

RENEGOTIATING RESISTANCE:
AFRICAN DIASPORA FILM AND THE DISCOURSE OF THIRD CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Emerging out of the context of the tricontinental revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, Third Cinema refers to a host of film practices from Latin America, Africa and Asia with the political intent of the decolonization of culture. For contemporary filmmakers and critics, however, the discourse of Third Cinema cannot be easily applied to contemporary times and contexts. In this thesis, I attempt to reconcile the discourse of Third Cinema with contemporary African diaspora film practices in a renegotiation of cinematic resistance.

Proceeding from Gilles Deleuze's theory that the evolution of cinema from classical to modern materialized out of the historic rupture produced by World War II, my thesis locates another rupture in the dissonance between Third Cinema and contemporary African diasporic filmmaking. The lingering effects of neo-colonialism and the process of globalization have rendered older categories to describe the world inadequate, and filmmakers all over the world are actively engaged in decentering the grand narratives of Western and Third Cinemas. Because this deconstructive process is most often associated with the diasporic condition by postcolonial theorists, I argue that a "diasporic turn" has occurred within cinema that shapes contemporary film narratives and aesthetics. Although my use of the term "diaspora" is conceptual rather than geographical, in my thesis the African diaspora, historically constructed through the process of forced and voluntary migration, operates as a unit of analysis for exploring the "diasporic turn." Through the analysis of three films from the African diaspora, my thesis not only explores the postcolonial and diasporic issues with which the discourse of Third Cinema must reconcile in order to have contemporary relevance, but it also gestures towards a new discursive framework for characterizing contemporary African diasporic film practices.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jamicia Evette Lackey was born in Atlanta, Georgia to James E. Lackey, Jr. and Sandra O. Lackey on August 10, 1979. After graduating with honors from Redan High School, she attended Duke University as a biomedical engineering major. Recognizing her growing interest in Africana Studies and media, she changed her major in her junior year to African and African-American Studies and minored in English and Religion. During her final years at Duke, she began to utilize the media outlets on campus to address the unacknowledged concerns of minority students. In her senior year she wrote a controversial column for the school newspaper that garnered an overwhelming response from the campus and local communities. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from Duke University in May 2002.

Because the accelerated pace of her final semesters at Duke prohibited her from exploring film as she had hoped, Lackey enrolled at American InterContinental University in Atlanta in the Media Production department the following year. There she learned to produce, direct and edit short videos. She also excelled at scriptwriting, and her submission to the BET/Black AIDS Institute's "Rap-It-Up Black AIDS" film competition was one of ten selected in the finalist round out of over 600 submissions. In acquiring the technical expertise of video production, she also gained an appreciation for film studies. She graduated with an associate's degree from AIU in June 2005.

Lackey enrolled in the Africana Studies graduate program at Cornell University in August 2005. While there she has had the opportunity to explore her interests in Africana Studies and Film Studies through a range of research papers and presentations. Upon graduating, she will enter the joint doctoral program in African-American Studies and Film Studies at Yale University.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Illustrations.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Liberating Icons: Re-membering Lumumba in Exile.....	25
Chapter Two: Diaspora as Desire in <i>Looking for Langston</i>	61
Chapter Three: “The Gift of Sight:” Destabilizing Patriarchy and Representation in Eve’s Bayou.....	81
Conclusion: Postmodern Modernism and the Possibilities of Resistance.....	111

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1	Peck reads from Lumumba’s prison letter.....	37
Illustration 2	Mobutu juxtaposed with Lumumba.....	37
Illustration 3	Lumumba’s political naivety.....	40
Illustration 4	The “lost” footage of Lumumba’s independence speech.....	47
Illustration 5	Exploring the Tervuren museum.....	50
Illustration 6	Inverting the ethnographic spectacle.....	52
Illustration 7	Cultural discontinuity between Peck and the Congolese.....	58
Illustration 8	Bar scene reminiscent of the 1920s.....	67
Illustration 9	Bar scene of the 1980s.....	67
Illustration 10	Beauty turns to face Alex in a highly stylistic shot.....	75
Illustration 11	Beauty’s strong legs.....	75
Illustration 12	Close-up on Beauty’s lips.....	76
Illustration 13	A white male consumes objectified black bodies.....	79
Illustration 14	Eve, an enslaved African woman, materializes in the sugar cane fields.....	93
Illustration 15	The image “imprinted indelibly” on Eve’s brain.....	96
Illustration 16	Maynard and Hosea enter the mirror.....	100
Illustration 17	Mozelle walks back into the reflected past.....	100
Illustration 18	Mozelle, Maynard and Hosea reenact the past.....	101
Illustration 19	Eve takes Cisely’s hands to ascertain the truth.....	107

INTRODUCTION

In their struggles for independence from colonialism and imperialism, Third World¹ intellectuals have always understood the decolonization of culture to be a necessary correlative of political and economic freedom. With its advent in the 1890s at the very height of European colonial expansion, cinema became an important tool in disseminating racist colonial discourse globally and, conversely, a medium through which that discourse could be challenged.² Out of the context of the tricontinental decolonization movements of the 1950s and 1960s emerged Third Cinema, a term coined by Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to describe “a cinema of subversion” that would contribute to “the possibility of revolution.”³ A radical alternative to the commercial Hollywood-based film industry and artistic European and Argentine cinemas, Solanas and Getino envisioned in Third Cinema a means to decolonize culture by introducing the social reality of the Third World into aesthetic practices.

A vast divide stands between then and now in terms of oppositional cinema. According to Michael Chanan, “The original Third Cinema was premised on militant mass political movements of a kind which in many places no longer exist and upon ideologies which have taken a decisive historical beating.”⁴ The binary cultural model of Third Cinema discourse has given way to more fluid conceptions of culture that

¹ As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, the term “Third World” “flows logically” from a discussion of Third Cinema. Its initial use by French journalist Alfred Sauvy referred to the revolutionary aspirations of colonized nations. When used by Third Cinema theorists (and in this thesis) it is intended as an empowering reference to the range of the anti-imperialist expressions that have emerged from former colonies and minority populations within the “First World.” See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 25-28.

² Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 19.

³ Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Toward a Third Cinema,” *Cineaste* IV, no. 3 (Winter 1970-71), 1-2.

⁴ Michael Chanan, “The Changing Geography of Third Cinema,” *Screen* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 388.

recognize the intersection and traversal of boundaries within the categories of nation, race, gender and sexuality. Its militancy is mitigated by the decline of revolutionary tactics and opportunities and neo-conservative backlash to the liberation agenda. These and other changes have forced contemporary filmmakers to renegotiate the terms of resistance put forth in the original conceptions of Third Cinema.

Proceeding from Gilles Deleuze's theory that the evolution of cinema from classical to modern materialized out of the historic rupture produced by World War II, my thesis locates another rupture in the dissonance between Third Cinema and contemporary African diasporic filmmaking. The lingering effects of neo-colonialism and the process of globalization have rendered older categories to describe the world inadequate, and filmmakers all over the world are actively engaged in decentering the grand narratives of Western and Third Cinemas. Because this deconstructive process is most often associated with the diasporic condition by postcolonial theorists, I argue that a "diasporic turn" has occurred within cinema that shapes contemporary film narratives and aesthetics. Although my use of the term "diaspora" is conceptual rather than geographical, in my thesis the African diaspora, historically constructed through the process of forced and voluntary migration, operates as a unit of analysis for exploring the "diasporic turn." Through the analysis of three films from the African diaspora, my thesis not only explores the postcolonial and diasporic issues with which the discourse of Third Cinema must reconcile in order to have contemporary relevance, but it also gestures towards a new discursive framework for characterizing contemporary African diasporic film practices.

From Classical to Modern to Third Cinema

The publication of two anticipated volumes on cinema in 1983 and 1985 by renowned philosopher Gilles Deleuze allow for consideration of the impact of

historical processes on cinematic representations that informs this study. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze describes the transition from classical cinema and the causal and hero-centered narratives of Hollywood to modern cinema, associated with European film movements and the liberation of the image from naturalistic sensory-motor schema.⁵ What is of interest here is his designation of a precise historical moment, the end of World War II, as a turning point which motivated these aesthetic changes.

Nevertheless, the crisis which has shaken the action-image has depended on many factors which only had their full effect after the war, some of which were social, economic, political, moral and others more internal to art, to literature and to the cinema in particular. We might mention, in no particular order, the war and its consequences, the unsteadiness of the 'American Dream' in all its aspects, the new consciousness of minorities, the rise and inflation of images both in the external world and in people's minds, the influence on the cinema of the new modes of narrative with which literature had experimented, the crisis of Hollywood and its old genres.⁶

Deleuze argues that post-war European cinema, particularly Italian neo-realism and French New Wave, moved beyond the hegemonic model of Hollywood because of changes in political and social reality. Through the "time-image," elaborated in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze also suggests that European cinema opens itself aesthetically to the representation of social reality.⁷

⁵ Angelo Restivo, "Into the Breach: *Between The Movement-Image and The Time-Image*" in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 171, 175.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 206.

⁷ Ka-Fai Yau, "Recon-Figuration: Revisiting Modernity and Reality in Deleuze's Taxonomy of Cinema," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 4 (October 1998), 59.

World War II also marked a turning point in the profile of colonialism, as the decimation of Europe presented opportunities for the buildup of tricontinental resistance to European imperialism. Consequently, Third World cinema practices also took a drastic turn towards the modernism Deleuze describes. By 1968, when Solanas and Getino published their manifesto on Third Cinema, many of the colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America had been gripped from European control. Struggling against neo-colonial dependency and underdevelopment, political theorists and intellectuals turned to cinema to express their revolutionary hopes and anti-imperialist stance. The influence of Italian neo-realism and French New Wave theories, among others, inspired modernist films that communicated political concerns to engaged spectators.

Solanas and Getino envisioned Third Cinema as a part of the Third World struggle against neocolonialism. In their manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema,” they link “First Cinema” to the emergence of the U.S. as an imperial power and contend that Hollywood films are produced in the service of Western economic interests, with the spectator positioned as “a passive and consuming object” of bourgeois ideology.⁸ Acknowledging that “Second Cinema,” or the auteuristic cinema of Europe and the Argentine elite, attempts to decolonize the Hollywood model of culture, they suggest that its failure to achieve this goal lies in its inextricable ties to capitalism and neo-colonialism. Third Cinema is presented as an alternative to these models because it: recognises in [the anti-imperialist struggle] the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point – in a word, the decolonisation of culture.⁹

⁸ Solanas and Getino 4.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

Likening the camera to “the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons” and the projector to “a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second,” Solanas and Getino call for the production of “guerilla” documentary films, such as their co-directed *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), in order to present an unmediated national reality and transform spectatorship into a political act.

Solanas and Getino’s Third Cinema was one of many oppositional cinema movements emerging in Latin America. Six years earlier, Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha published *A Critical Revision of Brazilian Cinema* in which he called for a new cinema that diverged from the “commercial-popular aesthetic of Hollywood...the populist-demagogic aesthetic of the socialist bloc, and ... the bourgeois-artistic aesthetic of the European art film,” proposing in its stead a “free, revolutionary, and insolent cinema” made by auteurs who privileged the nation over their individual subjectivity. In a 1965 essay “An Esthetic of Hunger,” Rocha justifies the violence of this new cinema, *Cinema Novo*, whose aesthetic merely reflects the “hunger” or “misery” of Latin America under neo-colonialism.¹⁰ In 1969, Julio Garcia Espinosa’s “imperfect cinema” sought to “do away once and for all with elitist concepts and practices in art” and instead draw its themes and aesthetics from the struggles of the people.¹¹ Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjines proposed a collective revolutionary cinema, made by the people *through* the director or screenwriter with content that represented the people and their struggles and formal and aesthetic values that demanded their engagement.

Similar developments were occurring on the continent of Africa. *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by Italian neo-realist filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo in conjunction with Algerian producer Sadi Yacef, was released in 1965. The film focuses on the pivotal

¹⁰ Stam 96.

¹¹ Julio Garcia Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema" in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin, Vol. 1 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 78.

confrontation between the French and the National Liberation Front (FLN) in the capital city of Algiers during the Algerian War of Independence. Through the use of neo-realist techniques to give the film a documentary feel, including a handheld camera and telephoto lens, grainy black-and-white film, titles, and freeze frames masquerading as faux historical photographs, the film attempts to document the war of national liberation in order to validate Algerian nationalism and safeguard the burgeoning national culture.¹² Although the term had not yet been coined at the time of its release, it is considered a Third Cinema classic because of its conspicuous anticolonial stance, sympathetic rendering of the Algerians and their revolutionary cause and realist aesthetic.

Although Egyptian filmmakers such as Youssef Chahine had been making realist, political films since the late 1950s,¹³ *The Battle of Algiers* signaled a turn in African cinema towards “politically committed, revolutionary” filmmaking because of the prominence of the Algerian anticolonial struggle. Earlier African films, such as Paulin Vieyra and Mamadou Sarr’s *Afrique sur Seine* (1955) about an African immigrant in Paris, were often more concerned with psychological freedom from European hegemony than blatant anticolonialism.¹⁴ With rapid decolonization during the early 1960s, neocolonial protest replaced anticolonial themes as disillusion set in over continuing disparities.¹⁵ Ousmane Sembene became one of the first black African filmmakers to direct a film in Africa when he completed *Borom Sarret* (1962), a short film that follows a donkey cart driver around Dakar to expose the plight of the

¹² Ranjana Khanna, “*The Battle of Algiers* and *The Nouba of the Women of Mont Chenoua*: From Third to Fourth Cinema,” *Third Text* 43 (Summer 1998), 15-16.

¹³ Qussai Samak, “The Politics of Egyptian Cinema,” *MERIP Reports* 56 (April 1977), 12-13.

¹⁴ Kenneth W. Harrow, “Introduction” in *African Cinema: Post-Colonial and Feminist Readings*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993), xiii-xiv; Melissa Thackway, *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁵ Harrow xiv.

urban poor in the embryonic Senegalese nation. *Mandabi/The Money Order* (1969) also deals with urban poverty, while *Xala* (1974), Sembene's most popular and successful film, castigates the African elite for "[perverting] social progress towards its own desire for material wealth."¹⁶ Sembene quickly emerged as Africa's foremost cineaste, following a long and notable career as a novelist.

Sembene's films came to be grouped under the rubric of Third Cinema with the publication of Teshome Gabriel's *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* in 1982, which references most of his films, along with a number from Africa and Latin America and a handful from Asia.¹⁷ Using Fanon's triadic model of cultural decolonization, which he calls the "inspirational guide for Third Cinema," and deviating from the model espoused by Solanas and Getino, Gabriel delineates three stages in the evolution of Third World film style. The first phase, "unqualified assimilation," represents identification with the Hollywood model by Third World filmmakers rather than the Hollywood model itself. The second phase of "remembrance" resembles Fanon's second stage of cultural decolonization in which artists return to the past for inspiration. The third "combative" phase, however, falls in line with Solanas and Getino's concept of Third Cinema as films that invite reflection and revolutionary action.¹⁸

There are striking similarities between the categories of cinema explicated by Deleuze and Third Cinema theorists. In that both refer to the Hollywood film industry and its subjugation of the masses, Deleuze's classical cinema and First Cinema are virtually synonymous. Deleuze's modern cinema, actualized in auteuristic European

¹⁶ David Murphy, *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), 99.

¹⁷ Notably, *The Battle of Algiers* is not mentioned in Gabriel's book, presumably because its director was Italian rather than Algerian.

¹⁸ Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 7.

films, is for Solanas and Getino Second Cinema, an incomplete attempt at the decolonization of cinematic language which Third Cinema realizes. On the other hand, Deleuze incorporates Third Cinema in his discussion of modern political cinema and praises Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and Sembene's *Ceddo* (1970) for their invention of collectives through film, as opposed to the blanket address of a presupposed collective.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Deleuze suggests, and Andrew Dudley affirms, that before the 1980s Third Cinema did not constitute a truly alternative cinema.²⁰ Deleuze critiques Third World filmmakers who continued to believe in the possibility of revolution, and, therefore, still clung to the modalities of classical cinema.²¹ Although Patricia Pisters equates Third Cinema with Deleuze's modern political cinema, each of the films she analyzes were produced in the new millennium.²²

Despite the difficulties of attuning Third Cinema and modern cinema (which I will return to in the conclusion), the breakdown of the schematics of both models when compared to contemporary filmmaking practices are symptomatic of yet another historic rupture that displaces both theories. Because Deleuze elaborates only one historic break, contemporary African cinema, for example, becomes conflated with the auteristic modernism it has surpassed. Third Cinema resonates with a revolutionary historical moment that dictates its terminology but is no longer viable to explain oppositional Third World films that do not utilize "direct, confrontational, anticolonial rhetoric."²³ If we accept, as Deleuze states, that time itself "has always put the notion

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 217.

²⁰ Dudley Andrew, "The Roots of the Nomadic: Gilles Deleuze and the Cinema of West Africa" in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 230.

²¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 219-220.

²² Patricia Pisters, "Arresting the Flux of Images and Sounds: Free Indirect Discourse and the Dialectics of Political Cinema" in *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, eds. Ian Buchanan and Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 175-193.

²³ Dudley 215-216, 230.

of truth into crisis,”²⁴ we can also entertain the possibility of “another shift in cinema, as complete as that which occurred at World War II...when the promises of modernism, including the political ones of May ’68, had soured.”²⁵ The disjunctures that arise from the direct application of Third Cinema theory to contemporary Third World cinemas necessitate a new discursive framework for evaluating cinematic resistance.

The Diasporic Turn

By the 1980s, the political conditions to which Third Cinema responded had changed in unforeseeable ways. The revolutionary fervor of anticolonialism dissipated with the onset of neocolonialism and the collaboration of Third World elites in continued inequality and underdevelopment in their newly independent nations. Feminists, gays and lesbians called further attention to the suppression of difference within nationalist discourses. The decline of the socialist bloc, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of global capitalism, blurred the distinction between the developed sectors of the Third World and the First World. Globalization, marked by increased motion of people, goods and ideas across the globe, also weakened the perceived boundaries between nations and cultures.²⁶ In other words, the ideological underpinnings and conceptual borders of Third Cinema must be reconsidered because they fail to account for the political and cultural developments of the post-liberation world.

The attempt to translate Third Cinema into contemporary contexts is also problematized by postcolonial theory, which considers the lingering impact of colonial

²⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 130.

²⁵ Dudley 216.

²⁶ Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1994), 351.

modes of representations on the present. Canonical postcolonial texts such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* have proven to wield a double-edged sword; the demystification of colonial discourse cleared the way for a critique of anti-colonial resistance that often merely inverts colonial binaries. While Fanon criticized Negritude for its compliance with the homogenization of black culture by colonial discourse, Said is also critical of anti-colonial nationalism which has had to "work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire."²⁷ Ranajit Guha of the Subaltern Studies groups suggests that anti-colonial nationalism can privilege the elite over subaltern, or non-elite, groups.²⁸ Feminists such as Carole Boyce-Davies have noted that nationalism often marginalizes women and their unique experiences of oppression.²⁹ Similarly, Etienne Balibar suggests that because racism is inherent to nationalism, there is always the potential for inwardly-projected racism and ethnocentrism, manifested in varying degrees from marginalization to annihilation of minority populations.³⁰ Postcolonial theory affirms that the quandaries of colonialism cannot be solved solely through an inversion of power dynamics but rather through the destabilization of colonial representations, particularly fixed identities.

Postcolonial theorists mobilize the concept of the diaspora as an existential condition or identity through which resistance to colonial representations is made possible. The term diaspora connotes the physical crossing of borders as well as the contestation of the "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness,

²⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 210.

²⁸ Ranajit Guha, "On some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-44.

²⁹ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

³⁰ Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, eds. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1991).

of ‘us’ and ‘them’” that undergird colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric.³¹ For Homi Bhabha, diasporic identity provides a counter-narrative to essentialized identity by unveiling the instability of unifying nationalist discourse, as “‘difference’ is turned from the boundary ‘outside’ to its finitude ‘within’; the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of ‘other’ people ... [but] otherness of the people-as-one.”³² Diasporic identity destabilizes dominant discourses from within, but it simultaneously acknowledges the instability of its own modes of resistance.

Although theorizing about diaspora as a concept in abstract terms and language, Bhabha looks to the African diaspora as a model that has maintained, or rather, pieced together, a sense of oppositional but self-reflexive political solidarity. In his essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” he analyzes the black British film *Handsworth Songs* (1986) to illustrate how “incommensurable cultural temporalities” come to constitute, through performance and repetition, a history of “cultural difference.”³³ In his essay “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall articulates a comparable theory of the three “presences” (African, European and Caribbean) from which a black Caribbean cultural identity constituted through difference has been constructed.³⁴ In another essay on black British cultural identity, Hall discusses the shift from the expression of a common black identity to the contestation of the notion of an “essential black subject.”³⁵ Having constructed identities through difference, internal and external to their imagined communities, diasporic subjects also challenge the

³¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 209.

³² Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300-301.

³³ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁴ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation" in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1992), 220-236.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara and Ruth Lindenborg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 166.

binary relationship between colonial and anti-colonial systems of thought by acknowledging that their representations of themselves have been influenced by both.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy also uses the African diaspora as a model of the “explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” of the modern world.³⁶ Gilroy, however, is specifically interested in the manner in which resistance is fostered through transnational connections. While he echoes Hall and Bhabha in proposing that black diasporic identity can be best understood through transnational routes instead of fixed roots, he reintroduces national particularity into diasporic identity by insisting that transnational dialogue translates into local resistance. In his work, transnationalism destabilizes fixed national identity, but national specificity avoids the homogenization of the diverse experience of people of the African diaspora. Gilroy also notes that the break with the past represented in diasporic theories does not make anticolonial discourses irrelevant but instead requires that they be appropriated to speak to contemporary conditions.³⁷ The diaspora is transformed from a passive recipient of either colonial or anti-colonial bestowals into an instrumental force in the creation of the modern world, and therefore an apt vehicle for understanding it.³⁸

Relying on the work of these postcolonial and diasporic scholars, I employ the African diaspora as a historically rooted concept and a unit of analysis in order to examine the limits of Third Cinema discourse. I use the phrase “diasporic turn” to refer to the disjunctures between Third Cinema and contemporary African diaspora cinemas that are reflective of postcolonial and diasporic reality.³⁹ In what follows, I will outline three broad and interrelated assumptions of Third Cinema that must be

³⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-23.

³⁸ Tiffany R. Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000), 26-31.

³⁹ My sincerest thanks to Professor Amy Villarejo who encouraged me to develop a term as a shorthand descriptor of my argument.

rethought in relation to contemporary African diaspora film, all of which intersect in the analysis of three films from the Caribbean, Britain and the U.S. in the main chapters of my thesis: (1) nationalism as the basis of culture and identity; (2) the marginality of the Third World and its binary relationship with the West; and (3) the transparency of the film medium and political intent. In each of these areas, the discourse of Third Cinema must be updated if it is to be revived in the African diaspora.

It is important to note that the discourse of Third Cinema and its practice are highly variegated, as the previous discussion on the discordant articulations of Third Cinema demonstrates. There are undoubtedly critical or cinematic articulations of Third Cinema that do not cohere to the texts by Solanas, Getino and Gabriel. Yet critics and filmmakers who consider any contemporary work to be Third Cinema must contend with these seminal texts because they have come to define Third Cinema in the face of an elusive and differentiated practice. The broad but viable generalizations I make about Third Cinema discourse emerge out of these texts and reflect upon the boundaries the discourse creates even as it acknowledges variance. My goal is not to condemn Third Cinema as an antiquated, binary discourse but rather to disrupt the coherence of these texts and open its borders to the inclusion of films from a different temporal, geographic and cultural location that remain aligned to its radical goals.

Challenging Nationalism as the Basis of Culture and Identity

The idea of national culture that pervades Third Cinema discourse is based largely on Fanon's arguments that national culture is the basis of liberation. Fanon stresses the importance of establishing nationally-based cultures to counter the homogenizing distortions of black culture created by colonial discourse, and he privileges national culture as the building block of international and racial solidarity.

Solanas and Getino's Third Cinema mirrors Fanon's third phase of revolutionary writing that corresponds to the foundation of national culture. Like Fanon, they believe that liberation processes are national rather than universal and that guerilla filmmakers should "make use of the concrete situation of each country."⁴⁰

Gabriel's work, on the other hand, has been widely critiqued for its homogenization of Third World film practices and sidestepping of national specificity. Paul Willemen suggests that Gabriel defines Third Cinema solely on the terms of its difference from Euro-American cinema, "thus implicitly using Hollywood and its national-industrial rivals as the yardstick against which to measure the other's otherness."⁴¹ For Femi Shaka, Gabriel's avoidance of the national question is symptomatic of the influence of "Negritudian ideas and the craving for a pure state in African culture and personality, free from European influences and the corrupt advance of modernity."⁴² I would disagree with both of these critics to the extent that national specificity does not negate Third Cinema's binary relationship to Hollywood and European films, even in Solanas and Getino's text. The upside of Gabriel's transnational and inclusive approach is its unintended challenge to the idea of national culture. His avoidance of national specificity points the way, albeit haphazardly, to postcolonial and diasporic reassessments of the discourse of nationalism.

The notion of exclusive national cultures upon which Third Cinema is premised does not accommodate for the contradictory position inside and outside of Western nations held by diasporic filmmakers. The African diaspora, formed through the forced export of West Africans to North America, South America and the Caribbean during the slave trade from 1502 to the middle of the nineteenth century,

⁴⁰ Solanas and Getino 6-8.

⁴¹ Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections" in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 15.

⁴² Femi O. Shaka, *Modernity and the African Cinema: A Study in Colonial Discourse, Postcoloniality, and Modern African Identities* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 99.

imposes upon its inhabitants discordant plural identities based on origin, race, region and nationality. These identities are further complicated by second-wave migrations of African diasporic subjects in the West (i.e., from the Caribbean to Britain) and a third wave of voluntary or exilic migrations of Africans to the West in the late twentieth century.⁴³ These traversals, along with the marginal positions people of the African diaspora hold in Western political and economic spheres, lend themselves to a transnational outlook. People of the African diaspora often envisage themselves and their struggles in close connections to the people and struggles of multiple Third World geographical locations, particularly in Africa.⁴⁴ This diasporic intellectual tradition is most notable in the discourses of Négritude and Pan-Africanism.

The importance of the continent of Africa to the transnational outlook of the diaspora cannot be overstated. Fanon considered the recovery of the connection to Africa a “historical necessity” for people of the diaspora who “need to attach themselves to a cultural matrix.”⁴⁵ His hope that this racial bond would give way to national unity has not been fully realized in the diaspora, as the idea of Africa continues to serve as a means through which the massive historical and cultural discontinuities entrenched in the diasporic experience can be mitigated.⁴⁶

Subsequently, many African diaspora films focus on transnational rather than national themes, such as Euzhan Palcy’s *A Dry White Season* (1989) about South African apartheid, or Raoul Peck’s *Lumumba* (2001) on the first Prime Minister of the Congo. The insistence that Third Cinema reflect national culture over racial or Third World affiliation does not readily translate in the African diaspora, where nationality does not

⁴³ My conception of the African diaspora is limited to the “Black Atlantic” and does not consider migrations of Africans to locales outside of the “New World” in order to limit the scope of my thesis and retain some semblance of cultural specificity.

⁴⁴ Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 233-35.

⁴⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 215.

⁴⁶ Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 235-36.

function as an adequate means of distinguishing the Third World from the First and in which nationalist claims are defined in part on shared ancestry.

The weakness of national identification in the diaspora makes it even more important that Third Cinema theory addresses class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity as alternate identities upon which solidarity and resistance can be based. As diasporas formed through these identities are similarly transnational and engage issues that are not nation-specific, Third Cinema must broaden its conceptual borders to think outside the nation. In addition, by conceding that nationalist discourse privileges some sectors of the population and disempowers others, Third Cinema discourse must exhibit a reflexivity that allows for internal critiques from marginalized voices. It must incorporate a postcolonial and diasporic understanding of cultural identity that operates through the recognition of difference beyond the national in its opposition to Euro-American cinema.

Reconsidering Marginality and the Third World's Relationship with the West

While Gabriel's affirmation that Third Cinema can be practiced anywhere opened the way for reassessment of the oppositional film practices of the African diaspora, he does not include any films made by black filmmakers from the U.S., Caribbean or Britain in his Third Cinema writings.⁴⁷ His Marxist definition of the Third World as nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America excludes minority populations of the First World and entirely ignores the nations of the Afro-Caribbean. Taking into account that slavery was a manifestation of imperialism just as pernicious as colonialism, more recent conceptions of the term include diasporic populations. Global capitalism also renders Gabriel's definition of "non-alignment" with capitalist

⁴⁷ Gabriel includes one film by Haile Gerima, an Ethiopian film director who migrated to the U.S. in 1967. Although *Harvest: 3000 Years* was produced during Gerima's years at UCLA, Gabriel treats it as an Ethiopian film.

or communist power blocks obsolete.⁴⁸ Including minority populations of First World countries in the Third World framework inevitably involves rethinking the binary relationship of Third Cinema to First and Second Cinema.

Claims that Third Cinema should not be assimilable within First or Second Cinema are premised on the marginality of the Third World. While the flows of Western culture to the Third World remain more dominant than the reverse, the introduction of the African diaspora into the equation of Third Cinema collapses the rigid barriers between the three “worlds” and blurs the boundary between marginality and inclusion. African-Americans remain politically and economically peripheral in the U.S. but their culture tends to circulate globally.⁴⁹ Kobena Mercer similarly notes that black British artists and filmmakers suffer from “hypervisibility” as well as marginalization, as national media venues provide opportunities for multicultural expression while the expression of cultural difference is limited in the political arena.⁵⁰ Further, many independent filmmakers in the diaspora have found funding and distribution outlets for their work through traditional circuits that imbricate them within First or Second Cinema.

Mike Wayne suggests that even classic Third Cinema films like *The Battle of Algiers* are in fact a combination of First, Second and Third Cinema elements.⁵¹ Similarly, Gabriel neglects to state explicitly that his final stage constitutes Third Cinema, and although this point is easily inferred, his tendency to conflate terms makes it difficult to discern where the lines are drawn between the “Third World film” of the first two stages and the “Third Cinema” of the final stage. His attempt to clarify his argument in the 1985 essay “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films”

⁴⁸ Gabriel, *Third Cinema*, 121 n1.

⁴⁹ Stam 285-86.

⁵⁰ Kobena Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness," *Third Text* 49 (Winter 1999-2000), 56.

⁵¹ Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001), 14.

does little to disentangle the terms. His classification of Sembene's *Xala* as between stages II and III, for example, belies his dedication of nine pages to the film in his book on Third Cinema.⁵² Ironically, many Third Cinema filmmakers like Glauber Rocha were directly influenced by European film movements or received their training in the West, like Sembene.⁵³ Solanas and Getino even concede that Third Cinema has been produced in the U.S. by Newsreel journalists.⁵⁴

The fluidity of the phases or categories of cinema in Third Cinema discourse is exacerbated by the diaspora's proximity to and saturation in First World cinema. Recognizing the hybridity of diasporic cultures also means acknowledging the "irreversible influence" of Euro-American culture and cinema on diaspora filmmakers. Stuart Hall proposes that this hybridity constitutes the diaspora's "uniqueness" because filmmakers must engage in a contradictory and complex dialogue with the dominant cinemas of the West.⁵⁵ Influenced by Third Cinema and Euro-American cinema, African diaspora filmmakers often incorporate elements from both traditions into their films, making it difficult to classify them as exclusively First, Second or Third Cinema. Further, the unevenness of cultural flows may make it difficult for diasporic filmmakers to be familiar with Third Cinema, and while their films may address political themes, they may use aesthetic strategies of First Cinema that obscure an oppositional stance.

Acknowledging that Third Cinema cannot be easily separated from First and Second Cinema also requires rethinking Gabriel's claims that Western film criticism, psychoanalytic and cine-structuralist, cannot be applied to Third Cinema. Femi Shaka

⁵² Teshome Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 35.

⁵³ Stam 96; Josef Gugler, *African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 126.

⁵⁴ Solanas and Getino 1.

⁵⁵ Hall, "Cultural Identity," 236, 243.

cautions that Gabriel's complete rejection of psychoanalytic criticism does not consider the social construction of conscious and subconscious drives that may be expressed in oppositional films and explained through psychoanalysis.⁵⁶ In addition, if a film communicates Third Cinema content through First Cinema's formalist norms, critics may need to utilize Western film criticism in order to expose the film's political intent.

Debating the Transparency of Political Intent

Gabriel's assertion that cine-structuralist film criticism need not be applied to Third Cinema because its political meaning is apparent prompts Shaka to chide him for undervaluing of the role of criticism.⁵⁷ Gabriel assumes that because Third Cinema "takes up an explicit position with respect to an ideological or social topic," this message is transmitted to "the masses" without mediation.⁵⁸ The same idealism can be found in the writing of Espinosa, who argues that "imperfect cinema" does not require the "anachronistic" services of critics, mediators and intermediaries.⁵⁹ While Solanas and Getino also insist that traditional theoretical and critical methods should not be applied to Third Cinema, they are more careful in that they caution against "neopopulism" that simplifies a film's political meaning to the point that it is ineffective for anti-imperialist struggle. Nevertheless, they encourage the use of militant and didactic film that "documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens *the truth of a situation*."⁶⁰ The idealistic view of the transparency of Third Cinema can ironically situate spectators in the same fashion as the hegemonic dominant cinemas – as passive receivers of political ideology, only in this instance an explicit ideology.

⁵⁶ Shaka 94.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88-90.

⁵⁸ Gabriel, *Third Cinema*, 7.

⁵⁹ Espinosa 82.

⁶⁰ Solanas and Getino 6.

The recognition of the plurality of identities within the diaspora, however, necessitates differentiation of “the masses” into smaller groups with intersecting political interests. Because spectators do not always have a common political goal, they also approach films with different modes of reading that confuse a director’s political intent. The role of critic and spectator become fused so that meaning is created by the viewer. While this is the outcome Third Cinema intends, its insistence upon the singularity of its audience’s reception to a film’s political message may thwart its empowerment of the spectator.

The desire for immediate and unmediated transmission of a clear political message, along with the influence of Italian theorists, drives Third Cinema’s demand for realist narrative styles such as documentary.⁶¹ The aim, as Espinosa notes, is also to eradicate the influence of the director on the work so that the cinematographic representation is directly aligned with what it represents.⁶² All cinema betrays (often in complex ways) cultural relativity, so the one-to-one correspondence drawn between reality and its representation is invalid. Because their decisions determine what audiences see on the screen, directors and other intermediaries such as producers and editors input their own biases into the work. Further, realist cinema must always utilize socially constructed conventions of realism in order to be perceived as real by spectators. The director’s biases and the audience’s expectations dictate whether the representation can be received as real, and therefore realist films are suffused on both ends with mediations that negate their ability to accurately reproduce reality.

For diasporic (and many Third Cinema) directors, the conventions of realism are pulled from the variety of sources, including Euro-American artistic traditions, that may be utilized to articulate opposition. The genres of African American films

⁶¹ Stam 73.

⁶² Espinosa 26.

referred to as “Blaxploitation” (1970s) and “hood” films (1990s), for instance, often depict black men, in stereotypical fashion, as criminals as a means of critiquing the social and economic oppression imposed upon them by racism and discrimination. At the same time, these confined and confining representations lend authenticity to films about African Americans, particularly those that do not mount an explicit political critique. These conventions of realism simultaneously subvert and reinscribe colonial ways of understanding minority populations. They also obscure alternate expressive modes that can be equally useful for oppositional cinema, reducing filmmakers and the medium to mere agents of mimesis.

With his inclusion of political films that are not necessarily intended to incite revolution, Gabriel not only rescued Third Cinema from certain death but also exposed the vulnerability of Third Cinema’s radical political intervention. In a special section dedicated to revolutionary films, Gabriel argues that a film does not have to create a revolution in order to be revolutionary.

If a film shown in its own cultural and historical context incites, sparks and kindles a ray of hope for a better society and raises revolutionary consciousness (even a questioning attitude) within its society, its revolutionary validity cannot be denied....The important thing is that a ‘revolutionary film’ is quite a different thing in a different cultural setting.⁶³

Gabriel’s liberal definition of revolutionary film opens Third Cinema to a wide range of non-militant political expression. His claim that the cultural setting determines what is revolutionary, which to some extent valorizes the national specificity of Third Cinema, nevertheless weakens Third Cinema’s “unassimilability” to First or Second

⁶³ Gabriel, *Third Cinema*, 38.

Cinema. In what Arif Dirlik calls a “postrevolutionary” era,⁶⁴ a “revolutionary” film might very well be one that utilizes fantasy and spectacle in order to challenge the limits of “realist” representations of black cultures. For diasporic filmmakers, breaking with the traditions of First and Third Cinema and the burden of representation they place upon directors may be the most revolutionary work of all.

Renegotiating Resistance

The task of translating Third Cinema into contemporary contexts requires a renegotiation of the terms of resistance. In my use of the term “negotiate,” I am following Said in arguing that models of cinematic resistance continue to be contingent on colonial discourse even as they attempt to displace it. The grounds on which that struggle takes place, however, shift with time and in different cultural contexts. The terms of resistance outlined in Third Cinema theory must be renegotiated not only in response to evolving imperialist structures but also in acknowledgment of internal debates over the most effective means of challenging oppression without replicating it.

Through the textual and formal analysis of three films from the Caribbean, Britain and the U.S., this thesis identifies and explores the discontinuities between Third Cinema theory and contemporary African diaspora film. The concept of film as text emphasizes that films are constructs and not simply mimetic imitations of reality. Textual analysis allows for consideration of the way “writers,” or directors and producers of films, and “readers,” or spectators, impact a film’s oppositionality.⁶⁵ Because film cannot be simply reduced to a literary text, formal analysis, which

⁶⁴ Arif Dirlik, "Postcolonial or Postrevolutionary? The Problem of History in Postcolonial Criticism" in *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 163-185.

⁶⁵ Stam 186.

focuses on elements such as lighting, sound, *mise-en-scene* and cinematography, fills in the gaps of textual analysis and acknowledges the sensory aspects of resistant cinema. Both analyses require repeated critical viewing and close reading of the films with special emphasis on the interplay between narrative and aesthetics. The broad geographical scope of this research also necessitates the use of film historiography, with national and regional specificity, in order to ascertain the distinct contribution of each film to the larger concerns of the diasporic turn.

In Chapter One, titled “Liberating Icons: Re-membering Lumumba in Exile,” I consider *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1992), a documentary on Patrice Lumumba by Haitian director Raoul Peck, as a case study to reflect on African diaspora filmmaking as a transnational practice. As a part of a Caribbean cinema of “exiles,”⁶⁶ the film resurrects Lumumba through the performance of exilic cultural signifiers that critique nationalism and liberate Lumumba from repression within the official histories of the Congo and Belgium. Peck’s incorporation of his personal reflections on Lumumba’s life and legacy also serve as a model for diasporic transnationality.

Chapter Two, “Diaspora as Desire in *Looking for Langston*,” examines British filmmaker Isaac Julien’s inventive meditation on black gay subjectivity during the Harlem Renaissance. The film constructs a “queer diaspora” through transnational circuits in order to valorize queer identity as viable for the construction of a political community and interrogate heteronormative histories of black culture. Julien also taps into the First Cinema notion of cinematic pleasure to overturn stereotypical representations of black males and at the same time reclaims pleasure for black spectators.

⁶⁶ Mbye Cham, "Introduction: Shape and Shaping of Caribbean Cinema" in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1992), 9.

In Chapter Three, “The Gift of Sight: Destabilizing Patriarchy and Representation in *Eve’s Bayou*,” I analyze Kasi Lemmons’s 1997 film about the “Oedipal” drama of a black middle-class family in Louisiana. I argue that critics and spectators must engage the film’s psychoanalytic overtones to understand its critique of intra-racial patriarchy. A radical rereading of the film challenges the dichotomy between political and individual resistance that subordinates women’s resistance to the domestic sphere. A popular narrative film in the Hollywood style, *Eve’s Bayou* also unsettles the binary between First and Third Cinema aesthetics.

In the Conclusion, I return to the question of resistance and inquire whether Third Cinema discourse can incorporate the concerns of African diaspora films without losing its radical fervor. Addressing the modern/postmodern debate implicit in this thesis, I place Third Cinema, Deleuze’s concept of modern cinema, and my notion of the diasporic turn in conversation to consider whether and how these discourses translate into actual resistance. I argue that contemporary African diaspora filmmaking is an example of “postmodern modern” cinema that is self-reflexive but selectively employs modernist concepts for the purposes of resistance. To close the chapter, I discuss how each of the films analyzed in this thesis have important psychological, cultural and discursive repercussions that qualify as resistance.

CHAPTER ONE

LIBERATING ICONS: RE-MEMBERING LUMUMBA IN EXILE

The concept of exile traditionally has been invoked in nationalist discourses as a condition of alienation to be rectified through the development of national or racial consciousness. The discursive shift within postcolonial theory towards a deconstruction of nationalism has produced a reconceptualization of exile which recognizes the potential of the diasporic condition. Rather than accepting *a priori* the homeland as a site of self-restoration to which one must return, contemporary diasporic filmmakers complicate the idea of return and explore the opportunities for resistance from within a diasporic framework. Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* is exemplary of the diasporic turn in this regard as it exploits the trope of exile in order to expose the cultural, temporal and ideological discontinuities involved in remembering Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Congo who was assassinated within a year of independence. By refiguring Lumumba in exile, the film eradicates the geographical and conceptual boundaries that delimit Lumumba's significance for a new generation.

Exile, Exîles, Ex-Isle – Toward a Definition of Caribbean Cinema

The Caribbean is unquestionably the heart of the African diaspora, distinct as the site of the convergence of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the various populations they ensnared, including indigenous Amerindians, enslaved Africans, indentured servants from Asia and profit-seeking Europeans. As such, the Caribbean remains a place of exile for a majority of its inhabitants, who continue to identify with a homeland across the Atlantic. The sense of the Caribbean as an exilic domain is heightened by the hybridity of its populations and cultural manifestations, obscuring

notions of fixed origins and stable identities. Massive migrations, voluntary or coerced, by Caribbean people to other locations within the African diaspora, especially Europe and the U.S., further complicate the discourse around exile which is often employed to characterize the Caribbean's perplexing heterogeneity.

Just as the condition of exile within postcolonial theory functions as a liminal space from which diasporic subjects begin to construct alternative identities, the trope of exile figures prominently in Caribbean political thought and cultural production as a means by which intellectuals and artists negotiate the vast complexity of the region. Geographical exile from Africa has been a common theme of Caribbean political and intellectual currents including Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, Négritude, the Pan-African Congresses organized by H. Sylvester Williams and George Padmore of Trinidad, and Rastafarianism. Seminal Caribbean texts such as Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) were inspired by the authors' experiences of migration to Europe and return to the Caribbean. In these instances the articulation of exile has served as a starting point from which Caribbean intellectuals reestablish the political and cultural bonds severed through the displacement of the slave trade.

Caribbean cinema responds to the same experiences of exile, as revealed by Mbye Cham's definition of Caribbean cinema as "'exîles' – from the islands/of people from the islands" and "a cinema of 'exiles' – by people from the islands living in exile."⁶⁷ As a cinema "exîles," Caribbean cinema produced by people permanently exiled from Africa struggles to assert its legitimacy in an industry dominated by foreign (primarily Hollywood) films. While many films were made in and about the Caribbean before the 1970s, they were not produced by Afro-Caribbean people and were received as foreign. Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1972) is generally

⁶⁷ Cham, 9.

considered the beginning of indigenous film production in the Afro-Caribbean and is hailed by critics as the first “authentically Caribbean” film because “everything about [it] was unapologetically Jamaican.”⁶⁸ Based on a true story, the film provides a view of the Jamaican working class through the main character Ivan Martin, an aspiring reggae musician and drug dealer who kills police officers during a raid and becomes a legend after his death.

Anita (1980), directed by Haitian Rassoul Labuchin, addressed the issue of *restavek* servitude in which young rural children are forced to work for wealthy families in urban areas of the country. As the first Haitian film to deal with political issues, it aided in launching a militant Haitian film genre that “[appropriated] the wealth of [Haiti’s] cultural heritage to use film as a weapon to educate and mobilize people around major national issues.”⁶⁹ Perhaps the best known Caribbean film is Euzhan Palcy’s *Rue Cases-Nègres/Sugar Cane Alley* (1983), based on the novel of the same name by Joseph Zobel. The film tells the story of Jose, whose grandmother encourages him to obtain an education as a means of escaping the harsh realities of Martinique’s sugar plantations and shantytowns. The film received international acclaim for its powerful and universal rite-of-passage narrative and simple but rich visual style, but it also resonated with Antillean audiences, for whom “the usual foreignness [of films about the Caribbean] is conspicuously absent.”⁷⁰

Cham considers Caribbean cinema a cinema of “exiles” because migration from the Caribbean to Europe and the U.S. has led to the formation of a Caribbean diaspora where many films are created. *Sugar Cane Alley* propelled Palcy into the international arena, and her second film, *A Dry White Season* (1989), was produced by

⁶⁸ Keith Q. Warner, “Film, Literature, and Identity in the Caribbean” in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993), 52-53.

⁶⁹ Michäelle Lafontant-Médard, “A Thematic Analysis of Rassoul Labuchin’s *Anita*” in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993), 60.

⁷⁰ Warner 57.

a Hollywood studio, starred American actors Marlon Brando and Donald Sutherland, and dealt with South African apartheid. Similarly, Haitian director Raoul Peck received his film training in Berlin and has worked out of the Dominican Republic, Germany, Paris and New York.⁷¹ Peck emerged as a notable Caribbean filmmaker with the release of *Haitian Corner* (1998), a fictional film in which an exiled Haitian reflects on his experiences under dictatorship. The film was well-received within and outside the Caribbean and was labeled by Rassoul Labuchin as “the best ever made by a Haitian.”⁷² Like Palcy, Peck’s later films also branch out beyond the Caribbean. *Lumumba* (2001) traces the rise to power and assassination of the Congo’s first Prime Minister, while *Sometimes in April* (2005) tells the story of two brothers on different sides of the 1994 Rwandan conflict.

Stuart Hall’s framing of Caribbean cinema in terms of the three competing “presences” – African, European and Caribbean – parallels Cham’s definition. Africa, the “unspoken unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture,” permeates Caribbean cinema from its African-inspired depictions of Caribbean culture and presentation of African subject matter to the presence of African filmmakers who have made the Caribbean their subject or location, such as Haile Gerima and Med Hondo. The European presence finds its way into Caribbean cinema not only through Caribbean filmmakers working out of European metropolises because of voluntary migration or forced exile but also in the sense of the “endlessly speaking” discourse of colonialism, violence, ethnographic spectacle and tourist exoticism to which Caribbean filmmakers must respond. The Caribbean or “New World” presence signifies the process through which the African and European influences become fused into a Caribbean identity. For Hall, Caribbean cinema’s “preoccupation with movement and migration” is one of

⁷¹ Raoul Peck and Clyde Taylor, "Autopsy of Terror," *Transition* 69 (1996), 242.

⁷² Cham 29.

its “defining themes and is destined to cross the narrative of every film script or cinematic image.”⁷³

Michael Dash locates this same current in Caribbean literature, employing the term “ex-isle” to represent the state in which the Caribbean’s “disconcerting elusiveness” drowns out subjectivity. To solve this dilemma, Caribbean writers, beginning with Césaire, have attempted to reconstruct Caribbean subjectivity by embracing the “inarticulacy” of the islands. In reference to Césaire’s *Une Tempest*, Dash notes that in Ariel, the only character not “in a state of ‘ex-isle,’” Césaire “[conceives] of the deconstructed subject, the abolition of all dualisms and the poetic expression of the unspeakable.”⁷⁴ Dash also extrapolates a system of corporeal imagery in Caribbean literature centered on the amputation of the body in “ex-isle” and its reconstitution upon return.

Taking Césaire and the work of other Caribbean intellectuals a step further, the diasporic turn in contemporary Caribbean cinema challenges the possibility of remembering the amputated exiled body and instead embraces the alternative identities that can materialize from that condition. Unlike Fanon’s ensnared subject in *Black Skin, White Masks* who struggles to “put [the] machinery” of his shattered identity “back together again,”⁷⁵ contemporary filmmakers question whether the revision of identity created by the processes of exile and migration actually constitutes an amputation. Does the exiled subject need to be re-membered if one defines identity as a construction rather than a given reality? Even so, is the excision repairable, and if not, what are the possibilities of resistance for the displaced subject? The diasporic turn of which many Caribbean films are an apt example poses these questions as a

⁷³ Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 229-233.

⁷⁴ Michael Dash, “In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature,” *Kunapipi* XI, no. 1 (1989), 20.

⁷⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 138.

means of negotiating Caribbean identity beyond the nationalist rhetoric of Third Cinema.

This negotiation of identity involves an inevitable (re)turn to a past comprised from collective memory and official history and distorted on both sides. Collective memory in the diaspora has been severed by forced migration to the New World, repression of narratives as a means of maintaining the uneven power dynamics of slavery and colonialism, and the willful exclusion of counter narratives from national histories. Similarly, the thrust towards national independence and its subsequent dismantling through neocolonialism has created another “collapse of memory.”⁷⁶ The unfulfilled hope of liberation produces nostalgia for a time instantaneous with independence and its fallen heroes whose stories become *lieux de memoire* that “without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep...away.”⁷⁷ This desire to maintain a sense of cohesive history despite exile explains the tendency of diasporic filmmakers to plumb historic archives to make meaning of the present.

The danger lies in the potential of these counter narratives created around sites of memory to become as rigid as the dominant histories they oppose, and diasporic filmmakers must query the hegemonic narratives of colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric to carve new modes of resistance. By acknowledging the contradictory narratives around sites of memory such as iconic figures, Caribbean artists also begin to accept the fissures of identity produced by competing and oppositional narratives. Allowing the audience to reread history and “start the act of perceiving all over again,”⁷⁸ African diaspora films allow contemporary diasporic subjects to renegotiate their

⁷⁶ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*" in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 284-85.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁷⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 42.

cultural and political identities by fashioning their own discourses that are drawn from, but may diverge from, other theories.

Of Haitian director Raoul Peck's films, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*⁷⁹ best embodies the three presences that shape Caribbean identity. Although the documentary traces the rise to power and assassination, as well as the "controversial character," of Lumumba between 1960 and 1961, the film's other themes are "the role of the media" and Peck's own "personal history," making it a decided mix of African, European and Caribbean subject matter.⁸⁰ *Lumumba* utilizes historic photographs and newsreel footage from the Congo alongside footage shot in Brussels of interviews with Lumumba's former associates and long takes of unidentified Belgians traveling on buses, standing on sidewalks and engaged in other mundane behavior. The documentary's Haitian element comes through Peck himself, as narrator and mediator. After being arrested twice under Haiti's Duvalier regime for inciting strikes among coffee workers, Peck's parents went into exile in 1961 in the Congo, where French-speaking professionals were being recruited in the rebuilding of the newly independent nation.⁸¹ The film includes home video footage of his family while in the Congo and on vacation in Europe, along with voice-over narration from Peck as he deliberates on the meaning of his experiences.

Lumumba utilizes the tropes of exile and return to reconsider Lumumba's legacy and image as hybrid discourses created from an amalgam of African and European narratives. While African-centered discourses present Lumumba visually

⁷⁹ Hereafter referred to as *Lumumba* for the sake of brevity. All references to Peck's 2001 biopic *Lumumba* will include the date of release.

⁸⁰ Thérésè Marie Deffontaines, "Lumumba, Witnessing a 'Prophet'," *Ecrans d'Afrique* 2 (1992), 34.

⁸¹ Georgia Popplewell, "A Vision of His Own," *Caribbean Beat*, March/April 2003, <http://www.meppublishers.com/online/caribbean-beat/archive/index.php?id=cb60-1-72> (accessed Nov. 8, 2006); Anaye Milligan, "Interview: *Lumumba* Redux; Peck Returns to Congo for Epic Bio-Pic," *indieWIRE*, July 3, 2001, http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Peck_Raoul_010703.html (accessed November 5, 2006).

and discursively as a national hero, *Lumumba* exposes the fissures of the nationalist narrative by situating Lumumba as a Zairian exile forbidden to return to his home country. By choosing Brussels as the site of Lumumba's exile, the film addresses how colonial discourses continue to inhibit the manner in which Lumumba is depicted and remembered. Peck's own narrative mediates between the memory of Lumumba as national hero and forgotten martyr to allow a new generation to make meaning of Lumumba's legacy beyond these dubitable extremes. At once a film about the Congo, Belgium and Haiti, *Lumumba* destroys the myths of unitary origins, discrete national cultures and recoverable coherent identities that the diasporic condition profusely belies.

Decentering Lumumba as a National Hero

Lumumba begins with the symbolic resurrection of Lumumba by reclaiming Brussels as a space for him to "haunt." Peck opens the ceremony with the recital of the opening lines of "Du côté du Katanga," a poem written by former Prime Minister of the Congo Henri Lopes about "the giant" Lumumba who "fell" in Katanga. In voiceover narration, Peck asks the unidentified Belgian travelers in the film's opening shots: "Should the prophet be brought back to life again? Should he be given the floor one last time? Or should the final traces of his memory disappear with the snow?" Peck's questions are also directed to the viewer, who has only a moment to consider before Peck decides that Lumumba should inhabit the bleak setting. A close-up on a rain puddle visually signifies the water that in Lopes' poem "falls from the heavens, from the forehead...from the eyes...flows into the river" and all "cry plaintively where death has the face of a prophet." The subsequent title credits signal the beginning of the film and the haunting.

The decision to search for “signs of the prophet” in Brussels instead of Congo (former Zaire) raises immediate questions which Peck also asks: “And why here in Brussels, and not elsewhere? ... Won’t the marshal of Zaire let him return home either?” In a scene in the airport, Peck and his crew choose not to board a plane to Zaire because they fear reprisal from the Secret Service which has expressed “interest” in the project. Considering the use of hand-held shots throughout the film and the “disembodied feel” they give the viewer, one can conclude that Lumumba possesses the camera and like Peck is exiled from Zaire.⁸² More than merely geographical, Lumumba’s exile from his native country also exposes the incommensurability of Lumumba’s legacy within nationalist discourses and the agenda of Zaire’s long-time dictator Joseph Mobutu, inevitably decentering the national narrative by contesting whether Lumumba can be remembered as a national hero.

The assassination of Patrice Lumumba within a year of his election as Prime Minister marked “Africa’s first great crisis.”⁸³ Quickly identified as an adversary to the West after delivering a defiant speech at the June 30th Independence Ceremony, Lumumba was betrayed on all sides. Within days of the announcement of independence chaos ensued, including a revolt by Congolese soldiers, the deployment of Belgian and UN troops, and the secession of the province of Katanga from the national government. In September, Congolese President Kasa-Vubu attempted to dismiss Lumumba as Prime Minister, and army Colonel Joseph Mobutu took advantage of the situation by neutralizing both politicians with support from international sources. While Lumumba was under house arrest, an intricate assassination plot that involved the Belgian and U.S. governments as well as the

⁸² Jeanne Garane, "Orality in the City: Mweze Ngangura's *La Vie Est Belle* and Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: La Mort Du Prophete*," *L'Esprit Createur* XLI, no. 3 (Fall 2001, 2001), 158.

⁸³ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

United Nations began to take shape. Lumumba escaped in late November, only to be captured days later, imprisoned and finally assassinated with close associates Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito on January 17, 1961. Lumumba's assassination and the subsequent establishment of a puppet dictatorial regime to protect Western interests set a precedent for neocolonialism and altered the course of African independence, particularly in Southern Africa, for decades to come.⁸⁴

Despite a massive campaign launched in Zaire and the West to suppress the details of Lumumba's assassination and purge him from collective memory, Lumumba continued to be heralded as an icon of Congolese and African liberation throughout the Third World. Inside Zaire, Lumumba came to be regarded as a national hero in opposition to Mobutu after the dictator first appropriated Lumumba's image to consolidate his position and then "reduced Lumumba to nothing...his memory banished from political life and his image from public space."⁸⁵ Buildings dedicated to Lumumba were never built, access to the Brouwez house where Lumumba was tortured and commemoration of his assassination were prohibited, songs and books about Lumumba were censored, and factions loyal to Lumumba were persecuted and exiled from the country. In response to this suppression, Lumumba came to be seen as "the father of independence, the independence that Mobutu had confiscated."⁸⁶ In popular paintings, through which collective memory is mediated, Lumumba became "a locus" around whom artists launched critiques of present conditions and expressed an alternative national consciousness.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Lawrence B. Ekpebu, *Zaire and the African Revolution* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1989), 11.; Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Fenby (New York: Verso, 2001), xxv.

⁸⁵ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga: Painters, Audiences, Buyers, and Sociopolitical Contexts" in *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1999), 26.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁷ Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting", 27; Mary N. Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, "Anticipation and Longing: Congolese Culture Heroes Past, Present, and Future" in *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1999), 96.

Tshibumba Kanda Matulu's series "The History of Zaire," completed in 1974 during the golden years of Mobutu's dictatorship, serves as a prime example of the reification of Lumumba as a national hero in popular Congolese painting. The series of 102 color acrylic paintings on canvas hinges upon the demarcation of Lumumba as a hero who attempted to unify the nation. The theme of unity that Lumumba's image evokes in the series comes through most vividly in Painting 68, *The Deaths of Lumumba, Mpolo, and Okito*. Above Lumumba's body, the six stars of the unity flag used between 1960 and 1963 are affixed in the sky, while Lumumba's blood flows onto the ground to form the word *unite*. Tshibumba explains that the symbolism of the painting, which includes three crosses in the background, means that "Lumumba was the Lord Jesus of Zaire...Lumumba died for the unity of Zaire."⁸⁸

Some of Tshibumba's paintings appear to revere Mobutu, but a close inspection of the details of each painting and Tshibumba's explanations reveals that Mobutu is depicted as Lumumba's opposite, a proponent of a dangerous brand of national unity that sends the nation into chaos. In Painting 88, *The MPR Makes Lumumba a National Hero*, Tshibumba exposes the hypocrisy of the gesture by depicting a revived Lumumba walking past the Brouwez house with his shirt torn (a sign of humiliation) and his hands bound behind his back. Tshibumba's apocalyptic visions of the future are the series' most conspicuous critiques of Mobutu's administration. The last six paintings predict a society in ruins, the decline of religion, the worship of Mobutu as God, and finally war. The images were inspired by a prophetic vision in which Tshibumba heard two songs, the first a praise song for Mobutu with the lyrics "Let us pray for a hundred years for Mobutu," and then another song about Lumumba with the lines "soki okutani Lumumba: okuloba nini? Which is

⁸⁸ Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1996), 122.

to say, in Swahili: If you were to meet Lumumba now, what would you say?"⁸⁹

Though Tshibumba fears reprisal for his paintings, he accepts the risk and through it "[asserts] that what it will mean to meet Lumumba is the taking of a general responsibility, the possibility of a scandal and a chance, for and in excess of Mobutu."⁹⁰

Like Tshibumba, Peck also accepts the responsibility of challenging Mobutu's narrative of national unity by comparing him with Lumumba. In one example, Peck reads from a letter Lumumba wrote to his wife from prison about the "terrible conditions" of the jail as the camera slowly zooms into a close-up on Lumumba's face in a photo of him under arrest (see Illustration 1). The film cuts to a close-up of a press conference photo of Mobutu and then suddenly zooms out as Peck quotes Mobutu: "Lumumba has three servants. The army is spending 1000 francs a day looking after these prisoners" (see Illustration 2). The juxtaposition of the two photos and accompanying narration exposes Mobutu's lie, in part through camera techniques that encourage identification with Lumumba and creates literal and figurative distance between the audience and Mobutu. In another scene, newsreel footage of Lumumba's arrest features Mobutu coolly observing as soldiers under his command manhandle and beat the prisoner. The paternalistic voice-over of the British commentator places the crime squarely on Mobutu, remarking that the brutal scene "serves to underline once again the conditions prevailing in the Congo."

Another tactic employed by Peck to stress Mobutu's complicity with Lumumba's assassination is the use of narration over photos and footage that subverts the anticipated meaning of each image or clip. A picture of Mobutu with his family is juxtaposed with the narration: "A family, like any other family. No, one cannot read

⁸⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁹⁰ Fred Moten, "Not in Between: Lyric Painting, Visual History and the Postcolonial Future," *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 145.

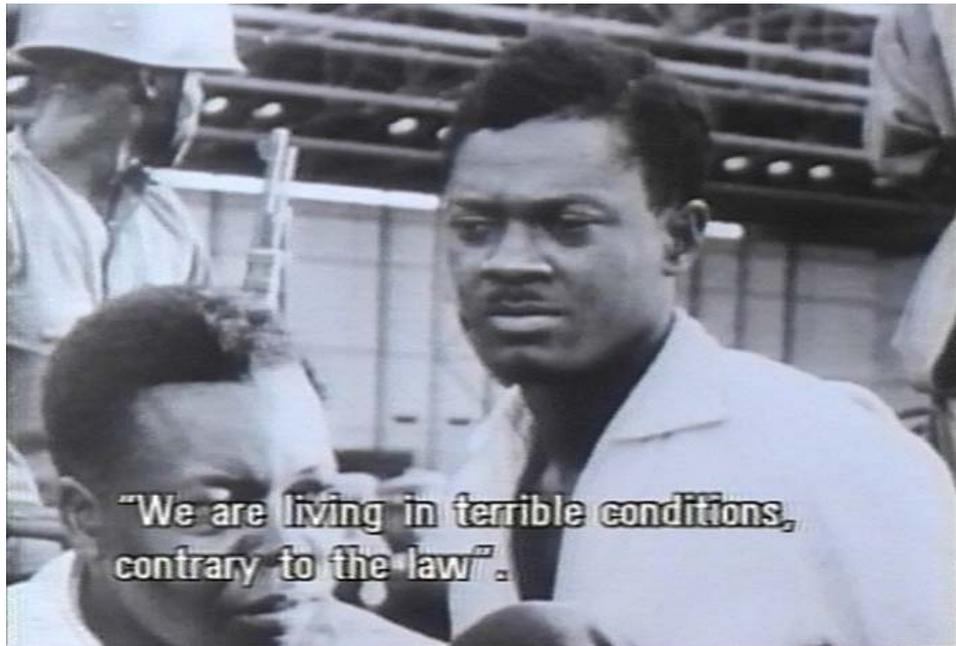


Illustration 1. Peck reads from Lumumba's prison letter. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.



Illustration 2. Mobutu juxtaposed with Lumumba. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

ambition on a face...one day he will elect himself Marshal.” Over a photo of Lumumba and Mobutu standing together, Peck offers: “In spite of what his friends say, Lumumba keeps Mobutu close to him. ‘Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.’ He took the hand and all the rest.” Over close-ups on photos of his mother socializing with diplomats, Peck relates a story his mother told him about typing an order for the Pentecost Hangings, the execution of four leaders from Lumumba’s party “accused of plotting by the Marshal.” A three-second clip of the bodies of Holocaust victims being tossed into a truck is spliced between shots of unidentified Belgians and an empty Belgian street in the next scenes. To this rapid montage Peck explains, “No images exist of this hanging. They are all in my nightmares.” Through this device Mobutu’s crimes are compared to the atrocities of the Holocaust, painting him as the polar opposite of Lumumba, the national hero.

The absence of footage of the Pentecost Hangings constitutes what Peck calls "black holes," or rather, "forbidden...but inoffensive" images that speak to the "blackout" on official information from Zaire.⁹¹ Another black hole occurs when Peck must use paintings of the Brouwez house and the forest where Lumumba was assassinated to accompany an account of Lumumba’s last hours. At another point, Peck deliberately creates a black hole as he wonders over a black screen whether “the Marshal of Zaire will let me film in his country.” By acknowledging these black holes rather than filling them in, Peck “[confronts] the problems of forgetting and willful distortion” that characterized Mobutu's reign.⁹² These black holes are visual symbols of silence that actually "serve as a concentrated appeal to memory" and as Peck notes may be "more corrosive than the images they hide."⁹³

⁹¹ Marks 36.

⁹² David MacDougall, "Films of Memory" in *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-1994*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994), 264.

⁹³ Nora 295.

The act of reviving Lumumba in exile goes further than merely critiquing Mobutu, however, to concede the flaws of African nationalism from the start. At one point in the film, we see a clip of a speech by Mobutu as he grants amnesty to exiled Zairians who “by their speech or by their actions ... have brought the country into danger.” The latter half of the clip comes later in the film, with Mobutu declaring, “If you start again the next day...Then I’ll catch you and throw you back into prison.” On the one hand, the two clips taken together reinforce Mobutu’s dishonesty and help us to understand why Lumumba’s pardon is “worthless.” On the other, it critiques the politics of authoritarian regimes that are far too common in Africa’s post-independence narratives.

In one journalist’s assessment, Mobutu’s accomplishments include unifying a divided nation. Historians have argued that the feeble and quickly mobilized nationalism of several African nations was falling apart even before independence was won, and as soon as the colonial enemies retreated, ethnic and regional divisions resurfaced as the newly independent nations prepared to assume self-sufficiency.⁹⁴ The Congo served as an early stark example of the threat ethnic and regional divisions posed to national goals, and African nationalists considered ethnic identification a “retrograde force” fueled by colonial intervention that ran counter to African nationalism.⁹⁵ Without denying the complicity of the colonial powers in orchestrating internal threats to African nationalism, *Lumumba* also suggests that a certain naivety is to blame for the collapse of national goals.

⁹⁴ Timothy K. Welliver, "Introduction" in *African Nationalism and Independence. Colonialism and Nationalism in Africa*, ed. Timothy K. Welliver, Vol. 3 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), xiv; Toyin Falola, "‘Seek Ye the Political Kingdom’: Nationalism and Nation Building" in *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 115.

⁹⁵ Thandika Mkandawire, "African Intellectuals and Nationalism" in *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 12.

Peck relays the “controversial character” of Lumumba by pointing out his political naivety, which Fanon and Sartre also address in writings shortly after Lumumba’s assassination. While studying a still photo of Lumumba drafting a document, Peck suggests that Lumumba’s appointment as Prime Minister was equivalent to being placed behind the wheel of a speeding car but having never before driven. Peck exclaims, “How wrong can a prophet be!” after relating that Lumumba believed he would be able to rest after attaining the post (see Illustration 3). In another sequence, Peck relates the story his mother told him of Lumumba’s dismissal. A montage of photos of Lumumba appear as Peck criticizes Lumumba for being “too late” in responding to his dismissal by President Kasa-Vubu, resulting in the loss of the army’s support.

In another shot, the camera begins on a close-up of Mobutu in a photo and then zooms out to reveal Lumumba standing beside him, as Peck explains that Lumumba

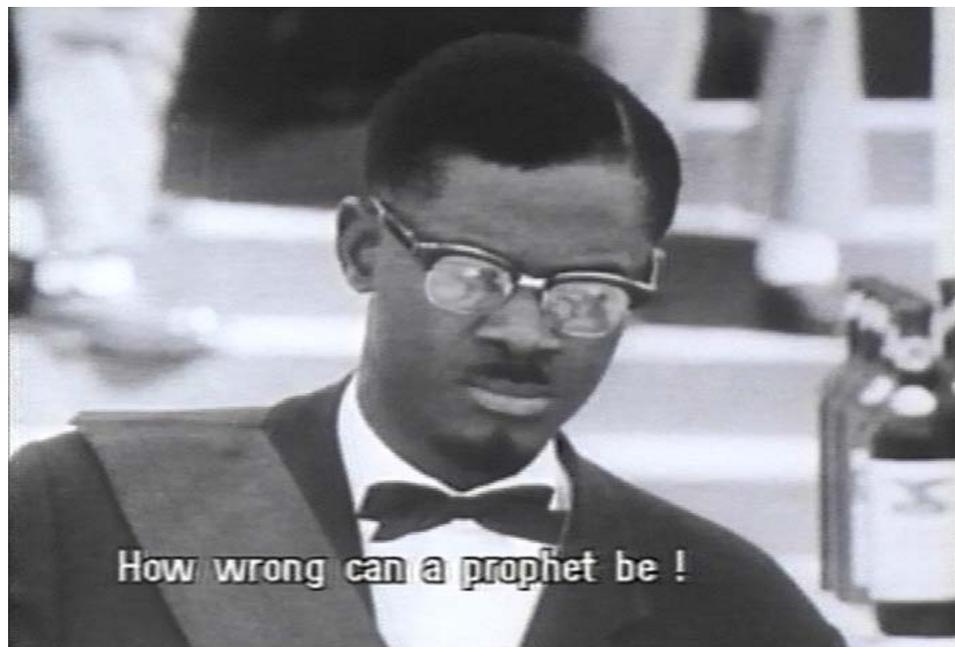


Illustration 3. Lumumba’s political naivety. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

ignored warnings of Mobutu's duplicity and then cryptically comments: "The irony of history. History has no irony. It settles its scores itself." In the next scene one of Lumumba's comrades recalls the "first failed coup d'etat," when Mobutu drunkenly announced at a casual gathering, "I arrest you all in the name of the people," to which Lumumba merely replied, "Go to bed." In the context of the remainder of the sequence, Peck's remark about "the irony of history" can easily be read as an indictment of Lumumba's lack of political sophistication. Like the heroes of Greek tragedies, Lumumba's tragic flaws, which a Belgian journalist tells us in the previous scene include his "passion [which] clouded his intelligence," are as responsible for his downfall as the actions of those around him.

In another scene, the camera travels into a formal party where Lumumba "seeks warmth." As unsuspecting party guests stare curiously into the lens, Peck asks "Why didn't the devil wait. Why didn't he let the situation deteriorate? Later, he could have returned as a saviour in his own country." While the reference to the "devil" may be a play on the propaganda to discredit Lumumba as "a devil,"⁹⁶ Lauten suggests a more accurate translation may be, "Why the devil didn't he wait?"⁹⁷ The question affirms Lumumba's martyrdom by suggesting that he chose to sacrifice himself, but it also satirically points to Mobutu's success in consolidating the country because he "waited," thus underscoring the detriment of Lumumba's political haste.

Peck's aim is not to criticize Lumumba for his inability to unify the nation, especially considering his short term and the manner in which his doctrine was undermined by internal and international parties. Instead, these scenes raise the issue of whether Lumumba could have been a force for unity or would have turned out to be

⁹⁶ Earlier in the film, the camera pans from the top to the bottom of a poster of Lumumba announcing "La mort du Diable."

⁹⁷ Kathryn Marie Lauten, "Ex-Hum(Aniz)e/Re-Hum(Aniz)e: Disturbing Bodies in 'Post-Colonial' Francophone Literature and Film" (1997 Abstract No.: DA9722023, U of Michigan), 145.

a dictator as Mobutu did. The fact that Mobutu is also depicted in the film as a “family man” whose face does not register his ambition suggests that the austere images of Lumumba used in the film may hide other intentions as well. Instead of completely valorizing Lumumba’s ideas, Peck merely argues that Lumumba should have been given the opportunity to put his ideas into practice, even though he concedes that “perhaps [Lumumba] would have made a mistake and the dream would have vanished.”⁹⁸

The documentary underscores the fact that Lumumba has been remembered as a national hero only because of his untimely death. By 1961 Lumumba was already “an international ideological artifact” and even in the Congo popular memory of him was based on “no more than snatches of a speech heard on the radio... a memory of some fragment of a press photo.”⁹⁹ If Lumumba is remembered at all by new generations outside of the Congo, “the only event remembered is the revolting crime: the murder of a defenceless prisoner.”¹⁰⁰ Press photos of Lumumba in wide circulation in published books and on websites maintain such shallow memories; most often Lumumba is depicted as a humiliated prisoner emerging with hands tied behind his back from a plane in Leopoldville or seated in the back of a lorry with other prisoners. Aided by a mass culture industry that reinforces the “oversimplification [and] reduction of ideals to banalized objects of immediate consumption...and to an alienated dehumanized hero cultishness,”¹⁰¹ these representations have come to stand in for the complex life and ideas of Lumumba. Lumumba is paradoxically

⁹⁸ Deffontaines 35.

⁹⁹ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Congolese Memories of Lumumba: Between Cultural Hero and Humanity’s Redeemer” in *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1999), 74.

¹⁰⁰ De Witte, Ludo, 175.

¹⁰¹ Reed, Adolph L., Jr., “Black Particularity Reconsidered” in *Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Glaude, Eddie S., Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 57.

remembered as a national hero in spite of and because of the press photos and footage of him taken from European sources that present him as “defenseless” against attacks from all sides.¹⁰²

The question that arises from Peck’s critique of the nationalist rhetoric which maintains Lumumba’s heroic status is whether or not he can be retrieved from this context as a national hero. While the film brings Lumumba into the present as a stark contrast to the repressive conditions in contemporary Zaire, the fact that Lumumba cannot return betrays the fragility of the myth of Lumumba as Zaire’s savior. In his opening invocation, Peck laments:

A prophet foretells the future. But the future has died with the prophet.

Whatever is said, today his sons and daughters weep without ever having known him. His message has vanished, but his name remains.

Has the prophet’s message vanished because of the success of neo-colonialism or because of the “mistakes in considering, judging and moderating” made by Lumumba, as one journalist asserts? Does the prophet’s name remain because of an oppositional nationalist rhetoric that refuses to allow his memory to die, or has he been silenced by the same nationalism he promoted? Consider the comment from Peck’s interview of a Belgian journalist: “The myths that are built around dead heroes work in Latin America, work everywhere...but up until now not in Africa.” Is Lumumba resurrected in the film as Congo’s nationalist liberator, or is the film a mere elegy for Lumumba that renders him forever dead to Congo and to African nationalism?

These uncomfortable ambivalences between Lumumba as national hero and naïve martyr, between nationalism as a force for remembering Lumumba and as a means of forgetting his message, remain unresolved in the film. I would argue in contradistinction to both positions that *Lumumba* is a call for Congolese to remember

¹⁰² De Witte 175.

that their national hero was but “an ordinary man, a layman,” as Lumumba’s former press attaché Serge Michel commented. Between Lumumba’s moment of glory (independence speech) and ultimate demise (arrest and assassination), Peck interjects alternative views of Lumumba that reveal his humanity above all else. Clips from an interview in which Lumumba relates commonplace biographical information are dispersed throughout the film. Yet even this claim is mitigated by the fact that at the time of its release, *Lumumba* would have never been screened or distributed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo because Mobutu remained in power.

The significance of Lumumba’s exile from Congo is that from a position of national difference and distance Peck can raise these difficult questions. In essence, the resurrected Lumumba is confronted with an identity crisis – even if he could return, would Congo’s national hero feel at home in Zaire? Where is home for Lumumba, who has been betrayed on all sides? Lumumba’s ghastly presence in Brussels forces reconsideration of whether the discourse of nationalism can adequately encapsulate his legacy. Although dedicated to a prominent nationalist, the documentary nevertheless disrupts the coherence of the nation as the appropriate framework through which to remember Lumumba.

Peck’s revival of Lumumba may be intended as a catalyst for change in Congo, as the closing inscription “Pour le Zaire” suggests, but the fact that it must be done in exile by a Haitian filmmaker speaks to a larger community upon which solidarity must be based in order to execute a new vision for the country. By positioning Lumumba in exile outside of (Congo) Zaire, *Lumumba* allows Congolese and others to imagine solutions that transcend national solidarity. It is not simply a matter of remembering the essence of Lumumba’s nationalist rhetoric and putting his ideas into practice; rather, it is the process of reconciling what has happened since Lumumba’s death, the collapse of nationalism, which opens up paths of resistance and change.

Re-presenting Lumumba as a Belgian Artifact

Peck's decision to represent Lumumba in exile in Brussels has practical and conceptual explanations. The film was created for a Belgian television station, co-produced with a Swiss film production company and a French television network, and Peck's inability to travel to Zaire necessitated shooting footage in Brussels. Belgium is also home to a number of Lumumba's former associates and the journalists who documented his short-lived period in office. Peck admits, however, that the prime reason for setting the film in Brussels is that "if one is interested in the history of the Congo, one necessarily has to look there."¹⁰³ Another important connection is Belgium's colonial policy of forbidding Congolese to return to their native country for fear they would tell others about Europe. In the film Peck visits the graves of six Congolese brought to Belgium for the 1897 World Exhibition who were forced to "roam this cold country in a loincloth" and "died of a simple cold."

The Belgian government's attempt to restrain the migration of Congolese subjects as part of the colonial process is challenged in the film through Lumumba's mobility in time and space. Hand-held shots of the scenes in Brussels give the viewer a "disembodied feel" and imply that Lumumba has not only possessed the capital but also the camera.¹⁰⁴ Is Peck roaming the streets of Brussels with a camera, searching for "signs of the prophet," or is Lumumba seeking his missing body? Peck's camera mediates between the living and the dead, allowing Lumumba to participate in the interview of Belgian journalists and visit the airport, Royal Museum for Central Africa in Turvuren and a formal cocktail party. Two scenes – at the airport, where the camera moves in opposition to the flow of passengers, and during a point-of-view shot

¹⁰³ Deffontaines 35.

¹⁰⁴ Garane 158.

from a traveling Brussels train – exhibit Lumumba’s spatial and temporal mobility as he haunts the metropole thirty years after his death.¹⁰⁵ I would argue that slow zooms that close in on Lumumba's face and eyes and quick pull back shots from old photographs before cuts to the present operate in the same manner, moving the film from the past to the present in the prophet’s “endless voyage.”

Lumumba’s mobility between past and present calls attention to the continuities between Belgium’s colonial past and the dreary nonchalance of the present. Peck juxtaposes photographs or footage from one period with images from another, see-sawing back and forth between the colonial past, the independence period and present-day Belgium to augment the critique. In one of many examples, Peck relays another of his mother’s stories about the rampant deaths of Congolese laborers who removed raw materials and built railroads for the Belgian colonists. Later, over the point-of-view shot from a Brussels train, Peck completes the link between past and present as he muses (and invites the viewer to consider), "Why do these images keep coming back to me? What have they to do with Patrice Lumumba? with a few million dead, with the uranium of the Congo, with an old greedy king?...And if there had been no uranium to build the bomb for Hiroshima?" The montage establishes clear links between colonial plundering and the large-scale atrocities that occurred over time around the world.

While the nonchalance of the Belgian travelers only intimates their willful forgetting of Lumumba, the “lost” or “deleted” image of Lumumba from the independence ceremony directly implicates the Belgian media in systematically eradicating him from collective memory in Belgium and abroad. In perhaps the film’s most profound scene, we watch and listen to the king deliver a predictable message: Belgium has "granted" independence to the Congo, and the new government should

¹⁰⁵ Lauten 453.

keep colonial systems in place if they "cannot do better." Lumumba's speech follows, and he immediately challenges the king by suggesting the Congolese have "fought without respite" for independence. The film cuts to an interview with a former Belgian officer in the Force Publique, who explains that Lumumba's first words indicated that "something was wrong...something here has nothing to do with what we had hoped to hear." Then Peck announces that the subsequent images "have been lost...the voice still remains," and we only hear Lumumba, over a black screen, speak of the atrocities of colonialism, including the "ironies, insults...beatings, morning, noon and night" the Congolese endured "because we were negroes" (see Illustration 4). The suspicious loss of footage at the point when Lumumba speaks of colonial violence poignantly foreshadows his subsequent assassination and also displays the "corruption" of European sources of information on Lumumba.¹⁰⁶

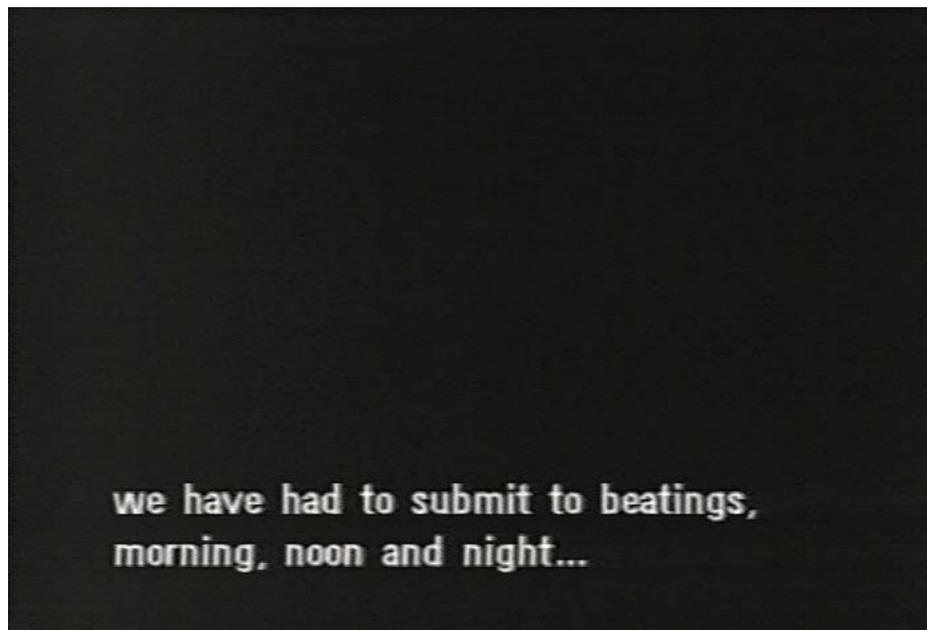


Illustration 4. The "lost" footage of Lumumba's independence speech. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

¹⁰⁶ Marks 36.

Two additional scenes of the film stand out as critiques of the distortion of Lumumba's image by Western media. The British newsreel footage of Lumumba's arrest features upbeat fanfare music and the authoritative voice of a British commentator, who characterizes the scenes as follows:

The whole affair, *of course*, serves to underline once again the conditions prevailing in the Congo. It's not enough to arrest a man; he must apparently be beaten up as well, then put him on trial later, no doubt. (emphasis added)

While the shot of Mobutu watching his soldiers abusing Lumumba confirms the commentator's assessment, his assessment of the scene cannot be taken at face value because of its paternalistic overtones. Even the celebratory nature of the music, which contrasts sharply with images of Lumumba being violently restrained and beaten, betray delight at Lumumba's capture even as the commentator condemns the Congolese for their inhumane behavior. In another scene, a poster of Lumumba that announces "La mort du Diable," or "the death of the devil," fills the screen, reminding the audience that the opinion of Western journalists interviewed or heard in the film are not be completely reliable.¹⁰⁷

In another integral scene before the first interview with a Belgian journalist, Peck ruminates over a photograph of a press conference in which the journalists surrounding Lumumba appear disinterested, there by coincidence or force, or worse yet, part of a "Flemish painting" of a "farewell scene." The camera zooms in on Lumumba as Peck concludes, "Perhaps [the journalists] are just actors, film extras. A director has told them: 'Look objective!' The director said: 'Action!'" The film cuts to a clapboard and Peck is seated opposite a journalist from the Belgian News Agency.

¹⁰⁷ As aforementioned, during the interview in question, a Belgian journalist relates that Lumumba's "passion" led to his downfall. The poster of the subsequent shot brings his analysis (and perhaps mine) into question, but the montage only reinforces my argument that the film raises ambivalences about the character of Lumumba that remain unresolved.

Peck continues, "...and the interview begins," before the journalist begins his *act*, explaining that "...We have a tradition of freedom of information." This elaborate but brilliant sequence emphasizes the ongoing cover-up of Lumumba's assassination by Western media.

Lumumba also criticizes the Western media for continuing to control the dissemination of images of Lumumba and Zaire. Peck complains in the film that the British Movietone News charged him \$3,000 a minute for the newsreel footage. Noting that "a Congolese earns \$150 a year," Peck complains that "memories of a murder are expensive." When money ran low during the film's production, a German network offered to help only if Peck could get footage from the Zaire. Peck addresses this in the film through footage of him and his crew leaving the airport because of a cryptic message they have received from the Zairian Secret Service. Highlighting the television producer's concern with the sensationalism of footage shot in Zaire under Mobutu's declining and increasingly violent dictatorship, Peck repeats the producer's instructions, "We need images of Zaire. That's what the viewer wants. The rest doesn't matter."

The scenes from the Royal Museum serve as another moment in which Peck interrogates the production and dissemination of Congolese images by Europeans. Unable to "represent Africa 'live,'" Peck turns to African exhibits from the Tervuren museum to determine if they can provide a better image of Lumumba or his home.¹⁰⁸ As "Independence Cha Cha," a 1960 song by the Congolese group African Jazz, plays in the background, we see a guarded entrance of the museum that houses "the greatest collection of Congolese artifacts, numerically, ethnographically and artistically."¹⁰⁹ The camera (perhaps Lumumba) moves at a dizzying pace on a dolly one or two feet

¹⁰⁸ Marks 44.

¹⁰⁹ Jared Banks, "Africa and the Archive: Literature, Identity, and the Postcolonial" (Diss., U. of Wisconsin - Madison), 31.

above the ground through a well-lit exhibition space featuring taxidermic animals of the Congo, searching for signs of life (see Illustration 5). The disorienting scene is accompanied by Peck's voiceover:

Sometimes you think you can hold things together. Sometimes they escape us. What is there left to say about a 30 year old murder? There are memories that are better left forgotten. For the executioner as well as for the victim. And then the assassin is not often whom we thought. There are many ways of killing someone.

The first two sentences refer back to a prior scene, as Peck reflects on Lumumba's inability to hold the country together. But they may also point to the inability of the museum to capture, represent or contain Lumumba or the Congo within its "cryptic archive."¹¹⁰

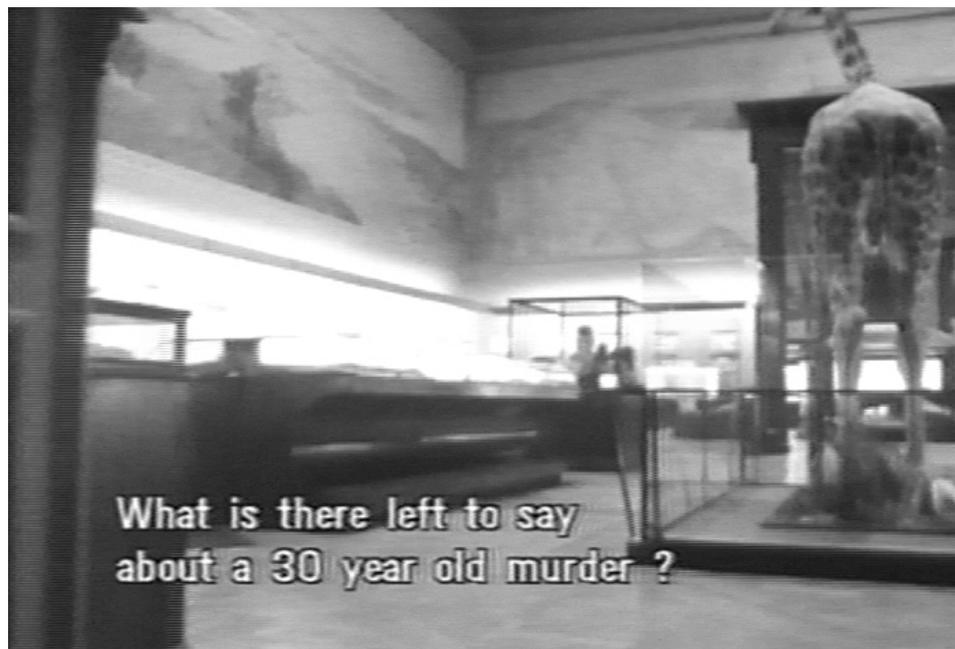


Illustration 5. Exploring the Tervuren museum. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

The museum sequence continues with low angle shots of three life-size statues in the deserted foyer of the museum. The first appears to be Peter Wissaert's *The Leopard Man of Anioto* unveiled, depicting an African man of the cannibalistic Leopard cult preparing to strike another man with the stone raised above his head.¹¹¹ The second sculpture of a bare African woman appears to be Arsène Matton's bronze sculpture *Slavery* of an Arab slaver attacking a defenseless woman.¹¹² The third sculpture of a young child in someone's arms may be part of Matton's sculpture *Belgium Grants Prosperity to the Congo*, a title which justifies the colonial mission and explains the meaning of all three sculptures, which are kept together in the Rotunda and its adjoining spaces near the entrance of the museum.¹¹³

The last sentences of Peck's narration during this sequence suggest that the museum itself is part of the process of killing Lumumba and stultifying his legacy. Given the shots of the sculptures, there is no life to be found in the museum. The sculptures of people of the Congo appear just as bestial as the beasts at the beginning of the sequence. The last two shots of the sequence – of the hand of an unidentifiable sculpture gathering dust and cobwebs and of an unguarded door to the museum – along with the low lighting and deserted space suggest that even these contemptible depictions of life in the Congo garner little interest among visitors. Like Lumumba, these sculptures inspire guilt in the Belgian conscience, and they have been carefully obscured in favor of exhibits that speak to the Congo as an exotic environment. Fittingly, the film cuts to a billboard of Tintin and his dog Milou, comic book

¹¹¹ Banks 40-41; Wendy Ann Morris, "Both Temple and Tomb: Difference, Desire and Death in the Sculptures of the Royal Museum of Central Africa" (MA Thesis, U. of South Africa), 36, etd.unisa.ac.za/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-04132005-085029/unrestricted/Dissertation.PDF (accessed Nov. 8, 2006).

¹¹² Morris 35.

¹¹³ Ibid., 25.

characters that fulfilled the similar purpose of sublimating the violence of Belgian colonialism under the guise of adventure.¹¹⁴

Lumumba inverts the ethnographic spectacle of the museum, turning the camera instead upon Belgium. Images of Belgians in photographs or traveling through the city become the ethnographic artifacts about which Peck manufactures narratives akin to those created about Lumumba. After interviews and footage that illustrate the attempt to discredit Lumumba by labeling him a communist, Peck considers a black and white photograph of Belgian army military officials and black servants. Zooming into each face, Peck imagines that “this one beats his wife, this one too. This one is a strict Christian, but an incorrigible gambler. This one loves music, but loves to get drunk on palm wine” (see Illustration 6). The film cuts to a Belgian man standing on the sidewalk and then another man seen through a bus window. Peck continues his fabrication, claiming that the former is “Ramon,” who is waiting for



Illustration 6. Inverting the ethnographic spectacle. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

¹¹⁴ Banks 40-45.

Marie Claire, while the latter, “Lionel,” wishes he were a “classical guitarist.” The sequence communicates both the violence and the inanity of the manipulation of Lumumba’s image. Just as Europe was behind the camera and behind the scenes during the colonial period and Lumumba’s brief term, a revived Lumumba now possesses the power, through a 16 mm film camera, to manipulate the image of Europe.

Through Peck’s creative montage, witty narration and ingenious aesthetic choices, Lumumba’s exile in Brussels becomes an opportunity to bear witness to the literal and discursive violence of colonialism and neocolonialism. The film upsets the balance of power between Europe and Africa by naming those implicated in Lumumba’s assassination and turning the camera upon them. While the film cannot restore Lumumba’s image because of the manner in which it has been manipulated by the Western media, it can bring attention to this manipulation in order to “tickle the feet of the guilty.”

Dis-membling and Remembering Lumumba from a Diasporic Perspective

While the body often serves as a site of fracturing within Caribbean literature, it is generally reintegrated through the process of return, even though that reintegration may reflect a deconstruction while highlighting the instability of the reconstituted body and its accompanying narrative. Dash notes that in Césaire’s poetry, for example, the reintegration in the lost body solves the exilic dilemma but Césaire “never ceases to insist on the unstable nature of the world.”¹¹⁵ Jeannie Suk agrees that in *Cahier Césaire* “undertakes a self-conscious recovery of the lost object and the undoing of exile” although he realizes the “futility and impossibility” of this “quest for

¹¹⁵ Michael Dash 24.

origins.”¹¹⁶ Return is employed as a strategy for constituting an identity through which resistance is articulated.

Lumumba takes a slightly different approach in that it fails to reconstitute Lumumba’s body. As the Belgian government is equally implicated in the assassination and subsequent dismemberment and burning of Lumumba’s body, it is fitting, according to Congolese lore, for an improperly buried Lumumba to roam the city in search of his remains.¹¹⁷ In the stead of a “bodied” presence, however, Lumumba’s spirit possesses the camera, and the “disembodied feel”¹¹⁸ of the hand-held shots mimics Lumumba’s disembodiedness as a signifier of his inability to return. Unlike Peck’s later biopic in 2001 which featured Eriq Ebouaney in the role of Lumumba, and other films that attempt to reconstruct the narratives of national heroes by using actors such as David Achkar’s *Allah Tantou* or Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* and *A Huey P. Newton Story*, *Lumumba* insists upon a visually irretrievable subject that reflects the tensions of diasporic identity formation.

The conspicuous absence of the body that Lumumba’s assassins are “unable to show” drives the narrative about Peck’s quest for information on the well-preserved secret of Lumumba’s executioners. Lumumba’s missing body is the documentary’s largest “black hole” which cannot be adequately filled because Peck must reconstruct Lumumba using the very sources that have prevented his return to his body.¹¹⁹ The loss of footage during Lumumba’s speech signifies Lumumba’s bodily absence from the film and Peck’s inability, forty years later, to recover the story in totality. The brief glimpses of Lumumba through photos and archival footage are often overlaid with narration that highlights Lumumba’s absence. While we see a photo of

¹¹⁶ Jeannie Suk, *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37, 41.

¹¹⁷ Poplewell.

¹¹⁸ Garane 158.

¹¹⁹ Marks 31.

Lumumba exiting a plane on his way to the Brussels Roundtable, Peck reminds us that "his future assassins are amongst those who embraced him on his return." Just as the documentary

At other times, Peck opts to fill in the black holes with "thin images" that invite the viewer to reflect upon their meaning. The pen-and-ink sketches of the Brouwez house and the forest where Lumumba was assassinated, the sculptures in the museum, the shots of the snow from the train, even the images of random Belgians require the viewer to make sense of the visuals by searching her own memory.¹²⁰ These strange images frustrate the viewer in their inability to relay with candor the details of Lumumba's life and assassination and also deny identification with Lumumba that might at least psychically allow remembering or re-membering. Instead, they "invite continued, embodied contemplation" by evoking a bodily response from the viewer.¹²¹ The viewer's body, not Lumumba's, becomes the site of the negotiation of history, memory and identity. The spectators' identifications with Lumumba are not solely dependent upon an actual historical narrative, a real body (or grave or monument) with which they can interact; rather, it is through their own bodies, their own narratives, that Lumumba's stories have meaning. The only narrative with meaning is the one that is consciously constructed from present experience.

By privileging oral narration over visuals or the lack thereof, Peck establishes the authority of the individual and the community to speak history. The footage taken in Brussels is meaningless to the viewer without Peck's voiceover. An ordinary photograph that the audience easily might have forgotten becomes the subject of great scrutiny through Peck's narration, encouraging spectators to uncover the hidden

¹²⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

¹²¹ Ibid., 74

meanings of the image. Through a voice-over that is “dispassionate yet reflective, delivered in a monotone, and often divergent from the images on the screen,”¹²² Peck privileges the narrator, rather than the visuals, as the historical authority. The reflexivity of the narration allows the viewer to “experience the method or process of representation and actively stimulates awareness of both the cinematic form and the issues inherent in the text.”¹²³

Each viewer individually “re-members” Lumumba according to his or her own experience of the film, but it is through this process that collective memory is forged. Peck asks the viewers, “Should the prophet be brought back to life again?” because the viewer is as responsible as Peck for his resurrection. While the symbolic resurrection of Lumumba evinces the rituals of Haitian *vodun* in a way that only “Haitians might feel,”¹²⁴ the ritual nevertheless “connects individual experience with collective experience, activating collective memory in the body.... the search for memory turns out to be a process of collective mourning.”¹²⁵ The viewer is invited to search for “signs” of the prophet along with Peck, who mediates between the living viewers and the deceased Lumumba.

Through the search for “signs” of Lumumba, Peck and the audience have the opportunity to negotiate their own diasporic identities. After the opening credits, we are immediately transported to “Haiti, 1960” as the camera pans a class photograph and settles on Peck’s youthful face. We enter the Congo through what appears to be home video of the capital, followed by another series of photographs of Peck and his family during their stay. As a diasporic subject, Peck must stitch together the pieces

¹²² Andrew F. Clark, “Lumumba: Death of a Prophet; Africa, I Will Fleece You,” *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (Oct. 1993), 1157.

¹²³ N. Frank Ukadike, “African Cinematic Reality: The Documentary Tradition as an Emerging Trend,” *Research in African Literatures* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1995).

¹²⁴ Peck and Taylor 244; Garane 157.

¹²⁵ Marks 74.

of Lumumba's story with which he identifies but of which he possessed little knowledge.¹²⁶ He consciously creates a narrative of Lumumba by drawing upon a variety of sources, the most interesting of which are his own home videos. The repeated invocation of his childhood experiences and his discovery of Lumumba through his mother's stories operate in a similar fashion and parallel the viewer's own incomplete memories of Lumumba. Peck's individual subjectivity acts as "simply the site, the threshold, where collective subject finds articulation, where private and public, individual and group interact."¹²⁷

Through these scenes, the Caribbean emerges as the site of negotiation between Africa and the West that constitutes Stuart Hall's third, "New World" presence.¹²⁸ Peck's attempt to reconcile his experience of living in the Congo embodies the common issues of solidarity, return and cultural discontinuity that define the African diasporic experience. As an example of cultural discontinuity, Peck implicates himself as a complicit witness to Lumumba's assassination. His guilt stems from his parents' participation in the Congolese government and bourgeois status, as well as the "200 years of difference" between them and the Congolese. He narrates:

We were black but we were white. We were different. We were the *Mundele*.

With my friends I took advantage of any ambivalences. I was Congolese when it suited me, and *Mundele* when I found myself in a group. (see Illustration 7)

He also expresses guilt over his family's travel to "discover Europe" in the midst of the coup that was taking place in the Congo. Revealing the first images in Europe with his father's camera of a matador taunting a dying bull, Peck draws an analogy to his family's ambivalence from the personal story: "My first images...My daughter and I watch these images, and she asks me what I felt watching this bull being killed. I

¹²⁶ Popplewell.

¹²⁷ Michael Dash 18-19.

¹²⁸ Hall, "Cultural Identity," 232.



Illustration 7. Cultural discontinuity between Peck and the Congolese.
Lumumba: Death of a Prophet, dir. Raoul Peck, 1992.

didn't dare say my main problem was keeping the camera in focus." This guilt implicates the viewer as well, who identifies with Peck as much as with the character of Lumumba.¹²⁹

Peck's attempt to make sense of these fragments of memory further refuses the mythical and embodied presence of Lumumba one expects to find in a documentary. The slow zooms into photographs, which are supposed to help us identify with Lumumba, instead force us to look for signs – does he know he will be assassinated? Peck's manipulation of the newsreel footage of Lumumba's capture through zooms and freeze frames only intensifies the dread, and the exciting music of the newsreel footage only adds to the misery. When we yearn for the pleasure of (re)discovering Lumumba, we instead find pain in knowing exactly how the story ends. Where there

¹²⁹ Manthia Diawara, "The 'I' Narrator in Black Diaspora Documentary" in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, eds. Phyllis R. Klotman and Cutler, Janet K. Cutler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 318.

should be photos and a story of Lumumba's early years, there is instead Peck's regret over his own childhood. We cannot relish in the victory of independence; we are not witnesses to Lumumba's life but to his death. The film highlights the impossibility of ever really knowing Lumumba's story or suturing the rifts Lumumba's death symbolizes in the narrative of Third World liberation. Its narrative revolves around the marked contrast between Lumumba's assertion at independence – “We, whose bodies have suffered under the colonial oppression, we say to you: it is all over now” – and Peck's assessment later in the film – “There is life, then there is death, after that there is nothing. One day he realized there was dead and dead.”

While Lumumba appears to be forever dismembered, Peck does provide a bit of hope. He finishes his statement by proclaiming that Lumumba understood that this second death “wasn't necessarily a matter of skin.” Peck aims to prevent Lumumba's second symbolic death by giving the prophet “the floor one last time.”¹³⁰ Lumumba can be reconstructed, at least symbolically, by Peck and the audience through the act of creating or watching a film.

The goal of the film is not to re-member Lumumba but instead to reconnect experience with social memory. While remembrance “actually shields consciousness from experience” and mimics official history, memory “deterritorializes remembrance [by reviving] a flow of experience.”¹³¹ Through the experience of watching the film, the audience relives their own “involuntary” memories of Lumumba, even if these memories are created on the spot. Like Peck, the viewer creates a memory of Lumumba for himself from the fragments of Peck's childhood memories, historic footage and shots of Belgian landscapes in the documentary. The film provides a new generation with the means to deal with the gaps in memory created by time, space and

¹³⁰ Lauten 144.

¹³¹ Marks 64.

neo-colonial forces by creating their own memories rather than relying solely on those of their ancestors. If, as Fanon suggested, “each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission,”¹³² *Lumumba* models this process of discovery which may later become the basis of shared identity and political goals.

¹³² Fanon, *Wretched*, 206.

CHAPTER TWO
DIASPORA AS DESIRE IN *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON*

While the proliferation of identity-based politics since the 1980s surpasses the borders of the African diaspora, the foundation for this development lay in the diasporic theorization of race as a political identity. Characteristic of the diasporic turn, transnational connections previously imagined via class or racial ties are now also fashioned through gendered and sexual identities, deepening and strengthening the structures of oppositional cinema. In this chapter, I analyze Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) as a transnational and trans-temporal meditation on gay subjectivity that addresses both concerns. The film constructs a counterhistory of the Harlem Renaissance and 1980s Britain that considers race in conjunction with gender and sexuality in order to subvert the heteronormativity of black nationalist discourses. *Looking for Langston* also critiques the objectification of black bodies within mainstream cinemas for the derivation of pleasure, while at the same time reclaiming cinematic pleasure for desiring black subjects by tapping into these fetishistic tropes. Juxtaposing documentary realism with fantasy, the film dismantles the binary between politics and pleasure of Third Cinema discourse by investing in varied spectatorial readings rather than transparent political meaning.

Decolonizing the Interior Spaces of Sexual Desire

As much as it is a meditation on the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes, Kobena Mercer notes that *Looking for Langston* is also a meditation on diaspora as “the field of desire.” Referring to the diasporic desire for community and historical continuity and the interracial psychosexual desires Fanon explicates in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Mercer cleverly hones in on the transition from racial

identification to post-essentialist representation that paved the way for the interrogation of repressed desire.¹³³ In the black British context, increasing hostility towards the mass migration of Caribbean, African and Asian émigrés led visual artists to articulate race over national affiliation as a political identity. *Pressure* (1974), the first black British feature film directed by native Trinidadian Horace Ove, is a race-relations narrative about the son of Caribbean immigrants who becomes politicized after he realizes that being British-born does not exculpate him from discrimination.¹³⁴ The release of Menelik Shabazz's *Step Forward Youth* (1976) and *Burning an Illusion* (1981) resonated with a new generation of black British for whom the question of British identity was not as central as affirming a militant black identity.¹³⁵ Both films deal with the politicization of the main character and reflect the emergence of a popular black consciousness in response to deepening social inequality and increased marginalization.

While these films, along with new avenues for multicultural initiatives on television Channel Four, increased black visibility and representation in the media, the masculinist bias of the "black aesthetic" these filmmakers promoted was soon challenged by women and queer artists who demanded a more inclusive formulation of black identity.¹³⁶ The films of publicly subsidized independent film collectives of the mid-1980s, as well as the heated debates at art and film conferences including a Third Cinema conference held in Edinburgh in 1986, reveal that the idea of a singular black identity was languishing under the weight of more hybrid methods of thinking

¹³³ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 47, 225.

¹³⁴ Houston Baker, Jr., "Representing Blackness/Representing Britain: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Knowledge" in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth Lindenberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4; Jim Pines, "The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema" in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara and Ruth Lindenberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 189.

¹³⁵ Pines 190.

¹³⁶ Mercer, *Welcome*, 14-19.

identity and culture. *Territories* (1984), directed by filmmaker Isaac Julien of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, marked a turning point in black British film production because of the multiplicity of political voices allowed to surface.¹³⁷ In denouncing the representation of the Notting Hill Carnival as primitive in a BBC documentary, two women filmmakers tackle the array of political meanings of the carnival for the diverse black British population, constituted of subjects with racial, class, gender and sexual identities.¹³⁸

The Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986, dir. John Akomfrah) and Sankofa's *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986, dir. Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien) furthered the de-essentialization of black British identity by privileging the marginalized voices of Asians and black women. *Handsworth Songs* revises the narrative around the race riots of 1985 by considering Britain's colonial history and the oppression of Asian and Caribbean migrants lumped under the collective term "black."¹³⁹ *Passion of Remembrance* employs a "distinctive female voice" to expose the sexism and homophobia of black British political activism.¹⁴⁰ These films were the first black-directed films to be released theatrically in West London, testifying to the increased visibility of black British films despite their continued marginalization within the larger film culture.¹⁴¹

According to Mercer, the aesthetic of these films – syncretic montages of documentary footage, dramatic enactments, and evocative and discordant sounds – correlate with the "liberation of the imagination" towards decolonizing essentialist political and cinematic discourses.¹⁴² Hall recognized that women visual artists of the

¹³⁷ Hall, "New Ethnicities," 167.

¹³⁸ Mercer, *Welcome*, 60.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴⁰ Anne Ciecko, "Representing the Spaces of Diaspora in Contemporary British Films by Women Directors," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1999), 69.

¹⁴¹ Mercer, *Welcome*, 75.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 61.

late 1970s introduced “a whole continent of themes...hitherto excluded from the political field proper because they were considered too personal, too emotional, too subjective, or too domestic” into political discourse and visual representation.¹⁴³

Similarly, Mercer suggests that the black British filmmakers of the 1980s enhanced these thematic interventions by rejecting realist aesthetics that attempt to reflect some objective reality, opting instead to utilize “phantasy” that amplifies the social and erotic desires that undergird the processes of identification and representation.¹⁴⁴

Looking for Langston has garnered wide attention not only because of its controversial subject matter – Langston Hughes’s sexuality – but also because of its imaginative, non-realist approach to the topic. Through a “meditation” on Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, the film “decenters” the nation as the prime site of affiliation and constructs a black queer diaspora to “demarginalize” gay identity as a valid basis for constituting “imagined community.” While the former is achieved through a montage of diverse voices and an ambiguous *mise-en-scene*, the latter operates through the subversion of codes of colonial desire in which the objectification of black bodies produces cinematic pleasure. Risking further objectification of the black body and the alienation of black spectators, Julien draws the audience into a web of cinematic pleasure in order to challenge the dichotomy between “pleasurable” and “political” cinema.

Queering Here and There, Then and Now

Like other diasporic groups marginalized within their nations of exile, queer black subjects of the African diaspora constitute their identities through “shared

¹⁴³ Stuart Hall, “Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge - and After” in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, eds. D. A. Bailey, I. Baucom and S. Boyce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁴⁴ Mercer, *Welcome*, 225.

identifications and imagined historical relations produced through a range of fluid cultural artifacts.”¹⁴⁵ *Looking for Langston* exposes the limits of national identity through the self-conscious construction of a queer diaspora that cuts across national and temporal borders. In choosing an African American as the subject of a larger project on sexual identity, representation and racial authenticity, Julien initiates a conversation across the Atlantic that is realized through the film.¹⁴⁶ The film does not limit itself to Harlem, instead engaging the geographic and discursive terrain identified by Toni Morrison in the film’s opening lines from her eulogy at James Baldwin’s 1987 memorial service.¹⁴⁷

...You wrote these words – words every rebel, every dissident, every revolutionary, every practicing artist from Capetown to Poland from Waycross to Dublin memorized: ‘A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them.’

The works of African-American figures such as Hughes, Baldwin and Bruce Nugent are placed in conversation with the poetry of Essex Hemphill and music by the group Blackberri, while Morrison, Stuart Hall and Erick Ray Evans provide voiceovers for the film and Julien plays a deceased Hughes. Their contributions condemn and counter the marginalization alluded to in Baldwin’s text.

The community imagined by, and performed in and through, *Looking for Langston* also spans historical periods in “a self-reflexive gesture” that establishes a relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and the British Black Arts Movement of

¹⁴⁵ Derek Walcott, "Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Space in the Diaspora" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 92.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York: Serpent's Tale, 1993), 169.

¹⁴⁷ David Deitcher, "A Lovesome Thing: The Film Art of Isaac Julien" in *The Film Art of Isaac Julien* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2000), 11.

the 1980s.¹⁴⁸ Archival footage of 1920s Harlem and its prominent writers and artists, including Hughes, Richmond Barthe, and Alain Locke, is juxtaposed with the ambiguous *mis-en-scene* of a gay bar with a reenactment of Hughes's wake taking place on the upper level as men interact and dance below. The film persistently returns to, and switches between, the bar scenes through a "call-and-response" trope that also moves the narrative forward in time.¹⁴⁹ The first time we see Julien lying in a coffin surrounded by mourners, we assume he is portraying Hughes in an imaginative reenactment, and when the camera cranes down to the lower level austere men dressed in formal attire and dancing slowly to jazz suggest that the period is the 1920s (see Illustration 8). By the end of the film, the dancers are voguing on tables to techno music (see Illustration 9) in such a way that we can also read Julien's cameo as a homage to the other black gay men who passed in the 1980s – Bruce Nugent, James Baldwin, and Joseph Beam, to whom the film is dedicated, as well as other undisclosed black gay men who lost their lives to AIDS during the decade.¹⁵⁰

The mourning the film depicts and ultimately performs seems to unsettle the safe space it also creates for black gay expression. Its insistence on returning to the scene of the wake, of death, constantly disrupts the exuberance and life depicted below. This anxiety between life and death runs through the film and highlights the marginalization of black gay men in all of the spaces it portrays. Harlem of the 1920s is simultaneously imagined as a space in which black artists could freely express their sexuality and were constrained by notions of racial authenticity in that expression. Hughes lies at the center of this controversy because of the ambiguity surrounding his

¹⁴⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Looking for Modernism" in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 201.

¹⁴⁹ José E. Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and Looking for Langston" in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 342.

¹⁵⁰ Gates, "Looking," 201; Deitcher 16.



Illustration 8. Bar scene reminiscent of the 1920s. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.



Illustration 9. Bar scene of the 1980s. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.

sexuality, particularly when considered alongside his avowal of “racial authenticity” as his responsibility as a “Negro” poet.¹⁵¹ The tension as between “an unspeakable, private” gay identity and a “collective African American identity” faced by many gay black artists is demonstrated through the recitation of writing and poetry from Hughes and Bruce Nugent, the only explicitly gay black writer of the period. The prominence of Nugent’s poem “Smoke, Jade and Lilies” compared to the paucity of Hughes’s poetry in the American cut of the film “inadvertently [produces] a poignant symbol for the poet’s own silence during his lifetime regarding the much-disputed matter of his sexuality.”¹⁵²

Rethinking history in terms of sexuality, the film also reacts to the homophobia of black nationalist articulations of the 1960s and 1970s. Julien fingers Amiri Baraka as one of the figures who exiled James Baldwin because of the belief that “homosexuality was a sin against the race.” In a voiceover Stuart Hall turns Baraka’s praise of Harlem as “beautiful” and “vicious modernism” against him by asking, “Could he understand the beauty of the people with freakish ways?” The film paints Baldwin and other gay black artists as radicals whose struggles for sexual freedom parallel and even supersede the liberatory rhetoric of radical but homophobic nationalists. Confronting the policing of black male sexuality and the codes of racial authenticity of both periods, while valorizing the gay black men who challenged these constraints, the film resists demonizing or glorifying either period. Instead, it places both spaces within a lineage of black thought that elucidates contemporary debates, thereby situating its project within a revolutionary tradition. This claim is bolstered by

¹⁵¹ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis, Vol. 9 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 31-36.

¹⁵² Deitcher 12.

poet Essex Hemphill, who proclaims: “So touch me now –/ Hannibal, Toussaint.../ I am a revolution without bloodshed.”

The film announces the new possibilities of the 1980s and situates its limitations within the sexualized counterhistory it constructs. Essex Hemphill’s cogent account of the gay black experience of the time period through the delivery of six poems symbolizes “a gayness that is not afraid of being *over-heard*, that assumes a presence in history” in contrast to Hughes’s silence on his sexuality, even as his poems speak to the social and literal deaths of black gay men in a schema of continued marginalization.¹⁵³ During a vignette in which two black men meet in a graveyard for a chance sexual encounter, Hemphill exclaims the lines from his poem “Under Certain Circumstances” in voiceover:

This kind of war frightens me. I don’t want to die sleeping with soldiers I don’t love. I want to court outside the race, outside the class, outside the attitudes. But love is a dangerous word in this small town. Those who seek it are sometimes found face down, floating on their beds.

Hemphill’s poem expresses an unfulfilled desire to move beyond the confines placed on his sexuality because of his race, calling to mind the struggles of Harlem Renaissance artists to be “racially authentic” by suppressing their homosexuality.

Hemphill’s poem also contextualizes the narrative of Alex, the film’s protagonist who appears to portray Langston Hughes and whose desire remains unfulfilled except in his dreams. Like Hughes’s “A Dream Deferred,” which serves as the inspiration for a song of the same name that plays throughout the film, the poem suggests that the dream of a conjoined racial and sexual liberation remains elusive. The exuberance of the later bar scene suggests new possibilities, while the recurrent

¹⁵³ bell hooks, “Seductive Sexualities” in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 198.

depiction of chance encounters between gay black men “under certain circumstances” reveals that the openings are slim and dangerous on many levels. The raid of the bar at the end of the film can be read as an indicator of the conservatism of Thatcherism that connects the repressive political climates of here and there, then and now.

Hemphill’s poetry most clearly articulates the film’s project of historical reclamation of a queer diaspora meant to counteract the disillusionment of the present. The portion of “Under Certain Circumstances” used in the poem contains the lines: “Those who find [love] protect it or destroy it from within. But the disillusioned...like them I long for my past.” Similarly, Hemphill reads from “The Edge” that his “revolution without bloodshed” entails “[changing] the order of things / to suit my desperations.” The “imagined” world *Looking for Langston* constructs around racial and sexual identity, then, is a mode of resistance to the material conditions of marginality, in the same way that Pan-African philosophies emerging from the diaspora reached beyond national boundaries to engage in political resistance.¹⁵⁴ The search for history reveals as much about the present as it does about the past, leading Gates to suggest that “we look for Langston, but we discover Isaac.”¹⁵⁵ Through *Looking for Langston*, Julien locates his “compatriots,” to borrow Baldwin’s term, who can not only join him in proclaiming the presence and contributions of a queer diaspora but can also ease the isolation produced by marginalization.¹⁵⁶

Between Third and First Cinema, Resistance and Pleasure

Of the multiple arguments that can be gleaned from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, his discussion of the sexual desires that drive colonial cultural expressions provide a neat entry into the representational codes *Looking for Langston* exploits in

¹⁵⁴ Deitcher 12.

¹⁵⁵ Gates, “Looking,” 202.

¹⁵⁶ Deitcher 12.

order to overturn. Fanon determines that within the framework of psychoanalysis the black man is reduced to a symbol of the biological, or genital, threat to whites. Surprisingly, however, the black man is as much the object of white erotic desires as he is the symbol of sexual fears. Fanon concludes that a white woman's fear of "rape by a Negro" is in fact a declaration of a masochistic desire to be raped, and similarly that the "Negrophobic man is a repressed homosexual."¹⁵⁷ Through this combination of fear and desire Fanon attempts to explain the contradictory but cohering stereotypes of black males as aggressively heterosexual and passively homosexual.

Mercer notes that Fanon's sexual anxieties about homosexuality, revealed through his denial of its existence in Martinique, are a product of his own internalization of the gendered and sexualized discourse of colonialism that paints colonizers as active and masculine and the colonized as passive and feminine. Fanon wishes to assert the "masculinity" and resistance of the colonized black male by equating homosexuality with whiteness and asserting his own homophobia in contrast. Mercer recognizes in this strand of Fanon's thought the same impulses that drove the homophobia of some articulations of black nationalism. From this analysis, he concludes, rightly so, that homophobia is "a significant element in black psycho-sexuality."¹⁵⁸

Fanon's cursory but insightful mention of his experiences as a spectator at the theater reverberates with his theories of colonial desire. Fanon is primarily concerned with the response of black spectators to the projection of colonial stereotypes of them onto the screen, but he hints that their anxieties, manifest in laughter, is coupled with the laughter of white spectators who derive pleasure from the images. It is not only

¹⁵⁷Fanon, *Black Skin*, 156, 179.

¹⁵⁸ Kobena Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia" in *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, ed. Ragnar Farr (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 43-45.

the stereotypical image that incites Fanon's ire but also, perhaps more so, the voyeuristic gaze of white spectators. He writes, "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me."¹⁵⁹ Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay on the pleasures "masculinized" spectators enjoy watching representations of passive women enriches Fanon's argument that it is the cinema's replication of social stratification and privileging of desires of the dominant group that is at issue. Manthia Diawara most clearly articulates this idea when he argues that "the dominant cinema situates black characters primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female)."¹⁶⁰ Considering these ideas in tandem, I would argue that even when black males are depicted as hypermasculine in cinema, these images can be received by white spectators as "passive" objects of desire, or "colonized homosexuals," following colonial (and Fanon's) logic.

Mary Anne Doane's observation that Fanon is writing about "the white cinema of mainstream Hollywood" is important because it hints toward the distinctions drawn between Third and First Cinema.¹⁶¹ The most consistent argument in all the definitions of Third Cinema is that it does not operate for the entertainment of its spectators. Solanas and Getino denounce First Cinema's commercialization of images and the pleasure derived from them when they argue that Third Cinema is a departure from films synonymous with spectacle and aims to disrupt, if not destroy, the "fantasy and phantom" of First Cinema "to make way for living human beings."¹⁶² Glauber Rocha's "aesthetic of hunger" and Julio Garcia Espinosa's "imperfect cinema"

¹⁵⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 140.

¹⁶⁰ Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" in *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 215.

¹⁶¹ Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 226.

¹⁶² Solanas and Getino 6.

similarly predict that stylistic “poverty” can obstruct the voyeuristic consumption of images by dominant groups and force a confrontation with the “real-world poverty” of the Third World.¹⁶³ Third Cinema is meant to be unassimilable within First Cinema because it subverts the pleasures Western spectators expect.

Influenced by the turn to psychoanalytic film criticism of the 1980s, Teshome Gabriel further disavows cinematic pleasure by suggesting that “the psychoanalytic spectator...is almost non-existent” in Third Cinema. In distinguishing between the “dream experience” of First Cinema and the “political and social experience” of Third Cinema, Gabriel suggests that pleasure can be disassociated from political resistance.¹⁶⁴ Critics, however, have charged that the masculinist bias of many Third Cinema films betrays this assumption, as films such as *The Battle of Algiers* and *The Hour of the Furnaces* have used exoticized female bodies in the service of the “masculinist pleasures” of anti-colonial revolution.¹⁶⁵ If we believe that First Cinema produces value through pleasure, we must also concede that Third Cinema does the same, albeit by engaging different pleasures that emanate from the desire (and cinematic fulfillment) of the overthrow of colonial pleasure.

The foregoing discussion ultimately cautions that cinematic pleasure cannot be separated from the social and political aims of Third Cinema. Just as First Cinema elicits pleasure by presenting the fulfillment of colonial domination that cannot be fully realized on the ground, Third Cinema also projects desire onto the screen as a means of mobilizing resistance. *Looking for Langston* is able to achieve its aim, the queering of black history, “by making something queer happen to viewers.”¹⁶⁶ It situates black spectators in an ambiguous space where their desires intersect with

¹⁶³ Stam 95-97.

¹⁶⁴ Gabriel, *Third Cinema*, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Ella Shohat, “Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, eds. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003), 58-59.

¹⁶⁶ Walcott 101.

those of white spectators. Its aesthetic techniques “fetishize” black male bodies in order to valorize them as legitimate objects of intra-racial desire. Viewers are coaxed to take part in the pleasure of the spectacle on a psycho-affective level as the embodiment of the film’s intellectual labor.

The first bar scene sets up a triangular web of desire between the film’s main characters: Alex; an unnamed white male; and Beauty, a black man who is the object of both men’s desires. Alex spots Beauty from the bar and stares, and Beauty turns to meet his gaze. In a highly stylistic shot with a *chiaroscuro* lighting scheme, Beauty’s face is illuminated in a halo effect, and when he smiles, the film cuts to close-up of his lips (see Illustration 10). Beauty’s lips become the focal point of the gaze as a symbol, or fetish, of Beauty’s eroticism and as a means by which the audience can experience the desire that consumes Alex. The spell of the moment is broken when Beauty’s white partner slams a champagne bottle on the table in order to recapture Beauty’s attention.

This dissection of Beauty’s body continues in a subsequent daydream sequence in which Alex imagines his desire for Alex fulfilled. Alex encounters Beauty in a field, and the camera pans up Beauty’s nude body in time with the lines of Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926) that highlight his “strong legs...muscular hocks...rounded buttocks...strong torsos and broad deep chest...brown eyes” (see Illustration 11). The close-up on Beauty’s lips recurs as he smiles at Alex, a gesture that reveals him to be an idealized and available lover (see Illustration 12). In the second half of this sequence, Beauty and Alex lay in bed together and Alex stares at Beauty’s face, again lit in half shadow, as he smiles in his sleep. Beauty’s “beautiful...quizzical” lips again fill the frame. Alex’s desire is articulated in the lines recited in voiceover – “I would kiss your lips...he *would* like to kiss Beauty’s lips” – and then his desire is fulfilled as Beauty’s lips press “cool and

hard” on his. The scene ends with their bodies entwined as the voiceover reveals that Alex “could feel Beauty’s body...close against his...hot...tense... and soft...soft.”



Illustration 10. Beauty turns to face Alex in a highly stylistic shot. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.



Illustration 11. Beauty’s strong legs. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.



Illustration 12. Close-up on Beauty's lips. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.

In Nugent's poem, the first work with an explicitly homosexual theme published by an African American, Beauty is not a black male but instead has "strong white legs," "firm white thighs" and a "Grecian nose." Julien omits the signifier "white" to recode the poem as an exposition on the desires between two black males. This strategy is essential in that it facilitates the re-reading of the fetishized black male body required of spectators. Discussing the controversial photographs of nude black men taken by gay white photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, Kobena Mercer insists that the fragmentation of the body in the photos:

[invites] a scopophilic dissection [in which] each part is invested with the power to evoke the 'mystique' of black male sexuality with more perfection than any empirically unified whole.... The cropping and fragmentation of bodies ... is a salient feature of pornography, and has been seen from certain feminist positions as a form of male violence, a literal inscription of a sadistic

impulse in the male gaze, whose pleasure thus consists of cutting up women's bodies into visual bits and pieces.¹⁶⁷

In a reconsideration of his conclusion, however, Mercer admits that his initial reading privileges his racial subjectivity over his reception of the images as a desiring gay subject. By neutralizing the racial difference between Alex and Beauty, Julien allows spectators to assume the position of a desiring gay spectator.

Beauty's objectification does not involve the violence of Mercer's racial reading but instead eroticizes his body as a valid object of black desire. The close-ups on Beauty's lips "revalorize that which has historically always been devalorized as emblematic of the other's ugliness."¹⁶⁸ Mercer argues that Beauty's lips are in fact "hypervalorized" in the same way that white women's beauty is given a transcendent quality through nude paintings. This involves a "feminization" of Beauty through cinematic codes normally reserved for female characters, including halo effect lighting and seductive positioning that allow the spectator to experience his male body as "soft." This process of reducing the black male body into a "passive, decorative *objet d'art*" takes on a different dynamic than that of the assertion of control over female bodies because the film also assumes a black male or masculinized spectator. With the tensions of gender and race removed from the subject/object relationship, the "erotic investment in the fantasy" can be seen as purely sexual.¹⁶⁹

Despite the cinematographic maneuvers that objectify him, Beauty is able to reciprocate the desire projected onto him through his smile, suggesting the mutuality of the desire and the possibility of an affectionate relationship with Alex. Affection is elicited from the audience as well through the dream sequences, as spectators are induced to identify with Alex's frustrated desire. Although Beauty is "feminized,"

¹⁶⁷ Mercer, *Welcome*, 47.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-179.

Alex's does not neatly fit into a dichotomous "masculinity." The ambiguity of his "masculinity," neither passive nor aggressive, lends itself to both the intimation of affection between Alex and Beauty and the "softening" of the spectator to share in the emotion. This affective quality is enhanced by Nugent's poem, which uses ellipses and is recited in the film to approximate a stream of consciousness, and the slow camera movements and expressive voiceover are meant to give the scene a dreamlike, fantastical quality.

It is Beauty's white partner who can be best positioned as aggressively masculine. His hostile response to Beauty's inattention reveals a possessive desire explored in later scenes in which he leafs through Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book* and is surrounded by images of mostly nude black males projected on the walls. In a voiceover performance of one of his poems, Essex Hemphill ascribes to him the role of the typical white male spectator deriving pleasure from the objectification of black male bodies: "You want his pleasure without guilt or capture...His name isn't important. It would be a coincidence if he had a name, a face, a mind." As the white male walks around the room and caresses the images Hemphill hurls further charges: "He doesn't always wear a red ski cap, eat fried chicken, fuck like a jungle" (see Illustration 13). This overt censure of the pleasure experienced by the white male spectator comes well after the scene between Alex and Beauty, withholding the complication of the matrix of desire between the three main characters until the desire between Alex and Beauty, black male character and spectator, has been venerated.

The reintroduction of racial difference into the film's elaboration of desire also restores a realist dimension. In contrast to the scenes between Beauty and Alex, the *chiaroscuro* lighting of the Mapplethorpe scene does not appear to be fantastical; instead, the lighting intensifies the power dynamic between the white male and the pornographic images he inspects. The documentary quality of the photos lends itself



Illustration 13. A white male consumes objectified black bodies. *Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.

to this sense of realism, particularly since they “fix” males in stereotypical roles of sexual aggression.¹⁷⁰ This hypermasculinity is tamed, however, through the same photographs. Projected on the walls, they pose little threat to the white male who caresses them as possessions. The final moments of the scene depict the white male brusquely handing payment to a departing black male, reenacting the racial and sexual power dynamics of the “colonial fantasy.”¹⁷¹

While the two scenes I have analyzed challenge colonial representations of black males, through different methods, they nevertheless play into a schema of visual pleasure that objectifies the black male body. The film operates in and against colonial discourse in order to critique it. By tapping into First Cinema codes of pleasure, *Looking for Langston* challenges both the objectification of black male bodies by white spectators and the “revulsion” black homosexuality aroused in Fanon

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹⁷¹ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” *Screen* 24, no. 4 (1983).

and other black nationalists by condemning the former and inviting the latter to desire. In this way the film carves a space for a historical queer presence and more contemporary queer identity within black liberation discourses by demanding the recognition Mercer notes that Fanon ironically seeks for the black man in the closing pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered ... In a savage struggle I am willing to accept convulsions of death, invincible dissolution, but also the possibility of the impossible.”¹⁷²

Engaging in the “savage struggle” over black representation, Julien’s film demands recognition from spectators and questions their liberatory intentions if they deny its plea.

Denying the transparency of the image and instead investing in its spectators’ abilities to produce value through their desire, the film reconceptualizes the role the artist/intellectual, “not as heroic leader...but as a connector located at the hyphenated intersection of disparate discourses and carrying out the translation.”¹⁷³ Langston Hughes serves as iconic symbol of this type of intellectual that operated between the spaces of racial authenticity and queer identity. Similarly, Julien and his film are also symbols of an emerging discourse that recognizes the intersection of race, gender and sexuality in the range of political responses to colonialism and its aftermath, and attempts to bridge the distance between these identities in recognition of the “possibility of the impossible.” The decolonization of the “interior limits” of colonialism, the spaces where the social and emotional conjoin to perpetuate colonial discourse, necessitates the acknowledgement of the repressed desires and marginalized communities whose liberation is also part of our liberatory political project.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Fanon, *Black Skin*, 218.

¹⁷³ Mercer, *Welcome*, 20.

¹⁷⁴ Mercer, “Busy,” 20.

CHAPTER THREE

“THE GIFT OF SIGHT”: DESTABILIZING PATRIARCHY AND REPRESENTATION IN *EVE’S BAYOU*

To most if not all critics, *Eve’s Bayou* is clearly not Third Cinema. As a dramatic narrative driven by the struggle of one African American family to overcome the patriarchal forces that threaten to tear it apart, *Eve’s Bayou* easily founders as Third Cinema because of its domestic concerns and psychoanalytically driven plot. Through a radical reading of a film far afield of Third Cinema, however, I aim to clarify how the discourse’s emphasis on political and material crises can foreclose the possibility of reading resistance in films that explore intra-racial conflicts through psychoanalytic tropes. In this chapter I argue that *Eve’s Bayou* is characteristic of the diasporic turn because it explores the hybridity of the African American experience and the internalization of patriarchy within black families. For Third Cinema to adequately address the unique experiences of oppression of women of the African diaspora, filmmakers must acknowledge the internalization of Western forms of patriarchy within the domestic sphere and perpetuated through the processes of gender acculturation, explained in part by psychoanalytic theory.

Third Cinema in the First World?

Few films produced by African Americans have earned the illustrious title of Third Cinema; nevertheless, its genealogy in the context of African American filmmaking begins with the increasingly radical political context of the Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Modeling their work after the rebellious attitudes of the times, black filmmakers began to deviate from the “tame” and “non-threatening” images of blacks that permeated Hollywood films of the 1950s and

1960s. The social documentaries of William Greaves, Shirley Clarke and St. Clair Bourne produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s inaugurated this new cinematic movement that engaged the social and political concerns of various segments of the black population.¹⁷⁵

It was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), however, that decisively altered the course of black independent cinema in the U.S. In presenting the story (and playing the role) of Sweetback, a sex show performer turned revolutionary, director Melvin van Peebles not only challenged stereotypical representations of black men but also set a standard for black independent filmmaking. That Sweetback “busts a White man’s head *and gets away with it*” was for some viewers the film’s most “revolutionary” aspect, but it was a landmark in terms of production as well.¹⁷⁶ The film featured untrained actors cast as “the Black Community”; alternative aesthetics including repetitive shots of Sweetback on the run, call and response between Sweetback and an off-screen chorus, and a spoken-word and funk-soul soundtrack; “realistic” and racy depictions of the ghetto; and guerilla production and distribution tactics with a minimal budget. With unprecedented box office revenue of more than ten million dollars gross, *Sweetback* set standards that Hollywood and black independent filmmakers scrambled to duplicate.¹⁷⁷

Sweetback was equally rebuffed by critics for its romanticization of the ghetto and inappropriate sexual and gender politics.¹⁷⁸ Faced with a proliferating blaxpotation genre backed by Hollywood that magnified *Sweetback*’s detrimental

¹⁷⁵ James A. Snead, "Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films: A Brief Survey" in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 371-72.

¹⁷⁶ William R. Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 38.

¹⁷⁷ Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 197, 207-208; Grant 36-40.

¹⁷⁸ Grant 39.

features but excised its revolutionary intent, a new generation of African and African American students at the UCLA film school countered with films that espoused a “‘non-standard’ vision of black people and culture” and appropriated *Sweetback’s* progressive accomplishments.¹⁷⁹ Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep* [1977]), Haile Gerima (*Bush Mama* [1977]) and Julie Dash (*Illusions* [1982]) were influenced by Third Cinema from Cuba and Latin America, the Black Arts Movement, the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party, African cinema, Italian neo-realism and the work of Oscar Micheaux, a prolific African American director of “race” films beginning in 1916.¹⁸⁰ Their efforts and the work of other prominent filmmakers and visual artists turned the tide of blaxploitation so that by the mid-1980s, cultural critic Greg Tate was able to identify a shift toward a “postliberated black aesthetic” that reflected “the maturation of a postnationalist black arts movement.”¹⁸¹

Against the backdrop of escalating crises in African American communities, including the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS, soaring crime rates, and increased police brutality and harassment, a flurry of “hood” films – inner city, black-male-oriented coming of age dramas backed by Hollywood studios – garnered mixed reception in the early 1990s. For some critics, films like John Singleton’s *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and Ernest Dickerson’s *Juice* (1992) were reflections on an authentic “moment of crisis” in black communities and for black males, also evidenced in rap and hip-hop music and the media’s portrayal of inner-city life.¹⁸² Critical of the penchant for

¹⁷⁹ Snead 373.

¹⁸⁰ Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers" in *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107-117; Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement" in *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 128.

¹⁸¹ Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk : Essays on Contemporary America; Fly Boy in the Buttermilk*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 206.

¹⁸² Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 94; Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism" in *Black*

gangsters and violence in the “hood” genre, however, these critics looked to the early films of independent filmmaker Spike Lee, including *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Malcolm X* (1992), to counterbalance these drawbacks by engaging broader social concerns. Black feminist and other critics argued that the “racial absolutism” and “masculine bravado” of the “hood” films were merely neo-blaxploitation. In Lee’s films they uncovered an underlying patriarchal bias exacerbated by his tendency to successfully raise but failure to interrogate the complex issues of African American social and political life.¹⁸³

A second wave of films from the LA film school helped to temper the “hood” film movement, including Charles Burnett’s *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* (1993), and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1993). Heralded as a “landmark achievement in black cinema”¹⁸⁴ because of its brilliant articulation of diasporic and “Aframentric” concerns, *Daughters of the Dust* stands out as the apogee of the Los Angeles school’s aspirations and as the African-American film most often associated with Third Cinema.¹⁸⁵ The film focuses on the Peasant family of the Carolina Sea Islands, who gather at the request of Nana, the family elder, to discuss the immanent departure of relatives migrating north. Set in 1902, the film explores the contradictions of a dawning Afro-modernity, between retaining values from an African past and embracing the opportunities of an American future, between communal living and individual aspiration. In opposition to *Sweetback’s* individualistic and male-oriented politics, exploitative depiction of women, and almost didactic focus on the repression of African Americans by whites, *Daughters* provides

American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20, 23.

¹⁸³ Yearwood 62; Bambara 137.

¹⁸⁴ Yearwood 217.

¹⁸⁵ Bambara 142.

judicious images of African American women (and men) whose struggle to maintain social ties is affected, but not overdetermined, by racism.

Eve's Bayou (1997), directed by Kasi Lemmons, appeared after the well had run dry on "hood" films, giving way to relationship and family-oriented dramas, such as *Love Jones* (1997) and *Soul Food* (1997). *Eve's Bayou* can also be situated in an cluster of independent and studio-backed films about African American women, including Forest Whittaker's *Waiting to Exhale* (1993), Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996), Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta* (1998) and Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* (1998). As the highest grossing independent film of 1997, *Eve's Bayou* not only challenges the "macho ghettocentricity" of contemporary black independent cinema¹⁸⁶ but also illuminates the sore need for a more flexible definition of Third Cinema that can challenge the patriarchal nationalism of Third Cinema and infuse individual subjectivity into its social and political critiques.

Situating Eve's Bayou in the Discourse of Third Cinema

Eve's Bayou relates the childhood memories of Eve Batiste, the inheritor of "the gift of sight" from a long line of female seers. Her idyllic childhood is shattered the summer she discovers her father Louis is having an affair with Mattie Mereaux. The family begins to unravel as oedipal tensions erupt between Cisely, Eve's older sister, and her mother, Roz. When Cisely accuses Louis of inappropriately kissing her, Eve's anger is ignited and she embarks upon a course to kill her father; she consults a "hoodoo"¹⁸⁷ practitioner and informs Mr. Mereaux, of the affair. At the end of the film, Mr. Mereaux murders Louis, and Eve must come to terms with her guilt, particularly after discovering a posthumous letter in which Louis contends that it was

¹⁸⁶ Mia L. Mask, "Eve's Bayou: Too Good to be a 'Black' Film?" *Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema* 23, no. 4 (1998), 26.

¹⁸⁷ In audio commentary on the DVD, Lemmons insists that Elzora is merely a hoodooist.

Cisely who initiated the kiss. On the surface, it is a Hollywood-style film that unearths destructive oedipal forces in a bourgeois (and by chance black) southern family.

Before offering an alternative reading of *Eve's Bayou*, it is important to address the critiques that relegate it to the realm of Hollywood cinema. The most scathing denunciation hinges on the film's emphasis on individual subjectivity and psychoanalytic interpretation of conflict over political and racial concerns. Teshome Gabriel's summation of Third Cinema as a practice that "relies more on an appeal to social and political conflicts as the prime rhetorical strategy and less on the paradigm of oedipal conflict and resolution" summarily excludes *Eve's Bayou*. In the same passage he also asserts that psychoanalytic theory cannot be applied to people of the Third World.¹⁸⁸ Following Gabriel's lead, April Biccum executes a psychoanalytic reading of the film but insists that its reduction of racial conflict to a mere "aside" invalidates its attempts to interrogate patriarchy. Instead, the film can only "briefly problematize, and then reassert a romantic notion of patriarchy."¹⁸⁹

Gabriel's refutation of the relevance of psychoanalytic analysis to Third World people and Third Cinema emanates from his desire to differentiate Third Cinema from Hollywood filmmaking. Although he does not provide a reference for his claim, his contention is most likely based on Fanon's deconstruction of Freudian psychoanalysis. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon argues that psychoanalysis is based on white males' and females' subversion of "colored" social reality, rendering black men and women as an invisible "phobogenic reality" to be uncovered through analysis of the psyche.

¹⁸⁸ Gabriel, "Towards," 39.

¹⁸⁹ April Biccum, "Third Cinema in the 'First World': *Eve's Bayou* and *Daughters of the Dust*," *Cineaction* 49 (1999), 60.

Demonstrating the failure of psychoanalysis to explain the alienation of black men and women as individuals, Fanon turns to “sociogenic explanations” and solutions.¹⁹⁰

Several feminists have critiqued Fanon’s work on the grounds that his assessment of black female psychosexuality conveniently mirrors his claims about white women – that both have masochistic fantasies of “rape by a Negro.”¹⁹¹ Despite Fanon’s proclamation that he knows “nothing about” the woman of color, Rey Chow explains that his description of women of color “[does] not depart significantly from the traditional masculinist view that equates women with sex.”¹⁹² Even if “the psychological matrices are skewed”¹⁹³ when applied to people of color, Chow’s critique exposes the centrality of psychology to understanding how patriarchy operates intra-racially. The description of gendered socialization within the patriarchal order provided by psychoanalysis cannot be ignored by people of the Third World, and by failing to interrogate the psychological realm, we inherently deny the possibility of understanding black women beyond the reductive lens of sexuality.

The critique that *Eve’s Bayou* does not engage political and social issues also overlooks the domestic sphere as a site of resistance and undervalues the social and political implications of patriarchy. Biccum replicates Gabriel’s binary between “systemic” (racial) and “psychological” (individual) conflict when she criticizes *Eve’s Bayou* because its narrative “carries on in spite of the backdrop of slave history, and centres around the psychological struggle of the family with patriarchy.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, "The Black and the Body Politic: Fanon's Existential Phenomenological Critique of Psychoanalysis" in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 76, 80-81.

¹⁹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 179.

¹⁹² Rey Chow, "The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon" in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 46.

¹⁹³ Gordon 81.

¹⁹⁴ Biccum 61.

Comparing *Eve's Bayou* to *Daughters of the Dust*, she expects the theme of slavery to “continually resurface” in the former as she argues it does in the latter.

Ultimately, however, Biccum is not searching for slavery but for Africa, a connection to an ancestral culture that in many nationalist narratives takes precedence in describing the diasporic experience. She praises *Daughters* for conceptualizing slavery as a site of tension between “cultural memory” (read African tradition) and modernity and critiques *Eve's Bayou* for its lack of continual reference to African tradition. She is disappointed that *Eve's Bayou* incorporates “voodoo” without “[harkening] these practices to their African source” even as she protests the film’s romanticization of “voodoo” as “that essential Africanness” that liberates the characters from slavery and patriarchy.¹⁹⁵

Biccum comes up short in her search for Africa in *Eve's Bayou* mainly because the films represent two different time periods. The characters of *Daughters* have a more organic relationship to slavery because the film is set in 1902 and one of the living members of the community, Nana, is both a former slave and the carrier of ancient traditions. Young Eve is four generations removed from slavery and must rely on what Biccum insists is “received” memory in order to relate to the experience of her enslaved ancestors. While the narrative of *Daughters* explores the tensions between African ancestry and African American modernity, for young Eve, “Africa, the motherland, is far behind. The father is the one beyond reach.”¹⁹⁶

But Biccum’s attempt to read *Eve's Bayou* through an Afrocentric lens also fails because she misreads the tensions in the film as individual problems rather than

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Carolyn M. Jones, “Imagining Race and Religion in Louisiana: Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* and Barbara Hambly's *Benjamin January* Novels” in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities and Contexts*, eds. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 115.

“tensions of community.”¹⁹⁷ The false dichotomy she sets up between community and individualism allows her to gloss over *Daughters*’ critique of patriarchy to assert that “traditional roles of patriarchy and matriarchy ... are never allowed to form” in Dash’s film.¹⁹⁸ There is no mention of the fundamental scene where Eli laments over the rape of his wife and Nana reminds him that he doesn’t “own Eula,” perhaps because an Afrocentric reading of *Daughters* tends to seek patriarchy in sources outside of the community. Eula’s refusal to name her rapist has often been read as an attempt to protect Eli from violence and not also as a challenge to Eli’s right to fret over the paternity of the unborn child and his wife’s “ruin.” Even though bell hooks acknowledges “the connection between [Eli’s] phallogocentricity, his patriarchal sense of ownership, and the mentality of the unknown rapist,” this recognition merely suggests to her that Eli “has another tradition he can relate to,” namely, African tradition, that can cure him of patriarchy.¹⁹⁹ Based on hooks’s argument, Biccum goes a step further and claims it is impossible to “[read] the phallus into or out of the text” of *Daughters* because both black men and women are depicted as oppressed.²⁰⁰

Community lines are drawn in *Eve’s Bayou* in the same manner they are drawn in *Daughters* – within the family around issues of tradition, religion and patriarchy. The clear social implications of patriarchy in *Daughters* are revealed in the climactic scene where Eula addresses the family on behalf of Yellow Mary, who is shunned because of the “ruin” her skin color signifies amongst other reasons. Eula encourages the family to embrace Yellow Mary:

¹⁹⁷ Biccum 63.

¹⁹⁸ Biccum 65.

¹⁹⁹ Julie Dash and bell hooks, “Dialogue between bell hooks and Julie Dash” in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*, ed. Julie Dash (New York City: New Press, 1992), 50.

²⁰⁰ Biccum 65.

We couldn't think of ourselves as pure women knowing how our mothers were ruined...but we've got to change our way of thinking. We all good women...If you love yourself, then love Yellow Mary.

Eula and the other women of the Peazant family must come to terms with patriarchy in order to love themselves, in order to heal the rifts that divide the family.

Eve's Bayou furthers the critique of patriarchy in *Daughters* by advancing the narrative in time, where we can see Eula's feminism and Eli's patriarchy still at odds within its isolated black community. The film uses a narrative of slavery not simply to speak truths about the slave experience but rather to reclaim it as a space from which the Batiste women, and by extension African American women, have always struggled to exercise agency despite oppression from multiple sources. The film focuses on the individual as a device that Hortense Spillers argues moves "agent (or actor) into the foreground."²⁰¹ Considering Zora Neale Hurston's character Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel that also critiques patriarchy and domestic violence and to which *Eve's Bayou* can be compared, Spillers asserts that its narrative "absorbs the question of racial origin" and allows Janie to act as an "agent endowed with the possibilities of action, or who can *make* her world, just as she is *made* by it."²⁰² The struggle of Janie and the Batiste women in *Eve's Bayou* to "journey from object to subject"²⁰³ within black communities, a consistent theme in the writing of black women including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, reveals the larger social project *Eve's Bayou* attempts to address. To paraphrase Fanon, the alienation of black women is not an individual question, either.

²⁰¹ Hortense Spillers, "Afterword: Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction" in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spiller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 253.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 253-254.

²⁰³ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., "Afterword. Zora Neale Hurston: "A Negro Way of Seeing"" in *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper, 1990), 187.

It is important to emphasize that the limitations Biccum places on *Daughters* and *Eve's Bayou* are inherited from the binarism of the Third Cinema discourse upon which she relies. While she can clearly see the political and social clashes within the Peasant family around tradition and religion, the patriarchal critique eludes her because patriarchy is so often an intra-racial and intrafamilial problem that erodes the boundaries between Africa and America, Third Cinema and Hollywood, "us" and "them." It is difficult to distinguish *Eve's Bayou's* attempt to implode patriarchal notions from within from an attempt to replicate patriarchal modes of thinking when the lines between mainstream and oppositional cinema are so rigidly drawn.

In what follows, I offer an alternative reading of *Eve's Bayou* to reveal its radical potential and test the boundaries of Third Cinema as a discourse of cinematic resistance. This reading posits "the gift of sight" as a literal and metaphorical site of black female agency to counter disempowering patriarchal and nationalist narratives. The gift of sight is passed down through the line but also cultivated in young Eve to enable her to intervene in her family's deteriorating situation. Because the events of the film are really memories that Eve, as an adult narrator, shares with spectators, it is the gift of sight, of black female agency, that is being shared with the audience. Personal subjectivity and collective memory intersect to address one of the most pervasive social and political conflicts, the destabilization of patriarchy which cuts across lines of race, ethnicity, and class. In order to achieve these goals, *Eve's Bayou* plumbs the depths of psychoanalysis to make the unconscious but destructive behaviors around gendered socialization conscious, to hold up a mirror into which black women can see themselves and their agency.

Destabilizing Cultural Memory

The opening scenes of *Eve's Bayou* return to the narrative of slavery to locate a legacy of empowerment for African American women beyond the proslavery myth of hypersexuality and the antislavery narrative of complete victimization.²⁰⁴ The film opens with two memories. The second begins as a black-and-white POV shot from a boat slowly drifting on the bayou towards the shore. The narrator Eve²⁰⁵ introduces the story with the shocking lines: "The summer I killed my father I was 10 years old." The subsequent images adhere to the aesthetic conventions of the visions Mozelle and Eve see during the film – slow-motion shots and series of overlapping images and dissolves. The film cuts from a shot of a sugar cane field to slave quarters, as the narrator provides us with the history of her small town in Louisiana.

The town we lived in was named after a slave. It's said that when General Jean Paul Batiste was stricken with cholera, his life was saved by the powerful medicine of an African slave woman called Eve. In return for his life, he freed her, and gave her this piece of land by the bayou. Perhaps in gratitude she bore him 16 children. We are the descendants of Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste. I was named for her.

During the narration, the "African slave woman," Eve, slowly materializes in a vacant opening in the cane field (see Illustration 14). The camera then travels along the shoreline of the bayou, where Eve materializes again among the Spanish-moss of the cypress trees. She raises her arm deliberately to point forward²⁰⁶ and as the camera

²⁰⁴ Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 64.

²⁰⁵ For clarity, there are three "Eves" in the film. Eve, the film's protagonist, is ten years old. As an adult, she narrates the film which represents a memory of her childhood. The third Eve is the protagonist's ancestor from whom she has inherited her name and the gift of sight.

²⁰⁶ Kasi Lemmons reveals in the DVD Audio Commentary that this scene is a recreation of Clarence John Laughlin's black and white photograph "Elegy for Moss Land," 1940.

follows her direction, the film fades from black-and-white to color and from mono to stereo sound as we cross onto the land and see the grand Batiste home.



Illustration 14. Eve, an enslaved African woman, materializes in the sugar cane fields. *Eve's Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.

As the story of the Batistes' ancestor frames the film and elements of the opening narration are repeated in the final scene, this scene demands close scrutiny. The narrator's phrase "Perhaps in gratitude" initially registers with sarcasm, but even if read as a scathing euphemism for rape, "perhaps" still throws the conclusion into question and destabilizes cultural memory of a victimized slave woman. On the other hand, can Eve's "gratitude," read as love, be genuine in the context of the power relations of the plantation? Did an enslaved African woman, in a racist and patriarchal slave order, have the choice of bearing sixteen children to a white slaveowner? Neither reading does justice to Eve as an agent; she is either consumed by patriarchal desire or desire for the patriarch.

An alternate reading suggests that Eve's "gratitude" is instead a bit of agency and foreknowledge. We learn later in the film that she is the source of the Batiste women's "gift of sight," the ability to see the future in visions or events in the past by touching the hands of an involved party. Is it possible that Eve was aware of the

benefits of healing General Batiste and manipulated the situation in order to attain them for herself and her descendants? In exchanging goods (his life for her freedom) with Batiste, Eve makes it difficult for him to view her as property and creates a “fissure” in the narrative of dominance.²⁰⁷ After healing Batiste, Eve gains her freedom and land, and the decision bear him children assures the perpetuation of the free status in the line as well as the wealth of the family. In this reading, Eve points the way forward in the scene towards the affluent town that bears her name, legacy and the fruits of her agency.

While the family still bears the surname of Batiste, which we will see is the source of recurrent tension for the family, Eve gives her name and legacy to the film’s backstory and to the Batiste’s and the town’s *history*. The framing narrative suggests that it is through Eve’s agency that the legal properties of white male citizenship in a slave society were handed down to her descendants. Her intervention destabilizes the patriarchal history that might have otherwise prevailed for the family and town, and the typically subjugated “maternal” agency she embodies becomes foregrounded against official history and African American cultural memory that might locate the power in the encounter between Eve and General Batiste with the latter.²⁰⁸ The selectivity of representations in the second scene parallel Eve’s importance; Batiste is not portrayed, and the only images provided are of Eve.

It is important to note that the name Eve is not coincidental, as the scene intentionally masquerades as a creation story. Male anxiety over female sexuality and procreative power are evident in the biblical creation story, just as they become evident in the subtext of Freud’s and Fanon’s psychoanalytic analyses. *Eve’s Bayou*

²⁰⁷ Sharpe 65-66.

²⁰⁸ This reading is drawn from the distinction of “female memory” as a maternal discourse that challenges official, patriarchal history in Gil Zehava Hochberg, “Mother, Memory, History: Maternal Genealogies in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie Et Vent Sure Têlummée Miracle*,” *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 3.

presents a version of the biblical myth of “Eve without Adam”²⁰⁹ which allows for rethinking the cultural myths that justify women’s oppression. By recasting this drama from a feminist perspective, the film attempts to historicize black female agency, to locate it in its earliest articulations as a means of nurturing its legacy in the future. In this myth of origin, the “law of the Mother,” the positioning of a strong African American maternal figure as “the founding term of a human and social enactment,”²¹⁰ displaces the law of the Father, with its insistence that history begins through the patriarchal exchange of women.²¹¹

Batiste’s absence from this scene does not negate the importance of his legacy in the union. The narrator notes that she and her family are the descendents of both Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste, and his name lingers despite the fact that the scene denies his visage. The gift of sight is passed on by Eve to her descendants to affirm her agency just as Batiste name is passed on to preserve their status. This tension between a subjugated but strong maternal narrative and an assertive patriarchal discourse is consistently repeated throughout the film and can be seen in the opening dialogue. The narrator relates Eve’s story as myth and fact; she affirms that the town was named for Eve but provides the details beginning with “It is said.” Remembering that the film is the narrator’s representation of her past, it becomes clear that there are possibly competing versions of the tale, but this is the one the narrator has chosen to represent her ancestor and the agency she inherits as the gift of sight. The framing narrative and each of the scenes in the film should be understood as the narrator’s “selection of

²⁰⁹ Matthew B. Johnson, "Film Review: *Eve's Bayou*," *Journal of Black Psychology* 27, no. 2 (May 2001), 247.

²¹⁰ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 80.

²¹¹ Maureen Moynagh, "'This History's Only Good for Anger': Gender and Cultural Memory in 'Beatrice Chancy'," *Signs* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002), 107.

images,” chosen carefully from those available to her but with a special emphasis on the history passed down through maternal circuits.

Remembering, Repeating, Reflecting

In the opening scene of the film, two indistinguishable figures, which we later discover are Louis Batiste and his lover Mattie Mereaux, are engaged in a sexual act and observed by young Eve, the film’s protagonist. The scene cuts to a close-up on Eve’s eyes to catch Louis and Mattie reflected in her pupil as the narrator recites: “Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain” (see Illustration 15). In the next moment, the narrator confesses that she killed her father. The audience later recognizes the scene when it is repeated, with visual clarity, as young Eve sleeps in the carriage house and is awakened by her father and Mrs. Mereaux.

It is indicative of the alternative circuits of cultural memory carved by the film that what is “printed indelibly on [Eve’s] brain” is not the victimization of her mother



Illustration 15. The image “printed indelibly” on Eve’s brain. *Eve’s Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.

and foremothers but the infidelity of her father, setting up an unorthodox “modern Oedipal tragedy.”²¹² The main characters of the film fall neatly into place in the oedipal drama. Louis is “the classic case of phallic desire in blackface,” while Roz is the stereotypically passive woman who lives to be object of Louis’s desire.²¹³ Cisely and Eve are the jealous daughters, who seek to replace their mother as the object of their father’s desire. The narrator’s confession that she killed her father rather than her mother, however, confounds this traditional reading. Eve and her aunt Mozelle confuse the normal trajectory of the oedipal story because of the unconventional female agency the gift of sight offers them.

Mozelle occupies the liminal space between the masculine (powerful, desiring) and feminine (passive, desired) that clears a path for the film’s critique of patriarchy. Considered a “black widow” because her three husbands have died and she cannot bear children, Mozelle embodies the struggle between the reassertion of the patriarch within the family, in the form of her brother Louis, and her maternally inspired agency.²¹⁴ We are reminded throughout the film that she and Louis are “very much alike,” but as the gendered “Other,” Mozelle’s “masculine” qualities open the narrative to an interrogation of gendered dichotomies. Like the heroines of melodramas, the genre within which Lemmons situates her film, Mozelle blocks the representation of women as signifiers of sexual difference by forcing the narrative “to be actually, *overtly*, about sexuality.”²¹⁵

Melodramatic protagonists are forced to choose between their “masculine” and “feminine” sides, often opting for the latter after encountering a series of obstacles in

²¹² Johnson 247.

²¹³ D. Soyini Madison, "Oedipus Rex at Eve's Bayou Or the Little Black Girl Who Left Sigmund Freud in the Swamp," *Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (Apr 2000), 218.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

²¹⁵ Annie Noncenti, "Writing and Directing *Eve's Bayou*," *Scenario: The Magazine of Screenwriting Art* 4 (1998), 197; Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'" in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 75.

accessing the power associated with masculinity.²¹⁶ Mozelle does not choose, and she is haunted by the memories of her dead husbands and mystified by the meaning of life. As a psychoanalytic subject, Mozelle represents *jouissance*, “the 'enigmatic', 'unnameable' sexual power of women” and like her brother Louis, she cannot be monogamous.²¹⁷ Like her brother, she is condemned to repeat the destructive behavior of infidelity as a means of filling a psychological void, and their extramarital affairs are destructive to the point of death. Mozelle continues to remarry in the blind hope that things will change because she cannot see her own future, even though she can foretell the futures of others.

Despite her inability to live her duality without negative consequences, Mozelle advances the agenda of female agency by cultivating the gift of sight within Eve. If the agency of the Batistes' female ancestor is speculative, Mozelle's is certain but unrealized, leaving Eve to perfect the genealogy. Mozelle treats Eve as her protégé, allowing her to eavesdrop on sessions with clients as long as Eve remains quiet and invisible. Although Mozelle cannot make sense of her own life, she gives Eve the tools to “make common, what appears to be irrational” and thus challenge the “official and hegemonic common sense” that the patriarchal narrative represents.²¹⁸

Mozelle uses stories from her own life to instruct Eve. In one pivotal scene of shared memory between them, we learn that the gift of sight is also the gift of storytelling, reshaping and transmitting memory, or rather, the “(re)production of social reality.”²¹⁹ Mozelle tells Eve about the death of her husband Maynard, who loved her “most of all,” at the hands of her lover Hosea. Mozelle describes the scene

²¹⁶ Marina Heung, “‘What's the Matter with Sara Jane?’: Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*,” *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1987), 32.

²¹⁷ Madison 323.

²¹⁸ Kara Keeling, “Reflections on the Black Femme's Role in the (Re)Production of Cinematic Reality: The Case of *Eve's Bayou*” (*Capital Q: Marxism After Queer Theory*, New York: New York University Press, Forthcoming).

²¹⁹ “Ibid., 12.

while standing in front of a mirror, explaining that Hosea arrived at her home and demanded she leave with him. As she repeats Maynard's response, we hear his voice and hers merge, and then Maynard and Hosea enter the frame of the mirror, the past becoming a reflection before Eve's eyes (see Illustration 16). After Maynard affirms his intentions to "keep" his wife at gunpoint, Mozelle tells Eve, "I walked slowly over...and I stood next to my husband" whom she suddenly realized she loved. Mozelle turns from the mirror and walks into the reflected past, leaving a bewildered Eve still gazing into the mirror (see Illustration 17). Mozelle, Maynard and Hosea reenact the moment in the mirror until Hosea shoots Maynard (see Illustration 18). Eve turns to see Mozelle standing alone behind her and the mirror is empty as Mozelle laments, "And I was alone, for a while."

Lemmons calls this "the defining scene" of the film, although she had to fight to convince producers that "a B-character talking for five minutes" was integral to the story.²²⁰ The scene's significance can be located in the mirror, which also has special meaning in psychoanalytic and film theory. According to Lacan, infants identify with idealized images of themselves when they gaze at their mirror-images. While this process prepares the child to adopt cultural norms, the idealized self also represents an unattainable reality toward which the child will strive through adulthood. Drawing upon this theory, Laura Mulvey likens the screen on which a film is projected to a mirror into which spectators gaze and see idealized images of themselves. Because most films reproduce the imbalanced gender roles of the patriarchal society, positing males as active gazers and women in the passive role of "to-be-looked-at-ness," she insists that spectators are "masculinized," regardless of their actual genders, to desire to control and possess women within the film vicariously.²²¹

²²⁰ Noncenti 195.

²²¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 62-63.



Illustration 16. Maynard and Hosea enter the mirror. *Eve's Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.



Illustration 17. Mozelle walks back into the reflected past. *Eve's Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.



Illustration 18. Mozelle, Maynard and Hosea reenact the past. *Eve's Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.

McGowan offers a corrective to Mulvey's traditional reading of Lacan, arguing that Lacan defined the gaze as objective rather than subjective. The gaze is not "the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision."²²² The subject's encounter with the gaze of the Other is traumatic because it exposes the subject's own insatiable desire for the Other, for wholeness. The subject, faced with his own lack, must relinquish the mastery of the gaze to the object. In other words, the masculine, active gaze is subverted when the passive, feminine object of desire and mastery is empowered to return the active gaze.

The mirror in *Eve's Bayou* enacts a similar ideological rupture through Mozelle's performance in the mirror. Mozelle demonstrates her mastery of the gaze as she conjures a reflection that is not her replica but a reenactment of a scene from her life, much like a film within the film. Possessing the "unabashed agency and history" that the gift of sight offers her, Mozelle "is not simply another woman seeing herself in the mirror through men and heterosexual, romantic love. She is not a

²²² Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and its Vicissitudes," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (2003), 33.

reflection of them; they are a reflection of her.”²²³ The active gaze Mozelle asserts in the scene subverts the spectator’s vicarious attempt to domesticate her as feminine and renders the gendered dichotomies of the gaze inadequate.

When Mozelle steps back into the mirror, however, she again ruptures norms by becoming the subject of her own gaze:

The moment Mozelle steps backward and into the mirror...she no longer 'looks on' but 'lives in' her gaze.... From master of the gaze she then becomes subject of her own seeing. The seer and the seen become one, actualized and embodied in Mozelle's memory.²²⁴

When Mozelle enters the mirror because she is no longer remembering the past; she is reliving it. Instead of imagining herself as a character in the story she remembers, she actually becomes the protagonist of her autobiographical tale. This act seals the gulf between her actual existence and mirror-image, and Mozelle embodies her ideal image as desiring and desired, subject and object. The anxiety and awe Eve and the audience feel during this scene is a response to Mozelle’s uncanny ability to find pleasure in the tragedy of her life because of the wholeness she acquires in the mirror that she lacks outside of it.²²⁵

When Maynard is shot and Mozelle declares, “And I was alone again,” the sense of lack has returned and the mirror is once again merely a reflective surface. The wholeness she achieves in retelling the story cannot be reflected in the story that unfolds in the mirror. Mozelle displays a dependence on the possessive love of Maynard and Hosea, a desire to lose *her self* in love, which complements and appears

²²³ Madison 324-325.

²²⁴ Ibid., 325.

²²⁵ In the DVD Audio Commentary, Lemmons relates that she instructed actress Debbie Morgan to play the role as someone “in love with the tragedy of [her] life....There’s something beautiful to [her] about the poetry of [her] loss.” In an interview with Annie Noncenti, Lemmons compares Mozelle’s pleasure in tragedy with the “neurosis” of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who was one of the inspirations for Mozelle’s character (197).

to justify the men's claims of ownership. But the uncontained desire of Mozelle, Maynard and Hosea, all motivated by a sense of lack, compels them into a lethal confrontation. Eve witnesses the self-destructive nature of "the phallus run amuck" in Mozelle's love triangle that "in its greed it commits a double suicide."²²⁶ The jealousy of her husband and lover break the spell of all-consuming love (submission to the Other) she desires at the same time that it offers her a fleeting moment of freedom.²²⁷

The mirror scene reminds us that Mozelle lives the struggle between patriarchy and female agency, between her ancestors Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste, in one body. Seminal texts in the African-American Studies canon, such as Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, also use a familial framing to describe the national racial conflict, revealing "latently oedipal" tensions which also perturb the Batistes.²²⁸ But whereas Du Bois and Brent live out the dilemma of being descended from "victimized" black mothers and absent white fathers racially, Mozelle's "double consciousness" cannot be understood without accessing its psychological dimension. For Mozelle, it is not just fidelity to the race and to the father that are at odds but also fidelity to the self, to her own subjectivity and agency.

It is only in the mirror, when Mozelle conjures up an image to remember and reflect (on) her life experience, that she attains a fleeting freedom that lives up to the agency she inherits from her female ancestor. The gift of sight liberates her

²²⁶ Madison 324.

²²⁷ This analysis parallels Todd McGowan's assessment of Janie's liberating relationship with Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. McGowan argues that their relationship is as liberating as it is confining for Janie, and with his death Janie has a fleeting moment of actual freedom and existence outside of the Other. See Todd McGowan, "Liberation and Domination: Their Eyes were Watching God and the Evolution of Capitalism," *MELUS* 24, no. 1 (Spring, 1999), 109-128.

²²⁸ E. Victor Wolfenstein, "On the Road Not Taken: 'Revolt and Revenge' in W.E.B. Du Bois's *the Souls of Black Folk*." *Journal of Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2000), 126.

temporarily in the same way it liberated her ancestor Eve from bondage and empowered countless other enslaved subjects to control their own destinies despite bondage and oppression.²²⁹ The power Mozelle exercises in the mirror, whose roots that can be traced to *Vodun* practices,²³⁰ becomes a means by which to “engineer the symbolic,” to bring into being the female agency otherwise denied, or that otherwise evades her, in everyday life. The mirror scene is a ritual that:

[makes] the unseen seen and the unknown known. The mythic becomes the narrative; the symbol becomes the evocation of the narrative; the ritual becomes the materialisation and enactment of the symbol into the narrative — this is the conjuring process.²³¹

This amalgam of storytelling and magic is, according to Hochberg, “the means through which women ...strive to displace, or at least to survive, history.”²³²

The Gift of Sight as a Rite of Passage

Mozelle’s performance and the story that unfolds in the mirror are meant to be tools for initiating Eve into the feminine agency of her maternal line. Mozelle encourages Eve to intervene in her family’s deterioration, although she is surprised to learn of the form Eve’s intervention will take. What Mozelle’s mirror reveals to Eve is that her efforts have been misdirected. Immediately before the mirror scene, Mozelle walks in on a tense moment as Eve lashes out at her mother for her long-suffering and masochistic toleration her Louis’s infidelity.²³³ After Mozelle’s

²²⁹ Madison 326.

²³⁰ Carolyn Jones suggests that the family is governed by the *loa* Erzulie Freda, who Zora Neale Hurston described as “the pagan goddess of love” and in whose song a General Jean Baptiste is mentioned (110).

²³¹ Madison 327.

²³² Hochberg 6.

²³³ In a scene that some critics have argued were not written for a child, Eve complains to Mozelle that her mother “keeps stabbing herself in the kitchen,” while Cisely has been in “the goddamn bathtub” for an hour. When her mother replies that Louis “works hard so [they] can have a house with four

performance, however, Eve turns her energies toward her father, realizing that being “careless” with her mother’s feelings will not solve the family’s problems. In the very next scene, she disrupts Cisely’s attempt to greet her father upon his late return home by staying up late as well. Transformed from the little girl who vied with her sister for her father’s affection, Eve instead attempts to prevent her father and sister from further damaging her parents’ marriage. When Eve realizes her interventions have not been enough – when Cisely confides in her that the boundaries between father and daughter have already been transgressed – Eve determines to kill her father.

Eve consults Elzora, a “hoodoo” practitioner and her aunt’s rival, after Mozelle refuses to tell her how to kill Louis with “voodoo.” On the way to meet Elzora she runs into Mr. Mereaux and slyly hints at the affair between his wife and her father. Eve gives Elzora hair from her father’s brush, expecting to receive a doll with which she enact a ritual and gain control over her father’s life. Instead, Elzora tells her she has already cast the spell, and Eve rushes to a local bar to prevent the death already in progress. She convinces her father, who has been indiscriminately flirting with Mrs. Mereaux in the bar, to come home with her, but Mr. Mereaux arrives and confronts Louis. He instructs Louis to not ever speak to his wife again, but in his arrogance Louis turns and says, “Goodnight, Mattie.” Mr. Mereaux’s anger is aroused and he shoots Louis.

Louis’s death parallels the murder of Mozelle’s husband Maynard in many respects. Just as Mozelle’s infidelity and inability to choose between her husband and lover instigated the confrontation that ensued, Eve sets her father’s murder into motion by warning Mr. Mereaux and consulting Elzora. One reading of the film suggests that Eve “kills” her father as a means of salvaging a family torn apart by Louis’s

bathrooms,” Eve retorts: “Not every night he’s working. I know he’s not.” The scene reveals how well Roz and Cisely fit into the oedipal narrative which Eve constantly works to disrupt.

philandering.²³⁴ By extension, this implies that Mozelle also kills her husbands, as the black widow image suggests. But I would argue that it is Louis's insistence on speaking to Mattie despite Mr. Mereaux's warning that causes his death, and that with the help of Mozelle's mirror Eve discovers, or rather, remembers, this. Eve comes to this conclusion by way of her attempt to decide between the competing versions of the kiss between Cisely and Louis, and her decision informs how she presents the memories reflected in the film.

When Cisely relates the incident to Eve, the audience is privy to a visual reenactment of her account, a projection of either Cisely's memory or Eve's mental image. Surprisingly, however, Cisely never says Louis initiated the kiss, but what she does say reveals her powerlessness in the situation. She *tells* Eve she sat on Louis's lap and "was scared," we *see* the reenactment in which Louis kisses her, and then Cisely's narration returns as she tells Eve that she was "trying to get away." Louis's version of the events are revealed near the end of the film after his death, when Eve reads a posthumous letter he has written to Mozelle in response to her accusation that he attempted to molest his daughter. We hear Louis's voiceover as Eve reads the letter silently, and he describes in detail what happened, including that Cisely "was kissing [him] like a woman," as we see the events unfold once again.

After Eve reads the letter she rushes down to the bayou and accuses Cisely of lying. Cisely retorts that she wasn't lying, and Eve begs for her hands in order to ascertain the truth (see Illustration 19). In her vision, however, she sees only fragments of what happened, the elements of the two prior enactments that are neutral. Eve comforts Cisely and together they push the letter into the water. As the camera pulls back to a wide shot of Eve and Cisely embracing by the bayou and reflected in the water, the narrator closes the film with the lines:

²³⁴ Johnson 247.

The summer my father said goodnight, I was ten years old ... Like others before me, I have the gift of sight, but the truth changes color depending on the light, and tomorrow can be clearer than yesterday. Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others imprinted indelibly on the brain. Each image is like a thread, each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture, and the tapestry tells a story, and the story is our past.

This closing scene leaves the audience in perpetual ambiguity as to who is at fault since Eve's vision fails to provide the spectator with a decisive visualization.

Kara Keeling helps to explain this scene when she argues that none of the visions in the film provide conclusive answers for the audience. She notes that Mozelle also sees fragmented images when she counsels her clients, and only Mozelle is able to make sense of those fragments. She then provides clients with her interpretation of the vision and "makes common" what she envisions for the audience. The spectator should not conclude, then, that that ambiguity of Eve's vision represents the ambiguity of the actual events, but rather, that Eve must make "common sense" out of this ambiguity. Eve's decision to push her father's letter into the water is a definitive clue that she rejects Louis's rationalization of the events, backed by the



Illustration 19. Eve takes Cisely's hands to ascertain the truth. *Eve's Bayou*, dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997.

disproportionate power of the father (as male and adult) and the written word, in favor of Cisely's muted accusation and "the enigmatic, undecideable, irrational visions available to the viewer and to Eve."²³⁵

If the film ends in ambiguity it is because the spectator has not realized that the film itself is Eve's attempt to "make common" the events of her childhood. The closing narration suggests that Eve has made a decision as to who was at fault. Instead of repeating that opening narration that the memory (the film) represents the year she killed her father, as an adult narrator Eve instead asserts that it was the year her father "said goodnight." Eve chooses to represent patriarchy as a self-consuming force, to emphasize that Louis insisted upon "saying goodnight" and caused his own death, instead of claiming that her actions or Elzora's spell killed him.

Both Mozelle and Elzora affirm this for Eve. We can conclude that Elzora does not actually cast a spell on Eve's behalf. Lemmons suggests that Elzora is only trying to scare Eve, and although she wishes to leave the film open to interpretation, she concedes that it is Eve's "emotional power" or "personal voodoo" that is on display more so than the actual power of a spell.²³⁶ Elzora warns Roz that "sometimes a soldier fall on his own sword," and before she accepts the hair from Eve she tells her that "people have a way of dying at their own speed." Mozelle tells Eve it is impossible to kill people with "voodoo," and after Louis's death she delivers a message from him that helps Eve absolve her guilt.

It is in Mozelle's mirror, however, that Eve first sees the self-destruction of "the phallus run amuck" that shapes her remembrance of her childhood. She remembers this scene, for the most part extraneous to the forward movement of the film, because for her it is essential to her understanding of her childhood. Eve's

²³⁵ Keeling 22-23.

²³⁶ Noncenti 195-196.

mirror is the film screen, and in her mirror we see the reproduction of her tragic experiences and the “common sense” she makes of them in order to survive. Both Mozelle’s mirror-magic and Eve’s cinematic projection utilize the gift of sight to recast the drama. Enlisting the two violent acts at the core of psychoanalysis as its themes, *Eve’s Bayou* contests the patriarch’s exercise of ownership of women that contradictorily supports his violation of the law against incest through the murder of the patriarch and the transformation of the object of exchange (women) into agents.²³⁷ Through the film Eve remembers her rite of passage, the moment when she came into being and agency as a Batiste woman with the gift of sight.²³⁸

The closing narration repeats the lines from the opening scene about memory. It is surprising, however, that the “indelible image” in Eve’s memory is not the ominous kiss between father and daughter but Louis’s fling with Mattie Mereaux. That Eve remembers this most of all suggests that Louis had transgressed acceptable boundaries long before kissing Cisely, through extramarital affairs that display an objectifying disregard for women and carelessness with his children’s feelings.²³⁹ The cavalier way Louis flirts with other women, and the cavalier words he uttered before he was murdered, become Eve’s justification for his death.

Keeling argues that the films “perfunctory” closing narration, which does not clearly “make common” how Eve interprets the vision, allows the audience to normalize the alternative circuits carved through the “gift of sight.”²⁴⁰ The audience leaves the theater believing Eve resigns herself to the fact that truth cannot be ascertained between the two competing claims, rather than that Eve has already made

²³⁷ Moynagh 107-109.

²³⁸ In an interview with Annie Noncenti, Lemmons admits that Eve’s character was inspired by the character Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (197), a novel that has come to epitomize the “coming-of-age” or “rite of passage” tale in American literature, ironically also through the murder

²³⁹ Johnson 246.

²⁴⁰ Keeling 27.

the determination. I would argue in addition that the Third Cinema critic cannot recognize the radical critique offered by *Eve's Bayou*, in this final scene or in the scenes that come before, if he or she does not wish to engage psychoanalysis. Spectators and critics must engage with the film's psychoanalytic overtones, rather than come from a presumed oppositional standpoint, in order to arrive at an alternative and oppositional reading. In other words, spectators must read against the grain of Third Cinema to uncover the potential of *Eve's Bayou*, which is a departure from both Hollywood films that "commercialise black bodies rather than explore black minds"²⁴¹ as well as from Third Cinema that replicates this effect by foregrounding racial conflict over and above other means for expressing the human experience. Like other diasporic filmmakers, Lemmons utilizes all of the tools available to her, including psychoanalysis, to challenge intra-racial patriarchy, and likewise critics must be willing to utilize those same tools to "make common" for spectators the potential of diasporic films.

²⁴¹ Kimberlyn Leary, "Remembering and Repeating in *Eve's Bayou*," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 81 (2000), 600.

CONCLUSION

POSTMODERN MODERNISM AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF RESISTANCE

In the foregoing chapters I have analyzed contemporary films from the African diaspora in an attempt to deconstruct and broaden the conceptual borders of Third Cinema. Yet the ideological and temporal break I designate as the diasporic turn reintroduces another theoretical boundary between Third Cinema as modern and African diaspora filmmaking as postmodern that I aim to address here. In this final chapter, I sketch some preliminary thoughts on how Third Cinema and African diaspora filmmaking can be situated within the modern/ postmodern debate and the implications of these positions on the translation of resistance beyond the cinematic medium.

Neither Third Cinema nor contemporary African diaspora filmmaking fall neatly into the narratives of modernity and postmodernity, in large part because these discourses have long operated as measures of Western progress in relation to a laggard Third World. In the Introduction, I situated Third Cinema precariously within the model of modern cinema put forth by Gilles Deleuze primarily because both cinemas open themselves to political and social reality, in opposition to classical Hollywood cinema which relies upon spectacle and fantasy. Third Cinema's strident oppositionality, which for Deleuze is reminiscent of the totalizing views of classical cinema, actually makes it modern; although it generates its own romantic notions of revolution, it does so with the intent of breaking away from the utopian world-view of the Western powers. Although, in typical fashion, John Orr locates the origins of modern cinema in the U.S. and Europe in his book *Cinema and Modernity*, his identification of a post-1950s "neo-modern" cinema that retains the "apocalyptic dream" of universal equality and the belief in the "mimetic power of the image" to

represent social concerns adequately characterizes the modern elements of Third Cinema.²⁴²

Scholars have argued that Deleuze's time-image, with its "schizophrenic" openness and aesthetic (rather than thematic) rejection of utopianism, actually reveals "an incipient postmodernity."²⁴³ This assessment is significant because it implies that postmodernism is in fact, as many scholars have argued, a retreat from contesting the grand narratives of the West. Tejumola Olaniyan isolates three critiques of postmodernism from African scholars that can be seen in Deleuze's "postmodern" cinema. The first – that the subject it decenters is "the European subject, with a capital S: the subject that, for most of the last four centuries, made itself the center of reason and deified that reason" – can be seen in the disillusionment Deleuze ascertains is the source of modern cinema. Olaniyan's second and third critiques that postmodernism deemphasizes action in favor of abstruse language and the interpretation of meanings²⁴⁴ is evident in the Deleuze's elaboration of the time-image and assertion that

We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it – no more than we believe that an action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially.²⁴⁵

His characterization of the producers, characters and spectators of modern cinema as mere recorders rather than actors provokes Stam's warning that at its worst

²⁴² John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1993), 4-6.

²⁴³ Angelo Restivo, "Into the Breach: *between The Movement-Image and The Time-Image*" in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 172.

²⁴⁴ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and African Studies" in *Postmodernism, Postcoloniality and African Studies*, ed. Zine Magubane (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 40-42.

²⁴⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 206.

postmodernism “reduces politics to a passive spectator sport where the most we can do is react to pseudo-events.”²⁴⁶

Although through modern cinema Euro-Americans come to share the sense of despair that bell hooks argues “black folks” experienced “prior to the advent of postmodernism,” the question remains whether postmodern cinema can be utilized for resistance.²⁴⁷ Deleuze subsumes the social protest of modern cinema in a taxonomic system of aesthetic signs, notably time-images, which Fredric Jameson would argue eradicates the “spatial” coordinates of critical theoretical difference.²⁴⁸ As such, postmodern cinema remains inside the system of thought it challenges, as Solanas and Getino incisively suggested when they termed European auterism “Second Cinema” that remains “trapped inside the fortress” of “the System.”²⁴⁹

The contemporary African diaspora films I analyze in this thesis cannot be easily situated within the models of modern or postmodern cinema. On the one hand, they follow the pattern of Third Cinema by challenging the hegemony of Euro-American cultural models; on the other, they critique the replication of these models within Third Cinema. Although self-reflexively exploring the politics of representation and calling for the plurality of identity, they nevertheless mobilize representations and identities for the purpose of taking political stances. To borrow Lowery Stokes Sims’s term, they are examples of a “postmodern modern” cinema that attempts to reconcile its contradictory position inside and outside of the West, inside and outside Third Cinema, inside and outside the discourses of modernity and

²⁴⁶ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 307.

²⁴⁷ bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 424.

²⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 48.

²⁴⁹ Jameson 195; Solanas and Getino 4.

postmodernity.²⁵⁰ In terming contemporary African diaspora film postmodern modern, I am also attempting to suture any rift implied by the diasporic turn, instead suggesting that it is a part of a continuum of Third World resistance that speaks back to external and internal domination.

If, at its worst, postmodernism is antithetical to revolution or resistance, what benefits are derived from a postmodern modern cinema? Can African diaspora films actually translate into the resistance envisioned by Solanas, Getino, Gabriel and others? The Foucauldian link between knowledge and power that is predominant in postcolonial and postmodern theories suggests that the most important contribution of postmodern art is its challenge to colonial discourse and reframing of the discourse of resistance. Fanon's references to cinema in *Black Skin, White Masks* invite consideration of the psychological impact a postmodern modern cinema could have on oppressed subjects. Similarly, his linkage of revolutionary art with the emergence of national culture in *Wretched of the Earth* exposes the cultural dimension of oppositional cinema. According to these models, African diaspora films should have psychological, cultural and discursive repercussions for viewers that translate into resistance.

Having detailed in the previous chapters what is postmodern about the three films studied in this thesis, I aim to focus on the interplay of the films' modern and postmodern elements that shapes their unique articulations of resistance directed, as Third Cinema aims, against the debilitating material manifestations of neocolonialism. I argue that by simultaneously "de-naturalizing" familiar circuits of resistance and reconstituting and mobilizing them in the service of critical forms of opposition,

²⁵⁰ Lowery Stokes Sims, "The Post-Modern Modernism of Wifredo Lam" in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 86-101.

contemporary African diaspora film invites spectators to participate in ideological struggle and share in the responsibility of transforming the world.²⁵¹

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet dismantles the idea of Lumumba as a national hero and cultural icon by disallowing full identification with him as an exiled subject. The psychological impact of this subversion of the spectator's expectations is that it forces the viewer to participate in Peck's search for Lumumba and for answers to the difficult questions his assassination poses. On the cultural front, the film addresses the inability of many political exiles to return home and the hostile conditions they encounter as national and diasporic subjects. It also expresses a nostalgia for a revolutionary past that seems increasingly difficult to reclaim in contemporary times. The film's overt critique of Belgian and U.S. complicity in Lumumba's assassination, made possible through European funding and presented mainly to a Belgian audience, prompted new inquiries into Lumumba's assassination and an official apology from the Belgian government. By the fortieth anniversary of the assassination, the full details of the international plot had been uncovered, subverting the power dynamics between colonizer and colonized and forever altering the discourse around Lumumba's legacy. Ironically, this development allows Peck to reposition Lumumba as a national and cultural hero in his 2001 biopic. Through these developments, the film's modernist project of recovery is accomplished even as it recognizes the inability of fully recovering the future Lumumba represents beyond memory.

The modernist aim of *Looking for Langston* – the valorization of black queer identity through the projection of Langston Hughes as an icon of queer identity and

²⁵¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1989), 3; Kobena Mercer, "Respondent to Clyde Taylor's 'Searching for the Postmodern in African Cinema'" in *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*, ed. June Givanni (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 146-147.

racial authenticity – is achieved primarily through psychological means. Through Julien’s postmodern subversion of the codes of interracial desire, the viewer discovers pleasure where they traditionally have found displeasure in cinema: in the spectacle of the black body. The film’s cultural intervention is its disclosure of the similar transnational processes of racial and queer identity formation. It also tackles the external and internal oppressions that collaborate to regulate the sexuality of black subjects. The film routinely disrupts the heteronormative discourse of black studies through its wide circulation in academic circles and its reassessment of the Harlem Renaissance. Even though the film is not necessarily an investigation into Hughes’s sexuality, it nevertheless promotes him as a convenient symbol that demands acknowledgement and acceptance of black queer subjects historically.

In Chapter Three I argue that spectators and critics must engage psychoanalytic criticism to fully uncover the critique of patriarchy in *Eve’s Bayou*. The film relies on a causal narrative to draw viewers in, but its erratic depictions of visions and “voodoo” as well as the initial ambiguity of the closing scene prompt viewers to revisit the film with a critical eye. It is possible, however, for viewers to get caught up in the ambiguity of the final scene, as Kara Keeling argues. Even so, the final scene initiates a public debate over what happened and who is at fault that divides audiences ideologically, often along gendered lines. Much like the national debates that “postmodern” news media routinely incites among its audience, *Eve’s Bayou* requires viewers to form their own interpretations and take stances. It is through this false debate that viewers can acknowledge the internalization of patriarchal attitudes within black communities and subsequently understand the film as a critique of patriarchy. Through its psychological manipulation of its spectators, *Eve’s Bayou* prompts viewers to engage in a discursive battle with profound implications for the understanding and negotiation of African American culture.

These results, however minor, imply that African diaspora films do make a difference and can spark various types of resistance. The conundrum of Third Cinema and contemporary African diaspora cinema, however, is that spectators must be willing to engage films intellectually and translate their cinematic experiences into thought or action beyond the theater. By tapping into the expedient modern and postmodern aspects of Third and mainstream cinemas, African diaspora filmmakers can continue to cross the discursive boundaries of both narratives to craft creative responses to local, regional and global issues. In conjunction with other forms of resistance, Third Cinema's radical aims can be reclaimed and realized within the African diaspora.

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