocello in order to highlight examples of artists who despite the status of Black women within hip-hop culture have reclaimed a sense of agency and subjectivity, while simultaneously educating young women and men. Instead of focusing exclusively on sex and relationships, both artists sing about other issues, such as spirituality, motherhood, identity and self-representation and revelation. Their works explore their inner psyches and the complexities of being Black women in a world that often marginalizes and excludes the perspectives of Black women.

Embracing a uniquely Black or African beauty aesthetic is another important part of the work of Black female artists, like Badu and Ndegéocello, who engage revolutionary politics in their work. They place an emphasis on wearing traditional African garb, head wraps, and ethnic jewelry. In addition, hair becomes a site for resisting hegemonic notions of beauty imposed by white supremacist patriarchal society and provides a space for open dialogue about intra-group prejudice based on skin color and hair texture. These artists engage in what bell hooks calls "loving blackness as political resistance" (hooks, Black Looks 9). Consequently, the wearing of dreadlocks, natural hair, braids, or other ethnic hairstyles speak to the artists' political position and make the statement that they are "down for the struggle." Some might question whether this aspect of the
new wave in young black female artists is a reflection of young black women's consciousness and direct interest in embracing the African past or aesthetic or whether it is driven by a consumer culture that has commodified the ethnic other and Afrocentricity. I argue that the use of hair in the performances of these artists is part of a complex process of reclaiming the past in order to exist within an artistic culture (hip-hop) that is struggling to define revolution. The cultural work of both Me'shell Ndegéocello and Erykah Badu are excellent examples of this struggle to define revolution and the place of Black women in revolutionary movements.

Self-naming is another important part of the revolutionary performances of Badu and Ndegéocello. During the 60s and 70s, many African Americans took on African names or constructed what would later become African American names as a direct form of resistance and affirmation of their African heritage. This process of renaming is an important aspect of both of the artists that I analyze in this chapter. Erykah Badu, formerly Erica Wright, rejected what she calls her "slave name" (McIver 33). She changed the spelling as an act of agency and empowerment. However, she negotiated this need to redefine herself with a willingness to respect her mother's wish that she keep her given name (32). This act is indicative of the emphasis and respect that Badu gives to being raised by her mother and other mothers, as well as an affirmation of
gynocentric culture. She attributes her last name "Badu" to her love of bebop and jazz, which uses improvisation and the practice of scatting (McIver 43).

Similarly, Me'shell Ndegéocello constructed her star persona partly through a process of rejecting a Eurocentric name and embracing Afrocentricity as a form of resistance. In a 1996 interview for *Essence*, the artist explains that her last name is derived from a Swahili phrase that means "free like a bird" (Greaves 95). Like many African American female and male activists before them, for both artists the very personal act of renaming themselves became a political statement of their commitment to a revolutionary struggle that had its roots in historical Black nationalist struggles for civil rights. Through their names, Badu and Ndegéocello signal to their fans and other listeners that they have revolutionary politics. This along with their lyrical choices connects them to a tradition and legacy of Black feminist activism and revolutionary performance.

Another important theme that emerges in the work of Badu and Ndegéocello is women’s sexuality and agency. Badu's expression of sexuality is exclusively in heterosexual terms. Her object of desire is always the Black man, whom she constructs in her music as a victim of systematic oppression. Her "stand by your man" approach is not without exceptions. For example in her song "Tyrone," she sings to a lover who clearly is not meeting her needs and who in fact uses her to take care of
him (Baduizm 1997). The female protagonist in this song tells her lover that he had "better call Tyrone to help him come and get [his] sh_t." In other words, she is fed up with the numerous excuses that this man gives her for his lack of attention and she is determined not to allow him to continue to use her financially and sexually. This song was an anthem for many Black women at her early concerts.

On her live album, which was released in 1997, you can hear the enthusiasm of the women in the audience when Badu sings the last line of the song: "I think you better call Tyrone, but you can't use my phone." In Badu's narrative, Black men deserve to have the support of Black women, but that support does not include a license to abuse or take advantage of Black women. This is consistent with narratives of Black women from as far back as the blues singers, who while lamenting that they loved a "no good man."

In terms of revolutionary performance, Badu's general approach is consistent with the approach to dealing with sexism taken by many women in the Black liberation struggle of the 70s. However, Black women who choose to "air dirty laundry" in public have been historically constructed as traitors, as evidenced by the reaction of some to Elaine Brown's autobiography, A Taste of Power (1992), which exposed the misogyny and sexism within the Black Panther Party in very explicit ways. Despite this criticism, the enthusiasm of Badu’s "stand by and up to
your man" approach continues to resonate with her female fans. Badu's approach to dealing with Black men, and particularly a form of Black masculinity that harms Black women, is to be public and direct about her critique. In this way, she carries on the tradition of many Black female soul singers, such as Aretha Franklin, who clamored for the respect of their men. This is a process of negotiating loving a Black man and claiming one's agency and right to respect.

Ndegéocello's approach to men and sexuality is complicated by her very open identification as bisexual. In her first album, Plantation Lullabies (1993), she persistently emphasizes the theme of loving Black men. In "Dredlocs," one of her most popular songs from the album, she implores her lover to "rest [his] weary head and let [her] run [her] fingers through [his] dreds." This song includes the line "ooh how I love a Black man oh my." Within this celebration of Black love is also an underlying theme of loving blackness as a response to the cruelty inflicted on Black men by a white, capitalist system. In fact, in much of her music, she indicts a racist capitalist system for creating the conditions of poverty and despair that lead to poverty. In addition, she identifies the racist capitalist system as a major precipitating factor in the incidence of drug addiction within the Black community. In “Shoot’N Up and Gett’n High,” she proclaims that there is a “capitalistic hand around [her] throat/Shootin’ up dope to cope in this dehumanizing society/We both found God when he
O.D.’d’ (Plantation Lullabies 1993). As I will discuss later in this chapter, the celebration of Black love and more specifically of Black men are complicated by Ndegéocello’s performance of female masculinity in her musical and visual performances.

Reaching into the past to reclaim visual images and rhetoric of revolution is a way of raising consciousness. Ndegéocello and Badu are looking to the past for guidance and using it to inspire revolutionary consciousness among the youth and construct a narrative of revolutionary change that emphasizes the centrality of Black women. A closer look at the work of each of these artists reveals the ways that Black female artists negotiate a variety of political positions and movements through the use of political iconography and rhetoric.

Soul singer Erykah Badu is a good example of the numerous ways that Black revolutionary iconography is used in the artistic work of contemporary Black female artists. Badu places herself squarely in the middle of dialogues about race, sex and revolutionary struggle. It is clear that Badu wants to position herself within the tradition of what Joan Morgan calls "hip hop feminism" in her book, When Chickenheads Come to Roost: My Hip Hop Feminism (1999). Badu has to balance her strong message to women with a preoccupation in her work with constructing herself as a Black woman who is supportive of her man and involved a critique of the many ways that young Black men are disenfranchised and discriminated against in the American justice system.
Badu has worn locks, Afros and has even gone bald. All of these stylistic choices draw on fashion from the 60s and 70s. Her use of the colors red, black and green pays homage to symbols of African pride that gained popularity during 60s and 70s and reemerged in the late 80s and 90s along with the reemergence of revolutionary fashion in rap performance.

In his book *Erykah Badu: The First Lady of Soul*, Joel McIver explores the life of the singer and chronicles the meaning and impact of her music. There are several aspects of Badu's early life that I find particularly relevant to my analysis of her music. According to McIver, Badu was raised by her mother and four other women, characterized as "other mothers" (McIver 15). This is important because Badu celebrates her female-centered upbringing. In addition, she says that the music of 60s and 70s icons, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin, had an influence on her work (14). In his biography of Badu, McIver discusses the trend of the embracing of African traditions, which were part of the Black cultural community in Dallas in which Badu grew up. Many early photos of Badu in the earlier part of her career feature her in headwraps and traditional African style clothing. This style is depicted on the cover of her first album (Figure 18).
Many of the photographs of Badu early in her career oddly resemble several of the photos of Black women depicted in publications like *The Black Panther Newspaper*. According to Joel McIver, Badu’s style of dress was a deliberate attempt to express her philosophical approach to life. She says:

The way I dress – I love adorning myself with my culture. And it is not a black and white thing for me, but I am very interested in the black community because there are a lot of professional artists and geniuses who dwell in that community who need to be uplifted in some kind of way… I want to be a different example of what a black woman is, what a black person is. I wear my headwrap because a headwrap is a crown, and I am a queen. A headwrap demands a certain amount of respect – it just does, and I am always head wrapped (McIver 17).
This quote highlights Badu's interest in embracing an African aesthetic not only as a celebration of heritage but also as a source of female empowerment. She uses the headwrap to command a certain amount of respect and to signal to others (male and female) that she demands respect not only as a Black person but also as a Black woman. This message is an important part of her use of revolutionary iconography.

Badu's concern with female empowerment and respect is reflected in the music video for her first single, "On & On" (1997). She co-directed the video with Paul Hunter. Her decision to use the film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as inspiration further emphasizes the important bridge that Walker's work served for young Black women like Badu. The video begins with Badu walking through a field toward a house as she sings her freestyle single "Afro" which is featured on her first album. The song reminds her boyfriend or "daddy" to pick his Afro because it is flat on one side. This is one way that she interjects her Afrocentric sensibility into her interpretation of the film.

In the opening scene of the video, Badu's hair is wrapped. She sings and walks to the family house to hang laundry and do other domestic duties. She assumes the role of Celie in this portion of the video, but her narrative diverts considerably from both the book and filmic version of *The Color Purple*. First, Badu is not married to an abusive husband and she is connected to a larger family. As she climbs the stairs to the family home, her parents and her sister are leaving dressed in their finest clothes. As she walks toward them, her mother
reminds her to do her chores and her sister sticks her tongue out at her. This is reminiscent of the classic narrative of Cinderella, who is forced to handle the domestic duties while her sisters live a lavish life. As she looks inside the house at the chaotic mess, she goes in and slams the door and the music to the video begins. As Badu walks around doing her various tasks, she sings:

Ohh, my, my, my/ I'm feelin' high. My money's gone/I'm all alone/Too much to see, the world keeps turnin'/Oh what a day what a day/Peace and blessins' manifest / With every lesson learned/ If your knowledge were your wealth/Then it would be well earned/If we were made in His image/Then call us by our names/Most intellects do not believe in God/But they fear us just the same (Baduizm 1997).

While Badu is left to take care of the children and do the chores, the camera follows her as she moves from chore to chore with ease. This suggests a freedom that Walker's character, Celie, never had in either the book or the film. Badu handles each task easily and even stops to smell the flowers. There are also several moments of comic relief in the video. Badu chases the dog, who has taken the wash from the line outside. As she chases the dog, she falls over a block of hay and lands in mud. She looks into a camera and proceeds to roll in the mud while singing her song. She falls back and relaxes in the mud, making a clear connection with the earth. The camera is positioned above her as she continues to sing. She relaxes and enjoys the feeling of the mud for awhile and then she heads
back to the house. At the house, she sits in front of a mirror and surveys the damage done to her clothes by the mud. The camera shoots her from behind and captures her reflection in the mirror as she contemplates what to do next. She looks at the emerald green tablecloth and looks back at the camera.

The next scene opens with Badu singing in the local juke joint. She has transformed into her version of Walker's character, Shug Avery. She is dressed in the tablecloth that she has fashioned into an African gown. She has also used part of the cloth to wrap her hair in a traditional headwrap. She stands proudly among the members of the audience, who are tapping their feet and enjoying her performance. She sings:

I'm feelin' kind of hungry/Cause my high is comin' down/Don't feed me yours/Cause your food does not endure/ I think I need a cup of tea/ The world keeps burnin'/Oh what a day, what a day, what a day (Baduizm 1997).

This scene lacks much of the raw sexuality that is depicted in the filmic adaptation of The Color Purple (1985). In the film, Shug Avery exudes sexuality and dances provocatively in her red dress, as the men sweat and drool over her. She thrusts her hips and shakes her breasts with pride and pleasure. In contrast, Badu stands like a queen imparting knowledge to her subjects her are clearly attentive, but not in a sexual way. Michael Gonzales argues that Badu's choices in this video "...conjures up hoodoo folklore, Black Nationalist chic and hip-hop bohemianism [and challenges] the cult of Black pop video hoochies..." (Gonzales
In addition to being a rejection of the over-sexualized image of Black women in music videos, this scene also reaffirms her belief in the Black women are queens deserving of respect. The theme of respect and the elevation of Black people is an important part of her work.

Badu's music reflects her desire to "uplift" the Black community. This rhetoric of "uplifting the race" has been a staple part of how Black female activists have historically positioned themselves in relationship to the larger movement for racial justice. Badu sees her music as raising consciousness, a very important Black feminist project that has its roots in 18th and 19th century Black female activism. This move in her music is also linked to the movement of the 1970s that surrounded her as she was growing up in Dallas.

Another important discourse about the role of Black women in revolution that is included in Badu’s work is the traditional notion that women are essential to the reproduction and nurturing of future revolutionaries. Badu's contribution to this discourse is highlighted in her very public discussion of her maternal identity and public displays of her pregnant body. For example, the cover art for her second album, *Erykah Badu: Live* (1997), includes a picture of Badu's very pregnant belly.

In addition, numerous photographs of Badu with her first child construct her as a Madonna figure holding her son, Seven, who coincidentally was fathered by Andre 3000, lead singer for the popular rap group, Outkast. For Erykah Badu, making music and giving birth are connected. Badu openly
discussed and celebrated her first pregnancy. Badu even uses birth as a metaphor for her work. In an April 1997 interview with Deborah Gregory featured in *Essence*, Badu proclaims, "I’m a child of hip-hop raised on Stevie, Dinah and Miles. Music is in labor now, and I’m a midwife helping with the delivery” (Gregory 66). She considers herself and other new, young R&B singers, as being part of the "rebirth" of soul music.

The concept of mothering in a broader sense is present in the work of progressive Black female artists. The process of mothering goes far beyond traditional notions of rearing one's own biological children. This is not uncommon for Black women, who historically were expected to take care of "other people's children." Mothering within the context of Badu's work is accomplished through the passing on of warnings or advice given to her by her mothers or grandmothers. Badu gives advice on choosing one's friends, in her song "Apple Tree," which was featured on her first album *Baduizm*. In an interview with John Morthland in Texas Monthly, she explains that her grandmother was always "putting proverbs" on her. "One of 'em is you pick your friends like you pick your fruit,' cause you don't want no rotten fruit" (Morthland 58). She also warns Black women about carrying emotional baggage and burdens in her popular song "Bag Lady," featured on her album *Mama's Gun* (2000). Badu plays the role of the wise woman, a common figure in Black women's writing, who passes on important lessons to younger generations.
Several examples of Badu's use of the visual iconography of Black revolutionary womanhood are included on her official website (www.erykahbadu.com). For example, in a bold drawing that appears on the site, she has blue skin (Figure 19).

![Figure 19: Drawing on Erykah Badu's Website](image)

The artistic choice to use blue skin rather than brown or black skin is an interesting choice given Badu's emphasis on Black pride. Perhaps she
feels like an alien in the world we live in or maybe she is suggesting some kind of evolved state of being that goes beyond the binaries of black and white. She is constructed as a cyborg as defined by Donna Haraway in her 1991 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." This is very different from earlier images of Badu that seemed to emphasize an organic connection with the natural world. Instead, Badu merges with a machine to produce her image and music.

This is a futuristic image of Badu that conjures up dangerous notions of the wild, aggressive and erotic Black woman. Her legs are open and she leans seductively to the side. Her gaze is straight forward and her expression is one of confidence. In addition to the blue skin, her hair sticks out in a mane of medusa-like spirals, conveying a wildness and freedom. The background is a bright red series of circles that spiral out like the speakers that are distributed around key parts of Badu's body. Speakers cover her breasts, stomach and inner thighs. The largest circle covers her stomach, which is related to the theme of Black women's reproduction as an important part of the revolutionary struggle and her use of the metaphor of "giving birth" to describe her process of making music. Her pubic area is constructed as the body of a stereo system. The spreading of Badu's legs and the long seductive red fingernails constitute an eroticization of revolutionary iconography that links revolution with a particular brand of Black female sensuality and freedom. The fact that this image is depicted on the website for her recording company Controlfreaq Records is significant because it
suggests a sense of female agency and control. It also plays on connotations associated with a sexually free and wild woman who likes to experiment sexually. Badu participates in one visual discourse within hip-hop culture that objectifies and positions women in terms of how they can satisfy men sexually. However, this image suggests a certain sexual independence and agency often ignored in mainstream rap and hip-hop culture. Badu reclaims Black female sexual agency when she uses the term "controlfreaq." Within male-dominated hip-hop culture, the term "freak" is often used to demean women and connotes a person who is willing to do anything to please her man. Badu changes the phrase and makes it clear that she is in control and comfortable with her sexuality. This picture is particularly interesting when compared with another image that is prominently displayed on Badu's website.

This drawing is of a closed fist raised in the Black Power salute (Figure 20). The major difference is that the thumbnail of this hand is painted a bright color of red, which clearly identifies it with femininity. Overwhelmingly, most of the images of raised fists highlight a male subject. This illustration refocuses the attention back on the vast numbers of Black women who were crucial to the development, progress and longevity of Black progressive movements during the 60s and 70s.
In addition to the themes of Black power and mothering, Badu uses the symbol of the gun as part of her Black revolutionary performance. Scholars such as Robyn Spencer and Imani Perry discuss how armed resistance and more specifically the depiction of Black women with guns is an important legacy of Black female revolutionary iconography. The title of Badu's 2000 album, *Mama's Gun*, as well as her song "Back in the Day (Puff)" featured in her 2003 album, *Worldwide Underground* emphasize her use of the image of the armed Black woman as essential to the protection of the Black community. In the chorus to
"Back in the Day" she chants "Because I got tha/Block on lock the trunk stay
locked/Glock on cock the block stay hot." The lyrics of the song suggest a link
between the need for a gun and the war on drugs, specifically marijuana through
the lines:

Wait/Got a box a money that I keep under my bed/But we don't
spend it though/Might need it fo mo yea-yo/We keep this
money/Just in case we need to make a run/ Gotta keep a clip in

This song not only carries on the theme of armed resistance which was prevalent
in Black Nationalist rhetoric, it also builds on Badu's concern with the link
between inequality, poverty and the decision of some young people to sell drugs
as a means of survival.

This concern was highlighted in her first album, Baduizm, in the song,
"Other Side of the Game," in which she laments the fact that she is pregnant and
her partner sells drugs for a living. She sings "See me and baby got this
situation/See brother got this complex occupation/And it ain't that he don't have
education/Cause I was there at his graduation" (Baduizm 1997) This line as well
as the chorus position Badu as a Black woman trying to negotiate her survival
with the survival of a Black man.

This is reminiscent of the dilemma of many of the 70s female activists that
I discussed earlier who used rhetoric that privileged the survival of Black men
over the unique concerns or needs of Black women. In the chorus to "Other Side of the Game" Badu sings:

What you gon do when they come for you/Work ain't honest but it pays the bills [yes it does]/What you gon do when they come for you/God, I can't stand life without you" (Baduizm 1997)

This song emphasizes issues such as poverty, the high rates of imprisonment of African Americans and the disillusionment of many in the Black community. Through her music and her performance, she engages in a process of consciousness-raising that is aimed at the Black community.

For example, Badu's performance at The Sugar Bush Festival, a concert series produced by Queen Latifah, illustrates how she uses her performances to raise consciousness and promote unity among Black people. During her performance in Columbus, Ohio, she decided to sing one of her famous ballads. It is not uncommon for artists to focus on one person in the audience when singing a ballad. As Badu started to sing, a Black man in the audience approached the stage and it appeared as if she was fine with this as she continued to look in his direction as she sang. However, before the man could get close enough to the stage, a member of the security staff stepped between the two of them. The security personnel were white. Badu stopped singing and questioned the actions of the security guard. After explaining that he had ruined the mood, she decided not to finish the song and moved on to the next song. The crowd enthusiastically applauded this gesture. This move on Badu's part was a
clear signal that she feels a strong connection to Black men and Black people in general and that she resented the suggestion that one of her fans, particularly a Black man, would be a threat to her safety. Despite the fact that there are real threats that a celebrity can face in the mist of zealous fans, Badu refused to be separated from her people and have "the love song" that she was about to sing to this black man be interrupted by a white man.

Like Badu, Me'shell Ndegéocello emphasized loving Black men in her first album, *Plantation Lullabies* (1993). Given the 80s backlash against Black women writers, such as Alice Walker, who were accused of "airing dirty laundry" and trashing Black men, Ndegéocello’s embracing of Black men early in her career assured at least a moderate level of acceptance and support from Black consumers of the young neo-soul artist’s music. At times, the rhetoric in her first album actually appears to distance herself from other women. For example, in the song "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)," she pits herself against another woman boasting about how she had sex with her boyfriend the previous night.

The title of Me'shell Ndegéocello's first album, *Plantation Lullabies* suggests her position in a long line of Black women who were theorizing and pondering the legacy and manifestation of slavery in the 1980s and 1990s. Poverty, homelessness and other issues plaguing the Black community are suggested by the title. The idea of a "plantation lullaby," that is a lullaby that is used to lull an infant or toddler to sleep, is an interesting use of language because
there isn't much that is soothing about the album. However, many lullabies have underlying stories that are designed to not only comfort children but also to teach them lessons. Whether it is about drug addiction and the hopelessness that allows someone to turn to substances to quench the thirst for a more fulfilling life or the other struggles of the ghetto, Ndegéocello makes sure that she touches on these issues. Within the mainstream media, the songs on her first album that got the most attention were the one's dealing with romantic or sexual relationships. For example, "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn’t Last Night)" and "I’m Digging You (Like an Old Soul Record)" are examples of the numerous ways that interpersonal relationships are worked out in her music. However, embedded in songs like "Digging You" are statements such as "remember when everyone was Black and conscious and down for the struggle", which clearly shows a nostalgia for the period of 70s Black Nationalism.

In her demeanor and performance, Me'shell Ndegéocello occupies an androgynous space between masculinity and femininity. There are moments when she embodies the stereotypical male persona through her dress. This includes the wearing of baggy jeans, men’s trousers, shirts and other markers of masculinity (Figure 21). This photo of Ndegéocello is particularly important to her use of revolutionary iconography, as she is wearing a sweatshirt with the image of legendary Black civil rights activist, Bobby Seale.
In addition, she went bald during a time when the only other prominent female singer wearing a bald head was Sinead O’Connor, a white woman. Ndegéocello’s wearing of a bald head is reminiscent of the trend among Black women during the seventies who chose to wear bald heads rather than large Afros. The cover of her first album, *Plantation Lullabies*, depicts Ndegéocello’s bald head (Figure 22). This is a particularly interesting photograph of the artist in that it obscures a clear vision of her face through the use of two profiles blurred together facing in opposite directions. This photograph has a futuristic quality, as well as suggests a duality reflected in Ndegéocello’s performance, lyrics and overall image.
In addition, Ndegéocello’s use of iconography in her performance can be read as both an expression of Black Nationalist aesthetics and as an expression of butch identity associated with lesbian culture and identity. Although it is unlikely that Ndegéocello would claim lesbian performance, given her position as an out bisexual woman, her performance in many ways signaled to the lesbian community and to the Black community that she rejects heteronormativity, while simultaneously affirming the sexual love of Black men, a position that would be heartedly embraced by her fans.

In *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music*, Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance characterize Me'shell Ndegéocello as a "disruptive diva" in the sense that her work is part of a process of disrupting mass musical culture (2). My analysis of Ndegéocello expands on this analysis in the sense that I am concerned with the ways that her work not only serves to disrupt mainstream
popular culture, but also negotiates various aspects of her identity within Black popular music.

More specifically, her engagement with the topic of revolution is particularly important within the context of her album, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (2002), in which she confronts her own early romanticized notion of revolution. On the track "Hot Night," she sings about her fight as a revolutionary soul singer. She also begins her song with an excerpt from a speech by Angela Davis. In fact, drawing on the legendary status of Davis is a way for her to position her music and introduce herself as an activist musician. She implores her audience to lift their fists in the air for the revolutionary soul singer. A critique of capitalism and the embracing of "property rights over human rights" reflect Ndegéocello's response to the growing tendency within mainstream Black musical production to cater to the demands of an ever growing consumption of Black culture that keeps the pockets of individual artists full, but doesn't necessarily nourish a positive consciousness among Black people.

The intermixing of revolutionary and progressive dialogue from well-known activists such as Angela Davis, as well as her own admonitions to the Black community, that "niggas need to redefine what it means to be free" show the ways that Ndegéocello is walking a fine line between illuminating the experiences of a depressed, hopeless underclass and advocating the need for a renewed sense of racial consciousness among Black people. In other words, her
strategy is to meet people where they are and avoid sugar coating the issues. She confronts gold-diggers, hustlers and those who blame their bad behavior on whites without a more reflexive view of intra-racial issues and concerns that need to be addressed, such as homophobia.

There are several layers to Ndegéocello's work. They first layer engages a larger sexist, white, capitalist society. The second layer explores a number of problems within the Black community, such as poverty, materialism, sexism and homophobia. The third layer engages an inner struggle with a number of issues such as spirituality, lost love and sexual desire for both men and women. In terms of aesthetics, Ndegéocello occupies a liminal space that blurs the lines between masculine and feminine, gay and straight, identity politics and a more postmodern/poststructuralist sensibility. According to Judith Halberstam:

Identity, it seems, as a representational strategy produces both power and danger; it provides both an obstacle to identification and a site 'of necessary.' As such, the stereotype, the image that announces identity in excess, is necessarily troublesome to an articulation of lesbian identity, but also foundational; the butch stereotype, furthermore, both makes lesbianism visible and yet seems to make it visible in non-lesbian terms: that is to say, the butch makes lesbianism readable in the register of masculinity, and it actually collaborates with the mainstream notion that lesbians cannot be feminine (Halberstam 177).
Butch-femme culture among Black lesbians has a long history that continues among young Black lesbians today. In the January 2003 issue of *Vibe*, Kathy Dobie briefly chronicles the experiences of several young Black lesbians who use the term "Aggressives" to refer to their expressions of butchness. Of course, these young women distinguish themselves from "dykes." "'B'utch means strapping down your chest, chopping off your hair, looking mannish. These girls want to look fly. The Aggressive persona is urban, hip, stylish, and bold…On city streets aggression is a good thing, the word has a positive, macho ring, and no one hoots the word at you from a car window" (Dobie 107).

The fact that Dobie's exposé is featured in a magazine that covers the latest trends in hip-hop fashion and musical culture is important because it further highlights one of the ways that the Black masculinity promoted in mainstream hip-hop culture is linked to modern performances of butchness by young Black women. Kara Keeling argues that the continued use of butch-femme identity is a recognizable practice among Black lesbians that serves several functions (Keeling 42). She says,

First, butch-femme still meets certain needs, whether erotic, economic, and/or something else, for certain living beings. As an element of black lesbian common sense, butch-femme contains nodes of consent to dominant hegemonies and it often enforces a rather rigid behavioral and aesthetic code that may have out-lived its usefulness for some. At the same time, however, butch-femme
also is a malleable and dynamic form of sociality that still functions as a vehicle for the survival of forms of 'black lesbian' community, as a source of erotic tension and fulfillment, and as a set of personal gender choices and expressions. Because butch-femme is connected to issues of survival, it has become a mechanism for recognizing 'black lesbians' and for organizing 'black lesbian' sociality (Keeling 42).

In the case of Ndegéocello, her performance of butchness signifies Black bisexuality by referencing a specific type of black masculinity, which is closely associated with young, black men. However, this is not to suggest that this performance of black masculinity is uniquely male, only that it draws on behaviors and gestures associated with Black men in the popular media. In addition, Ndegéocello's performance of butch lesbian identity is evident in her work.

For example, in the 1994 video for her hit single "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)," she takes a song that emphasizes competition between women for the attention of men and imposes a visual narrative that unites women through the visible pain experienced by the women in the video. While the song positions Ndegéocello as a cold-hearted woman who would willingly sleep with another woman's boyfriend, it also reveals a complex view of how self-hatred among women can threaten female solidarity. This is consistent with Ndegéocello's description of her early work as "love poems in the middle of
revolution" (Darling 178). She further explains in an interview in Harper's Bazaar that many of her songs are based on personal experiences that are shaped by her experiences as a Black, bisexual woman (Darling 178). She was labeled a misogynist for her song "If That's Your Boyfriend", but she explains that this song emerged from a very painful experience in her life:

I met this guy once, and most of the girls said there was no way he could like me because of the way I looked. There's an amazing misogyny among women, and I wanted to write about it (178).

This may explain why her video for the song features women all of whom are suffering from rejection, low self-esteem or insecurity. As a result, the visual images in the video not only highlight women's position and their complicity in a misogynist society. It also highlights the pain and confusion caused by rejection.

Shot in black and white, the video opens with a close-up shot of a light-skinned African American woman with curly short hair, who with closed eyes, says, "Roaming among the rubble of hate, field hand hair and master's face didn't stop me from meeting the noose." This statement emphasizes the reality of skin color privilege among African Americans while simultaneously rejecting it as a form of protection against racial hatred and violence. Beginning with a reference to slavery, skin color and lynching is strategic here because it emphasizes the inextricable ways that race, class, gender and sexuality converge in an oppressive society. She seems to signal to the audience that they are not about to see a "cat fight," but instead something much deeper.
After the opening monologue, the camera moves to a shot of Me'shell with her head down pounding the first few notes of the song on the piano. The video features women of various ages and ethnicities who speak throughout the video. They have short hair, long hair, braids, natural hair, straightened hair and at least one is bald. Some of the women wear make-up, some do not. In the video, each woman expresses her honest outrage, sadness and rage about infidelity and her individual approach to relationships. Close-up shots of each woman emphasize the importance of each woman's feelings. This contrasts with the female betrayal and lack of caring that is emphasized in the lyrics of the song. The video does not present an overwhelming narrative of female solidarity or unity. However, there is a consistent exploration of the multiple ways that external and internalized oppression harm various women. The only men in the video are two members of Ndegéocello's band who sporadically appear throughout the video.

In addition to the centrality of women's experience from a variety of perspectives, Me' shell Ndegéocello's performance of masculinity and femininity reflect the revolutionary way that her work negotiates binary oppositions. She simultaneously affirms the performance of butch lesbian identity and femininity in her physical appearance. She has a bald head, but she wears a full face of make-up. Most striking is the heavy and shiny lipstick that she wears. She also has on a men's A-line tank top and her baggy slacks are supported by suspenders. As she plays her bass and sings the song, she confidently dances and
sings. She unapologetically affirms her decision to sleep with another woman's man.

While the song is clearly about having sex with a man, shot-reverse-shot is used to affirm lesbian desire. In the bridge to the song, Ndegéocello stops playing her bass and dances seductively as she sings the following:

Ooh ooh, baby baby/good to the last lick at the bottom of the bag and/ooh, baby baby, make you wanna do things that you never have/ooh baby/mad sex/ and when we're through/ I really have no problem actin' like I don't know you (Plantation Lullabies 1994).

During this section of the video, her lyrics are briefly interrupted by one of the Black women who is featured in the video. After Ndegéocello sings "mad sex", the camera moves to this woman who responds, "Who is she?" The camera then immediately goes back to Ndegéocello who says, "And when we're through." The camera goes back to the woman who says "What?"

Through the use of shot-reverse-shot, it appears as if Ndegéocello is singing to this woman. This is one of the only times that there is a visual and lyrical interaction between women in the video. It is also significant because it suggests butch/femme desire. The woman is stereotypically feminine in terms of her dress and overall look, which is contrasted with Ndegéocello's performance of butchness in this portion of the video. The lyrics and the camera allow a lesbian identity to emerge within a song that is about sex with a man.
It is important to situate the musical and star personas of Me'shell Ndegéocello and Erykah Badu in the context of the larger socio-historical traditions in Black culture and experience within the United States. They both came of age during the Reagan era, a period of growing conservatism and backlash against progressive movements. Through their use of the rhetoric and imagery of the 60s and 70s, these artists, and many other rap and hip-hop artists who emerged in the late 80s and 90s responded to the increasing poverty and discrimination that plagued the Black community as a result of the weakening of welfare programs and the lack of enforcement of civil rights laws designed to protect minorities and women. In addition to critiquing the larger structural inequalities within the United States, Badu and Ndegéocello's albums interrogate practices within hip-hop and neo-soul music and the Black community, while simultaneously exploring and theorizing about the complex realities faced by Black women. In addition, their work suggests potential strategies for coping or transcending oppressive circumstances.
CONCLUSION

Key elements in iconic representations of Black revolutionary women and rhetoric from the 60s and 70s include the prominence of guns, a natural aesthetic (with a strong emphasis on hair), and the performance of revolution through rhetoric and fashion. In addition, many of the artists that discuss negotiate Black feminism with Black Nationalism. Sometimes this process suggests the need to subordinate the suffering of Black women to that of Black men. It also reinforces the construction of Black women as mothers, who are responsible for producing and raising strong revolutionaries are other defining features that have informed the depiction of Black female revolutionaries.

Revolutionary Black female activists during the 60s and 70s struggled to fight racism and sexism, while simultaneously watching filmic depictions of Black women that valorized their perceived brutal and man-like strength, while simultaneously ameliorating societal anxieties about their power through sexualization and objectification. These images also discouraged the creation of a unified vision of feminist activism that would include Black and White women. Despite these messages, the power of the visual allowed many Black women to derive pleasure and inspiration from these images.
In the late 1980s and 90s, Women's Studies and Black Studies Programs were becoming institutionalized in the academy. A growing body of feminist literature was being codified and taught in universities. Women of color, who had always been involved in the feminist and Black liberation movements continued to do their work analyzing feminism and antiracist failures to articulate a more inclusive agenda. Scholars like Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian and McDowell were calling for methods of analysis that would adequately address the growing body of Black women's literature that was receiving much more attention from mainstream audiences. Meanwhile a growing desire to bring these powerful depictions of Black female revolutionary activism into the visual realm resulted in a new set of visual representations of Black womanhood that continued the legacy of representing Black feminist activism and rhetoric.

The work of Walker and Lorde serve as an important bridge for the continued development of a Black feminist consciousness among Black women performers and spectators during the third wave. In the 70s and 80s, we see Black women writers negotiating revolution while juggling various ideological movements. Likewise, in the 1990s artists use visual modifications of written and visual texts to help them negotiate and define themselves as Black revolutionary women. constructed to celebrate the beauty of Black women, but not as a commodity to support a movement and satisfy the desires of Black men, but rather as figures of empowerment and self-esteem.

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What does this mean for those of us who are products of this shifting moment? How did we search for our "mother's gardens" or at least how did we tend to what was sowed during the movements of the past? Black women in the late 1980s and 90s read and saw the representations of their foremothers and tried to define a Black feminist sensibility that would work in the midst of an ever-growing conservative white patriarchal system, that asserted that feminism, and civil rights were no longer necessary. So, what are we their progeny to make of this legacy? Imaging and creating images of Black women that draw on the legacy of revolutionary iconography are an important part of a process of carving a space within feminism for young women today. Just as Etang Inyang created a space where she could be a Black revolutionary and Pam Grier’s, there are numerous Black female performers, like Erykah Badu and Me'shell Ndegéocello, who are continuing the construction of Black feminist identity and purpose through visual imagery and performance.
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