



# Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film

*Mia Mask*

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This insightful study places African American women's stardom in historical and industrial contexts by examining the star personae of five African American women: Dorothy Dandridge, Pam Grier, Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Halle Berry. Interpreting each woman's celebrity as predicated on a brand of charismatic authority, Mia Mask shows how these female stars have ultimately complicated the conventional discursive practices through which blackness and womanhood have been represented in commercial cinema, independent film, and network television.

Mask examines the function of these stars in seminal yet underanalyzed films. She considers Dandridge's status as a sexual commodity in films such as *Tamango*, revealing the contradictory discourses regarding race and sexuality in segregation-era American culture. Grier's feminist-camp performances in sexploitation pictures *Women in Cages* and *The Big Doll House* and her subsequent blaxploitation vehicles *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* highlight a similar tension between representing African American women as both objectified stereotypes and powerful, self-defining icons. Mask reads Goldberg's transforming habits in *Sister Act* and *The Associate* as representative of her unruly comedic routines, while Winfrey's daily television performance as self-made, self-help guru echoes Horatio Alger narratives of success. Finally, Mask analyzes Berry's meteoric success by acknowledging the ways in which Dandridge's career made Berry's possible.

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