

PAM GRIER AND THE ARTICULATION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN
BLAXPLOITATION THEME SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Discussing three films starring Pam Grier, I argue in this thesis that the theme songs within each film musically and lyrically aid in articulating a particular type of African American female subjectivity. Invoking Wayne Kostenbaum's work within diva discourse, I outline the "diva narrative" in Grier's career, from her first starring role in *Coffy* (1973), signifying her ascension to stardom, to *Foxy Brown* (1974), which anticipated not only the decline of her career but also of the Blaxploitation genre in general, to her comeback with her starring role in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997). While *Coffy*, as arguably the first female-starring action film, articulates with its three theme songs a radical female subjectivity within an ostensibly Black Power environment, *Foxy Brown's* one theme song ultimately translates to a return to gender norms with women as subservient to men. Reflective of the over twenty-year gap from *Foxy Brown*, I further postulate that *Jackie Brown*, through the incorporation of theme songs from various 1970s artists, articulates a new postmodern subjectivity.

Little scholarship has thus far been produced on the role music plays in the articulation of African American women's subjectivity in film, and I hope with this thesis to not only fill a gap in current scholarship but also to provide more nuance and specificity to existing literature. As this thesis is quite interdisciplinary in nature, I hope the research presented here can contribute not only to musicology but also to the fields of women's studies, African American studies, and film studies.

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Most film makers look at a feature in terms of image and story, or vice versa. Effects and music (most directors can't carry a tune in a fucking bucket) are strictly secondary considerations. Very few look at film with sound considered as a creative third dimension. So I calculate the scenario in such a way that sound can be used as an integral part of the film.

-Melvin van Peebles¹

As with all forms of expression, it is important to consider just *who* has been able to articulate their subjective positions, as well as how restricted their freedom of expression might have been based on their context. These points are especially important when considering the history of African-American women in film. Prior to the 1960s civil rights movement, performance opportunities for black women – constrained within a largely white patriarchal system – were highly limited. What resulted was a restricted set of character types, into four primary categories as outlined by Yvonne Sims: the mammy, exotic Other, jezebel, and Sapphire. These categories, summarized in the broadest sense, outline how film has showcased the African-American female as either not sexualized at all (the mammy and Sapphire) and thus unworthy of desire (from men) or hyper-sexualized (exotic other and jezebel) and desirable (for men). As Sims writes, “[t]hey represented dehumanized cartooning of a perceived range of African American femininity that continued to reinforce negative depictions of African American women in film.”²

With the civil rights movement, African Americans created the opportunity

¹ Melvin van Peebles, “A Black Odyssey: Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song,” in *Black Films and Filmmakers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero*, compiled by Lindsay Patterson (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1975) 228.

² Yvonne Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc, 2006) 42.

to increase visibility in the film industry through the inception of what is now typically referred to as the Blaxploitation film.³ Melvin van Peebles, arguably considered the pioneer of the genre in the early 1970s, saw the medium of film as an opportunity to bring the social struggles of marginalized African Americans to the forefront, to publicly display their constant fight against the oppression of white supremacist hegemony. The use of film as a medium of expression had two other aims, each related to the other. Blaxploitation wanted to not only encroach on the overwhelming successes of White cinema by offering a form of mass entertainment that would cater specifically to an African American audience but also portray a “realism” associated with lower-class ghettos in urban environments (and not present in such earlier films as the Sidney Poitier-starring *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967)). In short, figures such as van Peebles were primarily concerned with showcasing issues of race and class common in contemporary society. Gender, however, was also a prominent issue featured in the Blaxploitation film. While many of the earliest films of the genre – *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972), to name a few – featured male protagonists, it was not long before women emerged in the genre as having as much power to “stick it to the Man” as men did. *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones*, both released in 1973, ushered in an era of the Black female action hero, which was a distinct departure from such “traditional” stereotypical

³ Throughout this paper, I refer to the 1970s film genre as “Blaxploitation,” though this term is not without controversy. See, for instance, Walker, David, Andrew J. Rausch, and Chris Watson. 2009. *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

portrayals of African-American women as the mammy and the “exotic Other.”⁴

On screen, Pam Grier is frequently seen as a seminal figure in this shift in the representation of black women. Commonly referred to as the “first” female black action heroine – or, as I dub, the Blaxploitation Diva – she has been credited with revolutionizing the ways in which African-American women could express themselves. This is not only in regards to imagery – with her earliest films showcasing her “natural hair,” curvaceous body, and a distinct sense of fashion – but also in her attitude, which was augmented through both her dialogue and gun-wielding action stunts. This position has not gone uncontested, however, and several scholars, such as Jennifer DeVere Brody and Stephane Dunn, have attempted to position Cleopatra Jones, played by Tamara Dobson in two films, as the more “ideal” African American female figure, in turn charging Pam Grier’s characters with being shallow and regressive.⁵ However, they are too quick to dismiss *all* Pam Grier characters as one-dimensional, instead of exploring the individual facets of each film. While it is the case that some of Grier’s early films are problematic, such as *Foxy Brown* (1974), others, such as *Coffy*, are quite significant in their articulation of black femininity.

Significantly, too, while scholars such as Sims, Dunn, and Mia Mask have written about Grier in regard to imagery, a discussion of Pam Grier’s “aurality” has

⁴ Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*, 31.

⁵ Jennifer DeVere Brody, in an effort to legitimize Cleopatra Jones as a three-dimensional figure, delegitimizes Pam Grier’s characters as a comparable heroine. See Brody, Jennifer DeVere. Autumn 1999. “The Returns of ‘Cleopatra Jones.’” *Signs* 25:1, 91-121. Similarly, Stephane Dunn, through their respective chapter titles, notes that Tamara Dobson’s Cleo has “sexual power” while Pam Grier’s characters do not. See Dunn, Stephane. 2008. *Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

been much more sparse.⁶ As Michel Chion states, though, it is beneficial to “demonstrate the reality of audiovisual combination – that one perception influences the other and transforms it.”⁷ Indeed, music was always a significant part of the Blaxploitation film, as addressed by genre “founder” Melvin van Peebles in this thesis’s opening quote, with theme songs garnering particular prominence (and certainly since Isaac Hayes’s Oscar win in 1971 for “Theme from *Shaft*”). In diva discourse as well, theme songs also serve a significant function. In his book *The Queen’s Throat Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mysteries of Desire*, Wayne Kostenbaum writes:

Rose Ponselle [opera star] [...] had the privilege of luxuriously redefining “home” as a monument to her triumphs, her tastes, and her roles. In Villa Pace, she enjoyed a life ‘compatible with the grandeur of her fame and her personality.’ Her doorbell was inscribed with a phrase from her signature aria, ‘Pace, pace, mio Dio.’⁸

It is clear from the above statement that the “signature aria” or “theme song” is an intrinsic part of the diva’s identification, moreso perhaps for the sake of her attendees (for they are the ones who are hearing it) than herself. Unlike with opera stars, who in many ways are able to “envoice” their subjectivity, the Blaxploitation diva Pam Grier does not, for the most part, sing or participate musically with her

⁶ One notable exception is Miklitsch, on *Jackie Brown*. See Miklitsch, Robert. 2004. “Audiophilia: audiovisual pleasure and narrative cinema in *Jackie Brown*.” *Screen* 45:4, 287-304.

⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, Ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xxvi.

⁸ Wayne Kostenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mysteries of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 123.

theme songs.⁹ Thus, when considering her films, it is important to frame contextually the multiple, indirect ways in which female subjectivity is articulated through theme songs.

A discussion of theme songs aids in clarifying or shedding new light on the imagery of Pam Grier's characters. For instance, between Grier's first two starring films, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* (1974), the latter tends to be upheld as the more "sophisticated" of the two, and therefore of more value. As Sims states: "Since *Coffy* was the first of Grier's action heroines, she was not as polished or sophisticated as her later heroines."¹⁰ Sims, though, attributes this change to Grier being able to make aesthetic decisions, rather than incorporating other musical or narrative criteria. Indeed, she writes: "In *Foxy Brown*, Grier intentionally changed her hairstyle frequently, reflecting the changing definitions of beauty associated with African American women. [...] It was clear that Grier was gaining a voice in the development of her heroine as she insisted on hairstyle and costume changes for *Foxy Brown*."¹¹ As with aforementioned critiques of Grier's characters as less "ideal" than Cleopatra Jones, much of the focus on increased sophistication relates directly to imagery in the films. However, a focus on Grier's "aurality" rather than imagery reveals a complication of this comparison, and there is thus importance in

⁹ See Abbate, Carolyn. 1993. "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women." In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

¹⁰ Yvonne Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*, 77.

¹¹ Sims, 83.

analyzing the ways in which theme songs articulate the respective characters' female subjectivities.¹²

The first two sections of this thesis explore the distinct ways in which the theme songs *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* articulate Grier's subjectivity, using the pioneering Blaxploitation theme song "Theme from *Shaft*" as a reference. *Coffy*, in a radical departure from previous classic Blaxploitation film conventions, features three distinct theme songs for *Coffy* as opposed to one. "Coffy is the Color," heard at the beginning of the film, falls more readily into the funk genre as typified by Hayes' and Mayfield's scores. "Coffy Baby," on the other hand, sung by Dee Dee Bridgewater, is in a slower ballad style. "Shining Symbol," heard during the end credits, is a hopeful and uplifting song upholding *Coffy* as a radical figure in the African American Community. These songs together articulate a developing subject that occurs through the narrative. In *Foxy Brown*, however, there is again only one theme song, a return to a more static identity. An analysis of the song reveals that, rather than allowing for a continued development of radical female subjectivity (from *Coffy*), "Theme of *Foxy Brown*" in fact regresses to a pre-feminist conception that "weak" women cannot be articulated without the presence of male figures. Thus, based on the following analyses, and as opposed to Sims's contention, *Coffy* emerges as the more radical female figure.

The last part of this paper targets new ways in which Grier's subjectivity is articulated in the more recent *Jackie Brown* (1997), directed by Quentin Tarantino.

¹² See Abbate, Carolyn. 1993. "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women." In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

There is no longer, for instance, a clear thematic unity or trinity. Instead, a multiplicity of songs from various artistic and generic sources refers both to Jackie Brown's character in the film's diegesis as well as to past incarnations of Grier's own subjectivity. As an example, consider Foxy Brown (the rapper), who both was granted permission from Pam Grier to use the name of one of the latter's most famous characters and had the track "(Holy Matrimony) Letter to the Firm" featured in Tarantino's film. This example is significant for two reasons. First, the positive influence felt from Grier's earlier film *Foxy Brown* was to the level where the character's name was literally adopted for the rapper's own use, a name to embody and embolden Brown's foray into the patriarchal world of hip hop. Second, the use of a song off of Brown's debut album onto the soundtrack for *Jackie Brown* puts the song in a signifying position of its own. It is no longer solely the end result of Grier's influence but is also actively being used as a symbol, a means with which to perpetuate Grier's influence. In short, there is a self-referential aspect to Grier's subject positioning. To return to Kostenbaum, "she is in a continual, gratifying state of becoming."¹³

As Peter Manuel states, "One catalyst of the flowering of postmodernist-influenced popular musics has been the spread of the mass media and the concurrent proliferation of media codes in recent decades. While this has extended the reach of hegemonic mainstream media discourses, it has at the same time enabled local, lower-class and marginal peoples to make their voices heard as

¹³ Wayne Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 86.

never before.”¹⁴ Perhaps, then, through the postmodern aesthetic of collage *Jackie Brown* offers a shift in how African American female identity can be articulated musically through theme songs. To affirm this, though, I return to the theme songs of the films that served as direct reference points – *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*.

Coffy is the Color: Establishing an Articulation of Black Femininity

As mentioned earlier, *Coffy*'s visual appearance has been the subject of both admiration and contention in scholarship. The promotional poster for the film offers a neat visual summary of both sides of the debate (see Figure 1). On the negative side, the foregrounded image of *Coffy* was clearly created to objectify her body, with much of her upper body exposed. She is very attractive, but perhaps unneeded emphasis is placed on her thin, shapely figure and voluptuous breasts. She is wielding a shotgun (possibly sawed-off), which could be seen as promoting gratuitous violence. In a more positive light, though, the shotgun could also be seen as a necessary tool of self-defense. Sporting a “natural” afro, she is in a relaxed stance, though certainly not passive, and does not seem to need the help of others for protection. No one else in the image is foregrounded to her level.

As with the imagery of the film, some scholars have also viewed the soundtrack as contentious. Stephane Dunn criticizes the *Coffy* soundtrack, citing the cover art as a “colorful cartoon with Grier overflowing out of a hot pink, midriff-baring bra top and low-cut, tight bell-bottoms” and the track “*Coffy is the*

¹⁴ Peter Manuel, “Music as Symbol, Music as Simulacrum: Postmodern, Pre-Modern, and Modern Aesthetics in Subcultural Popular Musics,” in *Popular Music* 14:2 (May 1995), 228.



Figure 1. Promotional poster for *Coffy* (1973)

Color” as one among several tracks emphasizing the “sexualized characterization of the main character.”¹⁵ Further, Jennifer De Vere Brody cites (in her view) Coffy’s “confinement” and “limitedness,” further remarking in a long footnote that “[t]he fact that she has chosen to go undercover as a prostitute (and to go down on many a mafia mogul) does seem to undercut her authority” (a statement which, based on

¹⁵ Stephane Dunn, *“Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 112.

the plot, is not entirely true).¹⁶ More significant in this footnote is her “addressing” the theme song “Coffy is the Color” (though actually referencing the lyrics from the end-title track “Shining Symbol”), remarking that the song only tries to render Coffy as “authentic” and significant at the very end of the film. As these comprise the extent of the soundtrack’s critical reception, it is clear that such critique, when accurate, does not go into any details of the music itself or the multiple theme songs’ positions in the context of the film. While this critique is developed in a more substantiated manner on other films (such as *Foxy Brown*, to be discussed later), in *Coffy* these superficial statements miss the more prominent instances of Coffy’s individualism, as well as her subversion of patriarchal authority. As I will argue, her three theme songs – “Coffy is the Color,” “Coffy Baby,” and “Shining Symbol” – are placed through the narrative, together articulating a complex, radical female subjectivity that is increasingly defined as the narrative progresses.

Before delving into an analysis of *Coffy*, I think it is important to discuss *Shaft*, for the film and soundtrack in many ways set the precedent for how the Blaxploitation genre is received and perceived. In particular, Isaac Hayes’s “Theme from *Shaft*,” based on its successes (it not only reached number one on the *Billboard Hot 100* but also received the Academy Award for best song), is the seminal theme song of Blaxploitation films. As opposed to *Coffy*, there is only one theme song, featured at both the beginning and the end of the film. Although the use of the song during both the opening and closing credits does suggest a stasis in the character’s subjectivity, this should not necessarily be conflated with a lack of

¹⁶ Jennifer DeVere Brody, “The Returns of ‘Cleopatra Jones,’” in *Signs* 25:1 (1999), 95-96n8.

complexity. Indeed, it is actually the case that, counter to a superficial understanding of the song as a “one-note” (read: simplistic) articulation of Shaft’s subjectivity, neither the song nor the character is lacking in complexity. The multiple themes *within* the song suggest otherwise, as well as the overall “epic” quality of the song (the length of which runs over four minutes).

Though there are instances in both the song and the narrative offering a complexity of the black masculine subject, there are also several signifiers seeming to affirm a stereotypical conception of heterosexual masculinity. The song’s lyrics, for instance, begin with the following:

Isaac Hayes

Who’s the black private dick that’s
a sex machine to all the chicks?

Daaaaamn right!

Backup Singers

Shaft!

Mitchell Morris remarks, “The hyper-sexism of the portrayal is utterly faithful to the mores of the period: not only is Shaft by nature a Black Power *übermensch*, he has also taken on some of the characteristics of Hugh Hefner’s ideal playboy as well.”¹⁷ The name “Shaft” in itself is a signifier of masculinity, not just a part of his body but also emblematic of his very mode of being.¹⁸ Musical signifiers seem to further emphasize this, with Morris noting: “the lavish instrumental sound serves

¹⁷ Mitchell Morris, “Black Masculinity and the Sound of Wealth: Barry White in the Early ‘70s,” in *The Persistence of Sentiment: Essays on Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the ‘70s* (Forthcoming), 76.

¹⁸ “Ideal” black masculinity is doubly emphasized through Isaac Hayes’s image, who sings the title track. As Morris states of Hayes, “His facial hair and phallic shaved head matched his resonant bass voice perfectly, and since his image was foregrounded on his albums, anyone interested in his music would have had ample opportunity to know what he looked like.” Morris, 77.

double duty by evoking not only the exciting hubbub of the street, but also the lush way of life of the title character.”¹⁹ Through the first half of the song, many layers are slowly added, one on top of the other, until it reaches a rich climax featuring a large string section and brass ensemble. In terms of phallic imagery, the act of “climaxing” gives the music an audibly masculine edge. Also, evident in the opening title sequence (but not present in the studio recording) is the diegetic “soundtrack,” particularly the noise of cars revving and honking (the car also being a symbol of the male ideal).²⁰ Important to note, too, is Isaac Hayes’s vocal range and timbre, complementing Shaft’s masculinity with a deep, rich, baritone/bass range. Hayes’s voice also calls to mind Barry White’s love songs, and – along with the lyrics – one might consider John Shaft not only as a model for males but also as an ideal lover for females. Indeed, notions of this (hyper)heterosexual masculinity seem to be left unchallenged, to the point of one-dimensionality.

However, such an assertion neglects other musical signifiers that complicate this notion, such as the presence of multiple themes. As the lyrics end, “He’s a complicated man, and no one understands him but his woman.” Although there are no specifics in the lyrics as to what makes him complicated, the fact that the song has such an extended introduction (the lyrics do not begin until almost halfway through the song) elucidates sonically the complexity of Shaft’s character. The

¹⁹ Ibid., 75.

²⁰ In her analysis of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, Kiri Miller implies that the gameplay (including “jacking cars” and driving them) is a masculine endeavor, particularly since the only avatar option is male. There are racial implications as well (the avatar is African American), particularly with gameplay references to hip-hop culture and Blaxploitation film. Miller, Kiri. Summer 2008. “Grove Street Grimm: Grand Theft Auto and Digital Folklore.” *Journal of American Folklore* 121:481, 255-285.

overall sound of the introduction is symphonic in nature, featuring not only an electric guitar, drum kit, and piano but also strings (especially violins), flutes, and brass. Further, this introduction can audibly be divided into two main sections, the transition from the first to the second occurring about 1:44 (2:26 in the film), with each containing its own thematic material.

The “first theme,” as mentioned earlier, is built in layers, over the course of several eight-bar phrases. Following five measures of sixteenth notes played with high-hat (with the “wah wah” guitar entering the second beat of the third bar), the piano enters the sixth bar with the start of the first eight-bar segment.²¹ The piano outlines this phrase, with two F2 pedal-tones followed by two E2 pedal-tones, with each tone lasting two measures. This stasis is only countered through different instrumental entrances with each subsequent phrase. At the start of the second, for instance, a flute plays a motive, and a high frequency enters the mix. By the sixth phrase, brass and string sections have entered to create a distinctly textured orchestral sound. As this initial development occurs, the camera in the opening credits sequence follows the protagonist’s movements from a distance as he walks through New York City, which reveals very little of his character. An exception is the moment at which he is jaywalking and consequently nearly gets hit by a taxi. The camera zooms in on Shaft long enough to capture him defiantly “flipping off” the cab driver and continue walking, before retracting again.

The next moment an exchange between characters occurs, Shaft is revealed to be more than a disinterested jaywalker. A watch peddler approaches him as a

²¹ Throughout the paper, I use the term “wah wah” guitar, though what I am actually referring to is an electric guitar creating the effect via a “wah wah” pedal.

possible customer, but soon retreats when Shaft shows the hustler his law enforcement badge. Parallel to this moment, the new material of the next “theme” interrupts the layering of the first section, featuring not only a more lively rhythmic section but also shorter, four-measure phrases. By the third musical section (when Hayes begins singing), Shaft has continued his walking to seemingly nowhere, but the lyrics continue to describe him. Then, during the outro, Shaft momentarily converses with a white blind newspaper salesman and helps the man out by lifting up a newly delivered stack of newspapers. In short, the audio and visual tracks seem to take turns offering multiple facets that add up to a rather complexly defined character by the song’s end. Multiple themes, in turn, are a key musical signifier of complexity, a facet that is quite significant in the articulation of Coffy’s subjectivity. Importantly, too, the “wah wah” guitar functions as the “thread” that connects all of the sections together, which creates a unified, cohesive theme song.

The complexity of Shaft’s character as heard via this theme song is further affirmed in the heart of the narrative. In an oft-discussed moment, his heterosexuality is later complicated in a scene occurring about midway through the film (beginning about 57:46), which takes place in a Greenwich Village bar, radicalizing the stereotype of (hyper)heterosexuality. Shaft notices two enemy members of the mafia (who are allegedly involved in the kidnapping of Shaft’s client’s daughter). In an effort to get closer to the men, he temporarily exchanges places with the (white) gay male bartender. The bartender on the one hand, as Joe Wlodarz points out, is a significant, if conventional, method of securing Shaft’s

masculinity and sexuality, primarily through the former's whiteness. Even when the bartender pinches Shaft's ass, the latter's neutral response conveys a security and comfort in his own (hetero)sexuality. On the other side, though, the two characters do momentarily exchange their respective sexual identities. While the bartender "chats" with some ladies (one of whom reportedly asks him to "play" straight), Shaft plays the "character part" of a gay male (to avoid arousing suspicion in the two suspects) and codes his request for police backup by asking his "sweet baby" – his cop partner, Vic – to come to the bar.²² What results, then, as Wlodarz states, is a "blurring of boundaries" that "do seem to trouble the coherence of Shaft's ultimate role, that of the black macho."²³ This performative space, then, allows – if only for a moment – to radicalize the assertion of "traditional" heterosexual masculinity. More significantly, this performance highlights the fact that Shaft is indeed a "complicated man," as stated and heard in his theme song.

If Shaft is able to enjoy some multi-dimensionality of character, no woman in the film is treated with the same manner. Shaft involves himself with three women throughout the film: Ellie, his (primary) girlfriend; Dina, a friend (possibly an ex-girlfriend?) who is also a mother; and Linda, a white woman (from the bar) who engages with Shaft in a one-night stand. Though ultimately the film's focus is on Shaft, the harsh reality is that he shows no regard for his female cohorts, nor do

²² In the film, the bartender comments to Shaft about a female patron wanting to "straighten him[self] out," thus asking him to "play character parts." For more on this, see Wlodarz, Joe. 2004. "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation." *The Velvet Light Trap* 53, 10-25.

²³ Wlodarz, "Queer Blaxploitation," 14.

they get to fully assert themselves as subjects. Ellie is the most passive of the three, and although she theoretically “understands” Shaft (from the song’s lyrics) she is never an active agent of help. Dina has some agency, but her assertion is contained within her own home and functions only in the form of a protective mother warning two quarreling males of her sleeping child. Linda, as the white female lover, functions as the symbol of Shaft’s “conquering” of white hegemonic feminized society. Though Linda makes the attempt to be verbally combative (“Close it yourself, shitty”), she ultimately holds no power over Shaft – indeed, he and Vic mock her words. In short, though hypermasculinity is revealed to be more nuanced and multi-dimensional, there is nothing to suggest the hegemony of males over females is in any way challenged.²⁴ The female characters, in fact, remain submissive, one-dimensional figures, and do not get to assert themselves as subjects.

This submissiveness of femininity in *Shaft* is seemingly paralleled in Coffy’s initial portrayal of femininity. In the moments before hearing the first theme song “Coffy is the Color” – penned by Roy Ayers – a prologue allegedly introduces Pam Grier’s character. She is sitting in the back seat of a drug dealer’s car, “strung-out” and willing to prostitute herself for another hit of heroin. As a junkie drives the drug dealer and her to (literally) consummate the deal, the theme song begins with the opening title sequence. Visually, the camera “looks” out through the front windshield of a car through the entire sequence, remaining fixed as the car moves toward the junkie’s residence. Rather than being a mobile character, as with Shaft,

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

Coffy is rendered immobile via both the camera angle and her alleged habit. Through this sequence, Coffy seems to be no different from the “exotic Other” stereotype that frequently characterized African American women in earlier film.

The theme song “Coffy is the Color,” however, does not affirm this stereotype. Even moreso than Hayes’s “Theme from *Shaft*,” Ayers incorporates sonic signifiers of the funk “sound,” including the constant sixteenth-notes in the high hat as well as the distinctive sound of the “wah wah” guitar, placing the song within an ostensibly male aesthetic.²⁵ Unlike *Shaft*’s theme, though, “Coffy is the Color” is constructed in such a way as to make its function identifying Coffy rather unclear. One way this occurs is through the lyrics, which are sparse at best. They consist of the following:

Coffy is the color (x2)
 Coffy is the color of your skin
 Coffy is the world you live in
 Coffy is the color (x2)
 Coffy is feelin’ somethin’ deep (x2)
 Coffy is the color (x2)
 Coffy (x3)

The lines of most interest are the second and third which, with the second-person “you,” seem to address the audience as well as Coffy. This connection is significant for two reasons. As implied in the second line, “Coffy” as a representative figure looks just like every audience member “of her race” who is watching her movie. The third line refers to “Coffy” as a film, which seeks to offer its constructed environment as “reality,” as a setting with which every targeted audience member

²⁵ As Rickey Vincent notes, “For all of its universality and freedom, funk and the era of black bands were still a movement led by black *men*.” See Vincent, Rickey. 1996. *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*. New York: St Martin’s Griffin.

would be familiar. The fifth line, however, seems again to refer only to the character. But in what way could a prostitute looking for a “fix” be feeling “something deep?” As with Hayes’s declaration of Shaft’s complexity, there is no elaboration in the lyrics.

Whereas Hayes’s symphonic sound and elongated form offered a sonic and structural complexity to supplement the lyrics, “Coffy is the Color” has more of a so-called simplistic form. From the first full measure, the vibes and bass tracks play a four-bar ostinato that repeats throughout the entire song. Further, they play in perfect fifths and move via the whole tone scale, which negates any sense of trajectory with the harmonic progression (Example 1). Indeed, this cyclical structure, counter to the “climax” achieved in “Theme from *Shaft*,” contributes to a relative lack of buildup throughout the song (only rivaled by syncopated entrances).²⁶ The seeming straightforwardness of the four-measure sequence is further emphasized through the singing of the lyrics, with the relegation of only one lyric to each ostinato statement (Example 1). On the surface, then, there seems to be no evidence of a radical black female subjectivity.

²⁶ For more on cyclical structure, see McClary, Susan. 1991. “Getting Down Off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman’s Voice in Janika Vandervelde’s *Genesis II*.” In *Feminine Endings: music, gender, and sexuality*, 112-131. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

0:31-0:38

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Bridgewater, Ayers, Vibraphone, and Electric Bass. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The lyrics are "Cof-fy is the co-lor of your skin". The Vibraphone and Electric Bass play an ostinato pattern of eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The vocal lines for Bridgewater and Ayers are simple, each consisting of two notes per bar.

Example 1. Four bar vibraphone/bass ostinato pattern, with voices, in “Coffy is the Color.”

However, the voices’ positions as well as their respective ranges are highly significant. In opposition to “Shaft” – which featured Hayes as lead singer with a trio of female “backups” responding to him – Ayers’ and Bridgewater’s vocal roles are equalized. With Ayers singing the lower voice and Dee Dee Bridgewater the upper, this double voicing thus refuses to ascribe a gender to Coffy, instead creating a sonic space where males and females are equal.²⁷ Their lines also fall comfortably within both alto and tenor ranges, with each singing only two notes, making both lines not only accessible to all genders but also highly singable.²⁸ This is akin to union and protest songs, two examples that both have political intent and involve the participation of larger communities. Thus, if Coffy is both the protagonist and “the world you live in,” then she seems to be politically being upheld as a significant figure, a notion that is more explicitly realized in “Shining Symbol.”

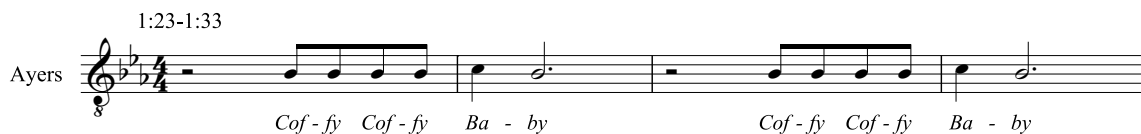
²⁷ In her discussion of *Farinelli*, Katherine Bergeron outlined the “forging” of male and female voices at IRCAM to personify an historical figure that has been perceived as sexually ambiguous. See Bergeron, Katherine. July 1996. “The Castrato as History.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8:2, 167-184.

²⁸ On the soundtrack’s LP jacket, Wayne Garfield also receives a “vocal” credit. However, because a third voice is not discernible on the recording, I believe this is a misprint.

These elements, offering a complication of passivity and submission as seen in *Shaft's* female characters, do manifest in the narrative shortly after the opening title sequence. From witnessing her murder two people (being the aforementioned drug dealer and junkie) to seeing why she murdered said people (her younger sister Lubelle was led to heroin at the tender age of eleven) to seeing her at her job (hospital nurse), to witnessing her respective relationships with her politician boyfriend and an old childhood friend, to seeing said childhood friend (who happened to be a rare "good" cop among the rampant corruption) beaten into a coma, we learn that Coffy is not solely a rare instance of "true" (read: passive) feminine beauty, as seen in the beginning of the film. She is also quite the force to be reckoned with, able to kill a man as easily as love him. The song "Coffy is the Color," though, only implicitly refers to this more active feminine subject.

However, second theme song "Coffy Baby," composed by Roy Ayers but sung by Dee Dee Bridgewater, does explicitly feature the feminine authority and control that Coffy's actions have (as aforementioned) readily demonstrated by this point. The most central indication of this is the foregrounding of Bridgewater as the solo female voice. This is both opposed to "Theme from *Shaft*" – which featured a solo male voice (Hayes) and a development of "Coffy is the Color" – in which Ayers's and Bridgewater's voices were equal. Indeed, this increased female presence lends to an overall increased articulation of female subjectivity. The only moment at which other singers are heard occurs at the "bridge" (Example 2). At this moment, while Bridgewater improvises on the name "Coffy," male backup singers (most likely Ayers himself) sing "Coffy Coffy baby" in a more strict

rhythmic fashion. As can be seen, the pitch range and rhythms are remarkably similar to the opening of Ayers’s line in “Coffy is the Color” (see Example 1). This does not seem coincidental and could perhaps refer back to the political signifiers previously discussed.



Example 2. Ayers’s vocal back-up line in “Coffy Baby.”

Featured at the exact midpoint of the film, “Coffy Baby” offers both a new musical aesthetic and a more thorough description of Coffy’s character.²⁹ The slower tempo, combined with both the sentimentality of the violins and Bridgewater’s lounge-style singing, contribute to the song’s ballad-like form, which “constructs its listener as *special, unique*.”³⁰ As the lyrics seem to “speak” directly to Coffy via their construction as a one-way conversation, Coffy is thus regarded as “special” and “unique.” More significantly, perhaps, the lyrics problematize “traditional” passive femininity, a notion that is reinforced both visually (as discussed earlier) and musically. The first lyric states that Coffy is “sweet as a chocolate bar;” meanwhile, in the image track, she is hiding a gun (with silencer) in a stuffed lion, preparing to kill a white drug lord (Vittroni). Further, Bridgewater, via the lyrics, “tells” Coffy she is beautiful but also “full of tragedy and tears.” In a mothering tone, she describes Coffy as being “as gentle as a song,” but the musical cue – the celesta – that follows outlines a tritone, representative of instability

²⁹ In the film, “Coffy Baby” enters at 45:10. The film’s length is 1:30:03.

³⁰ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990) 252.

(Example 3).³¹ Through these combinations of musical and extra-musical elements, Coffy's character is more thoroughly developed from "Coffy is the Color."



Example 3. Celesta tritone in "Coffy Baby."

It is not sufficient to conclude that the song only refers to a fictional character, for on the ballad genre, Middleton writes further that the listener feels special "within an implicit and comforting awareness of the existence of thousands of other 'yous', suffering the same pangs, desires, frustrations."³² "Coffy Baby" is thus perhaps also directed toward African American women who are watching the film. There is also the contention that Coffy has no one on whom to rely, for Bridgewater also sings, "No one knows and no one cares." This statement in itself stands in opposition to the Black Power movement, which at its broadest emphasizes a collective identity and sense of community (at least among African Americans). The song ends with a warning – "danger waits for you" – and on an unsure note (on the dominant, not resolving to the tonic), without commenting on Coffy's future or hinting as to whether or not Coffy will successfully transcend her current situation. This may be as much of a plot device as it is a way of emphasizing that the development of the black female subject is still incomplete. Considering Middleton's definition of the ballad, perhaps this song poses the

³¹ It should be noted that the tritone is also heard in an earlier verse, at a parallel moment, immediately following the line "sweet as a chocolate bar." However, it is clearly not meant yet to be the prominent element, as it is superseded by the presence of the strings.

³² Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 252.

question concerning the ability of African American women to succeed in the post-civil rights climate.

If “Coffy Baby” is a question, then “Shining Symbol” – heard during the end credits – is the answer, and a radical one at that. Following an unsuccessful attempt to kill Vittroni, Coffy learns that her politician boyfriend, Howard – who has, up until this point, been lauded in the narrative as a leader in the African American community – has been a part of the drug ring all along. Further, to prove to Vittroni that he was not involved in Coffy’s murderous plot, Howard tells the others to kill her. After escaping, Coffy kills Vittroni and shoots Howard, thus achieving justice. As the song begins, Coffy is walking on the beach slowly, away from the camera. Because it is sunset, she becomes harder to see the further away she moves. When the image finally freezes in anticipation of the rolling credits, her only remaining discernible feature is her afro, symbolic of Black Power. Additionally, the lyrics begin:

It’s not the end, it’s the beginning
 A law surrounds you
 A court tries you
 A jail engulfs you, but
 It’s not the end, it’s the beginning

The song opens with the (male) solo voice of Wayne Garfield, which might seem to counter the feminine subject articulation that had been developed to this point. However, and unlike Hayes, Garfield’s tone creates a soothing aural space, an affect created not only through his predominantly tenor range (A3-Bb4) but also his prominent use of the head voice (“falsetto”). The instrumental accompaniment functions empathetically, a string-heavy smooth jazz arrangement that features no

percussion with the exception of cymbal rolls. The last statement of “it’s the beginning” is the high point of Garfield’s solo, both in its range (to a Bb4) as well as its force. This opening section also modulates relatively freely between the major and minor mode, both acknowledging the pain of being sent to jail as well as offering hope for the movement Coffy’s actions have now inspired.

While the modal fluctuation continues into the chorus, the next lyrics take a decidedly more positive stance:

Revenge is a virtue
 You stood up like you should
 Standing up strong
 Like we all wish we could
 You’re a shining symbol, a shining symbol,
 A shining symbol of black pride

The music, too, conveys a peppier, more inspired outlook on the future. Beginning at 0:48, the bass leads the new section in a faster tempo. Beginning at 1:00, three voices (Ayers, Bridgewater, and Garfield) sing in choral fashion. Their voices, as with “Coffy is the Color,” feature a very limited vocal range, with Ayers and Bridgewater singing in octaves while Garfield primarily takes the fifth of the chord (though in some cases the third). As with “Coffy is the Color,” the simplistic melody, compounded with the declamatory style of singing, contributes to the overall sense that this is a message for the community. Additionally, the unified nature of the singing refuses a particular pinning of gender on the song. Though the song, in the film’s context, is about Coffy, neither the musical nor lyrical signifiers make it inherently so. Further, the lack of mention of already existent black militant groups and, indeed, of their inclusion in the film seem to imply that Coffy is the precursor, a matriarchal leader of the movement. The lyrics “You’re a

new breed, a future seed, of black pride” only reinforce this notion.

Coffy’s subversion of passivity counters ideologies as had been espoused in certain militant subgroups of the Black Power movement, where such (male) figures as Malcolm X decreed, “[T]he true nature of man is to be strong, and a woman’s true nature is to be weak.”³³ While *Shaft* ultimately did nothing to complicate these ascribed gender roles, *Coffy* offered a space for a female to radicalize these gendered constructions. Further, the film’s overwhelming success was such that arrangements for a sequel were made, which suggested a further development, and possible maturation, of this new radical feminine subjectivity. Although *Coffy II* never came to fruition, related themes and ideas were reworked into what became *Foxy Brown*. However, the films’ similarities did not include this new assertion of female power, though signifiers – now emptied of radical female subjectivity – remained.

Don’t Let Him Down: Foxy Brown and the Return of Gender Norms

Compared to *Coffy*, Yvonne Sims and Mia Mask have both implied that *Foxy Brown* is the more sophisticated film. For instance, Sims remarks on the shift from *Coffy* to *Foxy Brown*, stating that “[s]ince *Coffy* was the first of Grier’s action heroines, she was not as polished or sophisticated as her later heroines” and attributes it to Grier’s increased freedoms on set decisions.³⁴ Additionally, Mask writes that “*Coffy* served as the bridge from sexploitation to Blaxploitation,” which

³³ Mitchell Morris, “Black Masculinity and the Sound of Wealth: Barry White in the Early ‘70s,” in *The Persistence of Sentiment: Essays on Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the ‘70s* (Forthcoming) 70. Malcolm X was a member of the Nation of Islam.

³⁴ Yvonne Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*, 77.

implies that *Foxy Brown* was at least more firmly entrenched in a racial rather than sexual genre.³⁵ However, increased set decisions translated to requesting a more expensive wardrobe which, although an important action, unfortunately correlated with a lack of the character's complexity. Indeed, this calls to mind Angela Davis's later concerns of the reduction of the afro from "a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion," or from a signifier of radicalism to an empty signifier.³⁶ Although *Foxy Brown* is frequently seen as the height of Pam Grier's Blaxploitation era, I will show through both its theme song and the narrative that a return toward male-centeredness was actually already occurring, resulting in a lack of radicalism for Foxy Brown's subjectivity.

Operating concurrently with this was the return to a more traditionally passive aesthetic, and again movie posters reveal a lot in this regard (see Figure 2). Instead of a revealing top and pants, Foxy Brown appears wearing an elegant dress with matching high heels (and, indeed, though Foxy Brown is never showcased as a working woman, she is frequently adorned in expensive accoutrements). In lieu of a shotgun, she carries a more "concealed," tiny handgun tucked into the strap of her shoe. Most significantly, perhaps, she no longer sports the Black Power-signifying Afro that was so prominently featured in the *Coffy* poster. Instead, she is wearing a wig, with her hair long and flowing. While this shift certainly shows a concerted effort to develop from an otherwise similar role to *Coffy*, it is also clear that radical attributes – especially the shotgun – that defined *Coffy* as such have

³⁵ Mia Mask, *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 89.

³⁶ Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," in *Critical Inquiry* 21:1 (1994), 37.

been decidedly toned down and altered toward a more passive and assimilationist aesthetic. Similarly, too, it is telling that, like Hayes's "Theme from *Shaft*," Willie Hutch's "Theme of Foxy Brown" is featured both in the opening and closing credits and (as it turns out) is the only theme song in the entire film. Musical borrowings from "Theme from Shaft" in the *Foxy Brown* score (such as in the track "Chase") further reveal not only a reliance upon now-male musical signifiers but also a de-radicalization of these excerpts. For instance, whereas Hayes employed a complex song structure indicative of Shaft-as-complicated-man, Hutch uses a structurally simpler verse-chorus structure, coinciding with the de-radicalized characterization of Foxy Brown. While it is possible that "Theme of Foxy Brown" could have offered a critique on the more patriarchally centered narrative, the song in fact only reifies the film narrative's overt ascription of femaleness as contingent upon relationships with male authorities.



Figure 2. Promotional poster for *Foxy Brown* (1974).

The “increased sophistication” that Sims and Mask imply in *Foxy Brown* is not evident in the opening title sequence, where “Theme of Foxy Brown” is first heard. What is shown is a choreographed sequence featuring a multiplicity of Foxy Browns dancing provocatively to the tune, sporting different hairstyles and outfits. While the fancier clothes might offer an element of “sophistication” (as Sims seems to infer), Foxy is also visible on screen in various stages of disrobement. Joanna Demers has argued that there is power in the sense that she actually *hears* her song and responds to it, further suggesting that “because Grier is the hero/ine of the film, not merely a female accessory, her wink and smile [in the sequence] reveal that ultimately she is playing with the sexist conventions of

Blaxploitation.”³⁷ While this might be the case on Grier’s part, this conclusion ignores the camera angles and editing techniques that ultimately take away from Grier’s assertion of agency. The first moments, for instance, reduce Foxy Brown to a series of body parts, focusing on the eyes, mouth, and afro, respectively. This reduction of the female form is furthered via the camera frequently zooming in on Grier’s breasts and pelvic region as she dances. Even when her full figure is shown, it is frequently stylized as only an outline. All of these elements point to the overall objectification of Foxy Brown, as Stephane Dunn argues, abiding by Laura Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” theory “that the female presence has historically presented in patriarchal cinema.”³⁸ The implied male gaze does not allow for Foxy Brown’s image to be presented as a complete subject.

Further, this male-defined subject as evinced in the opening credits is representative of Foxy Brown’s overall presentation in the narrative. While it becomes apparent through the narrative that Foxy Brown does have some agency, its articulation is limited by her relationships with male figures. In particular, Foxy’s relationships her brother Link, her boyfriend Michael, and with the (male-run) Black Panther Party reveal dependent connections on different aspects of patriarchal authority. As opposed to *Coffy*, where the sibling was a younger adolescent sister who had been a victim of dope dealers, Link is a dope dealer in a similar age bracket to Foxy, though he is clearly more immature. Although he is ultimately a weak figure, Link is able to get Foxy to help him when he is in trouble.

³⁷ Joanna Demers, “Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop,” *Popular Music* 22:1 (Jan. 2003) 47.

³⁸ Stephane Dunn, “*Baadass Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*, 111.

For instance, following the opening credits, Link is being hunted by a drug racket for defaulting on a loan and calls Foxy for help. Being the ever dutiful sister, she drives to get him and hits a couple of the bad guys with her car solely for Link's benefit, providing him with energy and strength.

Michael is in many ways Link's foil, for he is a source of strength for Foxy while Link is in need of it from her. Further, whereas Coffy's politician boyfriend turned out to be her ultimate enemy (thus perhaps contributing to Coffy's self-reliance throughout the film), Michael has seemingly "endowed" Foxy with strength, through dialogue referencing that he taught her how to use a gun. A former undercover drug enforcement agent, Michael is forced to undergo plastic surgery to hide his identity from drug pushers. Of course, Link – who needs to get back in the good graces of the drug lords and give them something valuable so he can live – is the whistleblower who causes Michael to be killed. Ultimately, it is only through his death that the revenge narrative is set in motion.

For all of Michael's strength, because he was working for the CIA (a stereotypically white organization), he has limited knowledge of the workings of the local "neighborhood committee," a small all-male subgroup of the Black Panther Party (BPP).³⁹ On the way home from the hospital (where Michael was recovering from surgery), Foxy and Michael run into one of the members, Oscar, who (with others) is in the midst of apprehending a black dope dealer, better

³⁹ Although never referred to by name, iconography such as the fist as well as posters of George Jackson and Angela Davis assumes the group to be members of the BPP.


known to the BPP as one engaging in the “new slavery.”⁴⁰ The later exchange between Foxy and Oscar reveals a friendship between the two, a seemingly more egalitarian connection that further implies Foxy’s involvement with the party (or at least sympathy). She is also supportive of the Party’s violent approach to justice, to the point that when Michael questions it (“I don’t know... vigilante justice?”), she responds, “It’s as American as apple pie!” Indeed, compared to *Coffy*, Foxy remains much more cool and collected when it comes to violence in the name of “justice.” However, as the narrative later shows, Foxy has to ask permission from the BPP to engage in “vigilante justice,” while they clearly do not ask her approval before doing the same. Thus, as opposed to *Coffy*, the actions of males script Foxy’s actions in the narrative.

Willie Hutch’s soundtrack, too, creates a submissive female subject through the eyes (and sounds) of male figures. Of particular significance is the connection between Hutch’s soundtrack and Hayes’s seminal *Shaft* score. While a comparison between *Shaft* and *Coffy* revealed a radicalization of both characters’ subjectivities, comparing “Theme from *Shaft*” to “Theme of Foxy Brown” instead exposes only empty signifiers of black radical femininity. Clear markers demonstrate that Hutch not only was well familiar with Hayes’s score but also borrowed musical elements from it.⁴¹ One of the most obvious examples of musical borrowing can be found in

⁴⁰ It is important to note that even though Link is a dope pusher (and therefore a potential target of the committee), Foxy is not willing to kill her own brother even after finding out he played a role in Michael’s death.

⁴¹ The instrumentation for “Theme of Foxy Brown” also harkens to “Theme from *Shaft*,” particularly through the prominent use of the “wah wah” guitar, a full brass section, and strings (especially violins). However, there are also distinguishing timbres, such as the presence of the Fender Rhodes and the congas (both of which, interestingly,

the first track of the *Foxy Brown* soundtrack, “Chase,” which (as might be surmised) is a recurring theme that underscores the film’s chase scenes. In the track, a repeating flute motive quotes almost directly from a trumpet motive in the second introduction of “Theme from *Shaft*” (Example 4). Such types of quotation are not coincidental, and indeed aspects of “Theme of Foxy Brown” can also be compared to “Theme from *Shaft*” in this manner.

a) 2:08-2:16
 Trumpets (in C) 

b) 0:50-0:53
 Flutes 

Example 4. a) Trumpet motive from Isaac Hayes’s “Theme from *Shaft*” (1971). b) Flute motive from Willie Hutch’s “Theme of Foxy Brown” (1974).

As aforementioned, though, Hutch’s use of “Shaft” elements within an otherwise normative song structure results in an overall de-radicalization of the song. One seemingly similar factor between the two theme songs is the use of a rhythmic break, which (as its name suggests) is meant to disrupt the flow of the songs (Example 5). Of note is the presence of major tenths in the upper two voices of both excerpts, a similarity augmented by the fact that the top line is played by trumpets in both cases. Hemiolas are also present in both rhythmic breaks, although in Hayes’s score the rhythm is 3-against-4 while Hutch incorporates a 3-against-2 rhythm. The placement of each break, though, serves as testament to different functions. The rhythmic break in Hayes’s song occurs twice during only

were featured in “Coffy Baby”).

the outro portion, while the break in Hutch’s song occurs four times throughout the song. Considering that Hayes’s track is nearly twice the length of Hutch’s, the break in “Theme from *Shaft*” appears much more disruptive. Further, Hayes incorporates the break to “jump” the outro toward a cadence (though the break itself is not cadential), first inciting a shift from the “second theme” to the “first theme.” It later disrupts even the “first theme” (with the theme’s only real signifier being the “wah wah” guitar featured at the beginning of the track), with both the theme and the break becoming more fragmented until the final chord. The break in “Foxy Brown,” on the other hand, serves a decidedly more cadential function (particularly given the moving bass line), delineating the multiple sections – of which there are five (Chorus [C], Verse [V], C, V, C) – and serving as the final cadence. Given this regulation, Hutch’s break is used past the point at which it would be considered disruptive. In short, while emulating a distinctive quality of “Theme from *Shaft*,” Hutch’s “Theme of Foxy Brown” has no elements in place to create “disruptions” of its own, resulting in a de-radicalization of Foxy’s subjectivity.

a) 3:56-4:00



b) 1:03-1:06



Example 5. a) Rhythmic break from Isaac Hayes’s “Theme from *Shaft*” (1971). b) Rhythmic break from Willie Hutch’s “Theme of Foxy Brown” (1974).

Hutch's "Theme" is distinct in its tempo, which is more frenetic than either "Theme from *Shaft*" or "Coffy is the Color." This helps to establish its indicated function – provided by the visuals of the opening title – as a dance number, and it offers a clear connection to the growing disco movement (which became associated with passive femininity).⁴² As was the case with "Theme from *Shaft*," though, Willie Hutch is the solo singer in "Theme of Foxy Brown," backed by three female singers.⁴³ As compared to both "Coffy is the Color" and "Theme from *Shaft*," the lyrical content is the most verbose. But whereas Hayes's lyrics claim Shaft as a multi-faceted individual – he is not just a sex machine but is also brave, loyal to fellow African American "brothers," and "complicated" – Willie Hutch's lyrics primarily cast Foxy Brown as a master of love and pleasure, to the point where she is superior to the love goddess Venus herself. It is, of course, also important to point out that she does not "sleep around," and the lyrics ensure the audience from the onset that Foxy remains faithful to her man. One of the first lyrics states: "Oh girl, you're the kind of woman that won't let your man down," and later, "You're cute and sweet, no but you don't play around." As seen here, too, most of the lyrics "speak" to Foxy, much in the same way that Dee Dee Bridgewater "spoke" to Coffy in "Coffy Baby," but in this case it is a male who is describing and, more importantly, advising Foxy Brown. Willie Hutch is yet another example of Foxy

⁴² See Peraino, Judith. 2006. *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁴³ The backup singers (listed as "background singers" on the LP jacket) are Maxine Willard, Julia Tillman, and Carol Willis. Maxine and Julia were siblings, also known as the Waters Sisters, and all sang backup vocals for several albums, many produced by Motown Records (which produced the soundtrack to *Foxy Brown*).

Brown being defined by and through male figures, and his words recall a strange combination of the hypersexualized exotic Other with the desexualized-but-loyal mammy stereotypes.

One notable shift in this point of address occurs in the second section, during which Hutch proclaims (perhaps to the audience): “But please don’t make Foxy mad, or you’ll find out that the lady is super bad!” This line affirms the claim made in the movie poster (“She’s brown sugar and spice, but if you don’t treat her nice, she’ll put you on ice!”) in that she is beautiful and faithful but certainly not passive. Indeed, it is a trait key to the revenge narrative of the film, and it is important that there is at least some mention of it in her theme song. However, the lyrics quickly move on from this, instead seeking to reaffirm her lovemaking abilities as ideal for men. Throughout the song, Foxy’s abilities are related back to the needs and wants of men, as though she exists *for* them rather than *with* them. She “will not let [her] man down,” is the “kind of woman that a man needs around,” and is “the treasure of ecstasy [...] that most men have been searching for!” Further, and as the song concludes, she is expected to continue to defend her man’s honor: “Girl, whatever you do, don’t let him down!” Foxy must continue to operate as a vigilante until justice is served on behalf of the men (in her life) who suffered. While she is not passive, her “radical” black femininity is only activated by men’s needs.

This dependent connection to men is further realized through two other prominent female characters in the film, Claudia and Katherine Wall, for whether they succeed or fail depends on their relationships to masculine figures. For

instance, Foxy's archenemy is Katherine Wall, a straight white woman who runs a call girl agency. This agency is intricately connected to a drug ring, maintained by Katherine's "very personal, private property," Steve Elias.⁴⁴ Through Steve and Katherine's relationship, it is clear that Steve is in the figurehead post as the public relations director of the drug syndicate and as arm candy for Katherine, both of which are submissive positions. Katherine, in fact, is the head of a matriarchal society of sorts, having dominance not only over her call girls but also Steve. This reversal of "traditional" gender roles is presented as an unhealthy relationship between the two, which is contrasted with Michael's and Foxy's "normal" relationship, where Michael provides strength while Foxy supplies satisfaction.

Claudia is one of the more "seasoned" call girls in Katherine's agency who is called upon to help Foxy perform her first "trick." On the way to "please" a judge, the sudden appearance of Claudia's son and husband exposes the fact that she is also a mother and wife, who had reluctantly abandoned them once inside the oppressive matriarchal system of Katherine's agency. Further, and more significantly, Claudia momentarily becomes an active agent of Foxy's plan to take down said agency, becoming a side kick of sorts when the two humiliate the judge whom they were supposed to appease.⁴⁵ As demonstrated by the narrative, though, Claudia must return to her husband and son (read: the mother role) in order to survive. Further, Foxy's role in helping Claudia positions Foxy as an agent of "normalcy" in regard to "traditional" gender roles.

⁴⁴ The quote refers to a line of dialogue spoken by Claudia in film.

⁴⁵ The moment at which Foxy concocts this plan, while the two are in a taxi heading toward the judge's hotel room, occurs as the midpoint of the film.

This connection to maleness ties back to the overarching lyrical themes in “Theme of Foxy Brown,” and it applies directly to Foxy as well. For instance, although the primary revenge narrative is set in motion with the death of Michael, Foxy’s rape is indication that she cannot operate on her own without becoming victimized. Occurring well after the midpoint of the film (beginning 1:01:41), Foxy is sent to the “ranch” after being captured by Katherine’s gang for her earlier plot to humiliate the judge. At the “ranch,” and in a harrowing scene, one “redneck” male ties Foxy up while another prepares to rape her. Although the scene fades out, the implied trauma of the situation is evident. The revenge narrative, of course, requires that Foxy Brown recover from this moment, but her escape from the “ranch” (and the killing of her attackers) seems only to occur in the name of survival, an instinctive move rather than a deliberate articulation. Further, rather than refer back to her own victimization as a source of additional revenge (or justice), Foxy never addresses her rape. Of course, Hutch earlier also alluded to the rape scene’s trajectory: “But please don’t make Foxy mad, or you’ll find out that the lady is super bad!” To have the “Theme of Foxy Brown” continue to hold significance this late in the narrative is indicative of the song’s function as a singular, all-encompassing theme, and especially the de-radicalization of Foxy Brown’s subjectivity.

Indeed, the only other prominently featured songs in the film occur during the two love scenes (“Hospital Prelude of Love Theme” and “Give Me Some of That Good Ole Love”) and the chase scenes (“Chase”), and none of them specifically

relate to Foxy's subjectivity enough to qualify as "theme songs."⁴⁶ In the final scenes – after Foxy escapes from the "ranch" – she is next seen in an office with her friend Oscar from the BPP, where she learns that Link has been killed (as was witnessed in the immediately prior scene). She is again sporting an afro (which parallels the poster of Angela Davis behind her), though the fact that she is in the BPP's office to relinquish her authority negates its significance as a symbol of radicalism. Unlike Coffy, then, the afro has now become an empty signifier or a sign of the "politics of fashion." In the next shots, she is defending her request for "justice" (which is distinguished from "revenge") to the all-male panel of the BPP, not only for Link and Michael but also everyone who is taken advantage of by "big shots." At the end of the meeting, she must agree she will take care of the "revenge" if the male members will take care of the "justice." What this ultimately translates to is that the males castrate Steve while Foxy Brown presents the dismembered penis to Katherine. "Justice" is a (literal) loss of the phallus for Steve, while "revenge" is the exposure of Katherine as the bearer of phallic power, thus marked here – in anti-feminist fashion – as "wrong" for its subversion of normative gender roles.

Once this exchange is made and Foxy leaves this scene, "Theme of Foxy Brown" is featured again. In addition to reifying the song as the sole theme throughout the film, it also relates proximally to the end of the narrative. Hutch's first lyric ("Superbad!") nods in approval of Foxy's actions, and the song resumes

⁴⁶ Stephane Dunn points out that song titles in the *Foxy Brown* soundtrack offer an "even more phallogentric and sexually graphic body of songs, including 'Give Me Some of That [Good Ole Love]' and 'You Sure Know How to Love Your Man.'" (Stephane Dunn, "*Baadass Bitches*" and *Sassy Supermamas*, 112.)

its declaration of Foxy's love and devotion (to men). This includes her dedication to the men of the BPP, who are the ones to perform the castration. Further, it is significant that the song highlights Foxy as the bearer of love, for in presenting the phallus to Katherine she reveals the imbalance of power that resulted in Katherine's and Steve's lack of love. However, this analysis does not point to a female-centered perspective. Ultimately, "Theme of Foxy Brown" is about the female-operating-for-the-sake-of-male narrative, and there is no after-story once this narrative is complete.

Although ultimately the articulation of femininity in this film is problematic, Demers's present defense of the film does indeed reflect many (African American) women's later regard of Foxy Brown as a positive figure.⁴⁷ José Esteban Muñoz has written on this phenomenon of "disidentification," whereby in the relative absence of positive minority figures in the mainstream those who do achieve a level of notoriety are upheld as significant figures of the group. As he writes, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normal citizenship."⁴⁸ Although Foxy Brown was (and is) not an ideal representation of strong womanhood, the lack of other significant figures necessitated a negotiation with this feminine portrayal to maintain a semblance of some (black) female strength in cinema.

⁴⁷ As with, for instance, Foxy Brown (the rapper) and Mo'Nique. *The Mo'Nique Show*, Season 1, first broadcast 13 May 2010 by BET.

⁴⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 4.

Jackie Brown and the Postmodern Theme Song

As Yvonne Sims notes, “In a February 1976 interview, she [Pam Grier] admitted most of her pictures were trash, but credited them with allowing a lot of blacks to break into movies for the first time and feed their families.”⁴⁹ She attempted to start her own production company while she still had popularity, but it did not prove to be a fruitful venture. Although operating in lesser capacities, Pam Grier continued to work regularly. Further, with the rise of hip-hop in the 1980s and its gratuitous sampling of Blaxploitation soundtracks, Pam Grier’s image and influence held.⁵⁰ By 1996, Inga DeCarlo Fung Marchand had adopted the name “Foxy Brown” as her rapper name, as an homage to one of her childhood heroes, and Quentin Tarantino had offered Grier the role of Jackie Brown – specially written for her – that would propel her back to stardom.

As opposed to *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, in which both soundtracks were designed to articulate a character’s subjectivity (positive or otherwise), in Tarantino’s *Jackie Brown* there is a conflation of character with actress. Thus, one thing that becomes clear in the context of *Jackie Brown* is that there are a multitude of songs that relate directly to both Pam Grier and Jackie Brown. Much of what contributes to this conflation is the lack of an “original” score, with the soundtrack comprised of (mostly) 1970s songs chosen by Tarantino. While there are “theme songs” to accompany Jackie Brown in the context of the narrative, other tracks, such as the Pam Grier-sung “Long Time Woman” (1971) as well as references to

⁴⁹ Yvonne Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*, 86.

⁵⁰ See Demers, Joanna. 2003. “Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop.” *Popular Music* 22:1, 41-56.

her Blaxploitation films, also contribute significantly to the narrative. What results is a postmodern construction of subjectivity that opens up opportunities for black female expression and autonomy distinct from the radicalism (and anti-feminist backlash) in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*.

By 1997, when *Jackie Brown* was released, it was clear that the Blaxploitation genre had heavily influenced films and soundtracks of the 1990s, via the contemporaneous hip hop movement, specifically through the latter's sampling of various songs and artists of the 1970s. Joanna Demers expresses a concern with this particular forged link, remarking that "[h]ip-hop artists, in sampling sounds and images from the 1970s, often err in conflating different political schools of thought or glorifying artists that may not even have been committed to revolutionary ideals."⁵¹ While this might be true, such a statement actually critiques all hip-hop reference "samples" as moments of "nostalgia," a negatively-charged term implying a skewed version of history. In the presupposition that "truth" is embedded in the historical moments themselves, this conflation, rather than of differing schools of political thought, seems to breach a wider issue of citing an historical "moment" rather than acknowledging it as an amalgam of perceptions across time. As bell hooks asserts, "Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency. [...] Such a critique

⁵¹ Joanna Demers, "Sampling," 52.

allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience.”⁵² In the case of *Jackie Brown*, then, a multiplicity of songs – in the form of theme songs as well as “influence” songs – contribute to the “varied black experience” of not only Jackie Brown but also Pam Grier.

On the one hand, Tarantino does unabashedly revolve the film around Pam Grier. Further, his films, especially *Pulp Fiction* (1994), have garnered their critical acclaim for their postmodern style of narrative. With *Pulp Fiction* in particular, its nonlinearity was such that characters that were killed on screen reappeared through a “rewinding” of time to an earlier stage of the story’s progression. This distinctive filmmaking process might be said to betray a paradoxically singular vision, a control on Tarantino’s part that only seems enhanced when considering his additional function as scriptwriter. As had earlier been seen with *Foxy Brown*, Pam Grier’s ability to contribute to the film resulted in mostly such superficial decisions as costumes and hair styles, reflecting the superficiality of radicalism in the film (which actually hid anti-feminist sentiments). However, and as evidenced with the “making of” documentary on the film – Tarantino not only shot scenes in multiple styles but also allowed for actors and other crewmembers to voice their own ideas, thus giving Pam Grier more agency over her character than just through costuming choices.⁵³ It is this multiplicity of styles that pervades the film, although ultimately, too, most artistic decisions come back to Pam Grier-as-seminal-figure.

⁵² bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Postmodern Culture* 1:1 (1990): 10-11, accessed March 24, 2011, doi: 10.1353/pmc.1990.0004.

⁵³ “*Jackie Brown: How It Went Down*,” *Jackie Brown: Collector’s Edition*, DVD, 2002.

One way this multiplicity of styles manifests is through the various movie posters released for the film, reflecting distinct poster designs (Figure 3). Both of these examples are important in that they reflect the simultaneous placement of the film in the 1990s (visually and narratively) and 1970s (sonically). In the more “modern” poster (the look of which has largely to do with its use of photography rather than artists’ renderings), Jackie Brown is on the same plane as five other characters in the film. Although she is foregrounded and is in the most active stance of the six (helping to cement audience awareness of her character as the lead), the fact remains that Jackie Brown does not seem to be held to higher regard than the rest of the characters. This arrangement also fuels the tagline above it: “Six players on the trail of a half million in cash. There’s only one question...Who’s playing who?” Thus, the poster tries to propel the marketing of *Jackie Brown* as a neo-noir of sorts, a whodunit mystery in which the final outcome of the characters is unsure.



Figure 3. Promotional posters for *Jackie Brown* (1997). (Left) “modern” poster (Right) “retro” poster.

Of course, the 70s-style “Blaxploitation” poster tells other Blaxploitation (and especially Pam Grier-led ones) film fans that at least one character’s fate is secured: Jackie Brown’s. Indeed, Blaxploitation films were not known for masterfully innovative plots, instead relying on enough nuances within an otherwise formulaic storyline to guarantee some ticket sales. The primary lure for films was its star, and it was generally expected that the star’s protagonist would succeed by the film’s end. As with both posters for *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, the main characters were drawn to appear larger than life, especially in regard to the other characters, and *Jackie Brown* is much the same. Further connections to these earlier Grier films can be seen in the taglines – “She’s the ‘GODMOTHER’ of them all”

is taken from the *Coffy* poster, while reference to *Foxy Brown* is seen in the line, “She’s brown sugar and spice but if you don’t treat her nice she’ll put you on ice!” Additionally, the design of the film’s title, featured in both posters, is the exact font used in the title for *Foxy Brown*. In short, while the “modern” poster focuses more on Jackie Brown and her potential relationship with other characters, the “retro” one is more concerned with Pam Grier and signifiers of her filmic past. There is not only a seeming conflation of Grier’s characters but also a blurring of distinctions between Pam Grier and Jackie Brown.

It is important to note again that postmodernity here is not about the dissolution of identity, but rather, as hooks asserted, the creation of multiple identities, in this case articulations of *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, *Jackie Brown*, and (the thread linking them all) Pam Grier. The soundtrack, too, capitalizes on the multiple subjectivities of Jackie Brown and Pam Grier. Although there is not much scholarly material on the music of *Jackie Brown*, English professor Robert Miklitsch’s article “Audiophilia: Audiovisual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema in Jackie Brown” is a notable exception. His discussion of the various songs in the film serves to complicate Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “gaze” in film. In particular, he focuses on the “racial gaze,” an aspect Mulvey’s article ignores (she focuses on women as objects of the “gaze”), although gender invariably becomes a part of the discussion. But while he talks about subjectivity, it is in regard to the more generalized racial subjectivity rather than Pam Grier herself (or, for that matter, Jackie Brown). Indeed, many of the songs, if not directly about “her” (as either Grier or Brown), relate in some way back to her, a multiplicity of songs that constitutes what I call

the “postmodern theme.” This postmodern theme thus articulates a black female subjectivity distinct from the “radical” articulation seen in *Coffy* (and, indeed, the faux-radicalism in *Foxy Brown*).

The postmodern theme is directly related to the postmodern soundtrack, which has been discussed by musicologist Julie Brown. In her article “*Ally McBeal's Postmodern Soundtrack*,” she writes: “A musical ‘soundtrack’ of sorts also invades the diegesis: through various sub-plots and dramatic conceits music, especially a particular type of pop music, is elevated to the role of central plot and series metaphor, above all in relation to Ally’s character. Even by television’s standards, Ally McBeal’s soundtrack is highly postmodern.”⁵⁴ By her account, the “soundtrack” is a personal one, tending to revolve around Ally McBeal’s character as the primary figure in the narrative at large. In similar fashion, much of the music (though certainly not all) in *Jackie Brown* does revolve around Jackie Brown/Pam Grier. However, it is also important to consider to what extent the music in question relates to Jackie Brown or Pam Grier (or both), whether “she” (as in the narrative) chooses the music and, relatedly, from where the music came (both in the context of the narrative as well as outside). As will be seen, each song exhibits these factors to different degrees, which in turn contributes to the multi-faceted, postmodern articulation of Jackie Brown’s/Pam Grier’s subjectivity.

For clarity’s sake, I will outline a few plot points of *Jackie Brown* here. Jackie Brown is a flight attendant working for the “shittiest” airline because of a prior arrest for smuggling drugs on behalf of her former pilot husband. An ATF agent

⁵⁴ Julie Brown, “Ally McBeal’s Postmodern Soundtrack,” *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 126:2 (2001) 275.

and an LAPD officer detain her initially for smuggling money across the Mexican border and then arrest her after finding a bag of cocaine. The money and the cocaine belong to arms dealer Ordell Robbie, who pays Jackie to transfer money (the cocaine was unintentional) for him across the U.S./Mexico border. Jackie is now at risk of going to prison and thus arranges a deal with the ATF agent (Ray) to help him get Ordell on weapons charges. Jackie also knows that Ordell has a half million dollars in Mexico and thus conspires simultaneously with Ray, Ordell, and her bail bondsman “partner” Max Cherry to get the money into the U.S. and take it. The “mystery” of the plot involves the audience not knowing which side Jackie will choose, or if she will even choose a side.

Jackie Brown has three “theme songs” which, given their disparate genre sources and placements within the narrative, serve to articulate the character’s postmodern subjectivity. Indeed, this is distinct from not only Coffy’s developing subjectivity (via songs within a cohesive score) but also Foxy Brown’s lack of development (with only one theme song). The first, Bobby Womack’s 1972 “Across 110th Street,” seems to hold the most significance as a “theme song” by virtue of its positioning as the opening and closing song of the film. Further, it fits the mold as more “traditional” Blaxploitation theme song, most obviously since it *was* a Blaxploitation theme song.⁵⁵ The second, The Crusaders’ 1979 disco hit “Street Life,” featuring Randy Crawford, occurs two-thirds of the way into the film and accompanies Jackie Brown as she enters a mall to perform an elaborate scheme to secure the money for herself. Because of the parallel imagery used when these two

⁵⁵ Womack’s “Across 110th Street” is the theme song to the 1972 film of the same name.

songs are featured – “Across 110th Street” as heard during the opening credits – there is a clear relationship between these two scenes (Figure 4). Since “Street Life” is a post-Blaxploitation disco song sung by a female, its genre and sonic qualities articulate different aspects of the black feminine subject from the male-sung “Across 110th Street.” Nevertheless, their similar themes of the seeming inevitable necessity of “the street’s” existence (though without condoning said existence), as well as the parallel shots, audiovisually tie the two songs together. The third, Bloodstone’s 1972 romantic ballad “Natural High,” is featured about forty minutes into the film. Featuring multiple male voices, their harmonies suggest doo-wop influences, which – along with the romance-themed signifiers – place the song in a different genre from both “Street Life” and “Across 110th Street.” As can be seen, these songs are different from both *Foxy Brown* – which featured only one, non-developing theme – and *Coffy* – which had three theme songs but conveyed a more “modern” developing subject through the songs’ genre cohesion.



Figure 4. (Left) Still shot from the opening title sequence. (Right) Still shot from entrance into mall for the “real” money exchange. *Jackie Brown* (1997).

I will begin by discussing the primary theme “Across 110th Street,” showing how this theme connects to the earlier discussed Blaxploitation themes, from *Shaft*

through *Foxy Brown*. The opening lyrics to Womack's song are the first words heard in the film:

I was the third brother of five
 Doing whatever I had to do to survive
 I'm not saying what I did was all right
 Trying to break out of the ghetto was a day to day fight
 Been down so long, getting up didn't cross my mind
 But I knew there was a better way of life and I was just trying to find
 You don't know what you'll do until you're put under pressure
 Across 110th street is a hell of a tester

Although Womack is singing as "I" – thus creating the masculine subject as being the "third brother of five" – much of these lyrics also apply to Jackie Brown's narrative. As it is learned after the opening credits, officers catch her with money she has smuggled in from Mexico, to be delivered to Ordell. The viewer also learns that Jackie had been arrested thirteen years prior for smuggling drugs for her (former) pilot husband. In short, her "day to day fight" has been "running" illegal transactions across borders (via her job) for the sake of patriarchal figures, a scenario which connects to *Foxy Brown's* narrative (indeed, their narratives seem linked biologically through their last name). However, as opposed to *Foxy*, there are no radical male figures in *Jackie Brown* upon whom Jackie can rely. What ultimately ends up putting Jackie "under pressure" is the fact that she now either has to help the ATF catch Ordell or go to jail. The fact that she knows about Ordell's half million dollars in Mexico is what sets her narrative in motion.

Based on the song's lyrics, though, Jackie is not just the "brother" trying to survive. The chorus opens:

Across 110th Street, pimps trying to catch a woman that's weak,
 Across 110th Street, pushers won't let the junkie go free

Across 110th Street, women trying to catch a trick on the street
 Across 110th Street, you can find it all in the street

The relationship between Ordell (“pimp”) and Jackie (“weak woman”) serves as the analogue to the second line of the chorus – or, at least, as Ordell would have it. Ordell is the “pimp” who regards the women in his life as his “bitches” throughout the film. Indeed, he feels, a la *The Mack* (1973 Blaxploitation film), that “anybody can control a woman’s body,” with a successful pimp being able to then “control her mind.”⁵⁶ Ordell, although not an actual pimp (for his “trade” is as an arms dealer), is nevertheless unsuccessful for he actually exhibits very little control over most women in his life (and on his payroll), and especially with Jackie. Of course, Ordell has proven in the narrative that he will resort to violence when (seemingly) necessary. This occurs early on in the exchange between Ordell (“pusher”) and Beaumont Livingston (“junkie”), with the latter facing his fate for getting caught by police. Though Ordell tries to kill Jackie after she gets arrested, Jackie outwits him. Thus, she asserts rather quickly in the narrative, counter to what the song might profess and, indeed, counter to *Foxy Brown*, that she is the figure in control.

The music to “Across 110th Street,” interestingly, is quite different from other theme songs that have thus far been discussed, from “Shaft” through “Foxy Brown.” Indeed, one of its most distinctive features, comparatively speaking, is its more somber nature. This, at the very least, is similar to the opening introduction to “Theme from *Shaft*,” which also exhibited more of a serious, “epic” quality, although this affect is not maintained throughout the song. In both these songs’ cases, the more “serious” nature results partly from the slower tempo. But while

⁵⁶ At the beginning of the film, the Blind Man says this to Goldie, the protagonist.

“Across 110th Street” maintains a somber mood throughout the song, “Theme from *Shaft*” becomes exemplified through the interjected bits of humor in the lyrics. For instance: “Who’s the black private dick that’s the sex machine to all the chicks?” (“Shaft!” “Daaaaamn right!”). Later:

Isaac Hayes

They say this cat Shaft is a baad motha-

But I’m talkin’ about Shaft!

Backup Singers

Shut your mouth!

Then we can dig it!

The humor of these exchanges is also seen in the accompanying visuals in the opening title sequence, such as when Shaft gives the middle finger to a taxi driver for almost hitting him (though Shaft was at fault for jaywalking). The lyrics to “Across 110th Street,” however, contain no humor. They form a depressing depiction of the ghetto life, but an empathetic one as well (via Womack’s first-person reporting). People should do what they can to survive, but Womack advises that staying strong is “a better way out” rather than resorting to “coke snorting” and “dope shooting” (which, to him, is just “copping out”). Further, the violins (Example 7) help to outline the minor mode of the song (the song is in b minor), and the emotionality of the legato melodic line in their upper registers augments somber affect created by the b minor mode.

Example 7. Violin segment from Womack’s “Across 110th Street” (1972).

Womack's voice, too, as with Hayes, Hutch, and others, adds much to the overall affect of the song. As opposed to Garfield in "Shining Symbol," whose smooth voice contributed to a feeling of hope, Womack's "gritty" voice contributes to a "harder" sound signifying a lower social class, empathetically placing him in the depressed ghetto context. Interestingly, too, he has no back up singers, thus lending a sense of isolation to his voice that opposes the directive of the song. Further, the particular use of instrumental timbres (and lack of others) in "Across 110th Street" contributes to a lack of black radicalism. Certain signifiers of 1970s funk are subdued and pushed to the back of the mix, with the most blatant one being the "wah wah" guitar, a timbre that was constant in Shaft's theme. Of note is the articulation of the guitar, resulting in both a diminished rhythmic insistency and a very subdued "wah wah" effect. Since the film *Across 110th Street* featured a white cop and a black cop as protagonists, this diminishment of a clear association to Shaft (and thus the black masculine figure) might have occurred in order to not alienate the white subject and, in turn, achieve more of a racial unity. Since Black Power radical separatism was no longer as commonly accepted in the 1990s as in the 1970s, it is logical that *Jackie Brown* would refrain from evoking the radicalism epitomized by the 1970s Black Panther Party (and, indeed, in *Coffy's* "Shining Symbol").

While "Across 110th Street" evokes the grittiness and depressed mood of the ghetto life, the Crusaders' 1979 disco hit "Street Life," featuring the voice of Randy Crawford, offers a more upbeat aesthetic. The song (mostly) accompanies Jackie Brown as she is driving from the airport to the mall, and a bit later as she is

walking from her car into the mall. The brief exception involves a cutaway to Max's face as he also drives toward the mall. As Miklitsch notes: "The fact that 'Street Life', rather than, as in the screenplay, the Delfonics [a song of "influence" on Max, to be discussed later], plays under this shot indicates that even though the music is not enunciated by Jackie, her musical 'point of view' is dominant."⁵⁷ This occurrence thus reinforces not only Jackie's dominant subject position but also its pervasion into Max's "soundtrack."

"Street Life" opens with the lyrics to the chorus:

I play the street life, because there's no place I can go
 Street life, it's the only life I know
 Street life, and there's 1000 parts to play
 Street life, until you play your life away

As remarked earlier, the dual movie posters targeted different ways the film could be marketed. Here, too, the use of this song (specifically the presence of the third line) capitalizes on the fact that Jackie Brown, to this point, has been playing multiple roles as an accomplice in three separate camps: with Ordell (and, by extension, Louis and Melanie), the cops (Ray and Mark), and with Max. The song continues with this idea of roleplaying ("The type of life that's played/A tempting masquerade") as Jackie continues to drive toward the mall. Later, as she gets out of her car:

Street life, but you better not get old
 Street life, or you're gonna feel the cold

The song offers that some can "play" the "street life," but only as long as youth is retained. Jackie, being in her mid-forties and already voicing her concern of

⁵⁷ Robert Miklitsch, "Audiophilia: Audiovisual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema in *Jackie Brown*," *Screen* 45:4 (Winter 2004), 293.

“getting older,” is no longer in the position to be successful and must thus try to get away from the street life.

Though the two shots (as seen in Figure 4) were clearly designed to relate to each other, the accompanying soundscapes are actually quite opposed. The moment at which the parallel shot begins, “Street Life” shifts from its “stable” position in a more flat-oriented key (oscillating from f minor in the choruses to A-flat Major in the verses) to a more “jarring” harmonic progression. Via an enharmonic shift, the song moves suddenly from A-flat Major to E Major, then jumps up to F Major two measures later. This harmonic (also modal) shift contrasts sharply with the overall b minor mode of Womack’s “Across 110th Street.” Additionally, trumpets in “Street Life” add a sort of fanfare quality to this moment in the song. This fits nicely, too, with the differing stances of the two Pam Griers. In the former shot, Grier is standing on a moving walkway, and resultantly her muscles are still and relaxed. In the latter shot, she is very active, in the process not only of walking into the mall but also closer to the moment when the “street life” might end.

Occurring two-thirds of the way into the film, “Street Life” is sonically counter to the urbanity evoked in “Across 110th Street,” not only in its associations with disco culture but also with the featuring of Randy Crawford’s (non-“gritty”) female voice. Indeed, the only other occurrence of the female voice that directly “envoices” Jackie’s character is the Pam Grier-sung “Long Time Woman.” Recorded as part of the soundtrack to the exploitation film *The Big Doll House* (1971), a fragment of it is included when Jackie Brown is placed in jail. While certainly a

cheeky reference to an otherwise “unknown” instance of a singing Pam Grier on Tarantino’s part, the inclusion is nevertheless an important (as well as early) inclusion not only of a fellow female singing on the soundtrack, but indeed Grier herself “envoicing” Jackie Brown – perhaps the ultimate blurring of subjectivities. Interestingly, and as was the case with Womack, neither Pam Grier nor Randy Crawford has any back up singers. Instead of incorporating multiple voices, which (depending on context) tended to suggest either gender hierarchies or a sense of community, Grier and Crawford in particular highlight a singularity of the *female* voice not heard in the Pam Grier *Coffy-Foxy Brown-Jackie Brown* lineage since Dee Dee Bridgewater’s “Coffy Baby.” Indeed, *Coffy* only had one song (“Coffy Baby”) with a solo female voice, while *Foxy Brown* had none. Thus, the compounding of Pam Grier’s and Randy Crawford’s voices, through both self- and third-person reference, articulate the “multiple black experiences” of the postmodern black feminine subjectivity.

As I alluded to before, though, “Across 110th Street” is the final song of the film. After successfully taking the money and defeating Ordell (who is shot by Ray in a “sting”), Jackie has a parting scene with Max. As she drives away from Max’s office and toward the airport to go to Spain, Jackie mouths the words to the chorus of “Across 110th Street.” Thus, although it is the same song as in the opening credits, this shift in character response counters the lack of development seen in *Foxy Brown*. Miklitsch assumes this “mouthing” to be Jackie singing: “the moment when Jackie begins to sing 'Across 110th Street' (and, in the process, reveal the source of the music) is a profoundly paradoxical one, since at this point in the

diegesis, she is arguably audited *and* auditor, enunciator *and* enunciated.”⁵⁸ As he rightly points out, though the recorded voice is not hers, Grier visually “gives voice” to the song (or deacousmatizes it). However, I would argue that Grier is in fact lip-synching rather than singing, an important distinction that relates back to Carolyn Abbate:

But the allegory is staged in the context of yet another masquerade and delusion, since lip-synching [...] is engineered by dividing body and voice. Indeed, even without their lip-synchings the transvestites in *Mascara* create an acoustic rift, for the one thing a transvestite cannot disguise is his or her *voice*, whose pitch and timbre will contradict his or her visual identity. [...] Radical as the statement may seem, it appears that voice-type (and not physical appearance) is the common mark of gender and hence of position in the culture – subject or object, observer or observed.⁵⁹

The masquerade is a “tempting” aspect of the “street life” (which is “the only life [she] knows”). But, rather than the “masquerade” being a gendered one, perhaps instead it is about the lack of distinction of identity: is it Jackie Brown or Pam Grier lip-synching?

Of course, this multiplicity of identity pervades throughout the entire film, but it is particularly evident when Bloodstone’s “Natural High” (1972) is featured. Max Cherry, the bail bondsman with whom Ordell has entrusted Jackie’s bail, becomes forever linked with Jackie at this moment, when he is picking her up from jail. As Jackie is walking from the jailhouse toward the gate, the camera focuses primarily on Max’s face as he watches her. The song opens, and the lyrics begin:

Why do I keep my mind
On you all the time
And I don’t even know you (I don’t know you)
Why do I feel this way

⁵⁸ Robert Miklitsch, “Audiophilia,” 297.

⁵⁹ Abbate, “Opera,” 256.

Thinking about you every day
And I don't even know you (I don't know you)

Tarantino speaks about the initial reception of this scene:

White audiences watch that and thought [sic] “Oh, oh, this is like falling-in-love music. Robert Forster is falling in love. He’s hearing this song in his head ‘cause he’s seeing this woman come to him... oh, wow, Quentin’s being kind of sappy here, actually [...]” ...That ain’t in Robert Forster’s head, that’s *me* putting that music on there! Black audiences are sitting in the Magic Johnson theater and they’re watching the movie and they’re seeing Pam Grier walk, you know, towards the camera [...] they’re watching Pam Grier walk into a movie in a big way, and they’re hearing like the most soulful, greatest love song of the ‘70s play, she’s walking in time with the music, it ain’t about Robert Forster’s head or about falling in love, it’s just about “it’s all right with the world. This is a great movie moment.”⁶⁰

Based on Tarantino’s account of differing responses to the scene, “Natural High” seems to accompany a moment where it is unclear whether the figure on screen is “Pam Grier” and/or “Jackie Brown.” For him, the song (“the most soulful, greatest love song of the ‘70s”) is more importantly about the link it establishes between Pam Grier and the audience (with Tarantino as an audience member), as opposed to solely forging a connection within the narrative between Max and Jackie. Thus, it is his intent not only that the song is a “theme” but more importantly that is representative of Pam Grier-as-icon (which, to him, the black audience immediately understood). But the angle at which the audience “gazes” at Pam Grier walking toward them, her figure slowly filling up the screen, is from the same perspective as Max. The lyrics, then, contextualize a larger sphere of reverence, a multiplicity of perspectives – both black and white, audience- and character-driven – of both Pam Grier and Jackie Brown.

⁶⁰ ““A Look Back at *Jackie Brown*:’ Interview with Quentin Tarantino,” *Jackie Brown: Collector’s Edition*, DVD, 2002.

In addition to theme songs, there are also “influence” songs that not only relate to Pam Grier and/or Jackie Brown but also frequently connect her to other characters in the diegesis. For instance, much of the incidental (underscored) music connects not only historically to Pam Grier but from Jackie Brown to others. Among the tracks not included in the released soundtrack for *Jackie Brown* were five tracks from the *Coffy* soundtrack that were included as underscore: “Exotic Dance,” “Brawling Broads,” “Escape,” “Aragon,” and “Vittroni’s Theme – King Is Dead.” Significantly, no music from the *Foxy Brown* soundtrack is used, which through reference affirms the positive, radical subjectivity articulated in *Coffy* while excluding the shallow, empty signifiers from *Foxy Brown*. The entrances of these songs tend to coincide with the onscreen presence of Jackie Brown, such as in the first two instances at the beginning of the film. The first occurrence (featuring the track “Brawling Broads” beginning 27:29) marks Jackie Brown’s first appearance onscreen after the opening title credits. As she is walking toward her car from the airport, Ray and the LAPD officer (Mark) stop her and ask to search her bag. The song fades out – along with Jackie’s confidence – as Mark discovers fifty thousand dollars in cash stuffed in a manila envelope in Jackie’s suitcase. Sent to jail after the ATF agent (Ray) later discovers the cocaine, the music underscoring Jackie’s bail hearing is Ayers’s “Exotic Dance,” which only ends once the hearing is complete.

However, as mentioned earlier, incidental music from *Coffy*, while still relating to Jackie in some way, is not necessarily the counterpart to Jackie’s experience alone. Another track is featured during the money exchange, in which

Jackie and Max must execute a scheme they had earlier devised to secure the half million dollars. Three different perspectives of the money exchange between Jackie and Ordell's "little blond surfer girl," Melanie, are played out consecutively. The first is Jackie's: after exchanging the money (though not all of it) with Melanie, Jackie quickly places the rest of the money in the new bag she just received and leaves it in the dressing room. As she flees the store, Roy Ayers's "Chase" appropriately accompanies her until she is able to call out to Ray (and begin the fabrication of an "ambush" that lead to the disappearing money). Tellingly, the next perspective – involving Melanie and Ordell's right-hand man, Louis, both of whom are white (Ordell is an African American) – features none of Roy Ayers's music, and this might be a subtle nod to the black radical separatism of the 1970s as highlighted in many Blaxploitation films.⁶¹



Example 6. Opening excerpt (as heard in *Jackie Brown*) of "Vittroni's Theme – King Is Dead" from *Coffy* (1973).

Interestingly, the third perspective – featuring Max – does mark a return of the *Coffy* soundtrack. As he walks toward the dressing room to pick up the bag of money, "Vittroni's Theme – King Is Dead" is heard. This particular track is perhaps the most unusual on the *Coffy* album, featuring only a solo harpsichord playing slow, Bach-esque fragments (Example 6). The empathetic treatment of the scene

⁶¹ See Miklitsch, Robert. 2004. "Audiophilia: audiovisual pleasure and narrative cinema in *Jackie Brown*." *Screen* 45:4, 287-304.

with this track well accompanies the fact that Max is not yet sure whether the money is actually in the dressing room or if Jackie conned him. In a similar fashion, the upper voice of the harpsichord meanders slowly with its eight-note runs, its improvisatory manner suggesting the lack of a clear sense of cadence (in fact, at some moments of the track the harpsichord does not cadence, instead waiting a moment before beginning again with “new” material). The track fades out once Max confirms that all of the money is indeed inside the bag. As he exits, the musical mood shifts to Ayers’s “Aragon,” a triumphant-sounding funk track. The above moment conveys a theme of transference from Jackie to Max (but never the other way around). On the other hand, when Jackie takes the money, she also takes Ordell’s means of control and endows herself with it. When Ordell later discovers that he has been “had,” the track “Escape” (which had earlier empathetically accompanied Jackie’s haste from the store) resurfaces, now “propelling” him into an anxious frenzy over the loss of his money. Up until this moment, when Ordell had control (via his money), his soundtrack was distinct from Jackie’s. Now that she has taken his money (and thus appropriated his control), Ordell has to operate under her influence.

“Influence songs” also serve to reflect Jackie Brown’s intrigue and influence even when she is not in the diegesis. The Delfonics’ “Didn’t I Blow Your Mind This Time” is a highly significant song, as it pervades throughout the film. It is first heard when Max and Jackie are first talking in Jackie’s apartment (Max has to stop by to get his gun back, which Jackie stole the night prior to protect herself from Ordell). Hearing the song inspires Max to later buy a Delfonics cassette (to be

discussed), and every subsequent hearing of the song occurs while Max is in his car. As was the case with the *Coffy* soundtrack, there is a musical transference from Jackie to Max, for though she is the one who initially chooses the record (introducing it to the diegesis) she never plays the song again through the rest of the film. Indeed, she does not even hear the song again until the penultimate scene, when the song is blasting from Max's car as Ordell and Max drive to meet up with Jackie.

Foxy Brown's "Holy Matrimony (Letter to the Firm)" is also an "influence song" as well as yet another instance of the blurring of identities between Jackie Brown and Pam Grier.⁶² On the one hand, Foxy Brown's moniker directly taken from the earlier Pam Grier film of the same name, while the accompanying narrative involves Max Cherry picking up a Delfonics cassette from a record store, undoubtedly influenced from the prior scene where Jackie exposed him to the musical group. There is thus a double influence, from both "Jackie Brown" and "Pam Grier." A further connection to Jackie Brown can be heard in the lyrics of the opening chorus:

Uh, I mean damn, me and you forever hand in hand (uh)
 I'm married to the Firm, boo, you got to understand (understand)
 I'll die for 'em, gimme a chair and I'll fry for 'em (fry for 'em)
 And if I got to take the stand, I'ma lie for 'em (lie for 'em)

Although Max has not yet involved himself in Jackie's plan to get Ordell's money, his growing attachment to her makes him a prime candidate to be her accomplice. The anachronistic placement of "Holy Matrimony" (the album *Ill Na Na* was

⁶² Interestingly, the sample featured throughout the track is taken from Isaac Hayes's "Ike's Mood I" (1970).

released in 1996, while the narrative is set in 1995) serves as a clever anticipation of the moment when Max does (inevitably) decide to help Jackie. The lyrics thus represent Max and, in particular, his eventual commitment to her. As with “Natural High,” the line between Pam Grier and Jackie Brown is blurred.

Through both “theme” and “influence” songs, Jackie Brown’s soundtrack articulates bell hooks’s postmodern ideal of “the construction of the self and the assertion of agency.” With the three theme songs “Across 110th Street,” “Street Life,” and “Natural High,” a multiplicity of black female subjectivity is affirmed through distinct genre signifiers among the three songs as well as the lyrics. Influence songs, such as “Didn’t I (Blow Your Mind This Time)” and “Holy Matrimony (Letter to the Firm)” (as well as the *Coffy* soundtrack), further affirm the assertion of Jackie Brown’s agency. Initially, with her playing “Didn’t I” on her record player, she asserts power over Max (who later buys the track). Later, “Holy Matrimony” doubly evokes a sense of agency, with the track extra-diegetically dominating the picture as Max buys a Delfonics album, while the song’s presence also alludes to Pam Grier’s influence over the rapper Foxy Brown. Finally, to use an example from the *Coffy* soundtrack, the playing of “Escape” when Ordell discovers his money is missing sonically conveys the influence Jackie now has over him. As a result, these songs together construct the “postmodern theme” which, in turn, articulates the “varied black [female] experience” within (and outside of) the film.

It’s Not the End, It’s the Beginning

As seen in several musical examples, a multiplicity of identities is featured

that makes it unclear at moments whether the songs envoice Jackie Brown or Pam Grier (or perhaps both). Perhaps, and to return to Wayne Kostenbaum:

“Vocal crisis” means *a crisis in the voice*, but it also means *articulate crisis, crisis given voice*. Hardly an interruption of diva art, vocal crisis is the diva’s self-lacerating announcement that interruption has been, all along, her subject and method.⁶³

In a way, it seems appropriate that Pam Grier would not sing along to “Across 110th Street” at the end of the film; it is a reflective moment on her past, of a time when she had to counter the racial and gendered hardship she endured throughout her career. Although, as Sims notes, “Grier gradually gained control over her career and could openly voice concerns” in the mid-1970s, she soon “found it difficult to get mainstream acting opportunities precisely because of her outspokenness.”⁶⁴ Further, as Pam Grier remarks on *Jackie Brown*, “[To Tarantino] [I]f you’d written this for me when I was doing *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*, I don’t think I could’ve brought the confidence and wisdom and emotionality to it.”⁶⁵ Though her past undoubtedly featured instances that impeded her ability to progress as she might have wanted in the film industry, to Grier her “voice” at the time would have impeded her ability to take on such a role as in *Jackie Brown*. Perhaps, then, *Jackie Brown* is a meta-example of all of Grier’s films, except in this case her voice was no longer in crisis.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the theme songs the films *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Jackie Brown* illustrate a trajectory of black female subject articulation.

⁶³ Kostenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 128-129.

⁶⁴ Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*, 87. Grier also attempted to start her own production company, Brown Sun Productions, but the venture failed.

⁶⁵ “*Jackie Brown* on MTV,” *Jackie Brown: Collector’s Edition*, DVD, 2002.

In *Coffy*, three theme songs articulated different facets of Coffy's character, together developing a radical three-dimensional female subject. But the radical progression of this film did not carry over into *Foxy Brown*, a film that instead reified "traditional" gender roles. Its one theme song not only articulated a static, non-radical subject, but also re-affirmed the female subject's seeming dependence on males for articulation. With my analysis, it is this film that prefaces the soon-to-be decline of Grier's career, and though she maintained a steady workload in television and theater, she did not again earn a leading role in film until *Jackie Brown*. In turn, the "postmodern theme" not only captured Jackie Brown's subject articulation in the film (and, indeed, in many case dominating other subjects) but also Pam Grier's. Indeed, the function of the postmodern theme in this way epitomizes Grier as "a semiotic sign of the reemergence of the past in the present," and it transcends her subjectivity beyond the characters she portrays to a position as a "Shining Symbol," the Blaxploitation diva of the silver screen.⁶⁶

In many ways, the scope of this project seems to be the first of its kind, since very little scholarship exists on the function of music in female-starring Blaxploitation films. As such, there is much more research to be done. For instance, in my focus on Pam Grier's films I have neglected other contemporary Blaxploitation stars, such as Tamara Dobson and Carol Speed. In particular, it is interesting that neither Dobson nor Speed maintained a film career much beyond the 1970s. How do their theme songs articulate their respective subjectivities, and how are they distinct from Pam Grier's? Do theme songs in their films also reflect

⁶⁶ Mask, *Divas on Screen*, 104.

an anti-feminist backlash as seen in “Theme of Foxy Brown?” To widen the scope by genre, what about Theresa Graves, who was the first woman to star in a television show (“Get Christie Love!”)?

In addition, I have only focused on a limited number of Grier’s films, and three of which had a clear thread of significance to each other. But she starred in other films as well, such as *Sheba, Baby* and *Friday Foster* (both released in 1975). Their theme songs might also reflect the anti-feminism exhibited in *Foxy Brown*, but is this actually the case? Is there an attempt musically to subvert patriarchal authority, even if ultimately there was not an immediate resurgence of Pam Grier’s career? Further, following the success of *Jackie Brown* Grier achieved further notoriety with her starring role as Kit Porter in the television show “The L Word.” As the scope of the show, about a small group of lesbians living in Los Angeles (as well as their family members), falls outside the Blaxploitation trajectory, it would be interesting to see how music functions in this capacity. Is Pam Grier’s character musically distinguished from other characters? If she has achieved divinity, does this manifest in her role? Even if it were altogether impossible to correlate such a project to the work already done here, it would at the very least further demonstrate that Pam Grier has indeed achieved a postmodern subjective position. Indeed, as I have shown here with theme songs of several Blaxploitation films, Pam Grier has been able, over the course of her career, to articulate a multiplicity of identities, a varied black female experience.

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