

## **Violent Bodies (2004)**

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I would like to deal with the violent fate of the women who act as the main protagonists in the dramatic crime film *Set It Off* (1996), directed by F. Gary Gray. The film had a great tagline: "The only breaks you get are the ones you take". The four main characters in the film are: Lida 'Sunny' Newson (Jada Pinkett); Cleopatra 'Cleo' Simms (Queen Latifah); Francesca 'Frankie' Sutton (Vivica A. Fox); and Tisean 'TT' Williams (Kimberley Elise).

The women are presented as having separate agendas in life. 'Sunny' works in a bank, 'Frankie' seems to get by, 'Cleo' takes much pride in her car and lover and works as a cleaner, with 'TT' who struggles to do as much as she can to bring up her son. However, whatever their occupations are, they are stuck in the ghetto, and criminalised for their race. The not-so-funny joke that all black men look the same in the dark, has a macabre re-presentation in *Set it Off* when 'Frankie's' brother is shot down by the police, (led by Det. Strode) because his hair is decoratively shaved akin to a suspect's the police seek. His mark of belonging within the community becomes his mark of criminality to outsiders [in this ghetto, the outsider is 'the law' in the form of the police, and 'the authorities' are represented by the Department of Social Security].

I argue that the level of violence visited on to 'Cleo's' body in the final shootout sequence of *Set it Off* is highly disproportionate to what normally exists in a Hollywood movie. The level of cinematic scrutiny in the unfolding violence is one that fascinates me. Firstly TT is shot and we watch her suffer, and as you will see from the clip of the final shootout with Cleopatra, (the slowing down of the footage and the music: *Up Against the Wind* (Reprise) by Lori Perry), interest in what happens to her is extended. It is much more than the simple depiction of crime and punishment (being that this one of the main interests of the Hollywood filmmaking machine), but in the case of *Set it Off*, more comes from the almost inevitable car chase. It would be inconceivable within a Hollywood film (the simplification of the 'triumph over adversity' myth), to let these 'raced' transgressors go.