The Cultural Life of James Bond

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9. **Shaken, Not Stirred Britishness: James Bond, Race, and the Transnational Imaginary**

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**Abstract**

This chapter examines discourses of race and of blackness in the James Bond film series, starting with post-imperial, Cold War-inflected “Negrophobic” themes in 1962's *Dr. No*; to the post-Civil Rights, Blaxploitation sampling deployed in 1973's *Live and Let Die*; to a black Amazonian, hypersexual badass vibe on display in 1985's *A View to a Kill*; to a new millennial, color-blind casting sensibility at work in 2012’s *Skyfall*. Of particular concern are the Bond films’ racist portrayals of black womanhood, and their aestheticized violence in depictions of the spectacularized annihilation of bodies of color. Simultaneously, this chapter acknowledges that Bond fans routinely derive pleasure from negotiating the strange spectatorial sublime of James Bond's troubling discourses on race and otherness.

**Keywords:** James Bond; intersectional cosmopolitanism; hypersexuality; aesthetics of destruction; badass black Bond babes; toxic masculinity

[Being] white is part of the character’s specific makeup [...]. Bond's Britishness is an equally integral part of that makeup [...] [Thus,] a black Bond directly questions what it means to be British [...] (Fallon 2016).

I’m probably the most famous Bond actor in the world, and I’ve not even played the role.—Idris Elba

(quoted in Fallon 2016)

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When rumors surfaced in 2013 that Sony Pictures Executive Amy Pascal wanted to cast British actor Idris Elba as the first-ever black James Bond and likely successor to Daniel Craig, the story “broke the Internet” (Boot 2014). Responding to the uproar, Elba himself commented, “I don’t want to be the black James Bond. Sean Connery wasn’t the Scottish Bond, and Daniel Craig wasn’t the blue-eyed James Bond, so if I played him, I don’t want to be called the black James Bond” (quoted in Boot 2014). Elba’s hyperbolic colorblind assertion aside, the accomplished British actor of African descent was espousing a position out of sync with a larger trend occurring in both Hollywood and independent film, television, and theater industries wherein successful black performances in revivals of traditional and iconic white narratives have, over time, become all the rage. Additionally, the fact that the United States elected its first ever black-identified (but actually mixed-race) President, Barack Obama, in 2008 while the United Kingdom witnessed a mixed-race American actor, Meghan Markle, getting married to Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, in 2018 toppled centuries of rigid and anachronistic Anglo-American racial identity politics. Cultural productions helped to lead this new socio-political reckoning, of which a transnational fandom advocacy for a black James Bond was clearly symptomatic.

It is crucial to grasp the significance of such shifting cultural terrain in terms of race, romance, and representation, and how plausible expectations for and attitudes about a twenty-first century black Bond get instantiated by hugely successful black-cast productions in traditional Eurocentric and classic American literary and theatrical works, such as the 2013 Broadway and cable television revival of The Trip to Bountiful (Sondheim Theater, Michael Wilson 2013; Lifetime TV, Michael Wilson, 2014) starring African American icon Cecily Tyson, who won the Tony Award for portraying the lead role established by Caucasian actors Lillian Gish on NBC TV in 1953 and Geraldine Page in the 1984 film adaptation, for which Page won the Academy Award for Best Actress. As promising—or cynically exploitative—as these successful transracial casting choices may be, the persistent hot potato of casting the next James Bond compels us to ask if imagining a black actor as 007 signifies a bridge too far for Bond-producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson at Eon Productions. Will it matter to Eon that each new Bond feature will henceforth be released in the wake of the unanticipated blockbuster success of Marvel Studio’s Black Panther (USA: Ryan Coogler, 2018), or that its African American, megawatt co-star, Michael B. Jordan, is considered viable to replace Henry Cavill as DC Comics’ penultimate white superhero, Superman (Fernandez 2018)? These questions are important because the socio-political impact of stardom can easily elevate or diminish
any cinematic franchise’s cultural capital and subsequent commercial viability.

The proven business success of black casting in traditionally white texts helps us to understand why global cinema’s racially diverse fan communities prefer Idris Elba as the next 007. He is British. He is FINE! He is charming. He oozes Bond-like masculine prowess, and more. Indeed, it seems fair to say that, across the globe, fans of the perennial Bond franchise were shaken and stirred by the prospect of a black 007, including American Right-wing political pundit Rush Limbaugh, who learned—in the wake of the Sony Pictures Studio email hack in 2014—that the studio’s co-chair, Amy Pascal, was advocating for Elba as the next Bond (Gajewski 2014). As an expedient means to further the politics of America’s toxic racialized culture wars, Limbaugh asserted, “I know it’s probably racist to point this out, but [...] we had 50 years of white Bonds because Bond was white” (quoted in Zurcher 2014). Challenging the national and racial purism of Limbaugh’s James Bond, reporter Ryan Gajewski reminds us of the identity malleability of the 007 signifier, stating that, “perhaps someone should let Limbaugh know that Bond hasn’t actually been played by a person of Scottish descent since the first actor cast for the part, Sean Connery” (Zurcher 2014).

Ian Fleming’s Jamaica: The Birthplace and Ideological Center of James Bond’s Invincible White Masculinity

At the center of this exploration is the broader topic of race in the Bond films, focusing on the discussion of racial blackness because Bond-creator Ian Fleming crafted the James Bond spy persona while residing at his Goldeneye estate on the Caribbean Island of Jamaica. Trying to pin down the racial origin narratives for the Bond films can be a slippery undertaking, made more complicated by a narrative that belongs to a behemoth transmedia ecology comprised of novels, films, comics, television, and videogames. In turning our lens to Fleming’s construction of Eurocentric masculine whiteness, we are able to recognize Britain’s traumatic postwar collapse of its storied empire, and Fleming’s negotiation of this irretrievable, often inglorious colonial past alongside the anxiety-ridden predicament that redefined everyday British life after the Second World War. This postwar

1 This is an old African American vernacular term affirming someone’s exceptional attractiveness and charm. To be designated as “fine/FINE” means beyond good looking—essentially, it means drop-dead appealing. Idris Elba is all that, and then some, to his fans.
existential tumult is a fractured ideological scaffold on which Fleming erected his subsequent literary fiction of super-sleuth James Bond in 1952 (Comentale et al. 2005, xxii; Metz 2004, 2). The numerous biographies and lore about how Fleming patterned his alter ego after his own feats of derring-do as a British Naval espionage specialist during the Second World War, as a journalist, and as a well-heeled member of the British upper-class do not bear reduplicating here. What does bear on our discussion from that period of creative ferment for Fleming are his contemporaneous literary encodings of racial ideologies, colonial and postcolonial sympathizing and rationalizing that arguably animate and motivate the endlessly self-replicating transmedia narrative plotlines and phantasmagorical storyworlds that keep the James Bond texts viable over decades, even when they have become largely anachronistic on registers of race and gender.

As The Atlantic’s associate editor Katie Kilkenny (2015) posits in her book review of Matthew Parker’s 2015 Fleming biography Goldeneye, Where James Bond Was Born: Ian Fleming’s Jamaica: “Fleming loved Jamaica for its recreational activities, its Caribbean folklore (basically, his belief that it contained lots of buried treasures) [...] and the kinglike reception he got from the locals merely for being British (he arrived at the tail end of its time as a crown colony).” Kilkenny continues by rightly calling out Parker’s untenable myopia; she writes, “Parker downplays the blatant offensiveness of the Bond books—to various ethnicities, women, carnivorous sea creatures, Americans—by making the point that Fleming was prejudiced against anyone who wasn’t British.” One telling case concerns Fleming’s schizophrenic attitudes about his second home, Jamaica, which was fighting for its independence from British colonial rule while Fleming was writing his Bond novels at Goldeneye: a discomfiting realpolitik that makes its way into the racist tropes at the heart of a number of Fleming’s novels as well as their ensuing cinematic plotlines (Metz 2004, 5; Kilkenny 2015). In “Breaking the Cycle: Die Another Day, Postcolonialism, and the James Bond Film Series,” Water C. Metz (2004, 4-5) offers a useful insight that bears quoting at length:

*Dr. No* is also a quintessentially colonialist film. Like *Live and Let Die*, it begins with the murder of a white agent by blacks. Its first image is a vicious, racist one: three black men, pretending to be blind (and

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2 See Edward P. Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman’s Ian Fleming & James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007; Walter C. Metz’s “Breaking the Cycle; Die Another, Post-colonialism, and the James Bond Film Series;” and Lisa Funnell’s “Negotiating Shifts in Feminism: The ‘Bad’ Girls of James Bond.”
“comically” accompanied by the song, “Three Blind Mice”), walk through Kingston, Jamaica, entering the grounds of the Queen's Club, where they proceed to murder Strangways, a British secret service operative. They then shoot his secretary in the chest [...]. This opening first ridicules the black men with emasculating Stepn' Fetchit racial stereotyping, but then reveals them to be dangerous murderers of white women. The moment thus contradictorily spans the gamut of colonialist treatment of black men—Coon and Buck—but coherently effects a vision of colonialism as an ordered, beneficent system threatened by the chaos perpetrated by its charges. This is, of course, terrible history: Jamaica became independent on August 6, 1962, two months before Dr. No's London premiere on October 5, 1962.

These themes and tropes of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Negrophobia (or rabid anti-black racism) overlap with 007’s sexism and Orientalism and are crystallized in the first film adaptation of Fleming’s Dr. No (UK: Terence Young) from 1962. More troubling, however, is the film producers’ uncritical redeployment of these recurrent, abhorrent themes and their visual rhetoric throughout the franchise and during the American Civil Rights and Blaxploitation eras. In addition, these colonial significations—which are arguably not reflexive of British and American societal attitudes equally—return spectacularly and trade opportunistically on New British Cinema’s increasing representations of adult sexuality in the years following Fleming’s death in 1964. By establishing the Eon production house in the United Kingdom in 1961, Bond-producers Albert Broccoli and Harry Saltzman availed themselves of the global film industry’s changing censorship winds and identity politics in meeting modern audiences’ expectations, belatedly creating a space for black performers in Live and Let Die (UK: Guy Hamilton, 1973) and View to a Kill (UK/USA: John Glen, 1985).

Significantly, these and sundry other big-budget film titles featuring black stars as well as other protagonists and antagonists of color have habituated identity-affiliated groups and diversity-minded audiences, non-racist spectators, and principally Bond-fans to imagine a black performer—Idris Elba—as a viable and desirable James Bond for the twenty-first century. This idea of transracial casting, unquestionably, is historically so far removed from the literary origins of Bond that a colonialist ideologue such as Fleming could hardly anticipate it, let alone embrace it. Of particular interest here is how the Bond films represented race and Britishness in Fleming’s fecund escapist imaginary. As the cinematic Bond made its debut with the release of the colonialist Dr. No in 1962, Jamaica won its
independence from the United Kingdom just as postwar British culture and society were becoming multiracial. While the US Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of a war-torn Europe created an intercultural bridge of international exchange that begat the commodification of such American cultural exports as African American-invented Blues and Rock-n-Roll music, the growing ranks of first- and second-generation postcolonial West Indian, Caribbean, South Asian, and African subaltern Britons—whose parents were often former colonial subjects conscripted in her majesty’s military service during the Second World War, and who were subsequently relocated to the UK to help rebuild a war-torn Britain—contributed to the widespread architectural preservation and infrastructural reconstruction and modernization of the United Kingdom in the post-war era. Britain’s growing postcolonial populations thus rightly staked their multigenerational claims to “Britishness” as their birthright or earned benefits as wartime patriots and veterans.

Against this backdrop, then, Dr. No’s representational economies involving Jamaica and blackness become, at once, increasingly legible, complex, familiar, and above all racially suspect. Relatedly, the US Civil Rights Movement and other global African and African Diasporic liberation struggles need to be seen as another situational logic that informs if not fully enlivens the early Bond films’ discursive address to racial blackness that delimits the texts’ main characters and sensational plot points. Central here are the cinematic Bond’s powerful constructs of black male arch villains and evil masterminds as main characters and even co-stars, most clearly evinced for the first time in 1973’s Live and Let Die. In addition, the Bond films’ address to the changing sexual mores and to the geopolitical shifts and transnational entanglements authorize Bond’s womanizing and his transgressions of the “miscegenation taboo” with young, beautiful non-white women from across the globe as sexual playmates, conquests and antagonists—oftentimes simultaneously. Finally, another key area of interrogation concerns the Bond films’ especially problematic portrayals of gratuitous and excessive violence in scenes that foreground the spectacular annihilation, evisceration and mutilation of bodies of color, both male and female, friend and foe. After all, the clichéd trope of the black guy dying first should not be continually reduced to innocuous comic relief or slapstick antics. And yet, apparently Bond fans routinely derive enormous pleasure as they negotiate the strange spectatorial sublime that is James Bond’s complicated cinematic treatment of race and otherness, white male privilege and toxic masculinity, Anglo-American racial supremacy and cool Britishness.
**007, The Limits of Cosmopolitanism, and JFK’s James Bond Fandom**

Bond is “more a cosmopolitan man than a man of class[,]” and that cosmopolitanism carries over to downplaying the “Britishness” of the Fleming novels (even as Bond became an internationally recognized icon of Britishness [...]. [Thus,] the threat to specifically British interests [...] is turned into a global threat so that 007 is still a British agent, but a defender of the world (Elhefnawy 2015, 40).

The cinematic Bond emerged in 1962 at a time when Europe’s postwar national cinemas rebounded from the devastation of the Second World War (WWII). The revived national cinemas were of distinctive European art cinema movements (Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, New British Cinemas), which circumnavigated the globe with assistance from the US Marshall Plan, were provided with financial aid and infrastructure for their long-waited exhibition. Known as the European Recovery Program (ERP), which aimed to curtail the spread of state socialism, the Marshall Plan's cultural agenda required European film industries' acquiescence to screen a significant number of American films alongside homegrown products in order to expedite the recovery of Europe’s domestic film industries. Clearly, this was not a purely altruistic arrangement, but the ERP boosted the circulation of European arthouse cinemas worldwide, which contributed to some extent to a mid-twentieth-century *zeitgeist* of cultural cosmopolitanism in the West. In this context, two cinematic movements defined British filmmaking in the postwar era: one consisted of post-WWII bleakness, characterized by the so-called “Angry Young Man” and “Kitchen Sink” dramas, while the other was comprised of a more hopeful, Swinging Sixties corpus, exemplified by James Bond's seductive construct of the suave and debonair British agent’s masculine cool and mastery as embodied by 007 (Cook 1990, 589-99).

In the 1950s, European films, with their mature, sophisticated sexuality and highly stylized violence, were popular draws at American arthouse film theaters and cinemathques and helped augur a new American cosmopolitanism that resonated with the nation’s burgeoning youth culture. America’s generational shift was embodied most prominently by John F. Kennedy (JFK), who in 1960 and at the age of 43 was the second-youngest man ever elected to the US Presidency. Arguably, President Kennedy and his glamorous socialite wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, projected an image of American cosmopolitanism that rejected the American isolationism of
the interwar years. Indeed, art, fashion and literature were part and parcel of the Kennedys’ contagious cosmopolitan allure. The Presidential couple was also affiliated with Hollywood glamor, and JFK aligned particularly well with Hollywood’s leading-man-cool and with American pop culture more broadly. When President Kennedy subsequently listed Fleming’s *From Russia, with Love* (1957) among his favorite novels, James Bond and “Britishness” had become idealized cultural referents in the United States (McDaniel 2012).

Matt McDaniel (2012) underscores JFK’s immense influence and cultural capital by quoting a Bond insider: “Christopher Lee, who played 007’s adversary in *The Man With the Golden Gun* [UK: Guy Hamilton, 1974], said JFK’s endorsement of Bond was invaluable. ‘What more could you ask for? If it’s good enough for the President, it’s good enough for me.’” However, cosmopolitanism is a double-edged sword in the age of global media culture. For scholar and cultural critic Kwame Anthony Appiah (2012), “Cosmopolitanism has always—at its best anyway—combined the respect for universality with the recognition that there are forms of difference that should be allowed to exist. Not everybody has to be the same for the world to be going well, going right. [...] Cosmopolitanism in the arts is an engagement with the cultural and literary and poetic life of other societies.” Yet, if cosmopolitanism’s allowance for human difference and engagement with diverse societies’ cultures are mostly good things, the downside of Anglo-American cosmopolitanism is its destructive and counterproductive deployment in interactions or engagements with other societies and their particular cultures and peoples. In our focus on racial blackness in the Bond films, we often witness this benefit-threat dialectic of cosmopolitanism in effect.

Nader Elhefnawy (2015) understands *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (UK: Peter Hunt, 1969) as the original signifier of Bondian cosmopolitanism. Elhefanawy’s observation that James Bond represents British interests as somehow universal rather than uniquely beneficial to the British nation, is astute, especially during the Cold War of the 1960s. In this context, “Bondian cosmopolitanism” concerns the cinematic Bond’s daring approach to global interracial sexuality and its corresponding conversation with changing, postwar societal norms, expectations, and the representational taxonomies of race and gender.
Badass Black Bond Babes: Sexual Liberalism and Transgressing the Miscegenation Taboo

By indiscriminately bedding “good” and “bad” women, Bond attempts to ensure the success of his missions [...]. When women act as independent agents expressing sexual desire, they are typically threatening, deviant, and “bad”. (Funnell 2011, 199-200)

Mainstream cinema in the post-WWII era was often conflicted about the depiction of power, predicament, and complexity of modern and postmodern femininity. Bond Girls and badass women were no exception. Torn between an enduring ideology of ideal white womanhood that was, well into the 1950s, predicated on neo-Victorian notions of sexual purity, “society expected women to remain virgins until their wedding night, but, paradoxically, they were also supposed to be sexually attractive” (Miller 1996, 46). In addition, Douglas T. Miller (46) reminds us that unprecedented numbers of women who worked in previously male-dominated factory jobs, and women who helped win WWII, especially on the home front, were none too pleased after the war to be told that a career was too masculine and no longer appropriate for these former Rosie-the-Riveters. To surmise that women of the era were either confused or downright distraught by such contradictory logics is to understate many intelligent and college-educated women’s seething resentment at being relegated to housewives and mothers—as Betty Friedan’s proto-feminist book The Feminine Mystique made crystal-clear in 1963.

Positioned outside of this emerging postwar ideal of womanhood were African American women and other women of color. After all, black women had historically been caricatured as the strong, emasculating black females that Sojourner Truth challenges in her “Women’s Convention Speech” from 1851—later dubbed as the “Ain’t I a Woman? Speech.” More than a century later, the badass black Bond babes made their vexed cinematic debut, which suggests an affirmative response to that age-old question about black femininity. Indeed, the predominant historical image of black women in western popular culture is “the mammy figure,” who tends to be devoid of any feminine charms or characteristics. Hattie McDaniel’s archetypal “Mammy” character in Gone with the Wind (USA: Victor Fleming, 1939) is the quintessential and most familiar stereotype of this representational ilk. These taxonomies of black femininity help us to push our discussion beyond James Bond’s familiar womanizing in order to engage more pointedly with the little remarked-upon feature of 007’s sexual exploits with black women—most notably—and other women of color across the film series’ fifty-year run.
Whereas mainstream postwar cinematic depictions of race, romance, and sexuality were slow to demand racial, gender, and sexual equality throughout all spheres of civil society, independent cinemas of the era, by contrast, challenged taboos on interracial relationships, as exemplified in Britain by Woodfall Films’ *A Taste of Honey* (UK: Tony Richardson, 1961). In the US, the 1969 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia* struck down state laws banning miscegenation or interracial sex and marriage, thereby setting the stage for legal marriage between different races (and later same sexes).

A major consequence of this monumental ruling was that the censoring of representations of sexual race-mixing on screen had sustained a fatal blow. Consistently and as if on cue, Hollywood replaced the racially and sexually restrictive 1934 Production Code with the more tolerant and less moralizing Ratings System in 1968. This shift meant that the Code’s anachronistic anti-miscegenation discourses, homophobia, and other exclusionary positions on hegemonic identity normativity became moot as the liberal segments of America’s Baby Boom generation helped to recode the nation’s cultural industries, which ultimately gave rise to the sensationalist ethos of New Hollywood Cinema with its new discursive freedoms and less censorious narrative dictates pertaining to sex and violence. Finally, US cinema had caught up with the European new waves in its representation of more explicit sexuality on screen.

Consequently, by the 1970s, mainstream filmmakers were no longer compelled to self-censor scenes of interracial sexuality. The Bond films, I suggest, led the way in this regard. Against the backdrop of the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, the Bond franchise’s conscious transgression of the miscegenation taboo suggests a visual taxonomy, a specular forbidden fruit of sorts in which both the directors and the fans could indulge without censure. Beginning with *Diamonds Are Forever* (UK: Guy Hamilton, 1971), we have four Bond-stars (Sean Connery, Roger Moore, Pierce Brosnan, and Daniel Craig) “indiscriminately bedding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women” (Funnell 2011, 199), signifying the film series’ unapologetic equal-opportunity womanizing. Significantly, it should be noted that Bond’s sexual couplings with women of color do not signify tender and romantic encounters as much as they naturalize Bond’s masculine prerogative of accepting these women’s lusty hypersexual offerings to him. In this way, 007’s white male sexual access to black and other women of color brings into full relief the hypocritical Western morality about who could and could not indulge in sexual race-mixing. In “Negotiating Shifts in Feminism: The ‘Bad’ Girls of James Bond,” Lisa Funnell situates the narrative centrality of the Bond Girl within actual societal reckonings with women’s newfound power and agency during the
social activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This timing is coterminous with the rise and establishment of the James Bond film franchise. On the film series’ instantiation of the “bad” cinematic Bond Girl, Funnell (2011, 200) notes,

Established during the “swinging-sixties” […], [the Bond Girl was] liberated from the constraints of family, marriage and domesticity […]. [By embodying] the liberal sexuality of the emerging women’s movement[,] the 1960s Bond Girl is, perhaps, more accurately described as a “model of adjustment,” a dependent and derivative character that is tailored to fulfil the sexual needs of Bond.

Funnell’s intervention provides a strong foundation for what I define as the cinematic Bond’s “troubling intersectional cosmopolitanism” regarding the race and gender matrix of hypersexualized badass black Bond babes. Moreover, Cynthia Baron (2009) and Vivian Halloran (2005) remind us of the fact that these black Bond Girls and black Bond Girl-adjacents often originate from some fictionalized Caribbean island evocative of Fleming’s beloved Jamaica, which should not be dismissed so easily because the cinematic value of these mostly bikini-clad would-be assassins inheres in their association with a sort of a libidinous island fever to which 007 succumbs. Conjoined, then, with a favorite setting for Fleming’s literary Bond, which we recognize as a phantasmagorical or idealized Jamaica replete with oftentimes submissive and sometimes rebellious colonial subjects, badass black Bond babes convey the general limits of contemporary cosmopolitanism in cinema more broadly and in the James Bond films in particular.

Let us consider the earliest Bond film that makes the point. The 1969 entry On Her Majesty’s Secret Service, with George Lazenby as 007, features a segment in which an array of young international, interracial beauties are being treated for an apparent food-borne allergy—the young women are of Asian, European, Indian, and black/African extraction. Most striking is the sequence’s racialized associative editing structured on choices around racialized cultural differences, as evinced in the sequence’s strong emphasis on gastronomical etiquettes. In the beauty pageant scene centered on a communal meal, race is foregrounded in a montage that juxtaposes the East Asian women eating with chopsticks with the lone black/African woman depicted peeling and eating a banana. This is striking because it does not associate the black beauty with some recognizable and non-demeaning black-identified cuisines eaten with the hands, such as Ethiopian food eaten with injera bread. Instead, On Her Majesty’s Secret Service opts for the offensive and historic associational logic yoking this black contestant
to the image of a monkey eating a banana, part of a familiar and reified racist representational economy.

In this vein, we should not forget Europe’s embrace of the African American, Harlem Renaissance performer Josephine Baker and her nearly-nude, scandalous banana skirt dances, her dance-hall and cabaret acts, and her primitivist-themed films that all combined to make her a modernist rage across the continent during the 1920s and 1930s (Dalton and Gates 1998). An important complexity here is that Baker had agency in her creation and willing performance of her so-called “danse sauvage” (“savage dance”). In the French film Princess Tam Tam (France: Edmond T. Greville, 1935), Baker portrays the Tunisian tribeswoman Alwina, an “uncivilized” shepherder who rapidly climbs a tree while being intercut repeatedly with a rambunctious monkey climbing that same tree. Princess Tam Tam’s associational editing, which conflates Alwina and the monkey, exemplifies familiar racist tropes in Eurocentric and American white supremacist cultural production. If my calling out On Her Majesty’s Secret Service for its foregrounding of a black woman eating a banana is not convincing enough, the blatantly racist scene in Diamonds Are Forever in which a black, Afro-wearing South African woman morphs into a gorilla surely brings the point across.

The troubling intersectional cosmopolitanism of the Bond films, and how it informs the film franchise’s discourses on “dangerous black femininity” in On Her Majesty’s Secret Service and Diamonds Are Forever, participates fully in what Moya Baily’s has potently referred to as a “misogynoir” praxis of representation. Significantly, Bailey (2018, 763) is clear that the term “misogynoir” does not apply to all women of color but that it concerns instead a term “used to describe the unique ways in which black women are pathologized in popular culture. What happens to black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color.” Bailey (763) continues and argues that misogynoir “is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-blackness and misogyny combine to malign black women in our world.” The unique and vivid misogynoir imagery of Diamonds Are Forever comes to the fore in the film’s close-up two-shot of the facial expressions of two little girls watching the caged Zambora undergoing a “scientific” transformation from a beautiful black woman into a hulking black gorilla. In terms of spectatorship and primary identification, the little black girl is positioned differently from the little white girl in this scene’s visual regime of racialized looking. As a result, this instance of maligning a black woman does not evoke the same visceral reaction or psychical violence for both girls: otherwise, what is the point of this associational edit or montage? It matters that Diamond’s setting of this fictional circus foregrounds the promises
of horror and terror while the scene was shot on location in an actual Las Vegas venue called “Circus Circus,” with the film’s mad scientist imploring the spectators to flee for their lives after Zambora-the-gorilla breaks free of her cage. This type of discursive slippage between fiction and reality functions to exacerbate Diamond’s tropes of misogynoir.

The caged South African Zambora reminds us of Europe’s ignominious history of human zoos as part and parcel of colonialism predicated on the invention of the so-called African “savage,” which the tragic and barbarous treatment of the real-life South African Saartje “Sarah” Baartman, dubbed “the Venus Hottentot,” revealed most shamefully as she was sexually abused and exhibited at “freak shows” across the continent during the nineteenth century. Zambora in this Bond film is visible evidence of the persistence of a uniquely virulent racism, targeting and damaging black women in particular. To watch, untroubled, as the camera centers briefly but pointedly on the skeptical and fearful-looking face of that little black girl witnessing the caged, beautiful black Zambora’s metamorphosis into a dangerous animal is to be implicated in an aestheticizing of black trauma. As if Zambora’s transformation into a gorilla is not bad enough, the fact that the scene implies that her species may be modified as a result of “a scientific experiment” evokes the horrific medical experiments performed on actual Africans and African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By 1973, when *Live and Let Die* hit the screen, the Blaxploitation film cycle was a major box office trendsetter while its daringly transgressive portrayals of interracial sex were a game-changer in American independent and mainstream cinemas. As Christopher Sieving (2005, 16) points out, *Coffy* (USA: Jack Hill, 1973), the Blaxploitation film par excellence, “beat out the new James Bond film *Live and Let Die*—itself a sort of mainstream pastiche of the Blaxploitation phenomenon—for the number one position on Variety’s August 22 listing of the nation’s top moneymakers.” With its nudity, simulated sexual intercourse, and profanity, Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (USA: Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) had a catalyzing effect on *Shaft* (USA: Gordon Parks, 1971) and on *Coffy’s* bold transgressions against America’s miscegenation taboo, with its own flagrant iterations of mixed-race sexual encounters depicted on the screen. *Live and Let Die*, Sieving (2005, 16) indicates, was no exception. Crucially, Roger Moore’s considerably less intense and rather campy and flippant enactment of 007 seemed to diminish any shock-value in seeing Bond “bed” his first badass black Bond babe, portrayed with equal camp and playfulness by Gloria Hendry as Bond-antagonist Rosie Carver. In testing the waters of interracial sex, both Bond and Carver perform their sexual relationship as a bit of comic relief.
Twelve years after *Live and Let Die*, music artist and style icon Grace Jones took her turn as a Bondian badass black babe in *A View to a Kill*. Not officially considered a Bond Girl, Jones as May Day nonetheless fulfills, according to Lisa Funnel's (2011) typology, the function of the Bond Girl as an object of “sexual conquest” for 007—yet Jones does so to performative excess in correspondence with her own iconoclastic star persona. Jones’s May Day posits a schizophrenic picture of powerful black womanhood in the post-Blaxploitation era. At one end of the representational spectrum, May Day’s unquestioned physical strength and narrative agency—compromised to some extent by her ultimate self-sacrifice to protect Bond—defines Jones’ badass black womanhood, while at the other end, her black henchwoman power is inextricably bound to her animalistic hypersexuality encoded in scenes of her sexual intercourse with both 007 and the film’s Bond villain, Max Zorin (Christopher Walken).

One Grace Jones fangirl, Zina Hutton, suggests why it is necessary to assess these black Bond women with a measure of complexity and reflection. In her July 2015 editorial on “Bond Girl: Re-Watching and Re-Evaluating *A View to a Kill*,” Hutton (2015) proclaims that

> May Day stole the show for me [...]. May Day isn’t a conquest. Not in the least [...]. While she does have sex with James Bond, it’s absolutely on her terms [...]. [I]n the scene where May Day and Zorin go to May Day’s room only to find James Bond naked in her bed but okay—I love that scene. May Day is in charge for the whole of it. She walks in and drops her dress to the ground without any shame and Bond is taken aback and intrigued by her boldness.

Most on point here is Hutton’s observation that, “She takes the lead, stalking towards her bed and Bond as if she’s on a hunter [sic] out for her prey. I feel as if May Day sees Bond as a conquest and not the other way around and that rather makes me wonder how she sees Zorin and how she views their relationship.” While my assessment of May Day is less affirmative than Hutton’s, it is useful to recognize how overdetermined and discursively slippery cinematic constructs of black womanhood in popular culture remain. And despite the fact that, like Rosie Carver, May Day as a dark-skinned beauty presents counter-colorism images to those traditional or mainstream cinematic representations of black women as unattractive, unglamorous, and sexless mammy types, these earliest black Bond badasses are more aligned with the requisite sexual allure manifest in the white Bond Girls as well.
Delving into the franchise's later offerings, it is important to emphasize that the inspired casting of black British actor Naomie Harris as MI6's valued staffer Eve Moneypenny in *Skyfall* (UK/USA: Sam Mendes, 2012) and *Spectre* (UK/USA/Austria/Mexico/Italy/Morocco: Sam Mendes, 2015) represents the film series' own move into the realm of black casting of traditional white roles discussed earlier. Pointedly, Harris's casting as Moneypenny positions this black badass Bond babe in a noteworthy liminal space between the unofficial and the official Bond Girls signified by May Day in the former register and by Rosie Carver in the latter. It is striking that the sexual tension between Daniel Craig's 007 and Naomie Harris's Moneypenny is heightened exponentially beyond the white Moneypenny incarnations that preceded her, whose constrained and unrequited romantic fantasies about Bond are an essential motif in the successful secret sauce of the conventional Bond-narrative. By contrast, Craig's Bond and Harris's Moneypenny actually do have sex. Additionally, this black Moneypenny garners significant screen time, which includes daring and dangerous action scenes: this marks an improvement in the representational taxonomy of black womanhood in the cinematic universe of Bond. As a bona fide black Bond Girl, we should recall that Halle Berry's screen time in *Die Another Day* (UK/USA: Lee Tamahori, 2002) was equal to that of her white peers. This fact provides a precondition for Naomie Harris's repeat performances as the black Moneypenny that audiences can accept and arguably celebrate.

Following Halle Berry's star turn as a black Bond Girl, Naomie Harris is able to and is comfortable with foregrounding the issue of race and blackness in her reflections on *Spectre* in an *Ebony Magazine* article entitled “Black Bond Girls Unite.” Speaking fondly to her Bond trailblazer sisterhood consisting of Trina Parks, Gloria Hendry, Halle Berry, and Grace Jones, Harris commented:

You inspire me with your incredible performances and with your representation of black female beauty. Growing up in London, coming up in a little town, Finsbury Park [...] there were not many representations of black female beauty [...] I really have to thank Bond and the franchise [...] for being one of the very few franchises at that time that actually presented black women [...] I am so grateful and proud to represent this franchise, to continue the legacy you’ve all started (quoted in King 2015).

*Ebony* reporter Crystal Shaw King listened to these two generations of black female actors at the African American Film Critics Association's tribute to the “Black Women of Bond,” and surmised that, “The black Bond Girl is
definitely something to be celebrated [...], reflected on the big screen in a high-profile film with beauty, brains and power” (King 2015). For her part, Shaw King relished the contributions that these black Bond Girls have made to the franchise for over half-a-century. Of Parks, Hendry, Jones, and Berry, Shaw King observed, “They’ve either conspired with, slept with, or kicked 007’s British butt.” As innocuous and understandable as these disparate black women’s voices appear on the surface, upon closer inspection the black badass Bond babes largely make sense as expressions of black empowerment because the black female body in mainstream and independent film and visual culture is historically essentialized, normalized, and reified as the personification of the grotesque, the subhuman, the violent and the sexually insatiable “Hottentot.”

Against this representational taxonomy of explicit black pathology, any adjustment to such historic and persistent anti-black rhetoric is embraced with little to no critical pushback. I subscribe to Roxane Gay’s (2014, 250) observation that we should resist “representational neediness,” which follows an operational logic: “Here is popular culture about people who look like me. That’s all I should need, right? Time and time again, people of color are supposed to be grateful for scraps from the table. There’s this strange implication that we should enjoy certain movies or television shows simply because they exist.” If there exists a discursive space for a Black Bond Girls tribute, so should critiques of colorism, lookism, and black hypersexuality and violence inscribed onto the signifying black body be circulated.

Conclusion: Race and the Aesthetics of Annihilation in Bond

Importantly, as an emblem of Western superiority in a rapidly changing global history, the figure of Bond gave expression to biases and anxieties that continue to shape our understandings of identity and belonging (Comentale et al. 2005, xxii).

As we conclude this interrogation of blackness in the James Bond film series, our interests also include how the racial encodings above have changed over the course of the franchise in order to track more closely with geopolitical realignments after the demise of the Cold War’s raison d’etre that inspired Fleming’s creation. What ties Fleming’s Cold War discourse to this analysis of race, nation, and Britishness is the extent to which the scientific inventions of weapons of mass destruction—particularly lasers, satellites, atomic and nuclear energy—fired cinematic imaginings of the spectacular annihilation
of 007’s arch villains. A special sort of total destruction was predictably reserved for Bond’s non-white antagonists. Such racialized visual spectacles of bodily annihilation in the James Bond films recall Susan Sontag’s (1965) formulation of “the aesthetics of destruction,” which highlights important distinctions between science fiction literature and films. Sontag (1965, 2013) notes that, “the science fiction film [...] is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess. And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction lies.” Sontag’s “aesthetics of destruction” readily applies to the Bondian spy genre as well, resonating powerfully as a heuristic device for understanding race and difference in the James Bond narrative universe.

The Bond films that most clearly illustrate the racist encodings of bodily destruction enacted upon characters of color are Live and Let Die, Diamonds are Forever, and Die Another Day. If black audiences have grown accustomed to the trope of the black villain or the black buddy-sidekick dying in mainstream films featuring interracial casting, the spectacular and total annihilation of the black body in the Bond series reflects a persistence of racial bias and intolerance as evinced in the franchise’s anti-black racism (Diawara 1995). As I (Everett 2001) have pointed out, African American concerns about aestheticizing the destruction, pain, and suffering of black bodies date back to the beginnings of cinema. In 1909, New York Age newspaper editor and theatrical columnist Lester A. Walton penned a scathing condemnation of the Nickelodeons’ deplorable practices of promoting moving pictures featuring the lynchings and burnings of black men with promises of “hearing” the sounds of black pain and suffering thrown in for a penny (Everett 2001, 19-21). Walton’s legitimate fear that the new film industry was encouraging white spectators to enjoy such vile cinematic glorifications of the lynched and burned black body also applies to the Bond franchise, which sustains such racist tropes of black bodily annihilation by relying on more elaborate production values and computer-generated-imagery. Bondian on-screen-exemplars include Live and Let Die, wherein supervillain Dr. Kanaga aka Mr. Big, portrayed by black, dark-skinned actor Yaphet Kotto, physically balloons out after Bond inserts a deadly object in his mouth until he literally blows up, exploding from the inside and leaving behind dispersed and disintegrated black bodily fragments. And in A View to a Kill, Grace Jones, the badass black Bond babe and villain May Day, meets her demise when she is blown up voluntarily while trying to save Bond.

The Bond films’ especially venal aesthetics of destruction applied to its villains of color does not negate the central position of stylized violence and spectacular deaths in the action-adventure genre-formula and in the
Bond films in particular: this includes white villains, arch nemeses, and henchmen. In Bond’s Manichean realm of good versus evil, punishment and reward, key aspects of the franchise’s spectatorial pleasures reside in viewing the excesses of the films’ aesthetics of destroying planes, trains, and automobiles. Yet, while it seems that witnessing the transgressive bodies of bad guys getting their due punishment may be cathartic for audiences, the tendency of the Bond films to construct amoral, sinister and monstrous villains of color, befitting of an aesthetics of bodily destruction, nonetheless reflects the “imperial code” that Tony Bennett (1982, 13) identified at the heart of the Bond phenomenon’s longstanding taxonomy of racist representation.

This chapter began with a discussion of the excitement and anxiety over the possibility of Idris Elba succeeding Daniel Craig in the role of James Bond. Part and parcel of Eon’s inability to imagine Elba as 007 speaks to my analysis of the troubling intersectional cosmopolitanism that defines the limits of the Bondian universe. Thus, in 2019, we have come full circle by drawing our attention to the online reaction to rumors that a black woman, Lashana Lynch, may be the next 007. As expected, there is much controversy about this latest racialized conflagration over race, gender, and James Bond. As Aja Romano (2019) suggests in Vox, the deployment of race seems to have become a clever marketing ploy for Eon’s twenty-fifth Bond feature, No Time To Die (UK/USA: Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2020). Romano accordingly concludes that, “Casting rumors aside, the Bond franchise still has a long way to go before it’s meaningfully diverse.” Romano’s observation corresponds to my discussion of the intersectionality of race, gender, and nation in the James Bond film series. The box office-cred of Lynch’s star turn in Captain Marvel (USA: Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019) as the badass Air Force pilot Maria Rambeau fits Eon’s advertising and promotion bill neatly. As for me, the audacious casting rumor—even if a done deal—does not excuse Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson’s inexplicable refusal to cast Idris Elba as a James Bond for the twenty-first century. Just sayin’!

Now, millennial audiences and non-racist Bond superfans, what say you?

Works Cited


About the Author

Anna Everett is a Professor of Film, Television and New Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her publications include Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949 (Duke University Press, 2001), Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media (MIT Press, 2007), New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality (Routledge, 2003), Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace (SUNY Press, 2009), and Pretty People: Movie Stars of the 1990s (Rutgers University Press, 2012). Dr. Everett is a two-time recipient of the Fulbright Senior Scholar Award (2005 and 2007), and currently serves a County Commissioner and Chair of the Santa Barbara County Commission for Women.