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To be spoken for, rather than with

"'I'm not going to put a label on it,'" said Halle Berry about something everyone had grown accustomed to labeling. And with that short declaration she made herself arguably the most engaging black celebrity.'

Superheroes are a dime a dozen, or, if you prefer, ten a penny, on Planet America. Superman, Batman, Captain America, Green Lantern, Marvel Girl; I could fill the rest of this and the next page. The common denominator? They are all white. There *are* benevolent black superheroes, like Storm, played most famously in 2006 by Halle Berry (of whom more later) in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, and Frozone, voiced by Samuel L. Jackson in the 2004 animated film *The Incredibles*. But they are a rarity. This is why Will Smith and Wesley Snipes are so unusual: they have both played superheroes – Smith the ham-fisted boozier *Hancock*, and Snipes the vampire-human hybrid *Blade*. Pulling away from the parallel reality of superheroes, the two actors themselves offer case studies.

Smith (b.1968) emerged as a kind of antidote to the gangsta rap of the 1980s. In contrast to thug-like creatures, Fresh Prince, as Smith was known, and his partner DJ Jazzy Jeff were “embraceable” black men, who specialized in pleasant and entertaining, if insubstantial, numbers with strictly no mention of muthfuckas, bitches or niggaz. The transfer to television was almost seamless: in 1990 Smith starred in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a sitcom in which he played an inner-city kid from Philadelphia (his real home town) who is sent to stay with well-to-do relatives in Hollywood. It was successful enough to last until 1996, by which time Smith had ventured into film, his most commercially successful being 1995’s *Bad Boys*, in which he and Martin Lawrence played a pair of mismatched Miami cops. The film grossed \$141 million (£91 million) and triggered a sequel.

Bigger-budget movies followed; they included *Independence Day*, and, in 1997, *Men in Black*, which gave Smith’s music a boost: he released a tie-in single, as he did in 1999 when his *Wild Wild West* came out to coincide with his film of the same name. He kept recording up to 2005, by which time he had enough boxoffice to play leading men. He did so in 2008: in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. His performance persuaded Armond White: “Movie star Smith is also a political figure. His big screen exploits reflect the way we think about race, masculinity, humor, violence and fantasy.”

Snipes is also a political figure – if by this White means someone who motivates, typifies or, in some way, relates to popular ideas in a certain period. By 2011, Snipes had appeared in 50 films; he earned \$38 million between 1999 and 2004 alone. The relevance of this figure is that he did not pay tax on any of it. In fact, he claimed several tax refunds. Snipes was far from the first Hollywood actor to run foul of the IRS, but, as Eric Hoyt points out: “The case was remarkable largely because of Snipes’s defense: he didn’t pay taxes because constitutionally, he argued he was not required to” (p. 18). (Since US federal income tax began in 1913, a small number of individuals have asserted that the 16th Amendment, which authorized income tax, was fraudulently adopted or that no law makes anyone liable for taxes.)

Snipes’ case was more remarkable for other reasons, including the actor’s celebrity status, his ethnicity and the sums concerned. This was someone who had averaged \$7.6 million per year, remember. Snipes was charged with fraud for failing to pay taxes and was found guilty. He was sentenced to three years in prison.

Snipes (b.1962) grew up in the Bronx and attended Manhattan’s High School for the Performing Arts. After a series of minor film roles, he appeared in the video of Michael Jackson’s *Bad* in 1987. Over the next several years, Snipes distinguished himself, avoiding run-of-the-mill films in favor of, for example, in 1990, *Mo’ Better Blues* and, in 1991, *Jungle Fever*, both directed by Spike Lee and both, in different ways, essaying racial themes. In 1997, he played a successful bourgeois married to an Asian American who has a brief affair with a white woman in *One Night Stand*. Snipes camped it up as a drag artist in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. Even when it seemed he had been cast by type, he ironized the convention of natural black athletes in *White Men Can’t Jump*.

If any black actor swerved away from the surfeit of stereotype roles available to black actors in the gheftocentric 1990s, it was Snipes. Even his roles in *Blade* and its sequels were unusual: as I pointed out, black superheroes are a rare breed. Snipes was not alone in challenging racial types, of course: Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman and the afore-mentioned Samuel L. Jackson were among the others, though no one took on more demanding assignments than Snipes. “I don’t like perpetuating the stereotype of black males being drug dealers, and innately criminal,” he told Earl Dittman, of *Digital Journal*, in 2010 (July 6).

When pressed to explain his decision to play a drug dealer in Antoine Fuqua’s 2010 *Brooklyn’s Finest*, he revealed that he played his character as a mature version of a figure he had played in an earlier film, Mario Van Peebles’ *New Jack City*, in 1991: “He [the character] learned. Incarceration can change you. So he learned a lot. He had time to reflect on the error of his ways, and the futility of that path and how much death he was distributing to his own community.”

Snipes was certainly a member of American Rights Litigators, an organization like its successor company, Guiding Light of God Ministries, that advises its

members on how to avoid paying tax. Less certain was Snipes' affiliation with the Nuwaubians, a black, quasi-religious sect apparently descended from the Nation of Islam and based in an Egyptian-themed compound called Tama-Ra in Georgia. According to David Cay Johnstone, of the *New York Times*, Snipes, in 2000, sought a permit to build a military training compound on land next to the Nuwaubian camp; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms rejected the request (January 14, 2008). Snipes' associations with the group remain unclear, but add mystery to his case.

In 2010, convicted but still striving to stay out of prison, Snipes acknowledged to Dittman, "I still draw on the close relationships and friendships I found on the streets." He went on to uncover: "There's also this rhythm of the Bronx that's always in me. It's a very competitive environment there, and you're competing to survive." Perversely, this complements the remark from chapter 10: "They moved out of the ghetto, but the ghetto is still in them." It's by no means certain that Snipes would disagree with this. "I grew up in the Bronx where I constantly faced adversities. So, what's new? I think tough times in life are actually a blessing," he clarified his apparent indifference to the prison term he faced.

In December 2010, Snipes began a three-year sentence at a federal prison in Pennsylvania. Smith also had trouble: filming in New York's SoHo district, he was told to move his 53-foot double-decker trailer, complete with marble floors, 100-inch-screen film room and separate gym trailer, rented at \$9,000 (£5,000) per week. As a result he had to walk all the way from his apartment—about a mile away from the location.

"In the 1970s, there was no cinema equivalent of Motown or the long tradition of U.S. Jazz," writes William Lyne (p. 45). "The seventies blaxploitation explosion is roughly equivalent to the early part of the century when white record companies began to record and market 'race' records." I traced the development of blues, jazz and race music in chapter 9. But what of blaxploitation cinema? This was the term used to describe a genre of inexpensive, independent films made in the early 1970s and featuring predominantly black casts and funky soundtracks. The plots were formulaic and the characters were typically one-dimensional, offering little variation on racist stereotypes. An essential ingredient was, as Lyne notes, "big doses of sex that emphasize macho stud constructions of black masculinity" (p. 44). Lyne counts 50 such films released during 1970–72, "with black audiences in mind," but which became popular with whites.

The most influential film of the genre was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, directed by Melvin Van Peebles (father of Mario) and released in 1971. It cost \$500,000 to make and took more than \$10 million at the box office. As Lyne detects: "This led studios to turn away from such fare as *To Sir, with Love* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and toward the blaxploitation formula to boost black box office" (p. 45).

The two examples of the kind of films eschewed by the major studios both featured Sydney Poitier (b.1927), who was brought up in the Bahamas, but traveled to the US as a teenager and, as I pointed out earlier, won an Oscar for his supporting role in 1963's *Lilies of the Field*. Lyne's point is a crucial one: Poitier refused to succumb to the kind of parts typically reserved for black males and, instead, portrayed unusual characters. Unusual, that is, for cinema. In the two films Lyne cites, Poitier played a teacher at a London school, and a doctor engaged to the daughter of an affluent white San Franciscan couple, respectively. In perhaps his most famous film role, Poitier played a Philadelphia detective helping a murder investigation in Mississippi. *In the Heat of the Night* was another challenging film role for a black actor and Poitier reprised it in a sequel *They Call Me Mister Tibbs*. The film was released in 1970, and Poitier completed a trilogy with *The Organization* in 1971. Thereafter, his parts were either less central or more predictable, or else in television movies.

Poitier was an urbane, cosmopolitan figure, gracious of manner and refined of taste. He seemed freed of provincial attitudes. There was no trace of ghetto in him. If he had a musical counterpart, you wouldn't find it in the Motown studios or jazz clubs, and certainly not among the blues or R&B joints. Perhaps at the Capitol Studios in Hollywood, where Dionne Warwick (b.1940) recorded many of her successful singles and albums, such as *Here I Am* and *The Windows of the World* in the late 1960s. Her career also waned from 1970.

Like Poitier, Warwick was a black artist who subverted typical expectations and, for a while, seemed to offer possibilities for integration. Jason King appreciates her impact: "Warwick publicly emerged in the throes of the Civil Rights movement as a stunning emblem of visibility around black femininity and crossover potential" (p. 425). With requisite changes, the same could be said about Poitier; neither had what King calls an "explicit and contemplative relationship to the politics of black revolution," though both were, in an understated way, harbingers. They signaled the approach of others who, unlike them, satisfied popular expectations of black people and so looked and sounded more *authentic*.

Just as people reinvent the wheel, so they reinvent authenticity. Deborah Root, in her book *Cannibal Culture*, recognizes: "Authenticity is a tricky concept because of the way the term can be manipulated and used to convince people they are getting something profound when they are just getting merchandise" (p. 78). Artists like Poitier, Warwick or other black actors and singers who broke through to mainstream without conforming to popular expectations, were regarded as exceptional, but hardly reliable or accurate exemplars of the black experience. But were the blaxploitation and, later, hip-hop any more authentic, or were they just sold as such? Root describes the "commodification of difference," in which packaged versions of a purported culture are put on

the market. The label “black” is slapped on something and it at once takes on all manner of exotic qualities that become eminently saleable.

There was a self-replicating quality in films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*, both commercial successes featuring predominantly black casts, but in a narrow field of roles – the kind that Snipes later set out to spurn, but which audiences seemingly liked: maverick cops, drug dealers, pimps, hookers and so on. As Beretta E. Smith-Shomade certifies: “Most of these blaxploitation films characterized all African descendants as monolithic balls of anger, trapped within urban jungles and forever banished to the margins of society” (p. 27). They seemed authentic depictions.

Eventually, audiences started feeling ghetto fatigue and blaxploitation receded into history, though some writers like Pero Gaglo Dagbovie allege, “variations of 1970s ‘blaxploitation films’ continued through the 1980s and 1990s” (p. 314). The kind of films he has in mind are John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* and Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, the former focusing on South Central Los Angeles, the latter on the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

Both films were made by black directors and neither compromised by resorting to stereotypes. In their ways, they were complements to the style of hip-hop music of the late 1980s; what Geoff Harkness calls “cultural products with high resolution,” meaning artforms that provided or evoked detailed images of cultural life. There’s no presumption that they were authentic representations, however; no more than, say, the minstrel shows.

Smith-Shomade singles out *New Jack City* as the film that disrupted convention, though not in its narrative, which was “standard generic fare,” or its black male characters, who were “well-worn cinema stereotypes” (p. 30). While it now seems conventional, director Mario Van Peebles’ controversial debut film about the rise of a black New York drug overlord played by Snipes (who, as I noted earlier, consciously avoided similar roles afterwards) was both bold and radical in its day. It was released in the same year as NWA’s *Niggaz4Life*, an album that sounded like a portent.

In the movie, one of Snipes’ aides who has “a crucial role in implementing all security systems” is played by Vanessa Williams (b.1963), then 28 (not the same Vanessa Williams, who had been the first African American winner of the Miss America contest in 1983, and went on to play Berry Gordy’s mentee Suzanne de Passe in the movie *The Jacksons: An American Dream* in 1992, among other roles). Williams’ character is, for Smith-Shomade, a complete departure from the usual bitches and ho’s that inhabited both black-themed movies and the gangsta rap of the period.

Among the other genre films Smith-Shomade believes dealt with female black characters more complexly were *Sugar Hill*, another Snipes film, and

Set It Off, a 1996 film that gave rapper Queen Latifah (b.1970) her first major role and featured Jada Pinkett (b.1971) in a lead role. Pinkett, in 1997, married Will Smith and became Jada Pinkett Smith. The film didn't exactly launch either actor, though for Latifah it formed a bridge between the rap music, for which she was mostly known, and acting, which was to become her main career. In *Set It Off*, she was masculinized, in the sense that she appeared masculine in speech and manners, playing the lesbian leader of a female gang.

Some might struggle to understand why Smith-Shomade believes the film was so catalytic, but her point is that "hip-hop gangsta films have altered the cinematic landscape for black women." They created more roles – and thus more work – for African American women and gave them more visibility. While Smith-Shomade rates the assertive roles written for women in *Set It Off*, she neglects Pam Grier (b.1949), who had been playing bold, decisive and self-assured women for years. Unusual in their day, her portrayals were precursory. Chris Holmlund acknowledges this: "Grier's 1990s characters are now 'normal,' not exotic or 'other'" (p. 106).

Grier was the leading female of blaxploitation, making her screen debut at the age of 22 as one of several voluptuous inmates in the 1971 film *Big Doll House*. She never quite shrugged her image as a strong action woman and, even after the genre faded, found herself typecast. "Most of Pam Grier's 1990s roles are in some variant of action film," writes Holmlund, suggesting Quentin Tarantino's 1997 *Jackie Brown* was the only film of the period in which she was permitted to expand on her basic role (p. 104). Paradoxically, the film pastiches blaxploitation.

Grier's impact in mainstream cinema never matched her influence on blaxploitation and, while she struggled to make a transition, other African American women drew acclaim. Whitney Houston, a singer, became an actor playing a singer opposite Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard* in 1992. Angela Bassett, an actor, played a singer (Tina Turner) in *What's Love Got to Do With It* in 1993.

Whoopi Goldberg was nominated for a 1986 Academy Award for her role in *The Color Purple*, in which Oprah Winfrey also played. This was not a first for an African American female: Dorothy Dandridge, Diana Ross, Cicely Tyson and Diahann Carroll had also been nominated. Goldberg, though, branched away from serious roles and specialized in idiosyncratic characterizations: as a medium in *Ghost*, 1990; as a singer disguised as a nun in the *Sister Act* films; and as God in *A Little Bit of Heaven*, in 2011. Goldberg defended Mel Gibson, whom she described as a friend, invoking John 8:7 ("let him first cast a stone") to mitigate Gibson's widely reported racist tirade in 2010. She attacked Donald Trump when he questioned Barack Obama's birth credentials in 2011: "I'm getting tired of trying to find reasons not to think of stuff as being racist."

Unlike other celebrities, Goldberg didn't smother her blackness or refuse to discuss it: in fact, during her criticism of Trump, she acknowledged that she was prepared to play the "race card." The race card is typically "used to explain away racial meanings in the midst of melodramatic challenges to colorblindness," according to David J. Leonard (2004, p. 290). Goldberg had strenuously resisted the appellation "African American" for many years before. "I'm an American. This is my country ... Just call me black," she told the British *Daily Telegraph* (April 20, 1998).

Someone like Whoopi Goldberg, with her fearless preparedness to challenge what she believes is racism, appears to make a strong case: she uses her celebrity status and the cultural authority it brings. She remains popular with film and tv audiences and often elicits agreement for her pragmatism. At no point does she reduce the importance or prominence of her ethnicity, nor dilute her fierce patriotism. She is a woman to be reckoned with.

Or is she? After all, Goldberg is a funny person: while her early work was often earnest, even profound, she broadened her popularity by embracing comic roles in light entertainment rather than drama. Her power as a pedagogic or admonitory figure was vitiated by her funniness. This is not a criticism: it is merely an observation of how entertainers known best for their theatrical work become closely associated with their art, often to the point where they find their onstage persona inescapable. I anticipate the reader's response: what about Arnold Schwarzenegger? He certainly played in comedies, but he was a foil rather than a comic and, even then, the bulk of his work was in sci-fi or action roles. Could Danny DeVito, with whom Schwarzenegger (b.1947) featured in the 1988 film *Twins*, make a successful transition into politics after a career spent making people laugh? Or Eddie Murphy or Cedric "The Entertainer" Kyles?

Cultural authority is not the same as other kinds of authority: it is based on the recognition of aesthetic, artistic or intellectual accomplishments and these are often subjective. Celebrity culture confers authority on figures who may have no qualification or credibility outside their own domain. And this is particularly significant when discussing the effects of mainstream actors, who occupy a special position in the celebrity temple. In many ways, their cultural authority outweighs that of rock stars, if only because it derives in large part from their screen presence. Were James Earl Jones (b.1931, who has played Alex Haley and several political leaders), Morgan Freeman (b.1937, has played Nelson Mandela), or Paul Winfield (b.1939, has played Martin Luther King) to make pronouncements on social or political affairs, the gravitas and credibility of some of their subjects would pass, as if by osmosis, to them. Perhaps they all knew the zeitgeist and could, if pressed, give a lecture on the fate of Paul Robeson. Incidentally, all four actors played *Othello*, a role that requires solemnity and erudition.

Were any of the four contemporary actors to branch in directions other than those signposted by the entertainment industry, as Robeson did, it's possible

that we would not know about them. Perhaps the fact that we do demonstrates a truth.

“I had lived this woman’s life from the age of 15 to 65 as she was sexually abused, beaten, treated like dirt. I really felt the injustice and I was called nigger just one time too many on screen,” Halle Berry told Baz Bamigboye (p. 49). It was 1993 and she had just finished playing the title role in *Alex Haley’s Queen*, the concluding part of the *Roots* saga. She went into therapy. “I had gone to him thinking I was going to give up acting and become a full-time civil rights activist,” she explained. She didn’t, of course; she went on to grander roles, more bravura performances and, in 2001, became the first African American woman to win the best actress Oscar for her role in *Monster’s Ball*.

Whether the experience of playing the daughter of a slave and a white plantation owner who tries to pass as white in the period after the American Civil War (1861–65) impressed Berry (b.1966) indelibly isn’t certain. Eighteen years later, she seemed to draw on it when she fought her ex-partner for custody of their daughter. In the process, Berry crystallized many of the themes scattered through this chapter. They include White’s point that all black actors are, in some sense, political figures. Berry’s case also reflected the interest in “authentic” black culture that spread across popular culture, leading to a redefinition of roles available to black actors and, indeed, a redefinition of blackness itself. It also resonated with historical memories and emotions.

“Halle Berry opened the lid on one of the thorniest issues that still plagues race relations,” writes Earl Ofari Hutchinson in his 2011 article for *The Grio*. After splitting up with her partner, a white Canadian, Berry pressed for custody of their daughter. The custody was contested and Berry based her claim on her daughter’s ethnicity: she was black, insisted Berry, drawing on what has become known as the “one drop rule.” This is an old idiomatic phrase that stipulates that anyone with any trace of sub-Saharan ancestry, however minute (“one drop”), can’t be considered white and, in the absence of an alternative lineage – for example, Native American, Asian, Arab, Australian aboriginal – they are considered black. The rule has no biological or genealogical foundation, though in 1910, when Tennessee enshrined the rule in law, it was popularly regarded as having scientific status, however spurious. By 1925, almost every state in America had some form of one drop rule on the statute books. This was four decades before civil rights. Jim Crow segregation was in full force. Anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited unions of people considered to be of different racial types remained until 1967, when the Supreme Court repealed them completely.

By the time of Berry’s invocation, it might reasonably have been assumed that the rule had been exiled to America’s ignominious past. But, as Amy I. Kornblau writes, in the 1960s: “The ‘one drop rule’ experienced a resurgence

as black leaders argued for people of mixed heritage to regard themselves, and be perceived by others, as black” (p. 291).

“The debate was ongoing during the 2008 [presidential] election,” says Hutchinson, commenting on the public dispute over whether Barack Obama was black, biracial, multiracial, or even American. “Obama mercifully put that debate to rest for most Americans when he made it official and checked the box “African-American” on his Census 2010 form.”

Berry herself had an African American father and a white mother, who was from Liverpool. Her parents divorced and she was brought up by her mother in Cleveland, Ohio. Prior to the custody argument, she had declared she considered herself biracial, this referring to a child with a black parent and a white parent: “I do identify with my white heritage. I was raised by my white mother and every day of my life I have always been aware of the fact that I am bi-racial.”

Hardly a controversial figure, Berry had occasionally talked about the particular predicament of biracial people, but had never made an issue of it. At various points, she had also used black, African American and woman of color to describe herself. She had, in measured terms, talked of how she never felt accepted as white, despite her white mother. But her appeal to the one drop rule seemed a bit like a physicist trying to explain the movements of celestial bodies by citing astrology. Or perhaps, like Storm, the mutant she played in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, watching the Weather Channel before deciding what to wear – the character can create lightning, avalanches, heat waves, rain and tornados at will. Actually, while it seemed irrational, Berry’s explanation of her actions was far-removed from any kind of faux biology or pseudoscience. “I’m black and I’m her [her daughter’s] mother, and I believe in the one-drop theory. I’m not going to put a label on it. I had to decide for myself and that’s what she’s going to have to decide - how she identifies herself in the world,” she was quoted by Chloe Tilley, of the BBC World Service.

In resisting conventional census categories, or labels, such as biracial or multiracial, Berry was not returning to another label, black, as if returning to a default setting. Black, in her argument, is no longer a label: it is a *response* to a label – a response, that is, to not being white. Blackness, on this account, doesn’t describe a color, a physical condition, a lifestyle, or even an ethnic status in the conventional sense: it is a reaction to being regarded as different or distinct. As Hutchinson reveals, Berry and anyone who embraces this apparent paradox, “effectively recognize the hard and unchanging reality that race relations and conflict in America are still framed in black and white.”

Black no longer describes a designated group of people: it is the way in which those who have been identified as distinct from and opposite to whites have reacted; their answer. When Berry allowed, “that’s what she’s going to have to decide,” she meant that her daughter has some measure of discretion in the way she responds. Blackness is now a flexible and negotiable action; not the fixed status it once was.

This doesn't mean blacks are no longer regarded as Other, as definable objects, "as those to be spoken for or about rather than with," to use a suggestive phrase from Juliana Mansvelt (p. 147). Nor does it mean that the appropriation of cultural practices, images and artifacts such as downloads, movies and concerts are no longer predicated on blacks as continuously and unchangeably different. It means that blackness is not a thing, a category, a group, or even a designation: it is, to repeat myself, a response to all of these. The one drop rule was an incongruous imposition on an otherwise sophisticated argument, an argument that carried added force, coming from someone not known for her outspokenness or her humor.

Berry had shown an awareness of history when she dedicated her Oscar: "This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Home, Diahann Carroll. This is for every faceless woman of color who now has a chance tonight because this door has been opened."

By now, readers will be anticipating my argument. Berry, no less than any other actor mentioned in this chapter – or indeed, the many who have been missed out – is a political figure in the sense that White described Will Smith. As a person with cultural authority, she excited popular ideas about the way we think about race and, in her case, femininity, among other things. Smith's impression of boyish insouciance, as if he hadn't a serious thought in his head, has probably been a big factor in his success. "Smith can now claim cultural authority even over the equally slick George Clooney," White discerns (unlike Smith, Clooney has a well-documented history of involvement in causes, including famine relief in Africa).

White argues that Smith's status alone means he's no longer a lawn jockey, this being a garden-gnome-like statuette, usually black, symbolizing tameness and docility. His failure to show, as White puts it, "any social consciousness at all," does not lessen his impact. If anything, it enhances it. A silent black man without social consciousness who is, on Whites' account, a "first rate egotist" and shares Barack Obama's "smooth, casual approach to popularity," has made it possible for Americans to identify with him. They not only admire, but like and perhaps even respect him. Or, at least they respect his silence.

I contrasted Smith with Snipes quite deliberately. Also a high-earning movie star and maybe also an egotist, Snipes didn't share Smith's approach to popularity. Still enormously popular, he made his mark with challenging roles, often as unprincipled reprobates. His fall from grace didn't involve sexual transgression or violent behavior, but he went beyond the bounds of established standards of behavior and, as he was a black man, that had reverberations. Like so many other conspicuously successful African Americans, he appeared either unable or unwilling to control the impulse that led him to transgress. He even had a name for it, "this rhythm of the Bronx that's always in me."

Poitier too was political: it was as if Hollywood handed him a live grenade and stood back waiting for him to pull it. When he didn't, everyone lost interest and turned to the self-destructing pimps, studs, dope slingers and comely women who were much closer to popular expectations. The blaxploitation sensibility expressed post-civil rights frustration, though in an internecine way: black people were seen locked in mortal ghetto combat. Stereotype-on-stereotype violence shocked and offended, but comforted all the same.

The interest in authenticity, or ghettocentric logic, filtered through, steeping popular culture in all things black. "Through hip-hop, more Americans come to identify with black public figures than ever before," reflects White. "It's the common ground Bill Cosby shares with Snoop Dogg, and Hancock [the superhero played by Smith]." Think of the number of artists who have transferred from rap music to film or else negotiated a two-way career. Quite apart from Smith and Queen Latifah, there is Ice Cube, formerly of NWA and composer of "Fuck tha Police," who debuted in *Boyz N the Hood*, 50 Cent, whose first album sold 12 million copies worldwide, and who, as Curtis Jackson, appeared with Al Pacino and Robert De Niro in *Righteous Kill*, and several more films. Add to these: Eve, Ja Rule, LL Cool, Ludacris, Mos Def, Tyrese Gibson, and many, many more, including Eminem, all products of hip-hop culture, who went into the movies and became all-purpose celebrities. Figures that might, in the 1990s, be seen as menaces to society, became emblems of "black congeniality," to dip once again into White's phrase book.

Some might argue that it's incumbent on black celebrities in general and actors in particular to use their fame and, where appropriate, credibility to advance the causes of African Americans. Others might respond: why should we expect them to do anything other than entertain us? In any case, there is no universal agreement on what the cause actually is, or on the best way to advance it. This is why Halle Berry became a more interesting figure after she had spoken out on a seldom-reported subject.

In 2007, Karen Bowdre believed: "African American women ... are usually portrayed in an overly sexualized manner." (p. 17).

Bowdre may still have a point: most of the black women who have become visible on our screens do not play homely sorts. Beyoncé, Vanessa Williams, Thandie Newton, K.D. Aubert, Gabrielle Union, et al. specialize in beguiling, sometimes exotic roles. So far, only Berry has revealed evidence of her thought-processes. In doing so, she made herself less reassuring, perhaps even confrontational. "I'm not going to put a label on it," she said about something everyone had grown accustoming to labeling. And, with that short declaration, she made herself arguably the most engaging black celebrity.