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dissertation entitled

THE CINEMA OF HAILE GERIMA:
BLACK FILM AS A LIBERATING FORCE

presented by

Tama Lynne Hamilton-Wray

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Ph.D. degree in American Studies

Major Professor's Signature

August 27, 2010

Date

# THE CINEMA OF HAILE GERIMA: BLACK FILM AS A LIBERATING CINEMA

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

American Studies

2010

ABSTRACT

THE CINEMA OF HAILE GERIMA: BLACK FILM AS A LIBERATING FORCE

By

Tama Lynne Hamilton-Wray

Although Ethiopian-born filmmaker Haile Gerima's career spans nearly 40 years and he has received honors for his work from around the world, his genius is not yet fully appreciated and may not be for years to come. A significant force in world cinema, particularly in black independent cinema, Gerima is not just a filmmaker, but a pan-Africanist, an educator, an activist, an entrepreneur, and, as he is sometimes described, "a warrior." Gerima's important influence on black film culture is evidenced in his continual development of the language of film and in how he successfully integrates his work with the African-American community. His influence on black film culture is best demonstrated in the historic United States theatrical run of *Sankofa* (1993), Gerima's most financially successful film to date. *Sankofa*, a story of the African slave trade told from a black point of view, was deemed unmarketable by mainstream distributors. However, Gerima's film company, Mypheduh, and a team of community leaders and activists, developed and conducted a unique and successful national distribution campaign from 1993 to 1995 which drew thousands of black theater-goers hungry to see their history presented in a non-distorted manner.

*The Cinema of Haile Gerima: Black Film as a Liberating Force* documents the film career of Haile Gerima, placing him in the context of black independent film history and its intersections with Third Cinema and Global African cinema. Through the theoretical framework of the Triangular Communication Model, this study analyzes the

narrative films of Haile Gerima in an attempt to further understand the mechanisms he employs to execute what he identifies as "Triangular Cinema," a cooperative relationship between the filmmaker, the spectators, and the critics which aims to liberate society. The Triangular Communication Model adopts Teshome Gabriel's Third Cinema theory, which calls for looking at the filmic institutions of text, reception and production through the three-phased evolution of Third World film culture, assimilation, remembrance and combative, as its foundation. Gerima's Triangular Cinema approach and Reid's Black Womanist Spectator theory contribute by providing a framework for examining the filmmaker in the filmmaking process. The film text of *Sankofa* and Gerima's other narrative films, personal interviews, Mypheduh Films' documents, and film reviews provide the primary data for this study.

This study's in-depth analysis of *Sankofa*, including its production, distribution, and exhibition, provides an innovative, pragmatic, and foundational case study for filmmakers and scholars who wish to explore the potential for Third Cinema-influenced films in the African-American context.

To

Brenda, Devote, Grandma Ella, Shaka, Faye, and Carol

Knowing that you are peering down from heaven gives me enduring strength.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you God for your faithfulness.

As a daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, scholar, and colleague, I am deeply gratitude to all who have hoped for me, prayed for me, pushed me, supported me, believed in me, cajoled me, loved me, cared for me, advised me, and made me laugh.

I thank my parents, Flynn and Rachel, for giving me life, and bringing me up on good old Alabama-Mississippi values. You always encouraged me to fight on anyhow and made me believe I could do anything. I thank my husband, Jeff, for being my friend and lover. Our union is mighty. You are my heart. I thank my children, Jasmine, Kimani, and Elijah, for giving me a reason to push on when the going got rough. I hope that I have made you proud. I thank my siblings, Al, Richetta, Yvonne, Lloyd, Flynn and Charlie, for loving me and always being a phone call away.

Pero Dagbovie, you have inspired me and encouraged me in ways you will never know. I am eternally grateful. Judith Roof, Folu Ogundimu, Lynnette Overby, Aime Ellis, and Gretchen Barbatsis, thank you for all of your support and feedback. I am grateful to American Studies for giving me a home to explore my study and supporting me along the way. Thank you Ann Larabee, David Stowe and Steve Rachman, and Patience Adibe.

I treasure all of the friends who have sustained me while at Michigan State University and Ohio University. Your successes kept me going and helped me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. To my church family, St. Stephens Community Church, you have blessed me with a home away from home. Thank you for all of your kindness and prayers. And finally, thank you Haile Gerima for blazing the path.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Third Cinema, Black Film and Social Change

> I am nothing without Fanon. Frantz Fanon is my bible. Cabral is my bible. Nkrumah is my vision. Paul Robeson is my passion and rage. Du Bois is my intellectual.... As a filmmaker, especially at UCLA, I refurbished myself through the Pan-Africanist movement. That's where I come from. My energy comes out of that. So if I do exist (its) by their work, the seed they have unleashed a long time ago... I am, in fact, a very indebted person to those folks who wrote so much. Just to see the image of Lumumba makes me go forward and not backward.
> ~Haile Gerima (Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

The struggle against oppression and the pursuit of the American promise of freedom and equality have been persistant and pervasive efforts by people of African descent in United States for well over 400 years. Since the turn of the twentieth century, modern African-American socio-political movements, such as the anti-lynching campaign, the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement, have addressed these efforts in numerous ways. The artist has played and continues to play an essential and unique role in black socio-political change movements, as was particularly evident in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The engaged artist contributes to positive social change through his work of documenting, reflecting, inciting, remembering, inspiring, teaching, and critiquing society. Together with the community, the artist may engage in what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire calls *conscientização* (conscientization).[1] Friere describes conscientization as an internal process of social change that can lead to an external process of social change. Friere holds that through education and critical engagement with one's world, an individual is transformed and then able to engage with other self-actualized individuals to devise creative approaches to changing his or her

[1] The Portuguese word *conscientização* refers to an individuals's deepening attitude of awareness and ability to think critically, which can initiate liberation. It was central to Freire's adult literacy training (2001).

world for the better. The process of social change, according to Friere, is achieved not by oppressed people integrating themselves "into the structure of oppression" but rather by them "transform(ing) that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (74).[2] Development theorist Guy Gran's offers that concientization leads to a "liberation of human potential" (2-3) in that an individual:

> ... moves from a position as subject to one as an actor who defines the goals, controls the resources, and directs the processes affecting his or her life. An individual is in an unequal contest against large organizations. Thus individuals must also create small groups to enhance their power and ability to deal with external change agents. (146)

The engaged artist can provide the stimuli with his or her cultural productions that sets in motion a dialectical, collective process that both develops the individual and in turn the community.

Through an exploration of the cinema of Haile Gerima and black independent cinema, this dissertation studies the potential of using an expression of Third Cinema to promote positive social change in the African-American community. Film scholar Teshome Gabriel holds that Third Cinema's purpose is "committed to a direct and aggressive opposition to oppression" (*Third Cinema* 15). Third Cinema specifically sets out to achieve its goals by creating an alternative culturally-grounded film language that empowers spectators by critically engaging them in a demystified cinema experience.

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[2] The Portuguese word conscientização refers to an individual's deepening attitude of awareness and ability to think critically, which can initiate liberation. It was central to Freire's adult literacy training (2001).

In their manifesto, "Towards a Third Cinema," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the founders of Third Cinema, further stress the revolutionary and experimental nature of Third Cinema. They assert:

> The existence of a revolutionary cinema is inconceivable without the constant and methodical exercise of practice, search and experimentation. It even means committing the new filmmaker to take chances on the unknown, to leap into space at times, exposing himself to failure as does the guerrilla who travels along paths that he himself opens up with machete blows. The possibility of discovering and inventing film forms and structures that serve a more profound vision of our reality resides in the ability to place oneself on the outside limits of the familiar to make one's way amid constant dangers. (48)

The aesthetics of Third Cinema are intricately intertwined with an actively engaged audience. Gabriel notes that: "within the context of Third Cinema, aesthetics do not have an independent existence, nor do they simply rest in the work *per se*. Rather, they are a function of critical spectatorship" ("Towards" 60). Hence, in Third Cinema the artist, or the filmmaker in this case, and the community, or the spectators, are empowered to deconstruct the old system and create a new one in an effort to forge a path free from oppression.

This study informs three areas of scholarly inquiry: 1) Third Cinema, 2) black independent cinema, and 3) black audience studies. First, this study explores Gerima's application of Third Cinema strategies and in turn expands the way in which Third Cinema is theorized and researched. Second, the body of knowledge concerning black independent cinema history benefits from the documentation of the cinema of Haile

Gerima and his contributions to filmmaking and film theory. This study situates Gerima's contributions to black film history among other black film mavericks such as Senegalese Ousmane Sembene and African-American Oscar Micheaux. And finally, the in-depth look at the spectators' and critics' reception of *Sankofa* and the human interaction of the spectators, critics, and filmmaker with the cultural product of the film, *Sankofa* contributes to the scant scholarship on contemporary black audience studies.

*The Cinema of Haile Gerima: Black Film as a Liberating Force* critically explores the narrative films (from 1971 to 1993) of Ethiopian born filmmaker Haile Gerima (b. 1946), with special focus on his 1993 film *Sankofa*. His films are exemplary of the Third Cinema approach at work in the context of African-American culture and society. There exists no major study on this important and pioneering filmmaker who is the first and most successful African immigrant to make a career as a filmmaker in black American cinema. For nearly 40 years, Gerima has made significant contributions to Third Cinema studies, black independent film history, and the Pan-American movement as a practicing filmmaker, scholar, activist, and teacher. Gerima has created a solid body of narrative and documentary films covering both Ethiopian and African-American topics. His important influence on black film culture and his contributions to Third Cinema is evidenced in his continual development of the language of film and his commitment to building a conscientized audience with whom he can engage in a liberating cinema experience. Gerima proclaims:

> It is very important that we look at the film distribution, exhibition, and filmmaking in a very holistic way. We look at the theory and criticism in a holistic way. We all have to chip in further developing the audience, the cultural

movement that transforms all of us equally and not be authoritarians in each compartment that we carve out for ourselves. We should see the interfacing and reciprocal relationship of building this culture. We all have to work towards distribution, theory, criticism, in a triangular way with the filmmakers.

(Turner and Kamdibe 12-13)

Haile Gerima developed his innovative approach to filmmaking while studying at UCLA in the early 1970s. Along with a group of progressive film students, he resisted the conventional formula forced on him by the Hollywood-wedded UCLA School of Film.[3] In his early years in the United States, Gerima identified with and developed strong ties with the African-American community. This association has facilitated his ability to tap into the African-American experience in his work. His relationship with African Americans is important because historically Ethiopians have not identified themselves as being black Africans. Gerima, however, came to embrace the African-American community while immersing himself in literature on trans-Atlantic slavery from the outset of his studies at UCLA. It was in the process of delving into slavery historiography that he came to deal with how his identity was tied up in the complex history of Africa's complicity in slavery and African peoples' resistance to slavery. Gerima has built his cinematic career by exploring the themes of blacks' resistance, rebellion, and liberation as it relates to the history and legacy of slavery, and neo-colonialism.

[3] This group of filmmakers (including Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and Larry Clark) who attended UCLA from the late-sixties to the late-1970s have been coined the "LA Rebellion" by Clyde Taylor. Gerima rejects this title as he asserts there was no organized movement, just a common, spontaneous desire for an alternative expression in film.

Gerima's contribution to the practice and scholarship of Third Cinema is evident in his articulation of Third Cinema, or what he calls "Triangular Cinema." Gerima's unique expression of Third Cinema has helped to further define and develop Third Cinema practice. His contribution to Third Cinema is also evident in the generation of filmmakers that he has trained during his 30-year career as a Howard University professor. Finally, Gerima has contributed to Third Cinema as a film scholar, as he regularly writes about filmmaking, film theory, and film criticism and engages in academic conferences and panels.

Gerima's strong Pan-Africanist ideology as a filmmaker was born out of his Ethiopian heritage and his early experiences in the United States. Gerima's family had a history of resisting Western imperialism. His father was a playwright and director of a traveling theater that focused on themes of Ethiopian resistance to Italian oppression and his great-grandfather served under Emperor Yohannes. In the United States, Gerima came of age as a filmmaker in the midst of the Black Power movement. This heritage of resistance, cultural pride, and Pan-Africanism informs Gerima's unique fusion of storytelling and political ideology.

Gerima's sixth narrative film, *Sankofa,* serves as a successful case study for the potential of the Third Cinema approach for an African-American audience. This dissertation offers an analysis of the cinema of Haile Gerima with a particular focus on the *Sankofa* experience (defined as the comprehensive process of *Sankofa's* production by Gerima through the film's consumption by the public) and his narrative films from 1971 until 1982, including *Hour Glass* (1971), *Child of Resistance* (1972), *Bush Mama* (1976), *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976), and *Ashes and Embers* (1982). This study explores

how Third Cinema-inspired narrative film can act as a liberating force for a marginalized population. This study specifically addresses the following questions. How did the Third Cinema approach develop in the cinema of Haile Gerima? How was the Third Cinema approach realized in the *Sankofa* experience, in relation to the film's text, production, distribution, exhibition, and spectatorship? What were the unique circumstances impacting the African-American community's acceptance of *Sankofa*, in terms of the historical moment, the salience of the slave narrative, and Gerima's cinematic philosophy, specifically his Triangular Cinema model? What is the lasting impact of the *Sankofa* experience for black spectators and black film history?

**Third Cinema Movement**

Third Cinema is a cinema movement that emerged out of the wave of anti-imperialist and socialist movements sweeping through Latin America and other parts of the so-called Third World in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that marked the end of repressive dictatorships and military regimes through the efforts of popular, democratic movements. However, the United States was threatened by the rise of socialist states in their backyard and embarked on an active policy of destabilization in the Latin American region.

The newly independent Latin American nations were determined to maintain their hard fought independence, thus they set out to fight the imperialist forces on all fronts and using all approaches, including the arts. Many Latin American artists and intellectuals, particularly filmmakers from Argentina, Cuba, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile, saw the independence and post-independence struggles as not only physical, but also

ideological and cultural. These artists proposed using cinema as a tool for social change. They held that film was a unique medium for raising consciousness and spreading ideological messages because of its capacity to capture reality, synthesize information and penetrate the population (Solanas and Getino 44, 55). Influenced by the ideologies of Carl Marx and Franz Fanon, as well as the filmmaking of Italian Neo-Realists and Soviet Realists, these Latin American filmmakers created a "revolutionary cinema" or the Third Cinema movement. This cinema broke from the old powers and western cinematic representations and took a path toward achieving social liberation and supporting the establishment of a socialist society. Cinema was no longer a diversion for the urban, middle-class; it was now a weapon of the masses in the struggle for social and political change. The Third Cinema approach called for radical change, hence it advocated changing the system.

In 1967, Argentinian Fernando Solanas and Spanish-born Octavio Getino penned "Towards a Third Cinema," the first formal articulation of the tenets of the movement. In the manifesto, Solanas and Getino coined the term "Third Cinema" and described some of what had already been occurring in the cinema practices of Latin America and other parts of the Third World during the 1960s. They discussed the importance of demystifying cinema and employing collaborative techniques to involve the community in creating cinema. Their essay's "call to action" declared Third Cinema's potential to facilitate transformation and social change due to its lucidity and collective characteristics. They defined Third Cinema as one "that recognizes 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 decolonization of culture" (Solanas and Getino 37). Additionally, Third Cinema was described as a cinema that aimed to transform society by dealing with the themes of the oppressed (poverty, subjugation, inequality) and positioning the marginalized (children, women, the poor) as the heroes and heroines of their films.

The conceptional years of Third Cinema, the 1960s through the 1970s, were heady and optimistic. The hopefulness and urgency was apparent in the tone of the manifestos and declarations made by the Third Cinema filmmakers. One of the pioneers of Cinema Novo, Glauber Rocha of Brazil, wrote in "An Esthetic of Hunger" that violence is a cultural manifestation of hunger. Cinema Novo, he said, demonstrated that the aesthetic of violence is revolutionary because it is a "love of action and transformation" not one of "complacency or contemplation" (60). Jorge Sanjines of Peru offered in his essay "Problems of Form and Content in Revolutionary Cinema" further ruminations on the Third Cinema tactic of creating popular heroes or what he called "collective protagonists." In addition, he stressed the need to "arrive at the truth through beauty" (66). In other words, Third Cinema is an art form above all else, not a pamphlet full of propaganda. Thus, it should stimulate the senses as well as the intellect. In his seminal essay "For an Imperfect Cinema," Julio Espinosa of Cuba called for closing the division between the filmmaker and the masses because the "imperfect cinema" is a democratic one. Its mandate is to find its themes in the struggles of the masses and to be lucid and deliberate in documenting that reality. Espinosa held that an obsession with quality is a narcissistic and reactionary activity of the elite. Argentinian Fernando Birri's essay "Cinema and Underdevelopment" called for clearly defining the audience so that

the filmmaker is deliberate about raising their consciousness. In addition, Birri stated that the social documentary must show reality as it is, both the positive and the negative, in order to provide an affirmation and a critique of society where necessary.

During the first wave of Third Cinema, the spectators, or the masses, were seen as committed comrades in the struggle. There was no doubt that both parties, the filmmakers and the people, were working toward the same aim. In fact, the filmmaker was joining with the masses and helping to articulate a sentiment that already existed as opposed to initiating a movement. The spectator was seen as a co-author of the films because their problems and struggles were the raw material for the films (Sanjines 17).

The exhibition of Third Cinema films was democratic, as oftentimes the films were brought to the people in the countrysides or slums and screened in the market or other community gathering places. Solanas and Getino's "film acts" with the screening of *La hora de los hornos (Hour of the Furnaces, 1968)* exemplified a film revolution. Over 100,000 Argentinian peasants came out to participate in the film acts, sometimes under great personal risk. Some locations even required the presence of armed guards to protect the spectators from government forces (Solanas and Getino 55; Buchsbaum 155-7). During the film acts, the film was shown in segments and the spectators were given the opportunity to comment and discuss the film during the screening and in the breaks between the segments. Film acts, such as Solanos and Getino's, promoted the decolonization of culture and allowed the spectator to recognize himself or herself in the film, eventually contributing to their liberation (Gabriel 37).

It is useful to explore definitions of first and second cinema in order to better understand Third Cinema. In practice, the demarcations are fluid and the cinemas run

along a continuum. First cinema is equated with Hollywood studio cinema. First Cinema has been described as an imperialist, capitalist, bourgeois, big monopoly, commercial, big spectacle and informational cinema. It is seen as a cinema conceived to satisfy "cultural and surplus value need of a specific ideology and world view—US finance capital (Solanas and Getino 41)." First cinema aims to entertain above all else (Wayne 89-90).

The spectator of first cinema is a consumer of imperialist bourgeois values and ideas, according to Solanas and Getino (41). The first cinema spectator is defined as a complacent, non-questioning individual who finds the image of reality more important than reality itself. First cinema works as an arm of the imperialist system and aims to keep its spectators in a dream state. The fully engaged first cinema spectator absorbs and holds the same values and beliefs as the imperialist culture. This spectator is culturally alienated and unable to fully recognize himself or herself in first cinema (Gabriel 37).

Second cinema is, naturally, situated somewhere between Third Cinema and first cinema. Solanas and Getino define second cinema as author's cinema, expression cinema, Cinema Novo, or nouvelle vague (42). It is a positive development over first cinema, however it is not fully revolutionary in ideology. With second cinema, the filmmaker is most often indigenous or, at least, has indigenous sensibilities. The themes of second cinema are realist, ranging from issues of poverty, gender equality, politics and the desires of the petit bourgeois (Wayne 89-90). There is some experimentation with film language and content; however, distribution and administration are still controlled by corporate entities. Second cinema takes aim at cultural decolonization, but because this cinema is working within the confines of the hegemonic system, its development is restricted.

The second cinema spectator is encouraged to identify with the desires of the petit bourgeoisie and find pleasure in second cinema's nihilistic and mystifying tendencies that serve to cut its spectators off from reality. At other times, the second cinema spectator is invited to identify with the common person protagonist and his/her struggles. However, no solution to those struggles is offered, nor is the ruling system ever at fault for the protagonist's problems. Hence, there is no call for the spectator to promote change in the system.

At the conclusion of "Towards a Third Cinema," Solanos and Getino posed an illuminating dichotomy between Third Cinema and the commercial film industry (or first cinema) (56). They claimed that where the industry focused on characters, Third Cinema focused on themes. Where the industry focused on the individual, Third Cinema focused on the masses. Where the industry focused on the author, Third Cinema focused on the operative group. Where the industry focused on neocolonial misinformation, Third Cinema focused on the truth. Where the industry provided escape and encouraged passivity, Third Cinema provided intellectual challenge and encouraged engagement. Where industry films had top-down, high-budget productions, Third Cinema had low-budget and collaborative productions. Hence, this dichotomy positioned first cinema in direct opposition to the ideology of Third Cinema.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Third Cinema saw a slight shift. These decades ushered in fairly stable democracies in most Latin American countries and the fire of the first period of Third Cinema was lost. Film scholar Ruby B. Rich describes this second period in Latin America as a shift from revolutionary cinema to revelatory cinema. The new Latin American cinema of post-Peron and post-Allende governments, uncovered the

painful secrets of torture, "the disappeared" and unspeakable injustices committed under vicious dictators. The Third Cinema films of this period were engaged in creating what Rich calls a "collective subjectivity" that involves a "new form of looking inward that offers a possibility of a radical break from the past" (281). These films focused on how the political plays out in the everyday lives of the films' protagonists.

Spectators of this second period of Third Cinema were positioned as participants in the cinematic exercise of revealing their collective secrets and pain. The films provided a space for the spectators to question the recent past, reflect on the struggle, and speculate about the future--in other words, they provided a healing space. This second wave of Third Cinema films enjoyed a greater international audience. Many first world spectators were exposed to the realities of oppressed populations in the developing and developed world for the first time. *Sankofa* and its spectators are situated in this second period of Third Cinema.

**Third Cinema Theory**

Teshome Gabriel conceptualized Third Cinema theory from Solano and Getino's definitions of first, second and Third Cinema and Franz Fanon's phases of development as set forth in *Wretched of the Earth* (158-159). Fanon proposes that newly independent nations develop through three non-mutually exclusive phases: assimilation, remembrance, and combative. He adds that an oppressed people go from imitation and assimilation of their oppressor, to reflection and remembrance (though sometimes uncritically) of their pre-subjugated history, to finally challenging their oppressor in a

move to gain liberation. Fanon identified film as a cultural manifestation of a people and believed in its ability to promote change.

In Third Cinema theory, Gabriel, like Solanos and Getino, offers a comprehensive look at Third, second and first cinema by comparing Western and Third World film conventions. He argues that Western cinema studies theories are ill-suited for the analysis of Third Cinema because of the ideological and cultural differences of Western cinema and Third Cinema. He asserts that a major ideological difference between Third Cinema and Western cinema, or dominant cinema, is that the former aims to promote social change, while the latter aims only to entertain. "The difficulty of Third World films of radical social comment for Western interpretation is the result a) of the film's resistance to the dominant conventions of cinema, and b) of the consequence of the Western viewers' loss of being the privileged decoders and ultimate interpreters of meaning" (Gabriel, "Towards" 38-39). This difference in ideological intent that fails to privilege the Western critic has the potential to empower the Third World spectator and critic.

Gabriel further argues that a major cultural difference between Third Cinema and western cinema centers on how the oral culture of the Third World and the literate culture of the West influence the concepts of spatiality and temporality in film.

> Where Western films manipulate 'time' more than 'space', Third World films seem to emphasize 'space' over 'time'. Third World films grow from folk traditions whether communication is a slow-paced phenomenon and time is not rushed but has its own space. Western culture, on the other hand, is based on the value of 'time' –time is art, time is money, time is most everything else. ...What

> is identified as 'excess' in Western cinematic experience is, therefore, precisely where we locate Third World cinema. (Gabriel, "Towards" 44)

He claims that spatiality, that is the environment and human interaction with the environment, is a central and defining element of the narrative form in oral cultures. Temporality and the related linearity are the central and defining characteristics of the narrative form in literate cultures. This specific attention to space and time, of course, impacts the narrative structure of Third World cinema and Western cinema. Gabriel's Third Cinema theory lends itself to looking at the ways in which the differences of intent and style impact the form of Third Cinema and its Third World audience.

In Third Cinema theory, Gabriel posits that the analytical constructs of the film institution including text, reception, and production, be integrated with the evolutionary phases of Third World film culture, notably assimilation, remembrance, and combative. He explains that: "The intricate relationships ... (of the analytical constructs and evolutionary phases) ... help to establish the stage for a confluence of a unique aesthetic exchange founded on other than traditional categories of film conventions" (Gabriel, "Towards" 37). Under film text in the critical analysis, Gabriel calls for considering major Third Cinema themes, such as class, culture, religion, sexism, and armed struggle. He also calls for looking at the film text issues of language, music, editing, technique, and ideology. Under film reception, Gabriel's approach examines issues of exhibition and consumption, including venue, promotion, and, of course, spectatorship. And finally in relation to film production issues, he calls for including financing and film institutions in one's analysis.

**Triangular Cinema**

Haile Gerima's ideological model for filmmaking, or "Triangular Cinema," holds that the filmmaker (storyteller), the audience (community,) and the critic (activist) must all work together to transform society. According to Gerima, the filmmaker must be able to explore and experiment in order to achieve a higher aesthetic. As Gerima states, " ... provoked by a given visual arrangement, (the audience) has to struggle to understand and to help transform" the filmmaker and themselves, eventually resulting in some process of social change" (Gerima, "Triangular Cinema" 69). He holds that this triangular relationship enables the three communities (filmmaker, audience, and critic) to complement each other in their respective transformations and set in motion dynamic and innovative cultural inter-relationships. Gerima asserts:

> It is crucial that all parties be non-antagonistic, using constructive dialogue, motivated by a genuine desire to effect the transformation of a given society. This triangular relationship best functions through constant critical and innovative deliberation that includes analysis of the history and practice of conventional cinema. (Gerima, "Triangular Cinema" 68-69)

Gerima explains that the critic is an activist because he or she has three essential roles in the Triangular Cinema model. The critic's first role is to mediate between the filmmaker and the audience to help them understand each other better. The critic's second role is to help the audience to process the film through thoughtful and critical analysis, and finally the critic is to act as *griot* by promoting the film ("Triangular Cinema" 68-69).[4]

[4] The griot is a West African word that refers to the keeper of history, the praise singer, and the town crier.

**Black Womanist Spectator Theory**

In *Defining Black Film*, film scholar Mark Reid states that black independent cinema history has been sorely neglected. Reid proposes a spectator theory that is specifically suited for the exploration black independent film. He argues that Marxist and feminist theories often used to critique black cinema do not sufficiently grasp the full range of black representation in cinema, such as the intersection of gender politics and sexual orientation or the clash between phallocentric pan-African ideologies and black womanism. Black cultural theory, on the other hand, explores both the production and reception aspects of black cinema, the varied subject positions, and the unique innovations of black independent cinema. Reid's cultural critical perspective rejects "nation, race, gender, and class exclusivity" in an attempt to recognize the complexities and dualities of black life and identities in the present post-modern era (Reid, *Redefining* 109).

Borrowing from Stuart Hall's reception theory as explicated in Hall's seminal essay "Encoding/decoding," Reid proposes three black womanist spectator positions that, like Third Cinema, involve not only the spectator, but also the filmmaker and the film. The first spectator position, assimilation, fully accepts the film text, without question, as "realistic." According to Reid, this position "promotes an authoritarian confirmation between the creator (filmmaker), the discursive apparatus (film), and the consumer (the spectator)" (*Redefining* 116).

The second position, resistance, is characterized by a tension between the various cultural subjectivities of race, sexual orientation, and gender that a spectator may hold in relation to how these elements are represented in film. In the resistance position, the

spectator rejects the film text because it does not exactly replicate his or her reality. Hence the black, gay spectator is likely to find no point of identification with most Hollywood cinema because of its white, heterosexual focus.

The third position, accommodation, involves both the acceptance and rejection of the cultural elements of the film text depending on the ideological stance, be it Pan-Africanist, white feminist, or homophobic, of the spectator. Reid explains, "Enjoyment demands that Black womanist films represent, and their viewer-listeners identify with, some nexus-of-desire that results in accommodative readings of these films" (*Redefining* 115). In other words, the black womanist position derives pleasure from a dialectical encounter with the film-text that facilitates finding places of identification and spaces of empowerment. Jacqueline Bobo's study of black female spectators and *The Color Purple* provides a fine example of an accommodative reading. Bobo's study showed that black female spectators looked past the white male director Steven Speilberg's misinterpretation of key elements of the novel and instead found their own places of strong identification with the film's female characters and their own life experiences.

Reid calls for the filmmaker, critic, and the audience "to revision possible Black others in a post-Negritude world," (*Redefining* 120) to strive to bring to light "the histories of ignored members of the black community, and engage in dialogue within this community and across its imagined boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation" (*Redefining* 124). Reid proposed a more progressive and collaborative black filmmaking practice that seeks to move beyond the macho, hetrosexual, middle-class tendencies of conventional black cinema. Much like the practice of Third Cinema, the

new film culture that Reid proposes would empower spectators, filmmakers, and critics, alike, through a dialectical film practice and discourse.

**Theoretical Framework: Triangular Communication Model**

The Triangular Communication model will be employed for the study of the cinema of Haile Gerima. This theoretical framework draws on Gabriel's Third Cinema Theory, Gerima's Triangular Cinema model, and Reid's Black Womanist Spectator theory. The Triangular Communication model is specifically designed to explore the unique characteristics of the alternative cinemas of Third Cinema and black independent cinema. In the Triangular Communication model as illustrated in Appendix A, the film production process is a triangle that represents the full interaction of the filmmaker, the film, and film reception. The filmmaker is positioned at one point of the triangle, the film is positioned at another point of the triangle, and reception (spectator and critic) is positioned at the third point of the triangle. The interactions on the triangle are bi-directional, hence the film is an extension of both the filmmaker and reception. Likewise, the filmmaker is in conversation with the reception of his or her film and the film text itself. And finally, reception involves active engagement with the film and the filmmaker. No part of the process exists independently.

Third Cinema theory provides the base for the theoretical framework of the Triangular Communication model with the three analytical contructs that Gabriel identifies as text, reception, and production. In Gabriel's model, production solely refers to distribution and exhibition; however, in the Triangular Communication model, production refers to the entire film process, including writing; fundraising; shooting; and

editing, in addition to distribution and exhibition. It is around this film production process that the filmmaker, film and reception operate. Gerima's Triangular Cinema approach and Reid's Black Womanist Spectator theory inform the theortical framework by identifying the filmmaker as an integral part of the film production process. Gerima names the filmmaker, the critic, and the spectator as the three interacting agents in his Triangular Cinema model. Gerima's critic and spectator more specifically define Gabriel's reception construct. Reid's spectator positions provide a way of understanding how the critic and spectator actively engage with the film. Hence, the Triangular Communicaton model focuses on the interactive and dialectical relationship between the filmmaker, the film, the critic and the spectator, as well as all elements of production, distribution, and exhibition.

The addition of the filmmaker to the theoretical model acknowledges the need for having a cultural grounding when exploring films by African descendents and it recognizes the significance of the creative force in the communication process. In the reception model, as Reid suggests, it is necessary to employ a theory that allows for the multiplicity of black cultures (*Redefining)*. The Triangular Communication model is specifically grounded in African cultural traditions where art is seen as a tool for social commentary, and the artist is seen as an integral part of the community. For instance, community members in the African tradition of call and response provide the artist with critical feedback on his or her work. Hence, the communication process between the artist, the art, and the community is critical, dynamic and communal. Gerima's Triangular Cinema, as discussed in chapter four's study of *Sankofa*, serves as an example of an African oral performance eliciting an interactive response from his audience. Isidore

Okpewho holds that in the African tradition "(a)n oral performance truly exists where there is an audience that compels the respect of the performer" (57). This dynamic interplay between filmmaker, audience, and critic undergirds the Triangular Communication model.

The cinema of Haile Gerima and the *Sankofa* experience provide an exemplary Third Cinema case study due to both Gerima's ideological approach to filmmaking and to *Sankofa's* content, production, distribution, and exhibition. Gerima's body of work demonstrates his development as a Third Cinema practitioner from his first film to his latest.[5] With *Sankofa*, he brought together years of practice to produce a highly effective Third Cinema film. *Sankofa* not only told the story of slavery from a black point of view, but also from a female point of view. The film's production was truly Pan-African in scope, as it was funded by members of the African-American community and the governments of Jamaica and Ghana. The film's crew and talent represented various countries of the African Diaspora. The film was distributed by an independent black distribution company that relied heavily on grassroots' channels for promotion of the film (Shaw 70-72). During *Sankofa*'s theatrical run, thousands of black theater-goers across the United States, who were hungry to see their history presented in a non-distorted manner, supported the film and engaged in post-screening discussions with Haile Gerima or other discussion leaders (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998; Shaw 70-72). *Sankofa's* challenge of the dominant mythology of America's slave history energized and empowered its black audience. In addition, this audience felt a strong connection to the

[5] In 2008, Gerima released his eighth feature-length feature film *Teza* to critical acclaim.

film's content and became personally invested in the success of the film, helping it gross over 3 million dollars.[6]

In order to understand the *Sankofa* experience, it is necessary to understand the cinematic philosophy of the film's creator, Haile Gerima, because his philosophy directly informed the content, production, distribution, and exhibition of the film. Gerima's cinema exemplifies an approach to filmmaking that is antithetical to capitalistic and entertainment-driven Hollywood cinema. He is motivated not just by the desire to make films that question and critique the black condition, but also by the desire to build a black film culture, one that, as Gerima states, is "a pan-African cultural movement whereby we (African people) complement each other" (Gerima, Personal interview 1 Dec. 1995). *Sankofa* and Gerima's entire body of work provide insight into the relationship of the black audience with the black filmmaker.

Chapter One, "Global African Cinema: A Historiography," focuses on independent narrative global African cinema that exhibits Third Cinema tendencies. This chapter helps us better conceptualize Gerima's position within various African Diasporic film trajectories and explore his contributions to global African cinema. This historical survey looks at African-American cinema from its inception in the early 20th century and other global African cinemas from their beginnings in the past four decades. The chronological survey particularly focuses on five main geographical areas: the United States, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, Great Britain and Europe, and Canada. I discuss the development, movement, influences and trends in these cinemas as they

[6] Although in Hollywood industry terms, three million dollars may not be considered a box-office success, it is in the independent film industry. *Sankofa* was the highest grossing independent film of 1995.

have emerged and shifted in the past century and I situate Haile Gerima cinema within this survey. I address the following questions: What characteristics do Global African independent narrative films share? What social, cultural, and historical issues drew global Africans to filmmaking? What are the major phases in Global African cinema history? What factors have shaped Global African cinema in its development? What are some exemplary films within Global African cinema that exhibit Third Cinema tendencies? How does Third Cinema compare in the various regions of global Africa, specifically what are the similarities and differences? What are the major themes? What are the major contributions of global African cinema to Third Cinema? How does Gerima fit into the history of independent narrative Global African Cinema with Third Cinema tendencies? What role has he played in the development of the Third Cinema movement?

Chapter Two, "The Making of a Pan-Africanist Filmmaker," is a biography of Haile Gerima that sets out to explore the various influences on his work in an effort to better understand what he brings to the filmmaking experience. This biography explores Gerima's Ethiopian upbringing, including his family's influence and his formal education; his early years in the United States, including his college training at Goodman and UCLA; his political awakening and his birth as a filmmaker; his professional career as a filmmaker, as a professor, as an entrepreneur, and as an activist; and his family life as a husband and father. The biography specifically explores how Gerima's ideology and motivations inform his work. The biography is built on data collected from the primary sources of personal interviews with Gerima and his wife, and the secondary sources of articles on Gerima (others' interviews with Gerima, and speeches and writings by Gerima). How did Gerima develop his filmmaking style? What were the major influences

in his family life? How do his heritage, history, and culture as an Ethiopian affect his work? How did his formal and informal education in Ethiopia influence his ideology? How did he come to filmmaking? What drove him to want to make films? How did the political historical moment of the 1970s affect his ideology and development as a filmmaker? How was he influenced by the Civil Rights, pan-Africanist, Black Nationalist and other significant African-American social movements? In what ways was Gerima influenced by his fellow UCLA classmates? How do pan-Africanist and Black Nationalist ideologies influence his cinema? What is Gerima's relationship with the African-American community? By what authority does he make films about African Americans? What influences his choice of film subjects and stories, both African-American and Ethiopian? What drew him to teaching? What drew him to Howard University? How has practicing filmmaking in Washington, D.C. and at Howard University influenced his work? How did he get involved with film distribution? How did he come to open a video-book store? How do these auxiliary activities, of film distribution and video-bookstore entrepreneurship, help him to achieve his goals? How did he come to marry an African-American wife, Shikiriana? What are the challenges of being in a bi-cultural marriage and raising bi-cultural children? Why has he chosen to make the U.S. his home? What are his successes? What are his failures? What will ultimately be his legacy? These are the questions that guide this chapter.

Chapter Three, "Transformative Cinema: Gerima's Narrative Films from 1971-1982," discusses the narrative cinema of Haile Gerima through the creation of a filmography detailing Gerima's body of work from 1971 through 1982. The filmography chronicles the progression of Gerima's vision as a filmmaker by providing critical

analyses of his films based on his film-texts, reviews of his films, and other articles about his films. Chapter Three addresses the following questions about each film. What is each film's genre, format, length, location, and plot? What are the production details of each film, including the crew, talent, and budget? What were the distribution and exhibition methods of each film? To, what historical, social, and cultural issues does each film speak? What is my critical analysis of each film, specifically looking at themes, characters, music, dialogue, and *mise-en-scène*? What Third Cinema tendencies do the films exhibit and how are these tendencies executed? How does each film relate to the proceding and following one? How did popular reviewers respond to each film? What is the critical analysis of his work by other film scholars? How did audiences receive each film? What does Gerima say about each of his films? How does his early work inform *Sankofa*?

Chapter Four, "Return to the Past, Moving Forward into the Future: Gerima's *Sankofa*," focuses on Gerima's *Sankofa,* a landmark in black independent cinema. Specifically, I document the course of events in the *Sankofa* experience, from the film's inception to its 1994-1996 theatrical run in the United States. To examine how the Third Cinema approach was operationalized in the *Sankofa* experience, I look at each element of the phenomenon, including the film text, spectatorship, production, distribution, and exhibition individually and collectively. The primary data for my critical analysis is the film text itself, including the dialogue, music, *mise-en-scène*, etc. I draw on a body of neo-slave narratives in my in-depth reading of the film.

I conduct reception analysis using audience feedback of various forms. The primary data consist of reviews from newspapers and periodicals, and critical reviews

from scholarly journals. For the reception analysis of *Sankofa*, I look at the salience of this particular slave narrative for the African-American audience and the relationship between the filmmaker, critic, and spectator. I use historical research methods to evaluate the production, distribution, and exhibition processes of the film. Personal interviews with Gerima and *Sankofa*'s producer (Shirkiana Aina); newspaper, magazine, and journal articles; and in-house documents from Gerima's production company Mypheduh Films all provide primary data for exploring the issues of production, distribution, and exhibition.

The conclusion, "The Lasting Impact of Gerima's Cinematic Contributions," summarizes my findings, offers recommendations and suggests areas of future research. This chapter is concerned with the lasting impact of Gerima's cinema, and specifically *Sankofa,* to Global African Third Cinema and black independent cinema. How has the *Sankofa* experience influenced future production, distribution, and exhibition of independent black cinema? What does *Sankofa* tell us about black audience reception? What short term and long-term effects has the *Sankofa* experience had on the African-American society? What elements must be in place to develop a lasting Third Cinema culture in black America? These are the questions that I address in my conclusion.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Global African Cinema: A Historiography

> What I try to do now in my work is that I felt that, first of all, I had to pay homage to that voice, the African voice, which had not had a chance to speak out within the multi-bilingual voice, because I feel that, as the child from this very violent marriage between the African woman and the European man, the first person that must be able to speak and put her grief on the table is the African woman. She has to speak first, and only when she has spoken and really finished with what she has to say about all the years of this violent marriage is there a possibility to get to a balanced dialogue.
> ~Felix de Rooy (Cham, "Ava" 347)

Haile Gerima and his film *Sankofa* hold a definitive place in global African film history. Through an exploration of black cinema from the Americas to Zimbabwe, this survey aims to contextualize and provide a better understanding of Gerima and his body of work. This survey provides an historical overview of global African cinema, with particular focus on social change cinema, specifically that which has Third Cinema tendencies. [7] Hence, this survey examines and documents the history of global African films that demonstrate techniques and language that promote critical awareness and social change, in relation to: the historical, sociological, political and economic factors from which the cinemas emerged. In addition, this survey looks at Haile Gerima's development as a filmmaker and his unique place within this history. The survey primarily focuses on independent, non-commercial, and government funded narrative films.

The movement of people, ideas, and cultural practices throughout global Africa is constant and never static (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*). This has proven particularly apparent in the last century of global African music. Musical forms like jazz, salsa, *boce nova*,

[7] Ali Mazrui (1986) coined the term "global African" in his BBC/PBS television series, "The Africans: A Triple Heritage." An inclusive term, global African encompasses all people of African descent living throughout the globe, with no distinction between continental and diasporic Africans.

reggae, house, and hip-hop have bounced from continent to continent, blending, mixing and changing until new musical forms emerged. Global African cinema exhibits some of the same patterns as global African music. This survey illustrates the developments, characteristics, influences, and trends of these cinemas. The following survey of global African cinema looks at the various cinemas in five geographical groupings that correspond to either shared history or language: 1) United States, 2) Africa, 3) the Caribbean and Latin America, 4) Great Britain and Europe, and 5) Canada. These groupings are not mutually exclusive, however they allow for a more systematic method to examine the cinemas, the filmmakers, and their work.

Global African cinema is as diverse as the populations that make up Africa and its diaspora. However, there are common threads that run through these cinemas because of the common threads that run through the histories and cultures of African peoples. Black people, on the African continent, in the Caribbean, in North, South and Central America, and in Europe, are still experiencing the impact of Western patriarchical domination due to a history of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism.

Martin makes a case for the study of global African cinema in his edited text, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence and Oppositionality.*

> (T)he thematic concerns about culture, identity, history and social change, and the strategies and practices of black filmmaking in the diaspora, reflect and embody the aspirations and practices of Third World cinema, of which it is a part, especially the politically-oriented militant "Third Cinema." (1)

I support that the historical ties and cultural retentions are significant and strong enough to justify the study of these cinemas as a group. Pan-African developments in economic

and political fields are easily identifiable and have been well documented; these same kinds of developments are also evident in global African cinema (Tillery). From elements concerning the aesthetics of global African cinema to those concerning the business aspects of filmmaking, the parallels in global African cinemas run deep.

Important historical periods such as the African-American northern migration (1915-1930), the Scramble for Africa (1885), the independence movements in Africa (1950s-1980s), the black consciousness movements throughout global Africa (1960s-1970s), the neo-colonialist period in the Third World (1960s-1990s), and globalization (1990s-present) have had, and continue to have, a distinct and significant impact on global African filmmaking practices. This chronological look at global African cinema will particularly highlight the connection between these social, political, and historical developments and the production of Third Cinema oriented cinema.

The history of global African cinema for social change essentially began in the United States in 1913 with William Foster's first film. Evidence of social change cinema emerges in Africa in the1950s. And by the 1960s, Third Cinema emerges in Africa, Latin America, and in the United States. In the 1970s, social change cinema surfaces in some Caribbean countries. The 1980s marks the beginning of significant social change filmmaking activity in England, followed by efforts in Canada and other parts of Europe in the 1990s.

**Defining Global African Cinemas**

Before embarking on a discussion of global African cinema, it is necessary to define the terms concerning these cinemas. *Global African Cinema* is the institution of

films by people of African descent that reflect the realities of the lives, histories, and realities of people of the African diaspora. These various global African cinemas are supported by governmental, independent, private, and multi-national funding.

*Black Cinema* refers to films where the major creative forces (direction, screenwriting, editing, or production) are black and to films where the subject matter primarily deals with black people. The financing does not necessarily have to be black; however, it is important to recognize that the source of the financing may dramatically influence the creative vision of the film (Diawara, *Black*; Guerrero; Martin, "Introduction"; Reid, *Redefining*).

*African-American Cinema* is the institution of films by filmmakers of African descent residing in United States. This population includes those people of African descent whose ancestors were slaves, immigrants of African descent, and the children of those immigrants. The African-American cinema examined in this survey focuses on independent cinema where the majority of Third Cinema practices are manifested.

*African Cinema* refers to the institution of films by filmmakers who were born in Africa or whose ancestors were born in Africa and to films whose primary focus are African subjects. African cinema includes Nigerian cinema, Kenyan cinema, Algerian cinema and Zimbabwean cinema, to name a few. This term is inclusive of Franco-phone, Anglo-phone, Luso-phone, as well as any cinema produced in indigenous languages by Africans. Occasionally, African films are produced outside the African continent in Europe or the United States, as many African filmmakers have migrated to the West and made their homes in France, England, United States, and Canada. These filmmakers often still consider Africa their home. Some filmmakers of African descent who were not born

on the continent are also considered African filmmakers because of the subject matter of their work.

*Afro-Caribbean and Black Latin American Cinemas* are the institutions of cinema produced by Caribbean and Latin American filmmakers whose ancestors are African. As a region, there is some degree of overlap as some Latin American countries are also considered part of the Caribbean. However, for this survey, Latin America includes those countries in Central and South America, except Guyana and Belize, while the Caribbean includes all islands in the Caribbean Seas and Guyana and Belize, no matter what the Lingua Franca. Funding for Afro-Caribbean and black Latin American cinema may come from government or private sources.

*Black British Cinema and Black European Cinemas* are the institutions of cinema produced by British and other European filmmakers of African descent. This includes films produced in France, Holland, and Germany by those who consider Africa their homeland even though they may be second- or third-generation Africans. The black British and black European cinemas primarily rely on funding from government and private sources.

*Afro-Canadian Cinema* is the institution of cinema in Canada produced by black Canadians, some who have lived in Canada for centuries and others who are migrants or the descendents of migrants from the Caribbean or Africa. Though many Afro-Canadian films are produced with government funding, there is an emerging trend of private-funded films.

**The United States: African-American Cinema for Social Change**

Throughout history, black independent cinema has had a significant influence on black political thought. The development of black independent cinema closely mirrors the development of the social, political, and economic landscape of black America. In fact, a close examination of the three waves of black independent cinema (the early 1900s, the 1970s, and the late 1980s to the present) reveals that these movements parallel three important periods in black history, the Great Migration (1915 - 1930), the post-Civil Rights era (1968-1980), and the era of Reagonomics and globalization (1981-present). In addition, by looking at the history of black film scholarship, along side the black political thought that characterized these historical periods, it is possible to explore black cinema's unique tendency as an agent of social change in black society and the influence of socio-economic and political factors on the filmmaking practices of each era.

**Early African-American Independent Cinema**

The nineteenth century closed with the cessation of one of the worst horrors the world has seen--transcontinental slavery. Two of the largest slaveholding countries, the United States and Brazil, abolished slavery as late as 1865 and 1888, respectively. Hence, at the turn of the twentieth century in the U.S., most African descendants still lived in the South and were agriculture-based. However between 1915 and 1930, 1,300,000 blacks migrated to the north, in what has been named the "Great Migration" (Carson et al., 344-6). The former southern residents came in droves to Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York and other northern posts looking for new homes that were free from white racist terrorism and that offered economic potential. In both major cities and small towns alike,

the migrants built self-contained communities with black doctors and lawyers living beside black factory workers and maids. They sought to forge identities as non-agricultural, upwardly mobile city dwellers. As a people, African Americans seized this opportunity to work toward full integration into American society. The quest for information on how to negotiate this new life, how to fit in, and how to advance in their new environment, gave rise to self-determination movements, such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and other socio-political organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. The black press, which boasted more than 500,000 readers and over 250 different newspapers in the 1910s, also served an essential function in helping the newcomers to integrate into northern society and the modern era (Everett; Pride and Wilson). These newspapers reflected the mood and voice of black America. In addition, the black press advised, educated, and motivated their audience to strive for the American promise (Everett; Bowser and Spence).

Like the black press, black independent filmmakers stepped in to answer the community's call for information and direction. The first black filmmaker, William Foster, came onto the scene as early as 1913, with his film, *The Railroad Porter*. Some of the first African-American films attempted to counter the stereotypic and demeaning images propagated by Thomas Edison's racist shorts and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that made the case for the formation of the Ku Klux Klan (Bogle, *Toms*). African-American filmmakers John Noble and Emmett J. Scott made *The Birth of a Race* (1919) in direct response to *The Birth of a Nation*. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, founded by brothers George and Noble Johnson, and the Micheaux Film and Book

Company, Oscar Micheaux's first company, stand as two entities that made the greatest impact in this early film era. These pioneering filmmakers saw "uplifting the race" as their primary mission. They also saw film as a vehicle for encouraging dialogue and exposing injustices affecting blacks.

Though the lifespan of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was a mere five years, it is heralded as one of the first successful African-American film companies. The Johnson brothers understood the socio-political dynamics of black independent film in that they attempted to secure black funding, utilize black advertising channels, and create a black distribution network (Cripps). The mission of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, as stated in 1915 in the black-owned newspaper *The California Eagle*, was to "picture the Negro as he is in everyday life, a human being with human inclination and one of talent and intellect" (Cripps 76). The themes and values promoted in Lincoln films were middle class and assimilationist; however, they offered an alternative view of African-American life than that of the dominant culture. The Johnsons' film *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916) provided a blueprint for middle class assimilation.

Oscar Micheaux represents the most successful early cinema campaign, with a career that produced over 30 films in as many years (1919-1948) (Bowser and Spence; Green). Micheaux started out as a self-published novelist who sold his books door to door. He eventually decided to put his stories to film. Like his books, his films provide a unique window into issues that blacks were grappling with at that time. He tackled controversial and often taboo subjects, such as class (particularly the proper route to upward mobility), race (often the perils of miscegenation) and religion (specifically the

unscrupulousness of some spiritual leaders and the naïveté of their flock) (Bowser and Spence; Green). Micheaux' *Within Our Gates* (1919) boldly raised the issue of lynching, the rape of black women by white men, and crooked preachers. *God's Step Children* (1938) explored the issue of blacks "passing" for white and the great sacrifice that choice entailed. The legacy of Micheaux is still being discovered with films turning up in several European countries in the last two decades (Bowser and Spence; Green). Filmmaking became very expensive with the advent of talkies, pushing most black independents out of the business. Micheaux's exit from filmmaking in the late 1940s, left virtually no activity in black independent film until the 1970s.

**The 1960s - 1970s – Blaxploitation**

The 1960s marked an intense period of civil rights struggles for African Americans. Starting with the non-violent tactics of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the South and moving to the militant tactics of the Black Panthers in urban areas in the North and West, America went through tremendous change during this era. Two great leaders of the Civil Rights era, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., were assassinated in 1965 and 1968, respectively. New Civil Rights legislation put America's founding document, the U.S. Constitution, to test.

Much of the black filmmaking activity of the 1960s consisted of documentaries. One significant filmmaker of this period was documentarist William Greaves, who came out of the black public affairs tradition. Greaves' hour-long, award-winning films are now a priceless archive of documentaries that covered the burning issues of the day and captured interviews with important black public figures. Third Cinema tendencies were

demonstrated in Greaves' *First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966), a documentary film about the pan-African cultural event held in Ghana in the 1960s. Through adept editing, Greaves showed the strong linkages between African-Americans and Africans. This film was never released during the Civil Rights years in the United States because the United States Information Service feared that its pan-Africanist theme might add fuel to the Civil Rights movement (Knee and Musser).

After a hiatus of nearly three decades, a new crop of black independent narrative filmmakers entered the field. Newly empowered by the Civil Rights gains of the 1960s, but disillusioned by the slippages of political and economic power, two camps of filmmakers emerged. One group produced an urban "beat Whitey" genre that came to be known as Blaxploitation, a term combining black and exploitation. This Blaxploitation genre relied heavily on violence and sexual content in its portrayal of black heroes and heroines fighting against the white establishment in an attempt to restore the ghetto.

Melvin Van Peebles created a rebellious and ground-breaking narrative feature which is credited with starting the Blaxploitation genre (Pines). His film *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) featured a black hero who, backed by the black community, triumphed over the oppressive white-dominated system. Van Peebles wrote, directed, produced and distributed this low-budget film. To make *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Van Peebles adopted an uncompromised, experimental style and used guerilla filmmaking techniques. This involved using a light, mobile filmmaking unit that was able to shoot whenever and wherever the opportunity arose.

Other notable films with Third Cinema tendencies produced during this era were Sidney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), Ossie Davis' *Kongi's Harvest* (1970),

and Michael Shultz's *Cooley High* (1975). *Buck and the Preacher* took up the issue of the invisibility of the black cowboy in the American West and the racism prevalent in the usually romanticized old West. *Kongi's Harvest*, a Nigeria-U.S. co-production dealt with an interpretation of the Nigerian classic novel to film. *Cooley High* explored urban youth experience through a coming-of-age tale dealing with realities of poverty, educational opportunity, and legal justice in 1960s Chicago.

This period was characterized by the continuation of well-established old stereotypes, but also introduced new ones such as the black superhero, the over-sexualized vixen, and the street hustler (Bogle, *Toms*; Leab). Black filmmakers continued to struggle with a lack of financing and the threat of losing their creative control to studio powers. There was ample evidence that a cadre of filmmakers and actors saw this medium as a tool for exposing, teaching, and dealing with issues pertinent to black people. However, by 1975, more than 200 white-produced Blaxploitation films had flooded the market; shortly after that the wave died. However, by this time many independent filmmakers had been pushed out of the business (MacDonald 167).

The second group of filmmakers closely aligned themselves with the Black Arts movement that declared art as politics. The L.A. School, including Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, Charles Burnett, Alile Sharon Larkin, among others, consisted of the first substantial group of black university trained filmmakers. They were influenced by Third World cinema, Black Cultural Nationalism, Marxism, and the anti-colonial movements sweeping the world in the 1970s. Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977), a jazz inspired story that explores the black struggle in America through two musicians from different generations, is consided a classic of this era. Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) was

inducted into the Library of Congress as a national treasure in 1990. Through the story of a man named Stan who works in a slaughter house, *Killer of Sheep*, communicates the beauty and pain of life for a working class family in 1970s Watts. Haile Gerima's first four films, produced during this period, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

**Late 1980s - Present: Urban Dramas/ Diverse Cinema**

The next film era sprang up out of the era of Reaganomics and globalization. The 1980s was a decade in which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, thanks to "trickle-down economics" and other global socio-economic factors. The term "black underclass" was increasingly used to describe urban, poor, undereducated, disenfranchised black people. Gang violence, drug culture, and high rates of teen pregnancy were pathos attributed to this urban population. When, and if, presented in the media, blacks were usually associated with crime and poverty. Though, the Civil Rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s had provided blacks the opportunity to join the ranks of the middle class and live in previously all-white communities, many educated blacks met glass ceilings, and felt alienated in their all-white social worlds.

This third wave of black cinema was distinguished by four distinctive characteristics. First, the filmmakers were primarily college-trained. Second, they had better access to equipment and capital, usually because of their association with film schools. The topics of their films dealt with a wider range of topics. And finally, the filmmakers represented more diverse backgrounds and identities, including female, gay, and immigrant (Bogle, *Toms*).

Female filmmakers Kasi Lemmons and Darnell Martin deal with intersections of class, sexism, and racism in their female centered narratives. Lemmon's *Eve's Bayou* (1997) deals with the issue of patriarchical sexual exploitation and women's complacency in upholding that patriarchical structure even to their own demise. Darnell Martin's *I Like It Like That* (1994) looks at the struggle of a young woman to stake out her identity as a black Latina wife, mother, and employee in a world that devalues her multiple identities.

Gay filmmakers Marlon Riggs and Yvonne Welbon explore the unique struggles of black homosexuals in a generally homophobic African-American community and a racist U.S. society. Marlon Rigg's film *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1995) challenges the Black Nationalists impulse to ignore all other identities and struggles for promotion of the black macho agenda. Yvonne Welbon's biography *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* celebrates the strength and resolve of an openly gay black American woman who blazed the path for many in the modern gay movement.

Immigrant filmmakers Salem Makuria and Haile Gerima's experimental documentary films look at the painful recent political history of Ethiopia and its impact on contemporary society. Salem Makuria's film *Ye Wonz Maibel* (*Deluge*, 1994) focuses on her search for her brother who was one of many students killed during the military dictatorship that followed the fall of Haile Selassie. While Haile Gerima's *Adwa: an African Victory* (1999) documents the resistence of the Ethiopians to Italian colonial aggression at the turn of the 20th century. A common motivation of these filmmakers continues to be one of education and uplift, but also one of cultural critical analysis of society (Alexander, "Introduction"). These contemporary filmmakers aim to incite the

black spectator to question official histories and to inspire pride through exposure to untold histories of visionaries and survivors.

Out of the complex times of the 1980s emerged a young filmmaker from Brooklyn, New York. A descendent of several generations of Morehouse College graduates, Spike Lee turned American cinema upside down. His early films, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and Do *the Right Thing* (1989), took up the issues of class, sexuality, and race in African-American society. With an "in-your-face" style Lee's films offered no answers, but raised many questions about the present state of black America. Lee looked to Oscar Micheaux's marketing model for promoting his films. However, he took self-promotion to another level with the selling of T-shirts, hats, and posters to create excitement around his films even before they were completed. Lee created media frenzy with his every move and promoted controversy with every comment.

Haile Gerima, along with other independents like Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Ayoka Chenzira, and Wendall Harris, released feature length films in the early 1990s that reflected Third Cinema tendencies. Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), the first feature by an African-American female, presented the story of a family on the South Carolina Sea Islands at the turn of the 19th century. Her film examined the compromises black women had to make just to survive, and the efforts they made to preserve their families, while holding onto their self-dignity. Charles Burnett's first theatrically released feature, *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), told the story of a Los Angeles-based family disrupted by a visit from an old friend from their southern past. This film drew heavily on black southern folk culture to bring into debate what a people must keep from its past to maintain its identity, and what a people must discard to ensure its advancement. Ayoka

Chenzira's, *Alma's Rainbow* (1994), her first feature, was a coming of age story for both a single mother and her teenage daughter. Chenzira's film called for the breaking down of class barriers within the African-American community. In addition, the film dealt with letting go of a painful past in order to move forward in building healthy male-female, mother-daughter, and sibling relationships. Wendell Harris created a sharp, thoughtful satire for his first feature, *Chameleon Street* (1989). Brimming with criticism of American race relations and the particular psycho-social issues facing black males, the film is a classic that was seen by few. Harris masterfully used the element of humor to detail the racial dynamics of American society, highlighting Du Bois' concept of double consciousness and Fanon's concept of the mask. Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993), a fictional account of slavery, drew significant audiences across the United States. An in depth discussion of *Sankofa* is presented in chapter four.

**African Cinema**

Film was introduced to the African continent nearly at its inception in the late 1800s. The Lumiere brothers demonstrated their new phenomenon in North Africa before the turn of the century (Malkmus and Armes). Early on, North Africans, such as Mohamed Bayoumi of Egypt and Albert Samama Chikly of Tunisia, began to produce their own films. However, outside of North Africa, Africans were not involved in the production of their image in film. Film, like other goods from the West, was something imported from the outside to be consumed by Africans, not produced by Africans. Film served the colonialists in two ways, it provided entertainment and it was used as a propaganda tool to teach Africans how to be good tax paying subjects (Diawara, *African*

*Cinema*). Early in film history, western cinema began to establish its long-imbalanced relationship with the African continent. Africa and Africans were used as the backdrop for European and American adventure and dramatic films. In fact, it was during this period of early cinema that Tarzan became a household name in the United States. The only images of Africans as film subjects involved their documentation in anthropological films (Goldfarb).

Zmohamed Bayoumi and Albert Samama Chikly, who began making films in the 1920s, are considered the first two African filmmakers. By the 1930s, there was a solid tradition of feature filmmaking in Egypt with up to 50 films produced a year. However, the early work of the North Africans strongly paralleled Western cinema in content. The boom of Egyptian cinema, which consisted of musicals, farces, tales of love and romance, and stage adaptations, lasted up until the revolution in 1952 (Malkmus and Armes 31). Evidence of cinema with Third Cinema tendencies surfaced in Africa in the late 1950s just at the height of the independence struggles sweeping the African continent (Diawara, *African Cinema*; Ukadike, *Black*).

At independence, filmmaking was quickly identified by many new governments as a tool for promoting development and nation-building. However, the development of cinema on the continent was greatly uneven. West African countries, mostly Francophone countries and the Anglophone countries of Nigeria and Ghana, had the most active filmmaking communities. Many of the early African filmmakers received film training in France and a few were trained in Russia. The dominant themes the early African filmmakers tended to focus on were tradition versus modernity, rural life versus urban life, western values versus African values, the exposition of colonial injustices and

the criticism of post-colonial African governments, the struggles of the poor and oppressed, gender equality issues, and children's issues. The aesthetic qualities of African films tended to reflect oral tradition in their slow pacing and wide-angle shots. The individual was presented as an integral part of a community, the landscape served as a character, and people were portrayed as organic to their environment. (Diawara, *African Cinema*)

The development of African cinema was influenced by two factors, the former colonizer's degree of involvement in the development of indigenous filmmakers and the present government's commitment to building a national cinema (Diawara, *African Cinema*; Ukadike, *Black*). The French played an active role in the training of filmmakers and the financing of cinema in its former colonies, while the Britons and the Portuguese provided little or no support for filmmaking. The governments of Burkina Faso and Senegal made concerted efforts to develop national cinemas by establishing film boards and providing training and financing to filmmakers (Diawara, *African Cinema*; Ukadike, *Black*). Many notable filmmakers come from these two countries, in particular. In fact, during the 1990s, eighty percent of black African films were made in Francophone Africa (Diawara, *African Cinema* 21). After gaining independence from the Portuguese in the 1980s, the Mozambican and Angolan governments established socialist-oriented national film institutes. These filmmaking entities were directly linked to supporting the independence movements in each country. Significant films by black African filmmakers emerged out of South Africa and Zimbabwe since the fall of Apartheid and the Rhodesian government, but the film industry continues to be dominated by Africans of European descent. This region of Africa holds great potential for growth in filmmaking because

South Africa is one of the few African countries where a film can be made from beginning to end.

The birth of black African cinema is credited to Beninois filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra for his 1955 film, *Afrique Sur Seine*. This film was made with the help of "Le Group de Cinema," a group of African students living in Paris, and it focused on the concerns of these young, African intellectuals living abroad. *Afrique Sur Seine* offered " ... an overview of Blacks as they were then living in the French metropolis, as well as a reflection of the hopes and frustration commonly found amid uprooted youth in a foreign land (Pfaff, "Ousmane" 295)." Vieyra went on to make both documentaries that catalogued the monumental events in early independent Africa and narrative films that explored the politics of newly independent Senegal. He was also one of the founding members of FESPACI, or the Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers.

Along with film pioneer Vierya, fellow West Africans Ousmane Sembene of Senegal and Med Hondo of Mauritania were among the first global African filmmakers to articulate Third Cinema theory and apply Third Cinema techniques to their filmmaking in the 1960s. Haile Gerima names Sembene and Hondo as major forces in the development of his approach to filmmaking (Pfaff, "Haile").

Ousmane Sembene was crowned the father of African Cinema due to his prolific career and commitment to African cinema. Sembene, like Micheaux, came to filmmaking by way of writing novels. Also, an activist in the labor movement of migrant dock workers in Paris, Sembene felt that he could reach more people and better express himself through films. With his first documentary, *L'empire Songhaï*, and his first short narrative, *Borom Sarret,* both released in 1963, he established himself as a major talent in

African cinema. *Borom Sarret* is the heart-breaking story of a cart driver who makes a meager living hustling in the streets of Dakar. Borrowing from cinema verité, Sembene was able to portray a modern African country struggling with issues of governance, development, and the common citizen's place within that struggle. Though Sembene received his formal film training in Russia, he named African, African-American and Caribbean writers as his influences (Pfaff, "Ousmane"). Sembene's films have always been concerned with social and political issues. A strong proponent of using film to promote social change, Sembene referred to cinema as "night school" for Africans because of its strong potential for teaching the illiterate (Pfaff, "Ousmane" 237-9). Over the past four decades, Sembene produced 13 films, each one award-winning, each one controversial, each posing questions and challenging political, social and moral issues in Senegal and in the world.

Med Hondo of Mauritania came to filmmaking by way of acting. Dissatisfied with the limited roles he was offered as a student studying in Paris, Hondo turned to filmmaking as an outlet for expressing his experiences and that of fellow Africans in France. African students in France of the 1960s were treated as second-class citizens, and those of the Magreb found even harsher discrimination. In his first film *Soliel O* (1969), Hondo used the story of an African immigrant to deal with the themes of imperialism, slavery and neocolonialism. In this film and subsequent films, Hondo has tackled the plight of black migrant workers in France. As a filmmaker, he aims "to show people the problems with which they are confronted every day. I hope my films will help them fight these problems" (Pfaff, "Med" 161).

During the 1970s, African filmmakers began to question the trappings of African independence and challenge their indigenous leadership. African filmmakers explored the effect of development and modernization on African society and traditions. There is ample evidence of Third Cinema oriented films across the continent during this time period. A sampling of some classics of this period include *Vukani Awake* (1963) by South African Lionel Ngakane, *Xala* (1974) by Senegalese Ousmane Sembene, *Touki Bouki* (1973) by Senegalese Djbril Diop Mambety, *Last Grave at Dimbazo* (1974) by South African Nana Mahomo, *Kaddu Beykat* (*Peasant Letter*, 1975) by Senegalese Safi Faye, *Sambizanga* (1971) by Guadaloupan/Angolan Sarah Maldoror and *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1975) by Ethiopian Haile Gerima.

Ngakane's *Vakani Awake*, the first film made by a black South African, documented the South African liberation struggle. Sembene's classic *Xala* likened the new African state to sexual impotence. While Mambety's *Touki Bouki* explored the theme of social alienation through the story of a shepherd who is at first lured to Dakar and then dreams of migrating to Paris. Mahomo's *Last Grave at Dimbazo* exposed to the West the glaring injustices black South Africans suffered under the white apartheid government. Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* explored the devastating effect of the colonial agricultural legacy of the groundnut mono-crop on the post-independence economy through the eyes of a small village farmer. Maldoror's *Sambizanga* tells the story of the Angolan independence struggle through the wife of a freedom fighter. And Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* revealed the exploitive feudal legacy of his home country through the tale of a peasant family and a wealthy landowner.

Mozambique offers a particularly poignant example of Third Cinema activity in Africa. In 1976, the newly independent government of Mozambique established the Mozambique Film Institute as one of its first acts (Andrade-Watkins 188). The Mozambican government saw film as a tool for decolonization and fully supported the production of film, the training of filmmakers, and the development of critical film audiences. The great majority of films produced under the Film Institute were documentary, though a few narrative films were made like *O tempo dos leopardos* (*The Time of the Leopards*, 1987). This film, set in colonial times, followed the colonialists' search for a nationalist, Pedro, whose eventual capture inspired revolutionary activity.

The eighties were a time of reflection and many African filmmakers looked to history and traditional culture for answers to the hardships that Africa was facing (Diawara, *African Cinema*). The films of this period sought to address disillusionment and search for indigenous answers to African problems. One of the most significant filmmakers to emerge in the 1980s was Kwah Ansah of Ghana. His truly African hit, *Love Brewed in an African Pot* (1981), had record-breaking runs in his home country and three other Anglophone countries (Diawara, *African Cinema*). This tale of two lovers from opposite sides of the tracks deftly dealt with the theme of the contrasting values of traditional African culture versus Western culture. Other Third Cinema oriented films of the 1980s that dealt with the tradition versus modernity theme included Burkinabe Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), a tale set in pre-colonial days of an orphan boy who is taken in by a family after being cast out of his own village. Malian Souleymane Cisse's *Yeelen* (1982) is the tale of a boy who goes on a quest for a mystical artifact which will help him secure his sorcery powers that he must use to fight the evil forces of his father.

The retelling of historical events as a source of empowerment for contemporary struggles was also a common strategy of Third Cinema film of the 1980s. Guinea Bissauan Flora Gomes' *Mortu Nega* (*Those Whom Death Refused*, 1988) recounted the heroic independence struggle waged by the men and women of Guinea Bissau against the Portuguese. Sembene's *Camp de Thioroye* (1987) took up the historical event of the French army's massacre of a camp of Senegalese WWII veterans who challenged their European officers after learning that they were being paid substantially less than their French counterparts. Hondo's *Sarraouina* (1986) dealt with the historical tale of a West African queen who fought off the French at the end of the 1800s.

The present post-modern era, from the 1990s on, is characterized by globalization, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, hybridity, identity politics, emerging democracies, and the information technology boom. African countries, except for a few exceptions, have fallen deeper into poverty and debt. Much of the developmental strides made in early independence years has been lost or are stagnant. This has been a period where cultural, ethnic, racial, gender role, religious, and sexual orientation boundaries are constantly being crossed and challenged. Historically, colonial governments pitted one ethnic group against another in order to secure power and see their aims realized. These same divisions presently drive many of the clashes of the 1990s and 2000s. Ethnic tensions underscored with a jostling for political power have fueled civil wars in countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Central African Republic, and have led to the horrific genocide in Rwanda. Religious intolerance fueled the atrocious civil war in Algeria, terrorist activities in Egypt, and the repressive governance in the Sudan. The racially based system of Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa in the early 1990s and

the new constitution adopted by South Africa became one of the first in the world to explicitly deal with race, gender and sexual orientation. The post-modern period has also been characterized by the concept of hybridity, leaving some to ponder: what is African?

Third Cinema filmmaking of the 1990s explored many of the issues of this present period. In addition, the filmmaking arena is filled by many more women and filmmakers from previously underrepresented African countries. This has meant an even greater range of perspectives and voices. A masterpiece in conflict resolution Sembene's *Guelwaar* (1993) explored the conflict of the multiple identities of Africans through a tale of a Christian corpse that is mistakenly switched with a Muslim corpse, causing two communities to almost come to battle while attempting to correct the error. Jean-Pierre Bekelo's *Quartier Mozart* (1992) is a ground-breaking film which used a switch in gender roles to question the African concept of masculinity and prowess. Kenyan filmmaker Wanjira Kinyanjui provided a female perspective of the inequality of gender roles in a modern tale of an urban woman who leaves her abusive husband and returns to her home village in *Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1995). In *Les Silences du palais* (*The Silences of the Palace*, 1994), another female filmmaker, Tunisian Moufida Tlatli, explored the issues of gender inequality, class and post-independence disillusionment through the story of the daughter of a female servant who grows up within the walls of the royal palace just before Tunisian independence from France.

African cinema of the 1990s was also characterized by stories that attempt to come to terms with a painful past and challenge the official version of history. Using documentary form, Ethiopian female filmmaker, Salem Mekuria, fleshes out the secrecy, horror, and pain of the Red Terror and her family's loss in *Ye Wonz Maibel* (*Deluge*,

1997). Senegalese Djbril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas* (1992) centered on a strong female character who made a fortune as a prostitute, and then returned to her village only to find the very men who previously ostracized her, now bowed at her feet because she was wealthy. Abderrahmane Sissako, of Mali, examined the displacement many Africans feel living in Europe and the in-betweeness many Africans experience poised between tradition and modernity in *La vie sur terre* (*Life on Earth*, 1998). Congolese Mweze Ngangura's *Pièces d'identitiés* (*Pieces of Identity*, 1998) looked at the immigrant experience through the eyes of a father coming to collect his adult daughter who he sent off for schooling in Belgium as a child. In *Udju azul di yonta* (*Blue Eyes of Yonta*, 1992), Flora Gomes told a melancholy story of post-independence Guinea Bissau through the juxtaposition of a disillusioned freedom fighter and a carefree young woman who is ignorant of the past generation's sacrifices. *Dakan* (*Destiny*, 1997) by Guinean Mohamed Camara took up the controversial topic of homosexuality through a tale of the innocent love between two young men who become outcasts from their families. Moussa Sene Absa of Senegal wove a masterful story of post-independence corruption and unchecked adoption of western-style capitalism in *Tableau Ferraille* (1997).

The events of September 11, 2001 establish a distinct marker for contemporary times. Post 9/11, religious, cultural, and political differences have become magnified and xenophobia has intensified in the West. Discrimination against Africans in the West has increased as demonstrated in France by the anti-veil campaign and the youth riots in the past few years. Islamic fundamentalism has been fueling conflicts in Nigeria, Sudan, Kenya, and Algeria (Lyman and Morrison). The wide-reaching arms of globalization are affecting Africans even in the most remote areas because of world commodity prices. The

lack of economic opportunities and political instability continue to push Africans to migrate to Western nations and other more stable African countries. At the same time, the pool of formally educated Africans who fail to find adequate employment opportunities in their home countries is growing; hence, there is an enormous brain drain out of Africa. HIV/AIDS continues to have a devastating effect on many African countries, especially Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa. Despite political instability in many countries, Liberia elected Africa's first female president, while Senegal successfully held multiparty elections. Civil unrest fueled the inscription of child soldiers, the demand for blood diamonds, the rise of amputations in war victims, the perpetuation of rape of females in war zones, the creation of a generation of Sudanese refugees who came to be known as the "lost boys," and genocide based on ethnicity.

Globalization and its effects on African economies was the topic of films by Sembene, Sissako, and Ngangura. One of Sembene's final films *Faat Kine* (2000) examined the present economic state of Senegal in the world economy and contemporary urban gender relations. *Bamako* (2006) by Abderrahmane Sissako made an interrogation of the Malian economy and Mali's place in the global economy by putting the World Bank on trial. Through metaphor, Mweze Ngangura of Democratic Republic of Congo took a stab at the post-colonial Congo and its relationship with international monetary bodies in *Les habits neufs du gouverneur* (*The Emperor's New Clothes*, 2004).

Civil conflicts in Chad and Angola were reexamined through a personal story by Serge and a fictionalized account by Gamboa. In *Daresalam* (*Let There Be Peace*, 2000), Chadian Issa Serge explored the devastation of Chad's long-time civil war on his immediate family as well as the country at large. Angolan Zézé Gamboa's *O Heroi* (*The*

*Hero*, 2005) told the story of Vitorio, a war veteran and amputee, who, in the process of searching for a prosthesis, finds renewal and hope for the future of Angola through a makeshift family.

The psychological and social effects of migration (or in betweeness) are dealt with in the films of Sissako and Haroun, while the physical effects and risks associated with migration are explored in the films of Ismail and Djamdjam. Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakano* (*Waiting for Happiness*, 2003) worked through the theme of migration and the alienation that comes as a result. Chadian Mahamet Saleh Haroun created a soliloquy of the migrant who finally comes home, but finds it a place where he no longer belongs in *Bye Bye Africa* (1998). *Et après* (*And After*, 2001) by Moroccan Mohammad Ismaïl explored people's longing for a better life and the risks (sometimes fatal) they will take to attain it. In *Frontèires* (*Borders*, 2002), Algerian Mustéfa Djamdjam featured the dangerous trek of six Senegalese, each looking for a better life, from Senegal to Morocco in an attempt to illegally migrate to Spain.

The films of Souleman and M'Bala took up historical issues both present and distant to reconcile contemporary political and social concerns. The story of *Zulu Love Letter* (2004) by South African Ramadan Souleman followed the journey of journalist Thandeka as she struggles to rebuild her life and come to terms with South Africa's painful past and the fragile reconciliation efforts of the present. Roger Ngoan M'Bala of Ivory Coast explored the painful past of African complicity in the transatlantic slave trade through his film *Adanggaman* (2000).

**Caribbean and Latin America**

The countries making up Latin America and the Caribbean are vastly different in language and culture. However, they share a historical background of European colonization of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, of gaining independence in the mid-20th century, of plantation economies, of having racially and ethnically mixed populations of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans, and of being societies based on old oligarchical structures. Of the South and Central American countries, Brazil was the only one colonized by the Portuguese; hence, its lingua franca is Portuguese instead of Spanish. In addition, Brazil had one the of the largest African slave populations in the New World, making its present population the largest African descendent population in the Western Hemisphere.

The populations, languages, and cultures of the Caribbean vary more widely than those of Central and South America due to the colonial involvement of Spain, England, France, and Holland in this area and the multiple changing of hands of many of the colonies. In the latter part of the 19th century, Asian Indians and Chinese came to inhabit parts of the Caribbean, and their presence added another ingredient to the mixture of languages and culture in the Caribbean. Though every country is tied to its former colonizer(s) by their colonizer's language (French, Spanish, English, Portuguese, or Dutch) the masses, on any given island, speak some form of Creole or patois. Creolism is not only evident in the language of the people in the Caribbean, but also in the culture of the Caribbean, a blend of African, European, Asian, and indigenous cultures. Cham describes Créolité as "a continuation as well as a shift away from a history of intellectual, cultural, and political practice in the Caribbean ranging from Negroism in

Cuba, Indigenism in Haiti, Negritude in Martinique and Guadeloupe, and Pan Africanism" (Cham, "Introduction" 4-5). Though the influences of many cultures are evident in Créolité, the African heritage is the most dominant.

The countries of Spain, Portugal, Holland, England, and France maintained control over their colonies in the Latin America and the Caribbean world until the 1950s and 1960s when most Caribbean and Latin American countries gained their independence with Haiti as an exception[8]. In Latin America, the monarchical rule gave way to oligarchical rule by a few families of Spanish descent up through the 1980s. In the Caribbean, a similar phenomenon occurred with a few elite families consolidating political and economic power, forging a wide gap between the few rich and the many poor. The governmental structures that most Caribbean countries have today are patterned after their former colonial power.

After independence, many Caribbean and Latin American countries found themselves in the same state as many African countries post-independence. Economically they had few trained national professionals, abundant raw resources, few processing facilities, and high migration out. During the liberation struggles in Latin America, socialist ideology, Marxist ideology and liberation theology gained prominence. Two distinct voices came out of this era, Brazilian educator Paulo Friere who advocated a new approach to adult education as a means to empower the masses and Peruvian Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutierrez who promoted a radical application of Christian doctrine that called for social justice and the elimination of poverty.

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[8] Haiti gained its independence in 1803 through an indigenous-led revolution. Haiti was the second country in the Western Hemisphere to gain independence (Schneider).

Filmmaking traditions can be traced back to the early 1900s in Latin American and Caribbean countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Haiti; however, filmmaking activity by African descendents from this region is relatively recent starting as late as the 1970s. Afro-Cuban filmmakers, Sergio Giral and Sara Gomez who emerged out of the Cuban Revolution, stand at the forefront of cinema for social change (Burton, *Film*). Other notable global African filmmakers of the Caribbean whose work reflects Third Cinema tendencies are Martinican Euzhan Palcy, Haitian Raul Peck, Brazilian Pitango and Antillean Felix de Rooy. Releasing their first films in the 1970s and 1980s, these filmmakers worked in both documentary and narrative forms to explore the issues specific to their home countries, such as the legacy of colonialism, slavery, racism, class divisions, Creolism, and land ownership. Since each country has a very unique cinema tradition, the survey of Third Cinema oriented films in Latin America and the Caribbean will be looked at chronologically by country.

The practice of filmmaking emerged out of the practice of using music to explore political, economic, and cultural issues. As Cham observes: "The films (of the Caribbean) engage aspects of these currents (political, economic and cultural issues) as subject matter, and in some cases, aspects of these currents manifest themselves in matters of form, style, and orientation" ("Introduction" 5). Caribbean filmmakers are motivated by a great desire to show the full range of diversity of Caribbean culture in order to counter "its usual misuse as exotic background to Euro-American romantic narratives and spectacles" (Cham, "Introduction" 6).

It is often difficult to define Caribbean films and even more difficult to define an Afro-Caribbean Third Cinema-oriented film. Guadaloupean filmmaker Christian Lara

offers that in order for a film to qualify as Caribbean, the director, subject matter, lead actors and production unit should be Caribbean, and a Creole language should be used (Cham, "Introduction" 10). Afro-Caribbeans can be defined as anyone of African heritage, which encompasses the majority of the Caribbean population. Furthermore, Caribbean culture though a creolization, or amalgamation of many cultures, indigenous, European, and Asian, is primarily Afro-Caribbean culture. Hence, white Jamaican Percy Henzell's *The Harder they Come* (1972) is an Afro-Caribbean film because its sensibilities are grounded in Afro-Caribbean culture (Thelwell 179). Co-scripted by a black Jamaican, *The Harder They Come* oozes with authenticity and speaks to the Jamaican psyche with precise attention to the nuances of Jamaican culture, lifestyle, and the struggles of the working class. Further clouding the definition of Afro-Caribbean Third Cinema are films made by filmmakers of the African Diaspora whose subject matter is Caribbean, such as Mauritanian Med Hondo's slave epic *West Indies: Les négres maroons de la liberté* (1979) and African-American Hugh Robertson's *Bim* (1974) filmed in Trinidad.

**Cuba**

Afro-Cubans stand at the forefront of cinema for social change. The concept of film as a tool for social change developed directly out the Cuban revolution (Burton, "Theory"; Chanan). The Film Institute of Cuba became a site for training filmmakers with the similar ideology of using film in a radically new way to teach, question, challenge, and promote radical approaches to creating a more equitable society. Sergio Giral and Sara Gomez are two Afro-Cuban filmmakers who came out of this earlier

tradition, while Gloria Rolando represents the second generation of Afro-Cuban filmmakers.

Sergio Giral was educated in the United States and Cuba. He was living in the U.S. prior to the Cuban Revolution and he returned to Cuba in 1960. Early in his career, Giral mostly made documentaries, such as *Cimarron* (*Runaway*, 1967) a documentary based upon the autobiography of a runaway slave. His entrée into narrative filmmaking comprised a trilogy of tales about slavery, *El otro Francisco* (*The Other Francisco*, 1975), *El rancheador* (*The Bounty Hunter*, 1976), and *Maluala* (1979). Another of Giril's films is a documentary portraying a black Cuban singer. Though much of his work focuses on the Black historical experience in Cuba, Giral shies away from calling his work "black film." He claims that the construct of race does not manifest itself in the same way in Cuba as it does in the United States and he instead sees racism as an element of certain economic systems (Downing 269). Giral poses that we are materialists and must use historical materialism a as means of understanding reality. Hence, racism is an economic category. He does state however that, as a black man, he brings a unique experience to his work (Lopez & Humy).

Sara Gomez, a contemporary of Giral, made only a few films before dying at a young age from asthma. An anthropologist and sociologist by training, Gomez sought to make a study of everyday people engaged in their day-to-day lives on screen. She wanted to expose the lives of marginalized populations. Mentored by the master filmmaker and Third Cinema pioneer, Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Gomez worked mostly in documentary form. Her last film, *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*, 1974), is the first feature directed by an Afro-Cuban woman. Gomez explored the contemporary issues of racism

in Cuba through the relationship of a working-class mulatto man and a middle class white woman. Giral claimed that Gomez gave a contemporary view to problems of racism in Cuba (Downing).

Presently, up and coming Afro-Cuban filmmaker, Gloria Rolando has made two films dealing with racial issues in Cuba. Her two best known documentaries include *Oggon: An Eternal Presence* (1991), a film exploring the Yorubo based religion, *Santeria, and Eyes of the Rainbow* (1997), a film about Black Panther Assata Shakur, who has been living in exile in Cuba for the past 20 years. Rolando's pan-African ideology and Third Cinema tendencies easily place her within this survey of filmmakers. One of her most recent works, *Raices di mi Corazon* (*Roots of my Heart*, 2001), is an account of the Race War of 1912, when the Cuban army massacred around 5,000 Afro-Cubans. She has made several tours of the United States with her films. In a 1999 visit, she specifically reached out to black American communities to raise money for her film on the Race War of 1912 since she experienced difficulty in getting funding in Cuba. She made her last visit in 2001 to screen *Raices di mi Corazon* before the U.S. ban on Cuban artists.

Although Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is of European descent, his contribution of *La última cena* (*The Last Supper*, 1976) must be included among Third Cinema Afro-Cuban films. *La última cena* spun a historical tale dealing with slavery in Cuba to explore issues of racism, religion, and classism in modern Cuba.

**Haiti**

Haiti is unique in this region because it gained independence early on, in 1804. Haiti has a legacy of rebellion and resilience. However, even in independence, Haiti continues to struggle with the societal structure it inherited from its colonial past. Like many other countries in the region, there is a small and very wealthy elite and a large and very poor mass population. A hierarchal societal structure with whites and some mulattos at the top, mulattos in the middle, and blacks at the bottom has long influenced politics, economics, and daily life. In the twentieth century, the Haitian population suffered under the oppressive dictatorial regimes of the Duvaliers, and the neo-colonial policies of the United States and France. And in this present era, Haiti struggles to maintain a democratic state, build a viable economy, and declare its sovereignty under continuing demands from the United States and France (Schneider).

Cinema was introduced in Haiti near the same time it was introduced in the U.S. and other European countries. Films were made in Haiti, but only using the country as the backdrop for European adventures. In the 1970s, native Haitians, even under the heavy censorship of Baby Doc began to make films. These pioneering filmmakers drew on Haiti's strong theater and literary traditions for material. In fact, the first films to come out of Haiti were adaptations of Haitian novels and short stories. However, narrative filmmaking, like in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, took a back seat to documentary filmmaking.

One of the first black Haitian-made films, *Anita* (1980), was based on a novel of the same name by Haitian writer, Rassoul Labuchin. This film was locked out of the traditional movie houses in Haiti; thus, the filmmaker, Rassoul Labuchin, and those

connected with the production carried the film around the country from town to town showing it in open-air locations (LaFontant-Medard). A truly interactive experience in the African sense, the film screening programs included four parts: 1) song, 2) dance, 3) the film screening, and 4) a film discussion. The film was highly popular, partly because it tapped into Haitian popular and folk culture and partly because it was brought to the people, many of whom would never have seen the film in the cities (LaFontant-Medard).

Haitian filmmaker Raul Peck not only makes films--he makes policy. Serving as Minister of Culture from 1997 to 1998, under President Aristide, Peck exemplifies the social activism of many global African filmmakers. Through the medium of film, Peck exposes long hidden truths and provides the space for the spectator to delve into the personal and collective memories of history. In his experimental documentary *Lumumba, la mort du prophete* (*Lumumba, Death of a Prophet*, 1991), Peck recounts his personal story of living in Zaire with his father, a French civil servant, and the national story of the rise of Zaire's first leader and his CIA-backed assassination. Peck returns home to Haiti with *L'Homme sur la quais* (*Man by the Shore*, 1993), a haunting story of a young Haitian girl's memory of living under and personally witnessing the terror of the Macoute. Most recently, Peck tackled the very painful and complex history of the Rwandan genocide, in *Sometimes in April* (2005).

**Brazil**

As mentioned earlier, Brazilian cinema has been in existence from the early 1900s. Films featuring blacks in central roles gained prominence in the 1960s during the Cinema Novo movement, a film movement which sought to create a true Brazilian

aesthetic and a politically-engaged cinema that focused on the peasants and used the streets, favellas, and countryside as film locations. However, the inclusion of blacks as filmmakers did not occur until the 1970s. Though the Brazilian population is 40 percent black, blacks remain so disenfranchised that filmmaking is off-limits to but a few.

The entry of blacks into filmmaking in Brazil came by way of acting. Three filmmakers who have made notable films are both well-known film actors, Waldyr Onofre, Odilon Lopes and Pitanga. Their films are not overtly political, but according to Robert Stam, they attempt to "normalize Blacks" and expose some of the issues from within the community (258). Waldyr Onofre's film, *As Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro* (*Amorous Adventures of a Baker*, 1975), featured Saul, a black actor who is frustrated by the stereotypic roles he is offered. Saul has an affair with a bored white housewife. However, the adulterous couple find themselves pursued by the housewife's jealous husband who relies on the advice of a black lawyer who has climbed the social ladder and, now, wishes to abandon his blackness. Odilon Lopes' film, *Um ... Pouco, Dois ... Bom* (*One is Little, Two is Great*, 1977), dealt with the problems of the black middle class through two stories, one of a black man who loses his job and his house and the other of a pickpocket who dreams of climbing the social ladder.

Antonio Sampaio, better known as Pitanga, is an activist and actor. A veteran of the Cinema Novo movement with over 50 films to his credit, Pitanga dealt with the complexities of Brazilian racism in his film *Na Boca do Mundo* (*In the World's Mouth*, 1977). This film explored a love triangle between Antonio, a poor black man, Terezinha, a poor mulatto woman, and Clarice, a wealthy white woman. The story concluded with Clarice murdering Antonio and she and Terezinha running off together. Stam argues that

"The film shows white society killing blacks in the name of love, an apt image for the kind of paternalistic affection, the 'cordial racism,' with which elite Brazil treats its Black citizens (283)." He further argues that "The murder is seen as an 'accident,' an appropriate metaphor for a society where racism is widely disavowed, never acknowledged as intentional (Stam 283)." Another notable film of the 1970s is Nigerian director Ola Balugun's film, *A Deuca Negra* (*The Black Goddess*, 1978). This Nigerian-Brazilian co-production followed a Nigerian who goes to Brazil to search for his relatives.

Joel Zito Auraújo, *A Negação do Brasil* (*The Denial of Brazil*, 2000), crafted a poignant documentary about the plight of black actors in Brazilian soap operas and the contradictions black spectators experience in the construction of their identity through these soaps. Auraujo's *Filhas do Vento* (*Daughters of the Wind*, 2004) explored the rural/urban divide through the narrative of two sisters who come together after many years of having gone their separate ways, one living in the city and the other living in the countryside.

**The Antilles: Martinique, Guadalupe, Surinam and Curacao**

Though Martinique briefly changed hands from the French to the Britons in the 1700s, it remains today closely tied to France as an overseas department. Hence, the societal and economic structure of Martinique differs little from what had been in place under slavery when wealthy French businessmen owned and controlled most of the plantations and industry on the island. Martinique maintains a three-tiered societal structure with whites at the top, mulattos in the middle, and blacks at the bottom.

Euzhan Palcy, a young Martinican woman who studied filmmaking in France, chose for her first film to adapt to screen a classic Martinican novel by Joseph Zobel, *Rue cases nègres*. The story and the subsequent film *Rue cases nègres* (Sugar Cane Alley, 1982), was set in the 1930s. It told the story of a young boy, Jose, who lived with his grandmother, a sharecropper on a sugar plantation. Just one step up from slavery, Jose's grandmother sacrificed to send him to school in the city where he exceeded in his studies while discovering the racism imbedded in Martinican society. French Antilleans were thrilled to see themselves on screen for the first time (Warner, "On Adapting"). It was reported that half of the population of Martinique and Guadeloupe saw this film, many traveling from far away and others viewing it more than once (Menil 155). Palcy went on to make several pan-African films that had Third Cinema tendencies, a documentary on Aimé Césaire, *Aimé Césaire: A Voice for History* (1994), a narrative about South African freedom fighter Steven Biko, *A Dry White Season* (1998), and a television movie based on the true story of a 6-year old African-American girl who integrated the New Orleans school system, *Ruby Bridges* (1998).

A filmmaker with roots in Guadeloupe, but who practices filmmaking in Africa, is Sarah Malador. Born to a French mother and a Guadaloupean father, Malador was raised in France. Malador came into contact with African revolutionaries while studying acting in Paris. She married an Angolan and became actively engaged in the African liberation struggles in Guinea Bissau and Angola after going to Africa. It was here that she began to see film as a tool for reaching an illiterate population to raise awareness. She studied filmmaking in the Soviet Union with Ousmane Sembene. The liberation struggle in Angola was the subject of her most well-received film, *Sambizanga* (1972), the story of a

woman who became conscientized through her search for her husband who had been imprisoned for his involvement in the Angolan freedom movement.

Felix De Rooy of Curaçao was educated in filmmaking in the United States, but resides in Amsterdam. Set in the 1940s in Curaçao, DeRooy's most well-known film *Ava and Gabriel* (1990) deals with the legacy of the colonial experience. Controversy ensues and racial identity is brought into question when a black painter, who has been commissioned to paint the Virgin Mary for a local church, chooses to use a mulatto for his model.

**Trinidad and Tobago**

A recent film out of Trinidad and Tobago, *Sista God* (2006) challenges the definition of who God is. Trinidadian-Jamaican filmmaker Yao Ramesar, who was born in Ghana and attended film school at Howard University, explores both political and spiritual issues through the story of a young black woman, the daughter of an American Gulf War veteran, who discovers she is the Messiah.

**Jamaica**

Jamaica, like many other Caribbean countries, has a strong music and theater tradition that carries over into its television productions and radio dramas; however, the film industry is underdeveloped. Lack of access to funding and distribution channels, as well as the cultural imperialism imposed by its northern neighbor, the United States, are but a few of the tremendous obstacles facing filmmakers in the Caribbean. The U.S. satellite footprint covers a great deal of the Caribbean; therefore the Jamaican mass

media market is flooded with cheap American programming. In addition, Hollywood theatrical films dominate the Jamaican movie houses. However a few filmmakers have been able to build on the strong musical tradition of the island, particularly reggae music, and the theater tradition, to create Third Cinema-influenced films that reflect Jamaican culture, inspire pride, and promote dialogue.

It is important to note that there are filmmakers of Jamaican descent residing mainly in England and Canada who call on their Jamaican heritage for their work. Their work will be covered in the following sections on British, European, and Canadian cinema.

Beginning in the 1970s, there was sparse but steady filmmaking activity in Jamaica. Jamaican cinema relied heavily on popular culture, including music and dance. The earlier Jamaican films exploited the popular musical forms of reggae and the later films incorporated dance hall. The films highlighted the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, urban and rural life, and the manner in which crime, government, and tourism impacted the lives of poor Jamaicans. Rastafarism, a religion to which only 5 to 10 percent of Jamaicans belong, figures prominently in many Jamaican films. Of the few films that can be defined as Jamaican, only a few exhibit Third Cinema tendencies and those include work by Trevor D. Rhone, Dickey Jobson, Lennie Little-White, Barbara Blake-Hanna, Percy Henzell and Hugh King.

Jamaican Trevor D. Rhone's screenplay, *Smile Orange* (1971), made a biting criticism of the tourism industry through the comic tale of the "ideal" servant. Greek filmmaker Theodorus Bafaloukis's *Rockers* (1978) told the story of local reggae musician Larry "Horsemouth" Wallace struggling to make a living distributing his music while at

the same time trying to recover his motorcycle from the local Mafia. Dickey Jobson's *Countryman* (1983) featured the Rasta hero, Countryman, who rescues and houses two white tourists who are plane-wrecked. Countryman saves them and his village from "corporate scheming politicians" (Thelwell 108). Lennie Little-White's *Children of Babylon* (1980) and *Way Back When* (1985) explores the themes of class, race, ideology, and religion through the romantic interludes of a variety of characters. Barbara Blake-Hanna's documentary *Rhetoric and Rastafari* (1982) examines Rastafarian culture and racism in England. Percy Henzell's aforementioned *The Harder They Come* follows the rags-to-riches story of a reggae musician and in the process exposes the gritty reality of Kingston slums. Hugh King's *Body Moves* (1985) told the story of a romance between a rural schoolteacher and a Rastafarian broom seller who aspires to be a prizefighter.

In the films of the 1990s and 2000s, the illegal drug trade, gangster culture, and violence figure more prominently. Rick Elwood and Don Letts, both of British origin, told a compelling tale of a pushcart vender's dreams of upward mobility, while the subplot pitted the heroine against a local gangster in *Dancehall Queen* (1996). This film exposed social inequality and government corruption in Jamaican society; however, it portrayed the common person as powerless to affect structural change. The heroine is only able to change her situation.

Other recent films with Third Cinema tendencies lack Jamaican directors or producers, but have Jamaican screenwriters. Screenwriter Trevor D. Rhone provided the Jamaican creative force for *One Love* (2003) the tale of two lovers from opposite sides of the tracks and *Milk and Honey* (1988) the melancholy story of a Jamaican maid who leaves her young child in Jamaica to care for a Canadian family's children abroad. *One*

*Love* explored issues of class, religious differences, and colonial retentions, while *Milk and Honey* offered a commentary on the economic imbalance and the tenuous interdependence of the First World and the Third World. *The Lunatic* (1991), a foreign-produced and directed film, was based on a novel by Jamaican writer Anthony C. Winkler. *The Lunatic* explored race and the West's exoticizing of the Caribbean through the story of a relationship between a village man and a German female tourist.

Recently, a number of homegrown Jamaican films with Jamaican directors and screenwriters have emerged, but they clearly fall in the imitative stage of Third Cinema. Chris Browne's *Third World Cop* (2000), Cess Silvera's *Shottas* (2002), and Desmond Gump's *Rude Boy: the Jamaican Don* (2004) all exemplify a trend in ultra-violent gangster films that borrow from the African-American hip-hop gangster genre. Like their U.S. cousins, these films use popular musicians in the starring roles and employ a soundtrack heavily laced with a dance hall beat.

**Great Britain And Europe**

After World War Two, many West Indians and Africans, encouraged by colonial powers, migrated to Britain, France, and other European countries to fill the labor needs of the West. While increased economic opportunity was the major draw, many immigrants were also lured by the increased access to educational opportunities. The immigrants who came in the 1950s and 1960s were anxious to make these new places their home; hence, they attempted to fit in and fully adopt the host country's customs and culture. Their goal was to assimilate, often abandoning their foods, dialect or whatever made them stand out, with the hope of gaining full acceptance to European society.

However, as early as the late 1950s, there were incidences of civil uprisings due to racism and oppression against blacks in European societies.

By the 1970s, the European economy weakened and the situation for black immigrants and their now European-born children turned bleak. Within the immigrant communities, there was a rise in unemployment, an increase in substandard housing, and a decline in educational opportunities. Furthermore, as the economy tightened, whites began to feel threatened by the competition for scarce jobs; racial tensions increased. These same countries that had at one time encouraged immigration were now turning hostile toward their new citizens.

The children of African-descent immigrants began to experience the broken promises of their parents' new homes. Even though these youths were born and raised in England, Canada, France, Holland, and other European countries, their sub-culture somehow set them apart from the majority population. Many second-generation offspring felt the full impact of racism and classism in countries where the popular consensus said they would never be British enough, French enough, Dutch enough, or whatever. Hence they began to look back to the Caribbean or Africa to establish their identity.

**Great Britain**

*Pressure* (1974), directed by Trinidadian immigrant Horace Ove, was the first feature length film made by a black Briton and the first black-directed film funded by the British Film Institute. Influenced by black North American political struggles, Ove wanted to illuminate the black power struggle and its relevance in Britain through this film that dealt with the militant political struggle (L. Young 133). This early black British

film and others of this period were "embedded in the discourse of ethnic absolutism" (Diawara, "Power" 130). Hence questions of racial and cultural identity were the priority. Later films of the 1980s and 1990s emphasized multiple subjectivities due to the influences of White leftist independent filmmakers, cultural-critical theoretical developments, and black American female writers (Diawara, "Power" 130).

In the late 1980s, under Thatcher's conservative administration in Great Britain, civil unrest reached unprecedented levels causing the British society to reexamine its colonial past and its intricate relationship with British citizens with roots in Kenya, Jamaica, India, and other former colonial conquests (Gilroy, *There*). The unemployment rate for black youths aged 16 to19 in England was an alarming 80 percent in 1977. These second generation youths were labeled "problems to society" and were often portrayed as such in the mass media (L. Young). Youth in Britain responded to their situation with uprisings in the 1980s including the 1981 Nottingham riot. Film collectives were created as a direct response to repression and racism in London in the 1980s. Greater London Council (GLC) and Channel Four provided funds to help set up collective film and video workshops to keep black youths busy. Hence, it was out of the uprising that a distinctive black British cinema movement emerged.

Filmmakers Maureen Blackwood, of Sankofa Film Collective, and John Akomfrah, of Black Audio Film Collective, are two pioneering members of the workshop movement. They aimed to use the medium of film to illustrate both internal and external issues in the global African community (Fusco). Film scholar Manthia Diawara calls this period from 1985 to 1991 (the peak of the workshop era) the "black British Renaissance cinema" ("Power" 128). Drawing on the theories and writings concerning identity,

ambivalence, Englishness, and diasporic aesthetics by scholars such as Stuart Hall, Laura Mulvey, Lacan, Althusser, Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy, these filmmakers set out to reconfigure Third Cinema theory. By 1986, Diawara argues that "a new film language had been forged" ("Power" 128) that was significantly different from white independent, race relation, diaspora, and Third Cinema films that "lacked cinematic pleasure and took ambivalent positions" ("Power" 128).

Significant developments came out of the ascribed ideology and position papers drawn up by Black Audio Film/Video Collective and the Sankofa Film Collective. One was the concept of "collective practice" which John Akomfrah saw "as a means of extending the boundaries of black film culture" by de-mystifying film production and collapsing the distinction between audience and producer (Diawara "Power" 130). Other developments included shifting the debate from "positive versus negative images" to "representation" and a new emphasis on gender and sexual politics as constitutive elements in shaping film language (Attille 54). This approach created a space for exploring the gray issues of racial, ethnic, and national identity, especially in terms of hybridity and sexual orientation.

Significant films of the black British film collective era included *Handsworth Songs* (1986), *Passion of Remembrance* (1986), *Testament* (1988), *Looking for Langston* (1989), and *Welcome to the Terrordome* (1995). These films challenged conventional filmmaking in form, genre, and content. The concept of memory, that is collective memory, historical memory, and contemporary memory, was used to explore the post modern world of black people, specifically in Great Britain, but also in other parts of the African diaspora and Africa. The cinema of the collectives never offered binary positions

but promoted discussion and understanding through positing a full, complex range of experiences and subjectivities.

*Testament* followed the journey of political exile, Abena, from England back home to Ghana. In Ghana, a now foreign homeland, she must come to terms with how her past actions impacted those she left behind when she went into exile. *Handsworth Songs* wove together documentary and narrative forms to explore aspects of identity, race, gender, sexuality, and age through the retelling of the events around the Handsworth riot of 1985. *Looking for Langston*, an ode to Langston Hughes, poetically imagined interpretations of his history and explored his negotiation of race and sexual identity. *Welcome II the Terrordome* made commentary on present-day Britain through a cautionary, futuristic tale of an inter-racial couple living in a segregated and ultra-violent society.

**France**

France is another European countries that has an active global African film community. Black filmmakers in France have roots in Franco-phone Africa and the Franco-phone Caribbean. Since the 1990s, France, like England, has experienced an economic downturn, coupled with a rise in xenophobia. The immigrant communities are increasingly alienated in housing and denied equal access to employment. Second and third generation offspring of African and Caribbean immigrants are treated like second-class citizens. Religious tensions have further challenged race relations, particularly with the French government's 2004 law forbidding Muslim girls from wearing veils in school because of the constitution's separation of church and state.

*La haine* (*Hate*, 1995) by French Jew Mathieu Kassovitz and *Bye Bye* (1996) by Tunisian-born Karim Dridi are two films that deal with the African immigrant experience in France. *La haine* tells its story through the lives of three disaffected teenagers coming of age in the isolated, disenfranchised suburbs of Paris. *Bye Bye* offers an intergenerational tale of a Tunisian immigrant couple who struggle to make a life in Marseille with their French-born son and French-born nephew.

**Canada**

Canada shares many similarities with England, France and other European countries in that it welcomed many immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, particularly those seeking political and economic refuge in the 1970s and 1980s. However, Canada has not suffered the same economic downturn as Europe. The first and second generation black residents, along with the indigenous blacks, comprise a distinct and diverse Afro-Canadian population.

Canadians, in general, struggle to define themselves under the huge shadow of their southern neighbor and black Canadians are no exception. Hence, second generation Canadians of African or Caribbean origin and native Afro-Canadians explore themes of identity, history, and the diasporic relationship of African descendents in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa in their films. Third Cinema tendencies are apparent in the early documentaries and in the more recent narratives produced by Afro-Canadians.

As a small and marginalized segment of Canada, black filmmakers aim to make visible the invisible. Pioneers Jennifer Hodge de Silva, Clair Prieto, Roger McTair, and even African-American William Greaves, gained entry into filmmaking in the 1970s

through television and through producing documentaries for the National Film Board (NFB). The NFB's promotion of a national film culture through governmental funding has helped to launch the careers of a number of Afro-Canadian filmmakers.

The first narrative feature film by an Afro-Canadian appeared in the 1990s, with Clement Virgo's debut film, *Rude* (1995). This film effectively illustrates the realities for blacks in post-modern Canada (Virgo, Personal interview). In *Rude*, Virgo borrows from the conventional black urban male genre, while experimenting with storytelling conventions. Virgo effectively uses this genre to explore Christianity, Rastafarianism, masculinity, race relations, sexual responsibility, and sexual orientation. Like *Welcome II the Terrordome*, *Rude* challenges the viewer to explore a humane future in an inhumane world.

Trinidadian born Frances-Anne Solomon created the story for *A Winter Tale* (2007) through a collaborative effort with a group of Canadian actors. *A Winter Tale* took on the subject of urban violence as an issue of concern for the black people, not for gratuitous pleasure as in many black urban dramas. The story followed the reaction of a community to the death of a child killed by the accidental bullet of drug dealers. *A Winter Tale* toured Canada as part of "Talk It Out," a campaign targeting urban teenagers and multicultural communities to address gun violence and youth alienation through post-screening dialogue.

**Conclusion**

From the onset, Global African films have tended to portray the dynamics of social change in the black world. Though, the ideological movement of Third Cinema

was not articulated and put into practice until the early 1960s, by the 1970s Third Cinema had reached its peak. The impact of Third Cinema continues to be apparent in the work of Global African cinema into the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Third cinema as manifested in the various global African cinemas has never been the "call to arms" as articulated by Getino and Solanos, but it has served as a tool for empowerment. In fact, many of the Third Cinema films of the African diaspora are not ideologically driven, but they aim to make life better for black people by educating or raising awareness about an issue. The films are sometimes responsible for mobilizing the public to take action within the system. The filmmaking activity in Africa reflects some of the most consistent and powerful examples of Third Cinema. However, the filmmaking tradition that emerged in black England in the 1980s also demonstrated strong Third Cinema tendencies and made great contributions to the Third Cinema movement, in that it broke down the barriers between documentary and narrative filmmaking and contributed to the creation of new film languages.

This degree of Third Cinema activity in a particular country or community is dependent upon three factors: agency, disillusionment, and institutional support. The first factor concerns the degree of agency a population feels it has to affect change. Immediately after independence was won in West African countries, Africans had high expectations for development in society and they saw themselves as playing integral roles in that development. When the realities of post-colonialism became apparent, the films from West Africa began to critique society, government, and global social-economic structures. West African filmmakers addressed class divisions, gender inequalities, and

income disparities through their films. Their films helped to create awareness and promote dialogue that would bring about African solutions to African problems.

The second factor impacting Third Cinema activity in a given country is the level of disillusionment felt by the population. In post-Civil Rights United States, the realities of urban life were incongruent with the perceived gains of the Civil Rights struggle. Film became an important vehicle for exposing the untold realities of American ghettos and for questioning the shortcomings of American democracy. Similarly in 1980s England, it was the inconsistency between the rhetoric of British citizenship and the racial discrimination in British society that provided the impetus for a wave of Third Cinema activity in England.

The third factor influencing Third Cinema activity is institutional support. This support is both financial and structural. In countries where the government was wed to the concept of using cinema to transform society, like post-revolution Cuba and post-revolution Mozambique, there was fertile ground for Third Cinema production. In other cases, a strong supportive community, like the British film collective, lent itself to Third Cinema activity. A strong underground movement can also achieve results, as was apparent in Apartheid South Africa. International support aided the production of *Mapantsula* (1988) and *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1973) both made under the radar of the repressive South African government.

New trends in the Third Cinema movement are emerging as Anglophone West Africa moves into video film. The format of video allows for greater access because of cheaper production, distribution, and exhibition costs. Video film may be a way to avert the present barriers for the growth of Third Cinema, namely limited distribution channels

and lack of exhibition space. Computer produced and distributed film may provide another opportunity of the growth of Third Cinema in global Africa. These innovations may help to penetrate the barriers set in place by many governments and conventional film industries.

**Haile Gerima and Third Cinema**

Haile Gerima came of age as a filmmaker in 1970s U.S. during the height of the Third Cinema movement and at a critical time in the pan-African black radical Nationalist movement. These two movements undoubtedly influenced Gerima's development as a filmmaker, as he became an active participant in the exchange of cultural and intellectual ideas between the United States, Africa, Europe, South America, and the Caribbean with his work.

As an African, Haile Gerima identified and was influenced by his African filmmaker elders. From Sembene, Hondo and others, he understood the essential role of culture in Third Cinema practices. As an African film student in America, Gerima was exposed to the traditions, history, and filmmakers of African-American cinema. From Oscar Micheaux and other early black filmmakers, Gerima learned the importance of connecting to the black urban audience. In addition, he learned the role of the social uplift agenda in developing the black population, and film distribution and exhibition strategies.

As a student at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), literally in the backyard of Hollywood, Gerima was keenly aware of the oppressive ideology of the dominant cinema. Inspired by the times and committed to social change, Gerima and his classmates at UCLA set out to develop a revolutionary cinema. The studies of Gerima

and his classmates extended beyond what was offered by UCLA's film studies department, as they sought out and exposed themselves to Third World cinema, Third World filmmakers, and the writings of Marxist and progressive intellectuals. Gerima was inspired to experiment with and explore new film practices that would take his craft beyond the realm of the Hollywood model of mindless entertainment. As will be discussed in the next chapter, he became a part of a Third Cinema wave in the United States, along with some of his UCLA contemporaries, Charles Lane, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and Sharon Larkin.

As a practicing filmmaker, Gerima is committed to developing a critical film culture through his experimentation with film language and form and through his efforts to build a critical film audience. Gerima explicated his film ideology as a participant in a 1986 conference organized by film scholars Pines and Willemen, a meeting which brought together film practitioners and scholars in Edinburgh to examine questions of Third Cinema. Gerima's insightful essay, "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinknesh vs Lucy," details his Triangular Cinema model, which offers his interpretation of Third Cinema, and his use of its practices in his work. With *Sankofa,* Gerima fully realized his Triangular Cinema model by putting himself, his film, and his audience in dialogue, as will be explored in the coming chapters. Gerima's latest narrative film project *Teza* (2008) and his present documentary film, *The Maroons Film Project*, serve to continue the dialogue started with *Sankofa* as both films, like *Sankofa*, challenge the official history. His documentaries empower the audience, by offering a critique of the dominant version of history and positing an alternative version. Gerima's use of the documentary genre also serves to empower his interviewees, many of whom have not

been able to tell their story. The fictional narrative genre of *Sankofa* made the story of the transatlantic slavery ephemeral for viewers, much like Sembene's retelling of the massacre at *Camp de Thioyore* and Alea's fictional account of slavery in Cuba in *La última cena.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Making of a Pan-Africanist Filmmaker

> In my long life as a filmmaker, however imperfect and small my contribution may be, I have always held my head high, never being ashamed to present any of my films in public. Each, from Hourglass to After Winter, represents a stage of my own growth. In my travels across the U.S. and other parts of the world, I have been encouraged to pursue my search for truth. Again and again, after screening of my films, I have seen people emotionally and intellectually stimulated. And this is enough to return me to the film editing room.
> ~Haile Gerima ("Ashes" 350)

Haile Gerima's film career spans over 35 years. A significant force in world cinema, particularly in the black independent arena, Gerima is not just a filmmaker, but a pan-Africanist, an educator, an activist, an entrepreneur, and a warrior, a warrior fighting for the right to tell his story. Gerima's important influence on black film culture is evidenced in his continual development of the language of film and in his successful integration of community building and filmmaking. In an effort to reclaim the cultural heritage of African peoples, the cinema of Haile Gerima emphasizes the themes of resistance, resilience, empowerment, transformation, and liberation through narratives that follow characters from a non-politicized state to one of conscientization.

In his body of films, Gerima gives a voice to the voiceless, the poor, black people, the elderly, women and children, while exploring the everyday struggles and dilemmas of African people. Through the stories of unglamorous characters, like an Ethiopian peasant family in *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976), an African-American mother on welfare in *Bush Mama* (1976), or a vagrant African-American Vietnam veteran in *Ashes and Embers* (1981), he demonstrates the resilience of black people in the face of extreme adversity.

Gerima often uses the disempowered to illustrate that we all have the propensity to initiate social change and to liberate ourselves from oppression.

In his documentary work, Gerima has chosen to focus on neglected political or historical topics such as the Harlem Renaissance poet Sterling Brown in *After Winter, Sterling Brown* (1985), the ten civil rights activists wrongfully jailed in North Carolina in *Wilmington 10 - USA 10,000* (1979), the problems in contemporary Ethiopia in *Imperfect Journey* (1996), and the history of the Ethiopian resistance to Italian imperialist aggression in *Adwa 1898* (1998). Gerima documents the past and present history in his films whether through narrative or documentary film. By giving the subjects a voice, Gerima shows the potential of the seemingly least powerful to contribute to transforming society. Gerima asserts: "In innovative cinema, we are expected to be governed by the past and the complications of the present; and to forge the vision of the future, producers of culture are supposed to create new relationships between generations of people and men and women of all ethnic divisions" (Ukadike "Questioning" 270).

To understand Haile Gerima's work, called "cinema of transformation" by some and "cinema of resistance" by others, it is necessary to understand the man. Gerima's basic vision of using stories to teach, to challenge, and to motivate comes from his upbringing in a home of educators and storytellers. Born March 4, 1946 in Gondar, Ethiopia, Gerima the fourth of ten children (Givanni 32). He grew up with knowledge of Ethiopia's history of resistance to colonial aggression. From his paternal grandfather, who was secretary to Emperor Theodoros, the Ethiopian leader who fought and defeated the British, he drew pride and inspiration. From his paternal grandmother, who filled him with the folktales of his culture, he learned the fine craft of storytelling.

> My interest in storytelling has to consciously be traced to the time I sat around the fires, when my grandmother told stories. ... My grandmother told stories that are folkloric things about philosophical ideas that usually propagate the cultural value of a people. In the storytelling, I was always empowered. I was the principal character. (Turner and Kamdibe 4)

From his mother, who was a domestic science teacher, he acquired the desire to educate others (Pfaff, "de quelle" 53). And from his father, a teacher, historian, clergyman, playwright, and director, he learned to combine all of his passions and translate them into his unique pan-African Third Cinema aesthetic.

The Ethiopia Gerima was born into was ruled by the monarchy of the Selassie family, a monarchy that could trace its lineage back to the Biblical figure of the Queen of Sheba. It was also a highly strategized society where once born into a caste, it was nearly impossible to move out of it. The monarchy, which was the governing body, formed the top of society. The church, whose leadership comprised the intelligentsia of society, formed the next tier consisting of priests, historians, and teachers. Gerima's patriarchal line of priests, scribes, and teachers placed him in this middle strata. Landowners and merchants formed another tier. And at the bottom were the landless peasants, who lived a feudal lifestyle.

The city of Gondar, where Gerima's family lived until his early teens, has a long history stretching back into the 1600s when it was the seat of the Ethiopian government. Even after the seat of the modern government moved to Addis Ababa in 1889, Gondar continued to be a provisional capital of the Amhara Governorate General (Getahun). Hence, as a boy, Gerima was surrounded by the ancient churches and castles from

Gondar's more glorious past, as well the colonial structures from the Italian occupation (1936-1941), and the modern buildings of the provisional seat.[9]

The senior Gerima, Abba Gerima Tafere, who Gerima calls his "strongest inspiration" was part of the resistance movement to the Italians (Gerima "Jebdu"). Though a Coptic priest, Tafere eventually denounced the church because of its collaboration with the Italians (Pfaff, "de quelle" 53). Tafere turned to theater as a weapon in the anti-colonial struggle. According to Gerima, his father wrote plays "to mobilize people during the Italian invasion" (Pfaff, "Haile" 137). Even after the Italians left, Tafere continued to write plays telling Ethiopia's history of resistance and critiquing the Ethiopian government (Pfaff, "de quelle" 53). Gerima purports that: "Traditionally in Ethiopia theatre is not for living, it's for teaching" (Alexander, "Haile" 197). Thus Gerima was accustomed to using art as a tool for education. As a teenager, Gerima was a member of his father's traveling theater company, a company that provided students with both theater experience and a paycheck.

> He (Tafere) raises money with the ticket, and he would pay all of us. We all had salary. He took students in the summer time, and it was a nice summer stipend for most of us. My friends were in it, and my father chose classical type of plays, classical actors, who were better than us, we were young and we didn't get the lead parts. We were flunkies. We were the extras, we [were?] soldiers. But it was nice, nurturing. It's something I am very blessed, or at least, I am grateful at

[9] In *The History of the City of Gondar* (2006), Getahun gives a detailed account of the splendor of the ancient city of Gondar with its numerous governmental and religious structures.

least I was for whatever reasons I paid attention to that. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

However, he confesses that he did not fully appreciate the value of being immersed in the Ethiopian theater tradition and apprenticing under seasoned, professional actors until years later. He now says that working with his father in the Ethiopian theater tradition provided him "a major training ground" which has played an important role in the development of his storytelling skills (Pfaff, "Haile" 138).

Gerima's family moved to Jimma, in the southwest of Ethiopia, where he attended Miazia 27 High School. At Miazia, he began to write and direct his own plays (Alexander 197; Gerima "Jebdu"). "I could easily say that by the time I reached adolescence, history and storytelling was in my blood (Gerima "Jebdu")." He also worked as a ticket taker at a local movie theater, which mainly played Hollywood movies. Through these films, Gerima came to be enamored with Western culture to the point of denouncing his own culture. He declared, "the more I watched film, the more I withdrew from the influence of my father and that powerful local narrative style I grew up with. I became a totally colonized fixture" (Ukadike "Questioning" 255). He was so influenced by the culture of the colonizer that he recalls rooting for the cowboys in the Westerns and loving Tarzan films, totally oblivious of the demeaning images in these films (Pfaff, "Haile" 137).

Gerima finished out his high school years in Addis Ababa where he attended Shimelis High School. "By the time I graduated from Schimelis Habte School in Addis Ababa, I was fully decided on my professional calling—theater" (Gerima "Jebdu"). He then attended the drama program in Kine Tibeb (now the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design) where he studied under Tesfaye Gessese, a well-known

playwright and theater professor. At Kine Tibeb, Gerima recalls that he "excelled in writing" (Gerima "Jebdu"). "At the Center, I was able to raise my theatrical skills to new heights. I even won some prizes and gained recognition for my performances and finally, a scholarship" (Gerima "Jebdu"). Gerima also did radio work where he wrote and acted in what he calls "Ethiopian morality tales" (Pfaff, "Haile" 139). During this time, he came into even more contact with Western culture and Westerners, in particular American Peace Corps volunteers who encouraged him to study in the United States. When Gerima left for the United States in 1967, armed with a scholarship to study at the Goodman School of Drama, the centuries old Ethiopian monarchy had started to come under intense resistance from within. Upon Gerima's return to Ethiopia seven years later, the government of Haile Selaise would be on its way out.

Twenty-one year old Haile Gerima arrived in the United States at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Gerima was initially oblivious to the Civil Rights struggle and distanced himself from African-Americans who he saw as dregs of American society. He did not even view them as African descendents but as a "slave race" bred in the Americas ("Lecture at Mt. Holyoke"). However Gerima's firsthand encounter with racism and the acceptance he received from the African-American community caused him to question his identity. He reflects:

> I grew up knowing that African Americans were thieves, murderers, killers and buffoons. And so this to me was a shamed race that I didn't want to have anything to do with. So coming to Chicago and seeing black people was very traumatic for me. Then for the white system to slap the hell out of me, to line me up with all the

segregated people that I didn't think I was a part of was a big psychological struggle for me. (Alexander, "Haile" 198)

As an acting student at the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago, Gerima recalls that his culture and that of other black people in the acting program were constantly under attack. At first, he and the other African students in the program attempted to distinguish themselves as different from the African-American students. He described it as a psychological and social battle. Though he had come from a strong theater background in Ethiopia where he studied under accomplished playwrights, wrote award winning plays, and acted in plays that demonstrated the full range of human experience, he found his background totally ignored and discounted.

> [I]t is really in the theater that you find the workings of white supremacy; everybody else is an appendage. All the plays are about white people, and for an actor to aspire to audition for parts is a very real awakening that makes you see that your life, what you are about, the kind of image you have of the kind of community that you want to reincarnate, is not the work or in the interest of the power structure. (Alexander, "Haile" 197)

The alienation and discrimination Gerima experienced at Goodman caused him to gravitate to African Americans in his program who he began to share an affinity with as oppressed people. "I gravitated toward that camp because that camp was capable of defending me" ("Lecture at Mt. Holyoke"). Gerima further remarks: "the African-American social movement played a major role in reorienting me back to my own heritage, making me accept not only my father but my people and the legitimate aesthetic

criteria they had transmitted to me" (Pfaff, "Haile" 139). Hence, Gerima's encounter with black Americans led him back to his roots.

> I think the fact I came at a time when African Americans took this whole country to task, and the fact that I was engulfed and choicelessly had to define myself who I was and the blackness itself, as silly as it can sound to a lot of people, I had to come and revisit who the hell I was here, and my father loomed very strong, because I felt he was very confident. I began to question how I became insecure, why didn't I have the same confidence that he had. Why did I even, it made me flesh out the colonial mental colonial reality that I began to host in Ethiopia, and brought it all the way to here. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

It is at this time and place that Gerima began his cultural and political awakening. Gerima graduated from the program at Goodman with honors, though by this time he had become totally disillusioned with the acting program ("Jebdu").

In 1969, he left for UCLA intent on finding a more hospitable acting program. "I decided to just start all over again and left for the UCLA School of Drama, even there again, I was faced by the same racism, but it's not like the racism you couldn't march over" (Alexander, "Haile" 197). Haile Gerima became politically active, joining the Ethiopian student movement; however, he found his views differed from his fellow countrymen. "At UCLA when I belonged to the Ethiopian Students Union I was always considered utopian or anarchist because I've always believed that the more you endorse the new system you bring about, the more you become like the very people you overthrew" (Hedges 119). Recognizing his position as an intellectual, Gerima was critical of his status and the inherent issues of power that came with that status.

Due to the racism in the UCLA theater department, Gerima felt compelled to write plays to address the need for better roles for blacks. Again, he attributes his encounters with racism and his exposure to the Civil Rights Movement as directly affecting his artistic journey. Gerima recalls that "because of the political development in black America and other factors like that, I began to realize what was happening to me and that in order to become a thinking human being I needed to find a way of expressing myself. So I started writing" (Willemen, "Interview" 31). Gerima wrote plays such as *Chief* (1969-70), a symbolic play about slavery and black militancy, and *Awful Pit* (1970-71), a play about the growing political awareness of an African-American shoe shiner. And although these plays garnished prizes, Gerima turned to filmmaking because he felt it was a medium where he could better control his artistic vision and deal with racism (Willemen, "Interview" 31; Daney 63). "For me racism is the crux of the matter of my even finding myself in the motion picture department at UCLA" (Alexander 197).

> By accident, I stumbled into the film area at UCLA and saw these students who were projecting their bi-quarterly final project. Upon seeing that, I was knocked out in terms of the possibility of one's freedom to express oneself. Filmmaker Larry Clark, who became my friend and my classmate, encouraged me. He said, 'Haile, you can transfer. You need to come and stay!' (McCluskey 1)

Thus it was due to Larry Clark, Charles Burnett, and other budding black American filmmakers that Gerima was ushered into the world of filmmaking.

In the film program, Gerima learned the skills of filmmaking, though he found conflict with the Hollywood industry approach. "I ran up against a contradiction between what I wanted to do and the way cinema is made there. I had to reject the narrow

conventions tied to the cinema industry" (Willemen, "Interview" 32). He claims he taught himself editing in his attempt find his identity as a filmmaker and speak better with films. In addition, Gerima says that he did not study film theory and, in fact, did not learn about film theory until he began to teach film (Willemen, "Interview" 32). As a student, he instead focused on history and sociology, taking the majority of his classes in these areas (Pfaff, "de quelle" 54). He even admits to learning his own Ethiopian history during his time at UCLA.

Reflecting back two decades earlier, Gerima's classmate, Ntongela Masilela describes what he calls the "L.A. School." Masilela distinguishes the L.A. School from the Harlem Renaissance because it involved Africans from throughout the black Atlantic and the art form of film. "Not only is the Los Angeles School the first and only African-American film movement in the twentieth-century consisting of major film artists, it is also the first artistic movement to consist of black artists from two continents: African and the African Diaspora" (Masilela). Masilela purports that though Gerima has immersed himself into the African-American community, he maintains his Ethiopian roots: "(H)e is an African who has transformed himself into an African American yet remaining an African at the same time" (Masilela).

Gerima denies that there was any organized movement as such. He claims it was just an impromptu group of students who were dissatisfied with their curriculum and demanded more.

> I never advocated ourselves as viable independent filmmakers. I always told them, the "L.A. Rebellion" is a bullshit chapter on the basis of Clyde Taylor grandizing himself abstractively. The "L.A. Rebellion" was never a movement, it

was individuals, anarchistic, unorganized. People briefly met, didn't imprint on [culture], on language of film, didn't imprint.... We just made half (of a) film, fraction (of a) film. Wasn't anything that became consistent, no continuity. We were totally ignorant of the business of film. We didn't understand distribution. We were illusionists about art and film. We didn't understand capitalism *per se*, politically. Our spontaneous knee jerk thing didn't go beyond. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Though Gerima names Clyde Taylor as the one who coined this period the "L.A. Rebellion," Toni Cade Bambara is generally credited with defining the period as such ("Reading Signs").

UCLA conceded to some demands of Gerima and his classmates and allowed them to bring in progressive Latin American and African filmmakers. These encounters had a profound effect on Gerima's cultural and artistic identity. Gerima admits: "African and Latin American cinemas brought peace to me because they were stressing issues with which I could, as an Ethiopian, thoroughly identify" (Pfaff, "de quelle" 204). He joined other students in the school of film, Chicano, White, Iranian, Native American, Asian American, Latin American, and African, who wished to broaden the curriculum to include voices from the "Third World" (Hedges 119). Commenting on those times, Gerima said that:

We had the notion of not feeling in harmony with the status quo, with the way the industry was forced down your throat at UCLA. We were saying no—there must be another world where I can see myself in a very human way, or even in a fighting or angry way. This was how we found the African films by Ousmane

Sembene, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment*, films like *Lucia* and Cuba and *The Jackal* from Chile, and the amazing films of Glauber Rocha. ... Solana's *Hour of the Furnaces* was like a manifesto to us. When other white universities were into Godard we were into some other people who said that film is a weapon that's not a toy. There was already what we would call now a "rainbow coalition" that got together and demanded a special arrangement with the university to preview films that we could identify with." (Hedges 119)

Gerima names filmmaker veterans, UCLA professor Alicio Taylor, and his contemporaries as his influences. From Sembene, he says he got "courage, confidence, and encouragement" and the advice to "be yourself and be proud of your culture" (Pfaff, "Haile" 140). Sembene legitimized for Gerima the possibility of creating cinema with African characters speaking their own language (Ukadike, "Questioning" 259). Gerima says that he was strengthened by Med Hondo's anger and his "obsession with history and self-reliance" (Pfaff, "Haile" 140). He credits Larry Clark and his film *Passing Through* (1977) with inspiring him to experiment with film language (Hedges 119). Of his classmates, he asserted: "My restlessness was legitimized by these filmmakers because they were restless like me. And the unrest was calling for different cultural manifestations that I was able to share" (Howard 28).

In addition to screening films by African, Latin American, and Asian filmmakers, Gerima and his colleagues read and discussed Fanon, Du Bois, Cabral, and Che Guevara, among others. This supplemental education greatly influenced the development of Gerima's pan-Africanist, socialist approach to filmmaking. Pfaff describes Gerima's development as a filmmaker as Fanonian. The first stage she claims was Gerima's

infatuation with Hollywood images; he expressed that he wanted to imitate those images. The second stage was his total rejection of everything Western; however, this diversion of his energy negatively affected his creativity. And in the third stage, Gerima picked and chose the elements from western cinema that were useful to him. This process, in turn, allowed Gerima to better understand and appreciate Third World cinema (Pfaff, "From Africa" 204). At UCLA, Gerima really made an attempt to question the filmmaking process and the way stories were told, so that what he made originated from a decolonized space. Gerima expresses that "people should contribute to the changing of the static, conditioned film traditions that emanated from the western societies" (Willemen, "Interview" 32). Gerima started to find his voice through experimentation, discovering, as he states: "In the imperfection, we find our language" (Turner and Kamdibe 19).

Gerima produced four films as a student at UCLA. He describes his initial ventures as his attempt to articulate his empathy for the African-American experience. He pondered his own reaction if his own history had been one of a captured African ("Lecture at Mt. Holyoke"). He picked up an 8mm camera to first try his hand at filmmaking. The result was *Hour Glass* (1971) a 13-minute, experimental black and white and color film. He followed with an 57-minute, 16 mm experimental film, *Child of Resistance* (1970), again using black and white and color. He said:

> The whole initial part of it for me was really making films out of guilt of the very people I betrayed—the African Americans. Therefore, whether it is *Hour Glass*, the first Super 8 film I made, or *Child of Resistance*, or *Bush Mama*—those three

> early films I did were like rage and anger that were coming into my life as a result of white betrayal, white racism. (Alexander 198)

According to Gerima, his early work resonated with the black community, who he said hugged him and cried after seeing his film ("Lecture at Mt. Holyoke"). He progressed to more polished feature-length films with *Bush Mama* (1976), a 97-minute, 16mm black and white film, and *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976), 150 min, 16mm black and white film that he blew up to 35mm.

Gerima also says that these early films were precursors to *Sankofa* (1983). Part of his search for his identity was coming to understand slavery and his personal position in that history.

> I realized I didn't know about slavery; I located myself at UCLA library, on the fourth floor, around slavery. I wanted to be inspired by just reading, then from the reading to be inspired, to reinforce imagination. ...I realized also cinematically, I was totally not developed to tackle it [slavery]. I did *Child of Resistance*, *Bush Mama* and other films as I was encircling this film that I was going to attack one day. (Turner and Kamdibe 7)

Unlike many film students who graduate with two or three shorts under their belt, Gerima finished school with two shorts and two feature-length films. With each film he explored, experimented and pushed the limits of the medium in story and form. Gerima knew he did not want to stay in Hollywood because the environment was not conducive to his vision of cinema. In assessing the Hollywood industry, he asserted: "I was never rejected there [Hollywood], but I had to make clear choices. I said to myself, 'I can't be part of this party, because it does not sing the song I genuinely feel like singing'"

(Hedges 119). By the time Gerima left the West coast in the mid-1970s to pursue a teaching job on the East coast, his talent as a filmmaker was already gaining international recognition. His master thesis film, *Harvest: 3000 Years* won several domestic and international major prizes from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (California) Film Festival, the French Critics Association, the London Film Festival, the Lacarno International Film Festival (Switzerland), and the Festival International of Cinema (Portugal).

In 1975, Haile Gerima accepted a teaching position at the School of Communications at Howard University, a historically black university situated in the heart of Washington, D.C. (Reid, "Haile" 141). Like Gerima's protagonist in *Hour Glass*, Gerima had landed firmly in the black community for his professional career as a practicing filmmaker and film teacher where he refers to himself as a "migrant worker" (Gerima, "Triangular" 65). When asked about his decision to teach at Howard University in 1977, Gerima described Howard as his "last stopover before returning to Africa" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 218). Howard was the place where Gerima felt he could have significant impact by educating future generations of black and Third World independent filmmakers (Daney 64). He particularly saw this population of students as "seed revolutionists" (Daney 64).

Always anxious to engage in dialog and share his knowledge and experience with others, Gerima is a natural teacher. He claims that one of his main objectives, as a teacher, is to help students make the connection between ideology and cinema (Daney 64). He proposes an alternative cinema that looks toward African diasporic history and culture as sources of cinematic inspiration. Presently a full professor of film at Howard,

Gerima advises his students on how to create a cooperative film culture and maintain a true black independent cinema movement reminiscent of the early African-American cinema era of Oscar Micheaux and Noble Johnson.

> So, I didn't encourage them to be anarchistically like me. I want them to think, in advance to meet a law student, to meet a business student, MBA, get go together, hold hands and rise up vertically. Otherwise, individually you are preparing yourself to work either on the plantation or try to imperfectly do what I am doing. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Gerima's approach to teaching filmmaking has three main components. First, he disorients his students. He sets out to deconstruct all of the previous filmmaking conventions that they bring to the art form. Second, he retrains them, emphasizing the essence of culturally-grounded storytelling. Third, he has them practice on professional film productions, in order to demystify the filmmaking process and empower the black community (Pfaff, "Haile" 142).

Gerima developed the disorientation process out of his experience as a student at UCLA where he asserts that he and his classmates were active learners: "[W]e fought against authoritarian lecture and horizontally taught each other. Charles Burnett was my teacher. We taught each other" (Turner and Kamdibe 16). Gerima says that he "shock[s] and confuse[s]" his students making them lose their preconceived notions about filmmaking, including the clichés and stereotypes they bring to the storytelling process (Turner and Kamdibe 15). Gerima holds that: "[s]ometimes we confuse technique with the creative process of narrative, storytelling, etcetera. Sometimes we kill the storyteller trying to teach them Eurocentric formula cinema" (Turner and Kamdibe16). Therefore,

he encourages his students to deconstruct the conventional approach to filmmaking. He advises them to be cognizant of influence of the dominant culture as they practice the acts of storytelling, cinematography, and editing.

In the retraining process, Gerima begins by encouraging his students to get in touch with and work on their own culture and history. Filmmaking involves, as Gerima holds, "recognizing a technology and then harnessing the power of that technology to accommodate and effectively transmit one's identity, culture, and language" (Ukadike, "Questioning" 265). In order to tap into their own identity, Gerima instructs his students to first record the stories of their parents and those in their community because this, he insists, is their reference point ("Lecture at Mt. Holyoke"). Furthermore, he admonishes his students to not be in the field to please others, but to free themselves. Gerima asserts that the filmmaker liberates the audience through his or her own liberation. This liberation is accomplished through reading and studying history, in short, knowing who you are (Turner and Kamdibe 14). "You should say, 'I want to tell a story to get it off my chest, to liberate myself.' Then you find 10,000 black people say, 'With your release I am released, also'" (Turner and Kamdibe 15).

Finally, Gerima gives his students practical film experience by having them work on professional productions. From his first film made as a professor at Howard, *Wilmington 10, USA 10,000*, Gerima immersed his students in his Triangular Cinema approach to filmmaking. For example, in 1979, Gerima formed Positive Productions, a nonprofit film collective, to produce and distribute *Wilmington 10, USA 10,000.* This documentary film was prompted by the arrest and imprisonment of a group of activists, named the "Wilmington 10" who were unjustly charged with firebombing and shooting at

police in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1971. Gerima was invited by members of the Wilmington community to document their plight. The film production crew was primarily comprised of his students and non-professionals from the community. Only the camera and sound positions were reserved for professionals. When making *After Winter, Sterling Brown* (1985), a film funded by Howard University, Gerima had his students do the research for the film's content in order to acquaint them with the Harlem Renaissance. Gerima's students were also involved in directing *After Winter, Sterling Brown,* guided by Gerima's interpretation of the subject (Pfaff, "Haile" 140). Gerima trains his students as apprentices in much the same way he was trained by his father in theater. A number of Gerima's students have gone on to do significant work in the arena of black independent cinema.

A third major production that Gerima undertook as a professor at Howard University was the narrative film, *Ashes and Embers* (1982). Gerima won a prestigious National Endowment for the Arts grant to produce this film. However, his experience with this grant caused him to feel conflicted about grant funding. For Gerima, too many strings were attached for the independent artist. About grant money in general, he asserts: "... I was always given money that I called "noose" money – just enough to hang you, not enough to finish your project" (Hedges 119). Gerima holds the independent filmmakers's access to grant funding puts them at risk of developing unhealthy, dependent relationships that adversely affect their creativity. In addition, he claims grant funding may hinder unique African-American content ("Triangular" 66). On the other hand, financial constraints, Gerima admits, can greatly limit the filmmaker's ability to fully experiment and explore (McClusky 2).

> I'm trying my best and I can see my freedom within the context of these other (filmmaker) friends I have. My friends see me as a free person but a free person without much fun to experiment and distribute. The idea of developing or sharpening my cinematic language is jeopardized by the absence of finance. (McClusky 2)

Gerima has come to adopt a model of "recycling" his film money, in that any funds made connected to his filmmaking endeavors are put back into producing films, while his salary from teaching supports his household (Ukadike, "Questioning" 261).

Gerima maintains that his Ethiopian heritage is at the center of his identity as an artist. He has never relinquished his Ethiopian citizenship. "I've never wanted to be anything but Ethiopian. It's not advantageous, and it has no benefits, but spiritually I feel better" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 218). However, after marrying African-American Shirikiana Aina in 1983 and starting a family, Gerima firmly planted roots in the United States. Gerima and Aina have five children who range from elementary age to young adults. "Where would I be if I didn't have five kids now? So my kids are priority in terms of where I am right now" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 218). As the father of children of two continents, Gerima has been deliberate about exposing his children to their Ethiopian heritage, including teaching them his mother tongue, while nurturing their pan-African identity (Pfaff, "From Africa" 213-4). Gerima and Aina both teach their children about racism and encourage them to fight against it. "I think they understand that I am from Ethiopia and that my culture is Ethiopian. They understand they were born here and that their mother is an African American. I'm Ethiopian. They surf between these two polarities" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 214). He says he is not willing to move his children to

Africa because he feels "dislocating children is dangerous" and can confuse their identity (Pfaff, "From Africa" 214).

Gerima credits having children with grounding him. Before fatherhood he saw the world in absolute, unbending terms, but his children have helped him to put his life in perspective.

> My children, especially after I had my kids, I realized-- it made me realize I am not the end, I'm not the book end. In everything I am doing, I have to be very tempered, and they bring pleasure to make me not kill myself... They are very, very important elements. I didn't know it when I didn't have them, in fact I had very much, very much reactionary, and almost fascistic perspective of the world until I had my children. ... When the children are not in your realm of vision, the bad and the good becomes very simple. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

He also claims that before he had children he was very impatient; however, he eventually came to realize that his impatience was problematic. It discounted those who came before him and left no alternative for change. He now calls himself "just a piece of fire that is shooting through" and truly looks to the children to carry on the struggle. "The children are the future. Hey, I became more pragmatic about those things, it's not a slogan, it's a reality" (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998).

As a filmmaker father, Gerima raises his children to understand his beliefs and struggles and respect his commitment to filmmaking: "they know I am not only born in this world to raise them, but I am also here to make my movies. I let them know all the time that just because I am cooking for them, I am not a servant. I am the filmmaker

father" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 214). Like his film audience, Gerima strives to make his children critical spectators of film and other media images. There is no television in the home and he and his wife encourage them to watch select movies, "films that we feel empower them" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 214). His children can watch other films but they are encouraged to critically analyze and discuss them with their parents (Pfaff, "From Africa" 213-214).

Gerima stays actively involved in the broader global African film community. In 1983, he served as a judge for FESPACO and in 1985 he took a group of black filmmakers to FESPACO where he and Aina organized a dialogue between African filmmakers and critics and African directors (Pfaff, "Haile"143-6). [10] Gerima and Aina were also instrumental in establishing the first award to honor an African diaspora filmmaker at FESPACO, the Paul Robeson Award. However Gerima became a sharp critic of FESPACO after the assassination of the Burkinabe President Thomas Sankara in 1987 because, he asserts, the festival became a French venture in terms of funding and focus (Ukadike, "Questioning" 262).

From as early as 1977, Gerima spoke of his desire to foment pan-African cooperation in film production and distribution. His initial efforts involved working with filmmakers in the socialist-leaning countries, Mozambique and Angola, on distribution efforts. In 1982, Gerima and Aina founded the production company Mypheduh Films Inc. in the basement of their home (Reid, "Haile" 141).[11] Sankofa Distribution Inc. was established to distribute not just Gerima's films, but eventually over 100 titles of other

[10] FESPACO is the premier international African film festival held every two years in Ougadougu, Burkina Faso.

[11] Mypheduh, Gerima's middle name, is an Amharic word that means "making culture a sacred shield" (Aina, Beti 2000; Howard 39.)

global African filmmakers. In 1996, Gerima and Aina opened the Sankofa Video and Bookstore across the street from Howard University, in the heart of the black community. This building, purchased with earnings from Gerima's films, houses the brick and mortar store, an online store, and a film editing suite. Sankofa Video and Bookstore also hosts poetry readings, speakers, and various other cultural events. Mypheduh Films Inc. is involved in film symposia, intercultural exchanges, cooperative productions, and marketing activities, thus demonstrating Gerima's commitment to encouraging dialogue and exchange among black filmmakers throughout the African diaspora and Africa. As a member of the Comite Africain de Cineaste (CAC), an African filmmaker collective, he has participated in efforts to support collaborative film efforts. Gerima has long called for African peoples to pool their resources to create a viable African film culture.

Over the past three decades, Gerima has participated in a host of workshops and seminars across the United States and internationally, several of which produced notable contributions to film scholarship. A 1980 Symposium on "Black Cinema Aesthetics" at Ohio University brought together a number of black independent filmmakers and scholars, such as Thomas Cripps and St. Clair Bourne, for the first meeting of this sort in the United States. Gerima's article produced for this conference, "On Independent Black Cinema," provides one of his first written articulations of Triangular Cinema. Another meeting of particular note was the "Questions of Third Cinema" conference held in London in 1985. At this conference, Gerima delivered a seminal essay, "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys and Dinknesh vs. Lucy," detailing his now fully formed film philosophy, Triangular Cinema. As a participant in a 1997 post-Apartheid film conference in South Africa, Gerima conducted workshops and contributed the essay,

"Afterwards: Future Directions of South African Cinema," to a book produced from this conference, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa*. This essay adds a pan-African perspective to his Triangular Cinema model. In his critique of the present state of South African Cinema, he comments on contemporary African cinema and the challenges of producing film in a neo-colonialist system.

**Triangular Cinema**

The influence of Third Cinema ideology on the work of Haile Gerima is apparent in his earliest interviews and writings. In a 1976 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéema*, he talked of freeing himself from Hollywood conventions in order to establish an engaged, progressive cinema (Daney 63). In the 1980 symposium essay, he appealed to the black community to fight back and become a "political audience" that refused to passively consume films. He specifically proposed a dialectical cinema, saying that: "The end of the film should not provide answers but instead pose new questions to the viewers. As a filmmaker, my interest in not to entertain. It is more to be provocative and argumentative, and to have a dialogue with my audience" ("On Independent" 112-113). His 1986 conference essay declared that cinema be combative, innovative, and visionary ("Triangular" 68). He established the tenets of his filmmaking philosophy, Triangular Cinema, weaving together the cooperative relationship of the filmmaker, the audience and the critic. And in 1997, he appealed for a "new cinematic order" which put particular emphasis on economic issues of independent filmmaking. The new cinematic order he proposed seeks to link artistic independence with economic independence (Ukadike, "Questioning" 271).

Gerima most thoroughly details his aim to inspire a sustained black film movement through the triangular cinematic relationship he lays out in "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinknesh vs Lucy." He identifies the three components of Triangular Cinema as the community/audience, the activist/critic, and the storyteller/filmmaker. Gerima holds that all three entities must make a critical analysis of the "history and practice of conventional cinema" through "constructive dialogue, motivated by a genuine desire to effect the transformation of a given society" (68-9). He insists that: "[F]ilmmakers, audiences, and critics must carefully scrutinize and, if necessary, change the traditional screen-audience relationship. The initial step involves [our] consciously rejecting the falsely imposed aesthetics that have dominated, and still dominate, film terminologies" (Gerima, "Thoughts" 349). Hence, it is due to the committed engagement of each party that the dialectical process is set in motion and change is initiated.

For Gerima, the community encompasses the black and progressive film audience members. In addition, community includes professional and student progressive filmmakers and those from Africa and the African diaspora. The activists are black and progressive film critics, film scholars, the press, and organizations that promote black film. The storytellers are black and progressive filmmakers. When he speaks of the storyteller, he is also considering all of the ancillary activities in the filmmaking process, such as scriptwriting, directing, fundraising, acting, shooting, editing, distribution and exhibition.

Gerima describes the conventional relationship between filmmaker, audience and critic as "deformed" and asserts that "it is impossible to forge a transformed cultural

phenomenon in the African-American community" within this conventional relationship ("Triangular" 68). Therefore, he proposes his new cinematic order that is built on liberated relationships. The Triangular Cinema model requires that all three components are given equal importance. "We all have to chip in further developing the audience, the cultural movement that transforms all of us equally and not be authoritarians in each compartment that we carve out for ourselves. We should see the interfacing and reciprocal relationship of building this culture. We all have to work towards distribution, theory, criticism, in a triangular way with filmmakers" (Turner and Kamdibe 12-13).

**Audience/Community**

In Gerima's Triangular Cinema model, the community/audience plays an equal and integral role along with the storyteller/filmmaker and the activist/critic in transforming society. Acknowledging that one film cannot change society, Gerima's model calls for communities to organize through the filmmaking and film viewing experience. He holds that communities establish "meaningful, counter-cultural awareness organizations, film appreciation clubs or societies that can strengthen the individual filmmaker and intensify the communities' collaborative filmmaking effort" ("Triangular Cinema" 67). These organizations would serve to educate community members about the issues raised in particular films, the filmmaking process, and the film industry. In addition, the organizations would encourage community members to discuss and critique films, and exchange feedback with both the filmmakers and film critics. Finally, through these organizations, the community would help to finance films, as well as be involved in distributing, promoting, and exhibiting films. Gerima particularly points to the black

church as an institution in the black community that is key to the success of a black film movement when all other aspects are in place. In fact he calls the black church the "sleeping giant" because of its liberal nature and its history of being the site where most social change movements were conceived. "If we can hook up these communities within the idea of culture, then I think that's when the sleeping giant is resurrected" (McCluskey 3).

Triangular Cinema calls for the film audience to be fully engaged and active in the film viewing experience. The Triangular Cinema audience is comprised of critical viewers who seek to demystify filmmaking. Spectators can achieve this critical engagement through activities such as film clubs, moderated discussions, and media literacy workshops. The audience's goal is no longer to lose itself in the cinema experience, but to use the information presented in the film as a point of departure to organize and act. Gerima contends that:

> The black audience cannot afford to go to a film and be passive for a whole series of ideological biases built into the film. We must understand that Hollywood cinema has always been escapist. In the pursuit of this escape and entertainment, black and other oppressed social groups have been victimized. This must be fought by black audiences. ("On Independent" 112)

The Triangular Cinema audience seeks to understand the social economics of filmmaking so as to support and facilitate independent filmmaking, while making a critical analysis of the images generated by conventional cinema.

Specifically, Gerima asserts that the community be engaged with the filmmaker in a consistent manner in order for the filmmaker's work to connect with the community: "If

you want your film to be accountable to the community, then that community has to be part of your daily struggle" (Ukadike, "Questioning" 257). This struggle even involves helping to create the film. Sometimes the idea for the film comes from the community. When developing scripts, Gerima turns to the community to do readings and gather feedback on the themes, characters, and dialogue of the script. Non-professionals may be employed as actors. At screenings, Gerima or other facilitators engage with the audience in spirited discussions. He asserts that in Triangular Cinema, this exchange of ideas helps the audience to better interpret their world and critique how their reality is represented on screen.

The holistic and reciprocal relationship between the filmmaker and community, advocated by Triangular Cinema, also requires that the audience be involved in the business side of cinema that is funding, promotion, distribution and exhibition. Gerima asserts that the majority (perhaps up to 85%) of black film financing be derived from black people (McCluskey 3). This economic commitment serves two purposes, it gives the community ownership of the film and it frees the filmmaker from the constraints of the conventional film industry that is driven by capitalistic goals. Gerima points to the financial support from African-American community as a reason he has been able to grow as a filmmaker.

> If I have any postproduction office, or if I have a camera, it is because of the African Americans who went to see *Bush Mama*, who paid to see *Ashes and Embers*, and who allowed me to show my film *Sankofa* extensively and successfully. That is where my economic base is. My economic strength is the African-American community." (Pfaff "From Africa" 207)

Funding from within the black community supports Triangular Cinema's liberation ideology. Gerima argues that much of black art has been "mortgaged" because the artists have given up ownership to the white establishment. Internal funding, on the other hand, affords the practicing artist, or the filmmaker in this case, independence to experiment with the language of film (Ukadike, "Questioning" 261). Hence, the community/audience ultimately contributes to the filmmaker's experimentation.

**Critic/Activist**

In the Triangular Cinema model, Gerima makes a clear distinction between the conventional critic and the "activist" critic. He calls the conventional critic an elitist who through his or her association with the mainstream press or the academy are primarily devoted to personal aggrandizement or upholding the institutions of white supremacy and the capitalist Hollywood system. The critic must not be an elitist but be an activist who plays an integral role in helping to build a black film movement (Turner and Kamdibe 20). As an activist, the Triangular Cinema critic works to advance the cause of the black film movement. The film critic helps to mediate between the filmmaker and audience, specifically, giving them the language to discuss the films and the historical context to understand the trajectory of film's content.

"The Black critic has to look at the role as mediator and equally, a person who needs to transform with the filmmaker and the audience (Turner and Kamdibe 20)."

The critic's role of mediation specifically involves exposing the audience to new kinds of films, giving the audience the tools to understand alternative cinemas, teaching the audience media literacy, educating them about film history and theory (especially as it

pertains to black independent cinema) and sharing the struggles of contemporary independent filmmakers with the audience. Gerima insists that: "You have to say, always, especially in black cinema where it takes so much to finish a film, people go through, people pee blood to make films, suffer, ulcers and everything. Just take for a second, a minute to be very careful how you look at a film" (Turner and Kamdibe 21). Gerima appeals to black critics to nurture the black filmmaking community. In addition, he calls on critics to be considerate of the great obstacles black filmmakers face in producing their art. In this way, the critic can help the audience understand the struggles of the black independent filmmaker and how they affect the production of a film.

This role of mediation in relation to the filmmaker involves supporting and nurturing the filmmaker, promoting the filmmaker's work, offering the filmmaker constructive criticism, and providing the filmmaker with insight into his or her work. Gerima evokes the image of the birthing process to illustrate the delicate and important role of the activist critic in building up the black film movement versus tearing down the artist as the conventional critic does: "you can't be a fascist midwife. You'll kill the baby before it comes out (Turner and Kamdibe 21)." Thus as a critic, one must assist the filmmaker in bringing forth his or her films.

Criticism grounded in Third Cinema theory equips the critic with the framework to analyze a film through the rubric of culture and its influence on film practice, storytelling structure (i.e., oral tradition, traditional heros), style (i.e., symbolism, colors), language (i.e., indigenous, visual), and editing (i.e., non-linear, music). Culturally grounded criticism teamed with culturally grounded spectatorship and filmmaking practices advances the black independent film movement. Third Cinema is a

revolutionary cinema; hence, the Triangular Cinema critic must advance revolutionary critical analysis and not rob Third Cinema of its rage. Gerima asserts that treating film criticism as an academic exercise, as the academics and intellectuals of the 1980s and 1990s did, renders Third Cinema ineffective (Ukadike, "Questioning" 269). Triangular Cinema does not participate in "killing the artist or raising the artist" as in conventional criticism or in dismissing any deviation from the conventional, but it offers insight and understanding of why imperfections of Third Cinema exist (Turner and Kamdibe 20). Thus, the Triangular Cinema critic does not turn a blind eye to the problems in a film, but attempts to interpret those problems. Ultimately the Triangular Cinema critic, like the Triangular Cinema filmmaker, must maintain his or her autonomy, as in not answering to an academy, in order to be an effective cultural activist.

**Filmmaker/Artist**

Of course, the third component of the Triangular Cinema relationship is the filmmaker or artist and Gerima applies Third Cinema principles at each stage of the film production process from scriptwriting to fundraising, shooting, editing, and distribution. Those principles involve the filmmaker placing history and culture at the foundation of his or her work. Secondly, Gerima admonishes the filmmaker in the Triangular Cinema model to be connected to his community, in contrast to the conventional filmmaker who Gerima accuses of being detached and individualistic. The conventional filmmaker, according to Gerima, is only capable of producing uncreative works that perpetuate stereotypes and assume "people to be childlike, brainless and incapable of engaging in any meaningful relationship" ("Triangular Cinema" 67). Finally, he argues that the

filmmaker must question the conventional filmmaking process in an attempt to make films from a decolonized space (Willemen, "Interview" 32).

Early in his career, Gerima called for a focus on history, claiming that it was through the exploration of history that one was liberated.

> The independent black filmmaker should have a strong sense of history, because in that history the filmmaker finds his or her freedom. A sense of history provides a context and meaning for one's work, while struggle plays a central role in the course of that history. (Gerima "On Independent" 109)

Gerima's focus on history means opposing Hollywood and what it stands for. It requires the filmmaker (along with the critic and the audience) to make a critical analysis of his or her history and social institutions. Thus, both Gerima's narrative and documentary films attempt to reframe some aspect of African diaspora history, such as his exploration of Ethiopia's feudal history in *Harvest: 3000 Years* or black America's diminishing land ownership in *Ashes and Embers*. The filmmaker's critical analysis of history through his or her works is a vital part of a conscientization process that can lead the filmmaker towards a state of liberation.

Gerima asserts that the primary goal of the black independent filmmaker is to discover his or her own stories--stories that emanate from the filmmaker's life and the lives of the filmmaker's ancestors. The independent filmmaker must make films grounded in his or her community, pooling the resources of the community. The creation and sharing of culturally and historically based stories leads the filmmaker to discover, along with the critic and audience, both the strength and the resilience that comes from their historical struggle. The presentation of this work takes on the misrepresentations of

conventional cinema, and presents instead alternative images. "My thing is counter-proposing and making your own image normal and pursuing that as a 24-hour occupation" (McCluskey 2). The work employs a dialectical dialogue prompted by the film. Gerima calls for African-American cinema to be combative, innovative, and visionary:

> Every frame, every shot, and every scene, no matter what length or size, must vigilantly contribute to changing the system that oppresses the world economically as well as culturally. Whether it is projected in a theater, church, basement, prison hall, alley, or under a tree, this cinema must initiate the dialogue of change. (Gerima, "Visual" 27)

Ultimately, Triangular Cinema seeks to bring about systematic change. It is Gerima's hope that conscientized and liberated individuals of the black independent film movement will act to realize a more just society through organizing and activism. "As a filmmaker, my interest is not to entertain. It is more to be provocative and argumentative, and to have a dialogue with my audience. My interest lies not in whether one has seen my film; but where that person goes and what action is undertaken after that" (Gerima "On Independent" 112-3). Whereas the importance of history was stressed earlier in Gerima's career, he later came to stress the importance of innovation for the black independent film movement (McCluskey 2).

> The cinematic challenge before us is to innovate rather than imitate.... We can never transmit our repressed and untold stories by using the very conventions that have devastated us. More specifically, filmmakers, audiences, and critics must carefully scrutinize and, if necessary, change the traditional screen-audience

relationship. The initial step involves our consciously rejecting the falsely imposed aesthetics that have dominated, and still dominate, film terminologies. (Gerima, "Thoughts" 349)

Gerima steers away from stereotypes in developing his characters. The process he uses to achieve this goal is to first establish the environment in which the characters emerge. The environment is three-pronged: physical, sociological, and psychological.

> During the script writing process, I spend a great deal of time on what are known as environment and character development. The characters' development and growth are achieved by consistently analyzing, redefining, molding, and fashioning their individual characteristics and their circumstantial environment in which they are to interact. As a result the environment is believable and the characters are multi-dimensional and deeply reflective; they act to accomplish their human objectives, whatever their class status or occupation. (Gerima, "Thoughts" 335)

Gerima's approach to character development is apparent in a film like *Bush Mama* where the Los Angeles neighborhood, Watts, is almost a character in itself. Dorothy, the film's protagonist, is weighed down by her daily existence under the repressive welfare and police systems, two dominant symbols of Watts.

For Gerima, the script is a living document that transforms as he transforms. In fact, he insists the script is an organic extension of the filmmaker: "Rewriting is very important to me because I grow everyday; the script has to grow with me" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217). He is constantly rewriting his script to insure that the characters are representing the essence of the story. In addition, Gerima calls the script "the map of his

story" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217). In that vein, the script is not a rigid document, but a guide that carries the filmmaker and his actors through a mutual process of transformation.

For many directors, particularly those trained in industry-inclined schools, storyboarding is an essential component of the filmmaking processes. Gerima, however, does not use storyboards; he uses very descriptive imagery in his scripts.

> When you read my scripts, you will really see where the camera is. I don't do drawing. I just separate the action: the pressure points of the shots, where the joints are. I separate them by themselves as a line to say this is one action. ... Whatever the action I describe, it's there. It saves on time and budget. (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217)

Omitting storyboarding is, of course, a cost cutting device. However, it can also be seen as an empowering device that allows actors to more fully engage and contribute to the creative process of making the scenes come to life, as opposed to the rigid blocking of each scene as in conventional filmmaking.

In conventional cinema, the act of directing is defined as an individual artist's pursuit. However, in the Triangular Cinema model the director is engaged in a collaborative effort from casting to rehearsal to shooting. Gerima's neo-realistic aesthetic requires actors not only to reproduce dialogue but to inhabit his script. "Non-professional actors have that uniqueness and quality that I must have... I am in search of new aesthetics not only in my shots and composition, but in the expressions of characters. For a Third World filmmaker, the people you cast are tremendously important in terms of capturing reality" (Pfaff "Haile Gerima" 145). For that reason, Gerima prefers to use non-

professional actors who can bring an authenticity to his stories. "So there's a tendency of raw material, raw people, because I believe, one, logistically, it is less work for me to do, than to get star-struck people. Two, you get original material to work from" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 212).

Gerima also works with professional actors; however, he says he works at ridding them of the stereotypes and conventions that they have adopted from dominant cinema. He constantly challenges them to work outside the stereotype of who they think the character is. Referencing the process when making *Sankofa*, he recalled: "When the actors tried to bring this convention of stereotype, from lack of depth, I would nip it quickly" (Turner and Kamdibe 6).

Gerima continues to develop his script well into the rehearsal stage of film production process. This stage is of utmost importance as it is here that the filmmaker gives life to his words. "Preproduction is very important. With actors, rehearsing is very important for me. I don't want actors to do anything if they do not understand what I want to do" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217). He asks his actors to absorb the culture of the film, so that they become an organic part of the story. "For *Sankofa*, I rehearsed with the people in Washington and said to them: "Listen, you're going to be paratroopers to be dropped in Jamaica, and you're going to dissolve easily with the rest of the ordinary people in Jamaica. You are not actors, but you are part of the texture of the film" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217).

Gerima holds that the fine-tuned script is extremely important, and in fact he calls it the map of the film; however, at the shooting stage he allows the film to take on a life of its own.

> It depends on the project. If it is fiction we go from the script, and still I don't try to hold the film hostage to a script. So I had to--I have always learned something about the film. You want to talk to it--you want the film to talk to you. So in the, intially, and all that, from the jump, you start shooting with concepts. (Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

His specific approach to directing actors is to have the actor assume his or her character in phases: first, gain a holistic understanding of the character; second, establish belief in the character; and third, do the verbal and physical actions of the characters. His focus is on the inner conflict and trying to convey that on screen. This transformation of human beings is the foundation of Gerima's cinema as he states:

> If, as independent filmmakers, our interest is to tap the depth of the human soul, the growth and transformation of human beings, then we must shed light on the often invisible galaxy of inner contradictions that characterizes the individual in modern society. ("Thoughts" 343)

The process of shooting the film adds another dimension to working with actors. Gerima admits that he is reluctant to do re-takes because he says that his focus is not on achieving the perfect shot. His focus, instead, is on getting the right composition of elements in the shot. Gerima asserts that "it is no longer a question of getting 'the shot' but of whether the scene contains all the elements you wanted to have in it" (Willemen, "Interview" 33). Here, the concept of imperfect cinema takes shape and the message supersedes the medium.

The cinematographer, also drawing on Third Cinema principles, evokes historical and cultural influences, such as African cosmology and narrative rhythms, in

photographing the film. Gerima insists that: "Because of the rich history of black literature and our revered oral tradition, the black independent cinematographer must, out of necessity, incorporate and fully use this astounding body of resource material" (Gerima, "On Independent" 109). Triangular Cinema aesthetics draw on the filmmaker's historical, cultural background, and folk traditions for inspiration and material, expressing a filmmaker's unique "accent."

The narrative style that defines Gerima's aesthetics emanates from his rejection of conventional narrative structures; he instead draws on his pan-African heritage to forge a new film language. His narrative style is also defined by his commitment to exploring themes that transform the public. Though it is true, as Gerima argues, that all themes are universal, Third Cinema tends to focus on particular themes dealing with issues of oppression and liberation. Gerima's films are no exception. His central themes address the oppression, conscientization, transformation, and liberation of marginalized populations.

Gerima's pan-African cultural influences are derived from two main sources that he sees as intricately intertwined: his Ethiopian birth heritage and his adopted African-American heritage. From his Ethiopian roots, he draws on Ethiopian theater traditions, folk music, and folk storytelling traditions; while from his African-American cousins, he draws on jazz traditions, civil right struggles, and southern folkways. In fact, Mbaye Cham asserts that: "(I)t is the ways in which he avails himself of the full range of the artistic heritage of broader Pan-African world to construct his narratives that constitute much of the force and originality of his work" ("Film and History" 16). An examination

of Gerima's narrative style reveals that his narrative structure, narrative devices, editing, and sound mix combine to engage the audience in a dialectical viewing experience.

Gerima's narrative structure works like an internal dialogue. It is non-linear, episodic, and layered. It is a structure that employs a collective hero and each character represents a dimension of the primary character. The narrative devices include fantasy, metonymy (landscape, location, events), metaphor, symbolism, allegory, and neo-realism. Gerima is committed to creating a unique narrative structure based on Third Cinema principles. He insists that filmmakers commit to creating a film language where they call on their own cultural paradigms that reflect their thought processes: "Our metaphors and paradigms come out of these images to begin with; they come out of a thought system that uniquely reflects our diverse cultural identities that originate in Africa. ...we have the right and a historic responsibility to design and forge our cinematic language or languages" (Ukadike, "Questioning" 266). Cham coins the phrase "Black habitus," to refer to Gerima's narrative approach. He comments on Gerima's use of "African and black traditions of narrative, of music and of movement to construct filmic narratives that are at once complex, multi-layered, multi-textured, multi-lingual and extremely compelling" (Cham, "Film and History" 16). The Third Cinema approach calls on the audience to be actively involved in interpreting the story, in learning new film language, and in Gerima's case, exploring black realities within a liberated space.

The collective hero, as advanced by Third Cinema, is opposed to the Hollywood concept of the individualistic hero. The Hollywood hero is the narcissistic hero who single-handedly saves the day, advancing white supremacy or cultural imperialism all the while. The collective hero, on the other hand, is representative of the masses or the

oppressed, women, children, the poor, or the elderly. The collective hero gains his or her strength from the community. The hero's struggle is intricately connected with the struggle of his or her community. Gerima asserts: "I fight the very concept of 'hero' and I abandon the conventional notion of 'character', using them as a kind of collective human being" (Willemen, "Interview" 33).

As a storyteller, the narrative device of using dreams and fantasies frees Gerima from the constraints of conventional time and space. His characters are allowed to suspend reality or imagine an alternate reality to the one in which they inhabit. This is liberating not only for the characters but also for the spectators. Dreams and fantasy in the narrative allow for critical analysis of the present reality. Dreams and fantasy can take the character outside of the oppressive situation, if only in their minds. Gerima explains:

> There aren't human beings who do not have imagination and dreams, fantasies—and that makes them more human. I think that filmmakers who do not go there miss a great deal or lack imagination. When you see a very hardworking worker doing a routinely oppressive physical action, if you assume that his brain and his whole life are in that redundant work, you are missing what the complexity of human nature is all about. Our brain does go into different levels to make us cope with arduous, daily oppressive reality. Especially with oppressed people, one of the things they have universally identical is this extra way of existing, coping with life through imagination, through escape, through fantasy. (Pfaff, "From Africa" 217)

Narrative devices like metonymy (the substitution of one closely related object for another), metaphor (the comparison between two unlike objects where one assumes the

qualities of the other), and allegory (the abstraction of a story's elements to convey an alternative meaning) work on the symbolic level and expand the complexity of the story. The locations and landscape within Gerima's films serve as metonymic devices for a people's struggle (such as the rural countryside in *Ashes and Embers*), for racist neglect (such as the urban setting in *Bush Mama*), or religious exploitation (such as the Catholic chapel in *Sankofa*). Each character in Gerima's films stands as a metaphor for a stage in the conscientization process: imitative, remembrance, and combative. The stories of *Sankofa* and *Harvest: 3000 Years* clearly work as allegories. The conflicts in *Sankofa* represent the contemporary manifestations of race, class, gender, and religious discrimination in the United States. The conflicts in *Harvest: 3000 Years* represent the hold of Ethiopia's feudal history on Ethiopia's contemporary society. How Gerima manipulates these narrative devices in his films will be developed more fully in chapters three and four which provide in-depth critical analysis of his narrative films.

Gerima's editing style translates his stories into non-linear narratives with jazz-like, polyrhythmic, deliberately-paced, and improvisational elements. Gerima asserts that his editing techniques come from a liberated space because he taught himself and was not hindered by conventional cinema techniques. "I just plunged myself into my first film in super 8 and I started to discover certain things. Before I learned about editing I started to establish certain ways of editing" (Willemen, "Interview" 32). It is at the editing stage, Gerima claims, that the filmmaker puts his or her unique cultural aesthetic on a film project. For Gerima, the rhythm, language, and structure of the film are created in the editing booth. This is an area where many filmmakers relinquish creative control, but Gerima does not readily give up this creative control unless the editor is culturally in sync

with him. Reluctant even to use the word "cut" because of its connotation, Gerima fully regards editing as an organic component of the filmmaking process.

> Cutting is not filmmaking, editing is not cutting. Editing is culturally structured. There is a thought system that goes behind putting together a movie, and the psyche of cutting is very very brutal and fascistic for me. And so, if people are questioning the tradition of editing, they understand the cultural aspect of structuring a movie, I have no problem. That's where you structure the story. It's like a person, you know, it's like a jazz musician not writing his or her own story, but to give it to a person who is a music doctor from Europe to do it. It wouldn't have been invented, the very, the psychological structure, the social and cultural structure of jazz represents a people and an expression. To me editing is the same. You have to be able to put it together in the context to your own narrative. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Thus, editing is not a process of cutting and splicing, but a process of layering where Gerima allows himself to be open to any surprises or improvisations that might emerge. "In art, in filmmaking, I have learned the pleasure of creating... how can I not be gratified when two shots coincide or juxtapose and make a synthesized thing that I never had planned in the script stage or in the acting stage." (Hedges 119)

The sound mix, too, employs many jazz-influenced elements including complex layers of voice, music, song, and sound effects. Gerima culls from his many cultural influences in creating the sound tracks for his films such as the folk and classical music of Ethiopia and the jazz, gospel, and spoken word of African-American traditions. His

films use a combination of original compositions, pre-recorded pieces, vocals, instruments, poetry, dialogue, and voice-over.

As noted, in storytelling, theme is universal. However, there are themes that are common to Third Cinema films. These themes, as identified by Gabriel, include issues related to oppression, such as imperialism; colonialism; racism; sexism; classism; as well as issues related to liberation, such as popular struggle; organizing; and revolution (*Third Cinema*). Gerima adopts these themes in his Triangular Cinema model, particularly focusing on oppression, resistance, self-affirmation, and liberation, though Gerima identifies his primary thematic focus as transformation (Cham, "History and Film" 16; Howard 29).

The charge for the Triangular Cinema filmmaker is to put his or her cultural fingerprint or accent on the film (Ukadike, "Questioning" 265). "We will not invent a new theme in the world. All human beings, thematically, are one people, but the problem is how to fit a theme to a particular cultural identity and psychological makeup" (Ukadike, "Questioning" 265). Gerima's cultural and historical perspective guides his focus on African and black subjects. As an African, he sees his identity; culture; history; and future intricately connected with black people in the African Diaspora. His narratives originate from his curiosities, his explorations, his struggles, and they translate into stories featuring empowered characters who persevere and overcome adversity.

> [T]heme is universal. You're not going to say anything new about nothing. What is new for those of us who have been closed out of the movie industry is our own identity in telling stories, otherwise thematically, I don't know if a hundred year's history of Hollywood work what hasn't been touched. It would be too

> arrogant to think a new theme. But I think what is new about us is our style and our culture, and our way of telling stories. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Gerima's pan-African ideology impacts his politics, his teaching, his filmmaking and even his marriage and childrearing. His passion for realizing a democratic humanity drives his personal pursuit for transformation and liberation in his art, which in turn impacts society.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Transformative Cinema: Gerima's Narrative Films from 1971-1982

> [Filmmaking] is about recognizing a technology and then harnessing the power of that technology to accommodate and effectively transmit one's identity, culture, and language.
> ~Haile Gerima (Ukadike, "Questioning" 265)

Haile Gerima's first decade in the United States was probably one of the most volatile, exciting, and stimulating decades in modern U.S. history. The city of Chicago in the 1960s, Gerima's home for two years, was one of the most racially divided cities in the United States. The entrenched government of Mayor Robert J. Daley maintained a corrupt and unabashedly racist structure that could not be penetrated. Chicago was home to the infamous Cabrini–Green, a massive predominately black housing project where residents lived in near Third World conditions. Chicago was also the geographical center for a more radical approach to Civil Rights, namely, the Nation of Islam and the Chicago branch of the Black Panthers.

The city of Chicago was the site of some particularly pivotal moments in 1960-1970 social change movement history. In the summer of 1966, a year before Gerima's arrival, the city witnessed riots spurred by police brutality. In that same year, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. launched his Chicago Freedom Movement, a campaign to promote equal employment and housing opportunity. However, Dr. King was met with the first major failure of his career in Chicago. In April of 1968, after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, riots broke out in Chicago and other U.S. cities. Also in 1968, the Democratic Convention and massive anti-war protests were held in Chicago. Under Mayor Daley's command, the police led an unrelenting campaign against the protestors.

In 1969, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, of the Black Panthers, were killed during a police raid of the Black Panther Chicago headquarters.

When Haile Gerima relocated to Los Angeles, California in 1969 to attend UCLA, he found himself again at the center of black political activity. Angela Davis was fired from UCLA for her connection to the Communist Party in 1970. Davis then took on the case of George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers. She was jailed from 1971 to 1972 for her alleged involvement in the attempted prison escape of Jackson. From 1966 to 1971, the Black Panther Party of Oakland and the chapter in Los Angeles were powerful forces of social development in the black community. The FBI embarked on an aggressive campaign to totally destroy the organization, deeming it the "most dangerous and violence-prone of all extremist groups." In a matter of a few years, many of the Black Panther leaders had either been killed or jailed. Hence, Gerima found himself in the unique social and political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a climate which directly influenced his entrée into the medium of film and his development as a filmmaker.

The themes in Gerima's body of narrative work, from his first crude 3-minute, 8-mm film, *Hour Glass* (1971), to his fifth highly-effective and complex 150-minute, 35-mm film, *Ashes and Embers* (1986), reflect his early years in the United States. *Hour Glass* evokes the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. While *Child of Resistance* (1972), Gerima's second film, a 50-minute 16-mm stream of consciousness, is inspired by the political activities and imprisonment of Angela Davis, as well as the flood of Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s.

Gerima's third film exposed the plight of the invisible, exploited peasants of Ethiopia. Gerima took the skills he had honed in the United States and turned his camera toward his homeland for *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976). Ethiopia was one of the only African countries that had successfully fought off colonialism. Though Haile Selassie attempted to modernize Ethiopia, one of the oldest civilizations in the world, by introducing a Western-style educational system, advancing capitalism in the urban centers, and separating Church and State, the masses of Ethiopians still lived in abject poverty and under feudal conditions. There was rumbling for popular change when Gerima arrived to make his film in the summer of 1974. *Harvest: 3000 Years* makes a critical examination of the ancient feudal relationship upon which modern Ethiopia was built and captures Ethiopia just before the coup d'etat of 1974 that threw Gerima's home country into radical change.

While still editing *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Gerima plunged into his fourth film, *Bush Mama* (1976), which was influenced by his exploration of the disempowered in Ethiopia. *Bush Mama* demonstrated Gerima's adept understanding of the social-economic condition of African-American urban life within the dominant white supremist system. Reagan's "Welfare Queen" was deconstructed in Gerima's representation of the daily struggles of the oppressed and disenfranchised populations in Watts.

Gerima's experience living in the nation's capital certainly inspired the content of his fifth narrative film, *Ashes and Embers* (1982), the story of a Vietnam veteran attempting to readjust to life in America. During Gerima's initial years at Howard University, he also became better acquainted with black southern culture and history.

Using the Triangular Communication approach, this chapter traces the development of Gerima's transformative cinema by exploring the narrative form, filmic style, and themes of his films. In the analysis of each film, the filmic components of the filmmaker, the film, the production, and reception are explored individually and collectively to assess how each film functions as a Third Cinema product.

***Hour Glass (1971)***

*Hour Glass* (1971), Gerima's first film, is a 13-minute, super 8, black and white and color, experimental narrative that takes on the issue of identity formation and the behavior one adopts related to that identity. The film's images alternate between realistic action, and dream-like visions and flashbacks. The film's soundtrack advances the narrative through music, poetry, and speech excerpts. *Hour Glass* exemplifies an early, simplistic execution of Gerima's developing political ideology. Using non-sync sound, Gerima not only communicates his message through image, but also through music and excerpts from famous speeches and spoken word. The film is organized in a non-linear manner, hence the scenes move from past to present and back again, and from place to place in a non-linear manner. Gerima's unconventional style warrants an unconventional response to the film. As if written in a different language, the spectator must actively engage in interpreting the film's meaning. However, there are substantial gaps in the narrative that make interpretation of the text very difficult.

The protagonist of *Hour Glass*, a young black man, never speaks, nor is he given a name. First introduced to us on the basketball court, the protagonist appears just to be playing a basketball game. The "king and queen," a white man and woman wearing robes

and crowns, sit in the bleachers. They are smiling and officiating over the arena in an exaggerated manner. These two characters suggest that the protagonist is the focus of their objectification. Gerima has said that he wished to comment on the black athlete as a gladiator (Pfaff, "de quelle" 54). Hence the protagonist is there to entertain those in power and the masses. There are no other explanations offered as to the significance of his basketball game, what team he is playing for, nor how he feels about playing.

The protagonist is then shown in his bedroom (perhaps in a dormitory) surrounded by books by authors who espouse Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. These books, Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks* and Clever's *Soul on Ice*, were likely from Gerima's own library as he was becoming engrossed in the same literature. The protagonist sits at a desk reading and mulling over the multitude of texts before him. The film does not indicate whether he is a college student or whether he is in a dorm room.

The scene cuts to a preadolescent boy, the protagonist as a young boy, who is lying, uncovered and nude on a bed, in a fetal position. An imposing white woman stands over him. She is dressed in a conservative manner, like a schoolmarm. This scene cuts back to the adult protagonist sitting before his books, then back to the boy. This time the boy is covered by a bed sheet; however, the woman pulls the sheet away and hangs it on the wall to reveal an image on it of a black leader. The first sheet has Martin Luther King, Jr.'s image and the second one has Malcolm X's image. When the woman attempts to yank the third sheet from the boy's body, he resists and pulls it back. The boy stands up and holds the sheet in front of him to reveal the image of Angela Davis.

The film text does not make clear whether these scenes are dreams or actual memories. In the flashback scenes featuring the protagonist as a child, it is not apparent

whether this is the boy's home or a foster home. His relationship to the white woman is also not apparent. The film's ambiguity leaves the spectator to question: Is the white woman his caregiver or his foster mother? Why is the boy nude? Why is the woman removing sheets from the boy's body and hanging them on the wall? Does the woman wish to harm the boy? If she wants to remove the black leaders from literally covering him, why does she hang them on the wall where they are still accessible? Why does she not destroy the sheets? And finally, what is the lasting impact of these experiences on the protagonist?

The next sequence shows the adult protagonist in his room. With urgency, he jumps up from his desk and begins to pack a suitcase. He throws some clothes in his bag, along with some of his books. The books are his cultural weapons for the battle that he must wage. The battle is an ideological one. The protagonist walks outside along a red, white and blue wall. He passes by posters of different Black Nationalist leaders, such as Huey Newton. The next sequence features him walking with a noose around his neck and a long lead of rope dragging behind him. He pauses to look at each poster. These posters are leading him to his new consciousness and to his new place in society. In the next sequence, the protagonist is in a city bus station, and then boarding a bus. The scene indicates that he is traveling through an upper-class neighborhood. Affluent single-family houses are visible from the bus window and all of the passengers are business-suited white men. He transfers buses. This time all of the bus passengers are black and the scenes from the window are of an inner-city neighborhood with high-rise buildings (read: black). He has not only transformed in his conscious identity but also in his physical space. The final scene shows him walking down the street passing only "people of color."

His gait is upbeat. He is in his "natural" environment. He enters a building and closes the door behind him. He is set to start a new existence, no longer isolated, but in a black community.

**Analysis**

**The Filmmaker**

The title *Hour Glass* alludes to Gerima's primary theme in this short film-- the urgent need for the exploited black man to find himself, to engage in political action, and to reconnect with the community. The film opens with a poem by the Last Poet's "Run Nigger" playing underneath the visuals of the protagonist playing basketball in a gym. The rhythmic lines of the poem match his movements on the basketball court. The poem describes the exploitation of black men by the dominant culture, particularly the legal system, the sports world, and capitalism.

Time is running out on bullshit changes

Running out like a bushfire in a dry forest

Like a murderer from the scene of a crime

Like a little roach from DDT

Running out like big niggers run on a football field

Run nigger, screwin' your woman!

Run nigger, whippin' your ass!

Run nigger, stealin' your culture!

Run nigger, takin' your life!

Run nigger, killin' your children!

Run nigger, run like you run when

The liquor store's closing and

It's Saturday night. Run nigger!

'cause time is running/run like time

Never yielding or forgiving

Moving forward in direct pattern

Of progressive movement

Never warning or relinquishing

Time is running running running

Running running running

Time's done run out! (The Last Poets)

The protagonist is urged to act because the oppressor is actively trying to destroy black people. The protagonist must be proactive and change his fate. Gerima is commenting on threats to black American culture and prescribing how it can be saved.

Gerima foregrounds a number of Black Nationalist and pan-Africanist intellectuals and leaders of the 1960s and 1970s. The protagonist is shown reading their books and viewing posters with their images. Speeches by Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X are all used on the sound track. These intellectuals and leaders guide the protagonist to his conscientization and ultimately to his liberation.

As an Ethiopian, Gerima is a fellow global African, but he is still an outsider in America. Because of his position, he is able to offer a unique perspective on black life in the United States. He makes parallels between slavery and modern day sports. *Hourglass* displays Gerima's perspective as an outsider observing three major forces in his life as a

student at UCLA and a resident of Los Angeles in the 1970s: the mania of college sports, the radical student activist movement, and black life in Watts. Unlike Goodman School of Drama, UCLA is a college sports powerhouse. Thus, it is likely Gerima saw first hand the emphasis placed on young black college athletes. On the other hand, Gerima was in a place that allowed him to fully develop his political ideology. He explains that his first classes at UCLA were not film classes, but history classes (Willemen, "Interview" 32). In the meantime, outside of school, Gerima was introduced to Watts, a section of the city that was predominantly black. His classmate Charles Burnett was from Watts and together with other filmmakers, Gerima came to identify with the struggles of American blacks and appreciate the United States Civil Rights Movement.

In a didactic manner, *Hourglass* offers a critique of two issues: the exploitation of black men by college and professional sports, and black people who have abandoned their roots. The film calls for blacks to connect to the Black Nationalist movement and for black intellectuals to return to working in the black community.

**The Film**

The major themes Gerima explores in *Hour Glass* are racial and cultural identification and black stereotype/image in media. The style of *Hour Glass* (a non-sync sound film is a conventional exercise for a first film project) reflects Gerima's stage as student of film. The narrative structure is melodramatic and introspective. Little information is provided about the settings, characters, or narrative; hence, their meaning is ambiguous. Gerima uses a non-static camera giving the spectator the perspective of being inside the head of the protagonist. The grainy black and white and color 8mm film

stock has the feel of a home movie, though the choice of this film stock was probably made more for economic reasons than for aesthetic ones.

Gerima explained that in making *Hourglass*, he was experimenting with the film form. Though this experimentation was met with resistance from his teachers, he found encouragement among his peers. "And when the traditional teachers saw the final product and opposed it, there were also people who began to like it. The clash of points of view gave me more confidence to continue the process of discovering how I could speak better, sharpening my skills" (Willemen, "Interview" 32).

Since *Hourglass* has no dialogue, Gerima chose to speak using visual and sound elements. The visual elements include both color and black and white 8 mm film stock, black and white to represent the past and color to represent the future. The sound elements include instrumental music, vocals, and spoken word. Together these elements communicate a narrative of a young man who moves from being alienated and un-conscious to reconnecting with his community and being conscientized. However, these elements do not always provide a clear understanding of the film. The many gaps force the spectator to create his or her own meaning.

> *Hourglass* is a paradigm on sponsored guidance," says Gerima. "It's about a young guy who's raised in a foster home, in an Anglo-Saxon culture, and how much he is alienated from his own cultural essence. As a result he ends up playing basketball at a university, but he's not a normal participant of the sport and soon realizes that he's the new modern gladiator. That is the arrival point. He finally leaves this densely white school and goes into the community, where he needs to

go for his own peace and security. That is a constant and very insistent theme of my work: transformation, change, realization. (Howard 29)

Gerima writes about the importance of transparency in his Triangular Cinema model, meaning that film should be assessable and easy to understand. However, in his early work this transparency was not always apparent, particularly in this first film. In his later work, which continued to be non-linear and experimental, transparency in meaning and ideology is achieved. The specific areas of difficulty in *Hourglass* involve setting and character definition. The protagonist is introduced as an adult and then shown in flashbacks as a boy. As an adult, the clues to define him are the external elements of his action of playing basketball, his action of studying, and his possession of certain books and posters. In the flashback scenes, the protagonist is connected with the boy simply through the way the film is edited. The protagonist is lying down pondering and then the film cuts to a nude boy on a bed – a memory of his childhood. There are no cues to indicate that the boy is a foster child, nor any to indicate that the white woman who pulls sheets from his body is his foster mother.

In the final scenes of the film, when the protagonist flees his dorm room and travels to the black neighborhood, the narrative becomes clearer. Gerima employs familiar symbols to indicate his oppression. When he first escapes his white environment, he is weighed down by a heavy noose around his neck. In the transition between the white and black environment, he studies the posters of black cultural nationalists that hang along a wall on his path. When he boards a bus to leave the neighborhood, Gerima has a shot of a trashcan that reads "Keep Beverly Hills Clean." In the bus, the change of passengers from white to black as he transitions from one environment to another is

apparent. And finally, when he disembarks the bus and walks along the streets of the black neighborhood, he smiles for the first time in the film, showing his contentment. It is in this scene that Gerima communicates his optimism about the future.

Where the images do not always provide the transparency that Gerima would desire, the soundtrack does offer some clarity. The spoken word, speeches, and songs all work to provide an understanding of the messages and influences on the protagonist. The speeches represent three seminal voices in the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements. Martin Luther King is often not linked with the more radical leaders of Malcolm X and Angela Davis, but Gerima evokes all three demonstrating the range of voices and ideologies important in the struggle.

**The Production**

Gerima professes to have had no knowledge of film production when he made *Hourglass*. However, technically the film does not suffer. Not bound to the technical aspects of sound mixing, Gerima is able to draw on his theater background where movement plays an essential role in storytelling. In addition, his theater background is apparent in the way he uses setting to convey meaning. The first setting is a gymnasium. The second setting is a dorm room. The third setting is a child's bedroom. The forth setting is a route to the bus station. The fifth setting is a bus station. And the final setting is the black community. Again, as in theater, there is a minimum of characters: the protagonist and the "foster mother." The film is, essentially, the protagonist's internal dialogue. His transformation from gladiator to cultural worker is explicated through his physical movement from the basketball arena to the streets of Watts.

The budget for *Hourglass* was a reported $500 (Pfaff, "Haile" 140). Gerima's crew was likely made up of other film students. Inexpensive and easily accessible equipment was used. In addition, the processing of the film and ease of editing would have been aided by the fact that he shot in 8 mm, a format used for home filmmaking.

**The Reception**

Black independent cinema from the 1960s was significant according to film and literary scholar James Snead because it had "the feeling of intimate conversations between filmmaker and audience, and deal(t) with issues *within* the black community, without special regard for a theoretical white viewer" (22). The black community to whom Gerima was speaking consisted of his fellow filmmakers and the African-American world he had been adopted into. Gerima described his early films as a conversation with the black community. Gerima was attempting to work through his perception of the African-American condition, Africans' complicity in that history, and the white racism that he, as an Ethiopian, faced upon coming to America. He explained:

> Each film was like *Dear Friend* almost, but it had rage and anger in it. That is the background of the early films that were really buttressed or saddled by the racial turmoil of my own journey, from coming to a country feeling very peculiarly different – at least I'm different, I'm not them, I'm afraid to be a part of them. Then when you start to do films and you start to see politically the very Black people I disassociated from began to resurrect my militancy. I started to wear my Afro, to be literally nurtured, to accept myself and become the person I wanted to

be instead of the person I was being packaged to be by forces beyond me.

(Alexander, 198)

Hence, Gerima's audience was the African-American community. *Hour Glass* was his awkward though powerful way to express his take on black life in America and to offer a way of moving forward. His analysis and prescription were simple: the athlete and intellectual were alienated from the struggle and they needed to reconnect. It was not enough to study the words of the Black Nationalists and Pan-Africanists, but one had to live by those words and ideologies. Gerima hoped to spark a dialogue on the exploitation of the black athlete in the college or professional environment and the responsibility of the black intellectual in the black community.

Gerima's anticipated audience would most likely have an assimilationist or accommodationist position because Gerima's reading of the black athlete as gladiator or the alienated intellectual was part of the public discussion. A progressive spectator would identify with the critique and the critique might confirm the spectator's analysis of the athlete and the intellectual. However, the spectator would no doubt demand a more complex prescription than the simple "return to your roots" solution that Gerima offers.

The actual distribution and exhibition of *Hour Glass* has been limited to film festival and special venues. The film is also now available on videotape through Mypheduh Films and has gained a much broader audience in the past 10 years.

***Child of Resistance* (1972)**

The 57-minute, 16 mm experimental *Child of Resistance* explores the psychological journey of an African-American female political prisoner who remains un-

named (Barbara O) throughout the film. In contrast to *Hour Glass*, this protagonist exhibits conscientization in *Child of Resistance*. She calls out to oppressed populations throughout a non-linear dream-like sequence of events. Black and white represents her incarcerated reality and color represents her liberated psychological state. Gerima takes a didactic approach to set up a binary of blacks who are brainwashed by the dominant ideology of white supremacy and progressive blacks who espouse a liberatory ideology. Created at the height of the Blaxploitation era, *Child of Resistance* is a direct response to exploitative images common to films in this genre. The film is primarily a series of scenes cutting between the protagonist in a prison cell and a bar scene. The protagonist reveals, in a stream of consciousness voice-over, that she is a political prisoner. She comments on the present situation of black American men and appeals to black Americans to change. In her jail cell, she is under constant surveillance by a white prison guard.

The film begins with the protagonist in a jail cell. A white male guard stands outside her cell door. The scene cuts to a bar scene where the protagonist, in chains, is led through the bar by the guard. She passes people drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. She sees a nun and a stiltwalker waving an American flag. She passes by a long American sedan and a veteran in a wheelchair who is being pushed along by a nun. She sees a nurse pouring drinks and she sits down to have a drink. The soundtrack underneath is the sound of chains clanking and an iron door slamming. Additionally, the soundtrack features the protagonist singing a blues song and djembe and flute instrumentals.

The scene cuts to the protagonist pacing in her cell, then back to the bar scene. Four women (one black, two white, and one Asian, dressed in hot pants and go-go boots)

fondle an indifferent black man, the Blaxploitation hero dressed in a "Superfly" outfit. The soundtrack underneath is that of a horse neighing and a cock crowing. The protagonist declares that her people are in a plantation dungeon (a theme Gerima re-visits in *Sankofa*). Now using color film, the scene shows a man shooting up and two boys sniffing glue. Cutting back to her jail cell, the protagonist reads to them and appeals to them to stop. "While man never examines himself, it's always the black man's fault .... White men after his balls, now his brain. And Chicano, Indian." The soundtrack of djembe and flute instrumentals play underneath.

The film cuts to a series of scenes of iconic images: the prison guard wearing a safari suit and holding a cross wrapped in chains, the protagonist being rocked in an electric-rocking chair by the guard, a person hanging from a noose, and a multi-ethnic group of people sitting in front of an American flag. The camera pans along a row of black men lining the bar. The camera lowers to reveal the chains linking their legs. The soundtrack underneath features a double bass playing dissonant notes.

The protagonist tries to rest in her cell, but she is disturbed by images of the Blaxploitation hero leaning against the sedan. She states that the "white man" has declared war on black people. The guard sneaks into her cell. The protagonist suddenly wakes up and realizes it is a dream. Three revolutionaries (black men with guns strapped to their backs) smash shackles and the bars of a cell with sledge hammers, but it is not her cell. She paces and in her mind declares that her men, black men, don't protect her. The revolutionaries continue on their rampage; they sledge hammer the electric chair. The protagonist continues to pace, now in circles. She becomes dizzy and the ticking of a

clock is heard underneath. The soundtrack underneath features sounds of diversions, such as a marching band and the television.

In the final scenes, the protagonist, dressed in a white nightgown, has escaped her cell and is running down a long corridor. In her voice-over, she beckons to black men to hear her call and break free from cultural captivity so that they can unify.

## Analysis

### The Filmmaker

Gerima's simple description of *Child of Resistance*, "the politicization of a young African-American woman in prison," only hints at the complex nature of this experimental narrative film (Pfaff, "de quelle" 54). In *Child of Resistance*, his second film, Gerima confronts the images made popular in Blaxploitation films. Gerima continues to explore issues of conscientization, but this time through a female character. He said this story was inspired by a dream he had about Angela Davis (Howard 28). However, the film also demonstrates the influence of Third Cinema on his filmmaking in his choice of a female protagonist and the themes of oppression and exploitation that the film explores, issues particular to a black female position. Gerima uses the institution of prison to lead the protagonist to her enlightenment (Howard 29).

As in *Hour Glass*, Gerima states that his anger (in addition to the constraints of conventional filmmaking and the images perpetuated by conventional cinema) strongly informed his filmmaking practice in *Child of Resistance*. "Anger played a major role in the making of *Child of Resistance*, and it allowed me to abuse Western conventions and

gave me more confidence to explore and experiment. It was also rebellious because of the idea of the esthetic domination of the West over Third World people." (Howard 29) According to Gerima, his UCLA film instructors devalued his filmmaking approach and tried to force him to adopt conventional Hollywood techniques. "The teachers said the way I told a story was abnormal; I have to be drilled and chiseled to tell a story in a conventional way. I was angry because I was confronting a system that told me I was not legitimate." (Howard, 28) Gerima was most obviously reacting to the images made popular by Blaxploitation films of this era and the stereotypic images of blacks that were prevalent in mainstream American cinema. He directly criticizes the black buck image and the escapism inherent in the "party" life promoted in those films.

**The Film**

As a Third Cinema film, *Child of Resistance* falls somewhere between the remembrance and combative stage. Gerima makes a direct reference to mainstream cinema and the images perpetuated in the exploitive genre of black action films; thus, the film is combative in how it opposes racial and sexual exploitation. In addition, Gerima clearly calls for a direct confrontation to various systems of oppression, such as the police, colonialism, media images, and substance abuse. Murashige says that *Child of Resistance* was more of a direct call to action in that the film clearly spoke to the contemporary challenges facing black Americans in the 1970s.

> But where *Hourglass* may have been symbolic of certain realities, Gerima makes much more specific connections between the events that take place in *Child of Resistance* and the contemporary social and political world since the main

character of the film, played by Barbara O. Jones, is clearly meant to find inspiration and parallels in Angela Davis's imprisonment. (Murashige 185)[12]

Pfaff declares that *Child of Resistance* remains to this day "one of the most stylistically daring films of black African cinema" (Pfaff, "Haile" 140).

Barbara O is presented as an antithesis of the super vixen, such as Coffy and Cleopatra Jones, made popular by Blaxploitation films. She was instead inspired by the black female revolutionary Angela Davis. The protagonist is contrasted with the Blaxploitation heroine in dress, demeanor, and politics. Gerima explores this theme in a number of ways. The protagonist wears an Afro hairdo like Angela Davis as a symbol of her heritage, not a plot device as in a Blaxploitation film where the heroine conceals weapons in her hair to kill the villain at the opportune moment. Her sexuality is at risk of being violated by the prison guard, symbolizing a legacy of sexual abuse of black women at the hands of white men in slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary times. In the Blaxploitation film, the super vixen's sexuality is also often at risk of being violated by white villains. However, the very real legacy of sexual abuse is exploited as a plot device when the heroine uses her hyper-sexuality as a weapon to lure men into her trap to kill them.[13]

*Child of Resistance* has non-sync sound, thus the narrative is created through strong visual images, voice-over, music and sound effects. Because *Child of Resistance* uses non-sync sound, symbolism in the visuals is of particular importance. The two primary locations used in the film, the prison and the bar, are symbolic of two kinds of

[12] Barbara O. Jones dropped her surname "Jones" in the 1980s and now simply goes by Barbara O.
[13] Black Panther Party member Elaine Brown has also exposed the sexual abuse black women in the black power movement suffered under black men (1992).

imprisonment blacks may be subjected to, one that is mandated by an outside power and another that is self-imposed. Within the prison cell, which was primarily shot in black and white (to signify the protagonist's reality) there are a number of symbols used. The protagonist, herself, is symbolic of Angela Davis and other Black Nationalists who were imprisoned for their ideology and black liberation activities. Specifically, the protagonist's state is a symbol of the suppression of black rebellion. The prison guard is symbolic of the surveillance of and the destruction of revolutionary ideas and persons. The guard is dressed in a safari suit that further denotes his connection to a larger system of imperial domination of Third World peoples.

In several prison scenes, Gerima uses various iconic symbols to comment on state oppression and armed resistance against state oppression, colonialism, and slavery. One scene juxtaposes a noose hanging in the foreground against an American flag to signify State-sanctioned terror and white supremacy. While another scene features a group of "prisoners" of different races destroying an electric chair with sledgehammers. The electric chair stands as a symbol of legalized state murder which is unjustly meted against people of color. The destruction of the chair by the multi-racial group images a collective, unified response to state oppression. Another prison scene features the white prison guard holding a cross wrapped in chains. This image clearly speaks to role Christianity played in colonialism and slavery.

The location of the bar is a symbolic site of self-destruction and complacency. In voice-over, the protagonist says that her people are in a "plantation dungeon." In the various bar scenes, Gerima uses symbolism to comment on different issues. One scene shows a black Vietnam vet in a wheelchair. He is attached to an intravenous tube and a

white nurse is administering drinking alcohol in his drip. A reading of this scene speaks to the black veteran who returned home wounded both physically and psychologically. For many of these veterans, self-medication (such as drugs and alcohol) was their only treatment (Wallace).

Another scene shows patrons lined up at the bar. They appear to be in a zombie-like state as they drink and cavort. With shackles around her neck, the protagonist is led through the bar by the prison guard. She passes by the patrons who are also bound by a long chain linking them together at the ankles. Here, Gerima calls on the memory of slavery and its relationship to modern-day weapons of destruction and enslavement.

The bar scene featuring the long American sedan in the background and the Blaxploitation hero with a troop of adoring, hot-pants-clad women is a direct commentary on the Blaxploitation films complete with the fancy cars, flashy clothes, and disposable female characters. Gerima positions this narcissistic character not as a hero in the community, but as a self-centered materialistic, misogynistic creation of Hollywood. The protagonist's voice-over cries out to this character: "This is war. The white man has declared war on my people. Gladiators and performers trying to keep our minds off the truth." This last line calls to mind the themes Gerima explored earlier in *Hour Glass.*

**The Production**

The third filmic element of the Third Cinema theory model calls attention to the crew and budget of *Child of Resistance*. This student film was shot on a very small budget of $5,000. Gerima's crew was comprised of his fellow students. By necessity, costs were kept low through the use of few locations, non-sync sound, a small cast, and a

small crew. As in *Hour Glass*, Gerima's theater background is apparent in how he uses the locations and creates *mise-en-scène*. With no dialogue, Gerima utilizes the concept of theatrical tableaus to give meaning to the narrative. Gerima clearly attempts to overcome his financial constraints through his exploration with visuals and sound adhering to the Third Cinema principle of using the resources he has at hand to create his work.

**The Reception**

Like *Hour Glass*, *Child of Resistance* challenges the viewer. It is a very non-conventional film made at a time when black viewers were being lured to the theaters in droves to see the Blaxploitation films flooding the cinema houses.[14] These films were formulaic and highly accessible. In contrast, Gerima presented a non-linear and experimental film, mixing color with black and white and commenting on not one or two issues affecting the black community, but a laundry list of issues like stereotypes, drugs, police brutality, state oppression, and colonialism. Film scholar Clyde Taylor comments of the "psychic space" that Gerima creates through his non-linear camera work. He states that "Linearity is rejected as space is treated poetically, following the coordinates of a propulsive social idea – the social imprisonment of black women" (41).

The target audience for Blaxploitation films, that is young black urban males, would most likely have taken a resistance position. These spectators found pleasure in formulaic aspect of Hollywood cinema, Blaxploitation included, and *Child of Resistance* was certainly non-formulaic and difficult to interpret. For them, cinema was a form of

[14] From the period of 1970 to 1973, 200 Blaxploitation films were made. They were screened primarily in black communities. They were credited with economically saving Hollywood which had previously been in a slump. (Guererro; Bogle).

diversion. While social or political themes may be entertained, they had to be solely explored in the realm of the formulaic confines of Hollywood capitalistic cinema.

A good portion of the population, however, would ascribe to the accommodationist position, accepting parts of the film, while rejecting other parts according to their personal politics, ideology, and what they found aesthetically pleasing. Specifically, spectators belonging to the traditional Civil Rights movement, such as the NAACP or the Urban League, would align themselves with the criticism of Blaxploitation genre.[15] The rejection of the Blaxploitation genre and longing for films that represented the full range of African-American experiences or, more specifically, positive and progressive images would allow these spectators to align themselves with the cultural nationalist message of this film.

Film scholar Mike Murashige takes the assimilationist position in his critique of *Child of Resistance.* In one of the few critical reviews of the film, he expresses that Gerima successfully made the link between his film and the contemporary issues facing the black community (184). His critique represents those spectators belonging to the black cultural nationalist community. They would argue that the power and appeal of *Child of Resistance* lay in its topicality and its direct criticism of the Blaxploitation genre.

### ***Bush Mama* (1976)**

*Bush Mama*, a 97-minute, color, 16 mm non-linear, narrative film, centers on Dorothy (Barbara O) and her family living in Watts in the 1970s. Dorothy, a young black

[15] The NAACP actively protested the Blaxploitation genre as did some other civic groups, writers, and activists. (Bogle)

widow, lives with her lover T.C. (Johnny Weathers) and her teenage daughter, Luanne (Susan Williams). Dorothy is regularly visited by her neighbor, Molly (Cora Lee Day), a defeated older woman who drinks too much and regularly berates black people. Luanne is being tutored by an older teenage neighbor, Annie (Renna Kraft), a budding Black Nationalist.

T.C. is imprisoned for a crime he has been falsely accused of and it is in prison that he becomes radicalized. T.C., in turn, shares his new knowledge with Dorothy through letters to her. In their letters to each other, Dorothy and T.C. discuss the systemic socio-political factors that are responsible for the oppression of people of color, as well as the more personal issues of Dorothy's pregnancy and the welfare system's demand that she abort the baby. (This storyline no doubt reflects the reports that emerged in the 1970s of the rash of forced sterilizations of women of color in the United States.) Through the course of the film, Dorothy must face the bureaucracy of the welfare system, the abuse of the law enforcement system, and the general oppressiveness of living in a community under surveillance.

Assault by the State occurs on a continual basis. In the first few scenes of the film, we witness an actual scene of Gerima's film crew being harassed by the police. Dorothy is then introduced. She is walking the streets of Watts with aimless purpose and her purse is snatched by a black preteen boy. Dorothy chases him, running out of her shoes, but he escapes her. Soon after, Dorothy visits the welfare office. There she waits with the masses who are also looking for work and a means to sustain themselves. At the welfare office, security guards beat an old, confused man. Numbed by the oppressive climate of Watts, no one comes to his aid. A welfare worker visits Dorothy's home and demands

that she abort her baby. This request is yet another assault on Dorothy's humanity. Later, from her apartment window, Dorothy witnesses a man shot in his back by the police. And finally, Dorothy walks in on a police officer attempting to rape her daughter. This final act of violence drives Dorothy to strike back. She beats the police officer and kills him.

The film begins with Dorothy feeling no sense of agency. She even hands over T.C.'s letters to Molly to read because she seems to lack the energy to engage in the act of reading. However, as the film advances, and Dorothy begins her transformation; she is shown reading Langston Hughes, a sign that she is waking from her non-conscientized state. Dorothy's eventual transformation is spurred by her neighbor, Annie, and her lover, T.C. Both propose to Dorothy their brand of black liberation and empowerment.

Annie is a pan-Africanist. She asks Dorothy to allow her to hang a poster of an African female "warrior" in her apartment because her own mother will not allow her to hang the poster in her home. Dorothy obliges but barely takes note of what is on the poster. Annie later brings a poster of a bullet-riddled black man who was the victim of police brutality. Dorothy is intrigued and declares that his abuse is a shame. In another scene, Annie sits at Dorothy's kitchen table teaching Luanne about African geography. Dorothy listens in on the lesson.

Dorothy is also educated through T.C.'s letters where he tells her of the collective struggle of the men in prison, the oppressed in the Third World, and the oppressed in America's ghettos. Dorothy begins a process of conscientization. At first, she expresses confusion and frustration with T.C.'s budding radicalization, but later she is excited to tell him that she has taken the wig off her head, a symbol of her budding radicalization.

She sees her world/society critically for the first time. She understands her individual situation as part of a larger societal problem of systematic injustice and racism.

However, Dorothy's desire to fight back comes at a cost. She is jailed for defending her daughter against a police officer who is raping her. In jail, she is beaten by a prison guard which causes her to lose her baby. In a final scene of the film, Dorothy pulls off the long straight wig that she has donned throughout the film and combs out her "natural." She writes to T.C.: "They beat the baby out of me. The problem is the place I was born into. I must read and study to bring about change." Her final declaration is: "The wig is off my head." Dorothy acknowledges the systematic oppression of poor people and people of color. She declares her own agency in bringing about change and she expresses an outward sign of ridding herself of the psychological bondage of white supremist standard of beauty.

## Analysis

### The Filmmaker

*Bush Mama* was Gerima's third film made while a film student. Gerima claims that he made this film underground in order to have access to resources that UCLA afforded him. Gerima presents some of the same themes in *Bush Mama* as he did in *Child of Resistance*, however in *Bush Mama* they are more developed and nuanced. The protagonist in *Child of Resistance* starts out already having been jailed for her activism, while Dorothy in *Bush Mama* ends up in jail at the end of the film for her activism.

*Bush Mama* represents a film in the combative stage. The revolutionary themes presented through T.C.'s letters and Annie's visits frame Dorothy's transformation. The

Black Power Movement and cultural nationalist movement are represented as well as the omnipresent state surveillance in the form of police repression and the welfare system. Gerima identifies *Bush Mama* as a pivotal moment in his development as a filmmaker.

> *Bush Mama* was a turning point in the sense that a disaster in production enables you to lift away from the script, when the whole logic of the things you had planned backfires. *Bush Mama* taught me that film is not linear—that in film, most of the linear things that you had in your script were conventions that you need to question. This is what my whole struggle in the African cinema is about: the right of the African filmmaker to experiment, not just be a filmmaker to serve society. Not just to make a film, but to question and see how your accent looks when it's put in motion, in sight sound. If I'd had all the resources, maybe I wouldn't have learned. (Hedges 119)

Gerima was a member of a group of filmmakers who were featuring Los Angeles ghettos in their films and making Watts a character. Charles Burnett was from Watts. As a friend and fellow student, Burnett introduced Gerima to Watts and helped him gain invaluable access into this community. Gerima was also very immersed in Black Nationalist and pan-African ideology. As a student at UCLA, Gerima was in the bastion of the film industry. However, he and his colleagues, as discussed earlier, completely rejected Hollywood and all that it stood for. They looked to Italian Realism, French New Wave, Brazilian Cinema Novo, African Social Realism, and Latin American Third Cinema for inspiration. They desired to expose the underside of the Hollywood glitter myth. Hence, their films encouraged critical examination of the State's occupation of

black urban areas. According to Gerima, *Bush Mama's* Dorothy goes through a three-stage process of coming to assert herself:

> For Dorothy, when the oppressive tool came down on her daughter that was the last stair she would be pushed from. She stood her ground and asserted herself in very physical terms. But even then, in terms of my vision, it is with her consciousness that I ended the film and not at the logical conclusion of a conventional drama that would show that she went to jail. (Howard 39)

Thus, it was Gerima's desire to show Dorothy as a warrior against the system, not a tidy Hollywood ending.

**The Film**

Thematically, *Bush Mama,* challenges the oppressor who is identified as the State. The oppression comes in the form of racism, police brutality, state welfare, the judicial system, self-destructive behavior (such as drug and alcohol abuse) and the broken sense of community. Gerima depicts the oppressor as physically and psychologically raping the black community. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the film opens with an actual scene of police harassment of the film crew. The film crew become suspects simply because they are people of color with expensive film equipment.

In this film, Gerima still uses experimental methods, but the storyline is more linear and the style is more conventional than *Hour Glass* and *Child of Resistance*. Gerima develops each character to represent the continuum of black consciousness. Molly clearly sits at one end of the continuum, as unconscienticized. She thinks black people are good-for-nothings. To Molly, the dominant power structure has no bearing on

the state of black America; blacks are solely responsible for their socio-economic state. Simmi, at the other end of the continuum, thinks that blacks can overcome their problems if they would unify and develop a plan or what she calls a "calculation." The young neighbor, Annie, is a student of the revolution. She is actively involved in learning and in sharing information about the black liberation struggle. T.C. starts out as a non-politicized person, but after he becomes incarcerated he begins to learn and become conscientized.

These various characters represent ways of being for Dorothy and parts of a path to black liberation. After Dorothy's daughter is raped, she is jolted from her complacency and forced to act. The structure of this narrative presents the spectator with sides of the black liberation debate and encourages an active dialogue on the best path to liberation through Dorothy's personal story. The structure also links the black-American struggle to the larger pan-African struggle through T.C. and Annie rhetoric. T.C.'s letters talk about the fight against colonialism in Africa and Asia. Annie hangs a poster of an African female freedom fighter on Dorothy's wall. She also gives LuAnn a lesson on the African map, telling her about various struggles on the continent. Gerima uses a poor, black female as the central character; Dorothy is representative of a poor, disenfranchised community. Gerima's choice reflects Third Cinema tendencies in that Gerima makes use of the dispossessed to tell his story.

Gerima uses dream sequences and flashbacks to create Dorothy's narrative. At the film's onset, Dorothy is already on her own and struggling. It is through flashbacks that T.C.'s story is revealed. Through flashbacks, we learn that T.C. and Dorothy met in a support group. He brought happiness and some lightness into Dorothy's life. T.C. had

found a job and he and Dorothy had begun to dream of getting out of Watts. However, their future together abruptly ends when T.C. is accused and convicted of a crime that he didn't commit. A flash-forward is used to show Dorothy's incarceration. The narrative then backtracks to show the events leading up to her incarceration.

In *Bush Mama* the central location of Watts is a character in itself. For Gerima and his fellow film students, Watts was the heart of black Los Angeles and the cultural site for black life. Watts was also the repressive site that Dorothy longed to get free of, but did not know how. T.C. offered her only hope. After T.C. comes home with news that he has landed a job, Dorothy and T.C. dream of their more prosperous future and of leaving Watts. So bound is Dorothy by her limited surroundings that she is unable to truly fanaticize. Even when T.C. suggests Africa, Dorothy totally discounts his suggestion. The city is hard, concrete and devoid of any foliage. On the streets of Watts, Dorothy walks past rows upon rows of shops. Wig shops are prominently featured. Like Dorothy, the people seem to be numb. When Dorothy's purse is snatched and when a madman goes on a verbal rampage against the welfare office and the security guard rushes to beat him, no one seems to notice. No one comes to Dorothy's or the madman's aid. Gerima very ingeniously uses the location of Watts and various locations within Watts to create a constricted urban landscape. Dorothy obviously does not own a vehicle, thus she walks along the long streets of Watts with storefronts in her background. The welfare office is in the midst of the neighborhood as is the bar she frequents. The constant presence of the police conveys the feeling of surveillance. The police are on hand when a man rants against the welfare office outside their window. The police are walking the beat when Luann waits outside the apartment for Dorothy to return home.

Dorothy's dismal apartment is small, simply furnished, and minimally decorated. There are no apparent green places for Luann to play. In one scene, Dorothy forlornly stares out of the window. Gerima shoots from the perspective outside the window and Dorothy appears to be in prison. Dorothy lies about her apartment on her sofa. Her dress is half zipped as if the effort to get fully dressed is too overwhelming.

The welfare office is packed with people waiting. It is a typical government office where, socially and economically, the workers are just a level above the clients. As agents of the State, the workers slightly-elevated status gives them the authority to patronize the clients. The workers feel perfectly justified in inquiring about the intimate details of their client's lives and making demands on them.

The space of freedom is the local bar run by Dorothy's friend Simmi. The bar offers a respite from the oppressive outside world. Dorothy drops by the bar during the day when it is empty of customers. Simmi offers Dorothy a piece of sweet potato pie which Dorothy politely refuses at first. She then accepts the pie and savors every bite. Dorothy is able to unload her troubles with Simmi who offers a sympathetic ear. At night, the bar is filled with regulars who drink and socialize to forget their troubles for a short time.

The abortion clinic, like the welfare office, represents one of the sites of institutional oppression. At the front counter, Dorothy finds a receptionist and a nurse who both greet her with indifference. The clinic waiting room is filled with women of all races and ethnicities. Dorothy has a surreal fantasy about being in the examination room. She changes her mind about having an abortion and runs out of the clinic.

The final location is the jail. First T.C. is shown in jail. The camera pans from his cell along the row of cells, each one holding a young black man. Although this is a place of confinement for T.C., it is here that he finds his freedom. He tells Dorothy that he is reading and learning; hence, his mind is free. Later, Dorothy lands in jail. She is beat. She hemorrhages and loses the baby. T.C.'s letters offer a clever plot device because T.C. can educate Dorothy in a non-obtrusive manner. With nothing else to do in prison, he is able to educate himself and elaborate on what he has learned in his letters to Dorothy. Gerima uses T.C.'s letters as a device to express his own political ideology.

**The Production**

*Bush Mama* was shot on a budget of $20,000 from money Gerima raised working odd jobs (Pfaff, "Gerima" 140). He shot *Bush Mama* during his 1974 summer vacation while a student at UCLA. This gave him access to film equipment and a film crew from UCLA, thus allowing him to keep costs down. Gerima worked with a crew who espoused similar filmmaking ideology including Charles Burnett. His talent included Barbara O and Cora Lee Day, two actresses who have dedicated their careers to black independent cinema.[16] The influence of Italian neo-realism is apparent in Gerima's use of non-professional talent and his use of documentary style filming. His adoptions of these tactics also contribute to lowering his production costs.

[16] Barbara O appears in Gerima's *Child of Resistance* (1972), Julie Dash's *Diary of an African Nun* (1977) and Zeinabu Irene Davis' *It's a Powerful Thang* (1991). Cora Lee Day appears in Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977). Both Barbara O and Cora Lee Day appear in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

**The Reception**

In Gerima's Triangular Cinema model, the audience and critics are encouraged to engage in the film as active participants. *Bush Mama* provides numerous places for the spectator to enter, as they may be sympathetic to various characters or find themselves in opposition to them. Many urban blacks might take the assimilationist position believing that this is a realistic portrait of life in the ghetto. French critic Celestin Monga called it authentic black life: "*Bush Mama* is one of the most faithful portraits ever done on black life in the United States (Monga 59)."[17] Monga and other critics did not question the portrayal of Dorothy's life but saw the film as an authentic indictment on U.S. society. Howard praised Gerima's use of Watts as "a jangling amalgam of urban sound and image" (29).

Those spectators espousing a revolutionary ideology might take an accomodationist position. They would likely accept the themes and storyline Gerima presents in *Bush Mama*, but might reject the experimental format of the film as I suggested with *Child of Resistance*. They might accept all of its revolutionary message and its most political content, but demand the film be more accessible.

Taking into account that this film was released at the end of the Blaxploitation era, it is easy to imagine that a good portion of the black audience completely rejected *Bush Mama* on the grounds that it was not the conventional Hollywood film, let alone the conventional Blaxploitation film that they were accustomed to. The resistant spectator identified with the social commentary that films like *Superfly* and *Shaft* offered even

[17] *Bush Mama* apparâit comme l'un des plus fidèles portraits jamais réalisés sur la population noire aux Etats-Unis (Monga 59).

though it was framed in a black macho narrative of the black community against the evil white man. For these spectators, the oppressor came in the form of the crooked cop and the drug kingpin, not the welfare system, nor the penal system.

***Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976)**

The 150-minute, black and white, 35 mm, narrative *Mirt Sost Shi Amit* (*Harvest: 3000 Years*) is named for the 3,000 years that Ethiopia existed under actual or near feudal rule. The plot centers on a peasant family who work for a ruthless land owner. *Harvest: 3000 Years* specifically follows the story of three different characters, war veteran Kebebe (Nuguse/Negus Nailu/Hailu), shepherd girl Beletech (Worke Kasa), and her teenage brother Berehun (Adane Melaku). The son, Berehun, and the daughter, Beletech, both want something different for their lives than what their mother Tifre (Kasu Asfaw) and father (Melaku Makonnen) had. Kebebe (Gebru Kassa), a veteran of the Ethiopian-Italian War, stands as the sole voice in the community who is unafraid to criticize the landowner for acquiring his land through unscrupulous means and the failings of the modern Ethiopian state under Haile Selassie. In the end, Beletech's life is sacrificed for the landowner's possession of a head of cattle, Kebebe strikes out against the oppressor with more than words by taking the landowner's life, and Berehun breaks from his destiny as a peasant by leaving his village on the back of a truck. In the end, the literal "harvest" for which the people have toiled does not return to them, but is claimed by the State.

In a slow and meticulous manner, Gerima portrays the daily struggles of this Ethiopian peasant family. His aim is accentuated in the opening scenes of the film that

depict the family rising to the crow of a cock and the rustling of cattle. Huddled together in their humble dwelling of a mud and thatch house, they take on their tasks of driving the cattle, milking the cows, delivering the milk, and sowing the land. At the end of a long grueling day, the women continue to work by preparing the family's meal. The peasant family's existence provides a stark contrast to the landowner's existence. The peasant family is closely-knit, while the landowner appears to have no family (though it is revealed through a conversation with a friend that his wife is ill and being cared for at the church). The peasant family members are dressed in meager, traditional Ethiopian clothing, while the landowner wears western-style pants, a suit jacket, and overcoat an a hat. The peasant family are diligent and hardworking people, while the landowner lives a leisurely lifestyle, waited on hand and foot by his faithful servant, Kentu.

Kebebe is an old man of experience and conscience who fought against the Italians. He believes their fight was a righteous one, but he believes the present Ethiopian government has squandered what he and others fought for in the Ethiopian-Italian war. He not only opposes the government ideologically, but he is waging an actual physical battle against the government through the legal system. His land has been confiscated and redistributed in a concentration of power. Kebebe is acutely aware of the economic exploitation Ethiopian peasants suffer at the hands of the Ethiopian elite and their European partners. He acts as the town griot, making criticism of the ruling class and government through songs and stories. The landowner chooses to label him insane rather than confront the injustices Kebebe reveals in his public rants. Kebebe regularly travels to Addis Ababa to fight for his pension and the property that was unlawfully taken from

him. In the city, he reconnects with his war buddies and together they rehash their heroism.

Forced to live on meager means, Kebebe makes his home in a squatting under a concrete bridge. He washes in the rain water that runs from the bridge and sarcastically remarks that his home is the best home, with fresh air and all the fresh water he needs. In the village, he serves as a mentor to Berehun. They share coffee and bread in Kebebe's squatting. Kebebe schools Berehun on the evils of the big city, warning of its magical technology, its capitalistic trappings, and its decimation of culture. He admonishes Berehun to pursue his education explaining that it is the only way to end exploitation, though he acknowledges that many of the intellectuals who led the independence movement were from the educated class. In the end, it is Kebebe who acts on the feelings of the other peasants when he takes the life of the landowner.

Obedient daughter Beletech clearly knows the roles assigned to her as a peasant girl, but she refuses to accept them. Beletech wants gender equality. Even though she does the same job as the shepherd boys, they do not see her as equal and refuse to allow her to play with them. Beletech will not be limited; she joins in their games anyway. She has a dream that troubles her. In the dream, her parents are hooked to a yoke and the landowner is driving them like cattle. Later in the dream both she and her brother are tied to the yoke with her parents. Beletech asks her mother and grandmother to help her interpret the dream, but they will not discuss it perhaps because they know like Beletech that it reveals the exploitive nature of her family's relationship to the landowner. In the days that follow, Beletech has visions of breaking from the yoke. She declares through voice-over that even if she is a girl she will not submit; she is not afraid.

Ironically, Beletech's freedom comes only through death. One head of cattle that she is tending wanders off into the river. She tries to retrieve it, but the river is high and fast. She is drowned. In her death, the greed and ruthlessness of the landowner is accentuated when he sends his servant Kentu to the mourning family to tell them they can keep the meat from the cow, but they must return the dead cow's hide to him. Berehun berides the landowner for his callousness in declaring the head of cattle was more valuable than Beletech's life. This is a catalyst for Berehun's conscientization and, hence, his transformation.

Berehun serves as the mirror for his parent's trials. He sees the life of the landowner, he listens to the lessons of Kebebe, and he yearns for life beyond his village. Berehun works side by side with his parents in the fields. In one scene, he is shown walking behind the oxen drawn plow, breaking the soil with his hands as if he were an extension of the oxen. In his regular visits to Kebebe's makeshift home under the bridge, Berehun is well aware of Kebebe's ability to expose him to things his parents cannot. Kebebe has lived outside the village and is a man of experience. Berehun soaks up knowledge from Kebebe, asking him questions about airplanes and tall buildings. Though Kebebe's answers are not always correct, they feed Berehun's yearning for a new life. He wants to leave the farm and pursue his education. When Berehun's age-mate visits his family's compound and brags about his upcoming job as a servant, Berehun criticizes his friend for his state of subjugation. Berehun recognizes that his friend's ability to make a living is not an opportunity to be free from the oppressive system under which they all live. Kebebe's murder of the landowner is the catalyst that moves Berehun to seek his freedom. In Berehun's process of conscientization, Kebebe's act is the final one in a

course of events that propels Berehun to defy his parents and his place in society in order to forge a different future. In one of the last lines of the film, Kebebe asks in voice-over what will become of the literal harvest of the serfs; however, his question also alludes to the political harvest of Ethiopia.

The final scenes of the film bring together the overarching message of the solidarity of the exploited masses. The film shows this through close-up shots of the faces of the Ethiopian peasants--male, female, young, and old. The voice-over explains that exploitation is everywhere: "I am your baker. I am your teacher. I am your servant...with our labor...with our back...with our sweat." These are the people who give Ethiopia its strength and wealth. However, they are also the exploited ones who never benefit from that wealth. Perhaps Berehun will change that.

**Analysis**

**The Filmmaker**

In *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Gerima was in the final year of his film program. *Harvest: 3000 Years* was made as a thesis film to satisfy his graduation requirements. Gerima went home in 1974 for the first time in seven years to shoot this film. Gerima was abreast of the political and social issues facing Ethiopia as he had been connected with Ethiopian student organizations in the United States. He was prepared to work in whatever environment he found himself, knowing that parts of the country were facing possible famine. He also understood that there was mounting opposition to Emperor Selassie's rule.

At the end of his tenure as a UCLA film student, Gerima was well versed in conventional Hollywood filmmaking techniques. However he resisted those conventions, and adopted Third Cinema filmmaking techniques for this film as he had done with his previous work. Most importantly, he set out to make a film that gave the Ethiopian peasantry a voice. Gerima involved the local population in the creation of the plot, as he explains: "I had to work guerilla-style, even while shooting the film ... I went to Ethiopia a month early and lived with the peasants, talked with them and prepared the shooting, discussing the issues" (Willemen, "Interview" 33). With this approach, the actual process of making the film became an act of empowerment.

Gerima exhibited great flexibility, knowing that he was entering a potentially unpredictable situation in Ethiopia. He expressed that he wanted to make a film about the feudal land situation, but he was willing to shift the focus of the film to the growing threat of a famine in Ethiopia. No matter which film he made, he was resolute that it would have political impact. He used a small crew and limited each scene to one take to economize on time and money. Gerima's cinematographer, Elliot Davis, stated that the film was made with a "guerilla type (of) production efficiency" (Pfaff, "Haile" 141).

**The Film**

According to Gabriel's theory of the phases of Third Cinema, *Harvest: 3000 Years* falls somewhere close to the combative phase. It is not a call to arms, but it does offer up a critical examination of the Solomonic feudal society in terms of politics, economics, and social structure. The film takes a dialectical approach to achieve this examination. It presents the relationship of the feudal–serf and the central government as

two parts of the oppressive system that peasants lived under. There is no central character but there are a number of supporting characters who represent segments of the population. The conflicts and relationships between these characters help to tease out the pertinent issues of the discussion. The feudal lord symbolizes the old entrenched system and the neo-colonial government. He abuses the peasants and exploits their labor. The peasant family represents all peasants who toil working the land. They have no time or energy to pursue justice; they only have the energy to survive. The young man and daughter represent the hope of the future. The son wants to pursue an education, while the daughter wants equal rights. The madman is the voice of the oppressed. He is able to say what the common peasant feels but is unable to express it for fear of repercussions. The servant serves as an example of Bhabba's mimic man who defines himself through his master. He fantasizes about taking the place of his master.[18] He does not want to disrupt the system; he wants to become part of the system.

The film uses complex visual and aural elements, but uses a minimum of dialogue. The story is told through a combination of slow long shots of the countryside with the peasants enveloped in the countryside and close up shots of certain individuals.

> The most prominent visual concepts came out of my own knowledge and understanding of a peasant society under an extreme feudal system. ... I considered the peasants I wished to depict in my film to be dignified, honest, and struggling under harsh circumstance, so we adopted a visual approach whereby the peasant family were always shot from a low angle in order to achieve a dignified portrayal of the spirit that I felt they embodied. On the other hand, under

[18] Bhabba, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

> a feudal system, given my perceptions of landlords--whom I personally knew as selfish, greedy, short-term being--we adopted a high wide-angle visual concept to achieve a distorted, dwarfed visual posture. (Gerima "Visions" 32)

Hence, through the manipulation and reversal of conventional camera angles (high for the peasants and low for the land owner) Gerima was able to convey certain relationship dynamics, as well as his own ideology.

The cultural element of using Ethiopian music and the Amharic language adheres to the Third Cinema practice of culturally grounded content. The soundtrack is infused with Ethiopian folk music using traditional instruments. The theme song, "3000 Year Old Bride," was written by Gerima's father. He honors his father by weaving the song throughout the film. "It is to pay homage to my father that I include in my film, *Harvest: 3000 Years*, the song that he composed and which describes Ethiopia under the characteristics of a wife whose dress is 3000 years old" (Pfaff, "de quelle" 53).

The music is at times dramatic and jarring and at other times melodic. In an interview with Willemen, Gerima stated "the song provides a contrast with the official version of history" ("Interview" 35). Gerima drew on his childhood background in traditional Ethiopian theater to create his story and the dialogue. In addition, he taps into the uniqueness of the Amharic language and uses this language, his mother tongue, is used to create maximum narrative effect.

Similar to his other films, Gerima used 16 mm film to create a neo-realist and non-linear style. Critics often refer to the film as a docudrama because of the style of the film. He often uses dream sequences and fantasy, which accommodate the nightmarish scenarios his characters experience. Gerima ends the film with an open-ended conclusion,

Berehun jumping on the back of a truck and leaving his village. This ending allows the spectator to imagine Berehun's future, perhaps pursuing an education, perhaps landing a job in Addis Ababa, or perhaps becoming an activist. The most important aspect, according to Gerima, seems to be that he grabs hold of technology and changes his future.

**The Production**

The film was made on a very limited $20,000 budget. Gerima funded the film with loans from friends and money he had saved from doing odd jobs (Pfaff, "Haile" 140; Willemen, "Interview" 33). His small crew was composed of a handful of his fellow film students who traveled to Ethiopia after he had done the pre-production work. He also employed a number of local Ethiopians. He was able to save money by borrowing equipment from the UCLA film department. He told his UCLA instructors that he was making an ethnographic film, since this type of film would be validated by the school. However, some of his professors must have come to know the specifics of his project because they tried to stop him on the grounds that he was making a political film (Willemen, "Interview" 33).

Gerima's guerrilla style of filmmaking included a short shooting schedule and a 1:1 shooting ratio which truly reflects the film's politics, while impacting on the films Third Cinema aesthetics (Willemen, "Interview" 34). Cham positions *Harvest: 3000 Years* with other films by Ethiopian filmmakers of the 1990s who deal with memory and attempt to rewrite the idealized 3000-year-old Solomon Ethiopia by calling attention to feudalism and the failings of modern regimes ("Film and History" 9).

**The Reception**

Most critics of *Harvest: 3000 Years* take the assimilation position so much so that, though a narrative film, they generally read *Harvest: 3000 Years* as an ethnographic or a documentary film. Quan labeled the film a "political ethnography." This classification stemmed from the description of the film as a realistic or specifically authentic depiction of pre-capitalist Ethiopian society. Neil Young described the film as "tough, abrasive and angrily polemical in nature." He also held that the film took "a startlingly uncompromised approach to the economic woes of mid-seventies Ethiopia" (N. Young). Willemen attributed the film's authenticity to its narrative style that he described as "non-idealized" and "grounded in oral cultures" (39). For Quan, the film's "compelling authenticity" was due to what he identified as "Haile Gerima's evocation of the concrete sensual reality of Ethiopia" (6). Ferent attributed the film's authenticity to its mode of production: "The sincerity and truthfulness which runs throughout the film from one side to the other is explained without doubt in part by the natural and artisan conditions in which it was made" (60). The style Gerima adopted for *Harvest: 3000 Years* led critics Howard and Delorme to compare the film to the work of early Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov and early Japanese filmmaker Kenji Mizoguchi.[19]

The narrative structure of *Harvest: 3000 Years* lends itself to an accomodationist spectator position. Willemen described the film as Hegelian, while Grunes described it as

[19] Known for their social documentaries, these filmmakers used montage and non-obtrusive camerawork with long takes, wide shots, and natural lighting to great effect. In addition, these socialist filmmakers deliberately used the film medium to challenge official history and expose social inequalities.

Brechtian. Gerima achieved this dialectical structure through his manipulation of the visuals, the soundtrack, and the characters of the film. The visuals played an important role in creating the film's dialectics because, according to Ferent, they were both beautiful and disturbing (Pfaff, "Haile" 149). Howard described the visuals as "lyrical" and "hypnotic," while Neil Young described them as "politically lyrical" and "jaggedly gritty." For Quan, the film's visual qualities created an emotional tone that evoked a "lurking sense of repression, violence and revolt" (6). Hill drew attention to the film's contradictions, that is, the rigors of peasant life set against the beauty of the land. Hill noted that this was accomplished through Gerima's use of slow panning shots of the fields and sky and his placement of the characters within this lush and harsh environment.

The soundtrack, according to Willemen, criticized, complemented, and contradicted the images on screen ("The Sixth" 41). Quan suggested that the "dramatic silences," in tandem with the "sharp visual images" contributed to the strength of the film (7). Indeed, the soundtrack functioned as more than background to the action on the screen, at times it replaced the image. Grunes commented on how the natural sounds and silences work to give the film its dramatic tension. "Mostly silent, the film is punctuated by distancing naturalistic sounds: mooing cows, squawking chickens, dripping water—this last, a sign of something ominous steadily growing." Willemen noted that the soundtrack acted to connect the metonymic (substitution of one term for another based on association) and metaphoric (substitution of one term for another based on similarity) discourses of the film ("Interview").

Gerima's characters function, according to Quan, to show the "ambivalence and pervasive mystification of modernization ideology." Willeman argues that Gerima uses

each character to advance a Hegelian discourse: the landowner affirms the state, the madman Kebebe negates the state, and the disciple Belehun rejects both the negation and the affirmation to realize an alternative, negotiated relationship with the state (31). Quan writes that Kebebe's rants specifically serve to express the vision of a transformed Ethiopia. Beleteck's dream reveals that popular revolt and the rejection of traditional roles are the true path to change, and Belehun's "escape" functions to show that the "internal contradictions both in modern education and in traditional culture must be transcended before oppression can be conquered" (Quan 5). Ferent states that Belehun's act of grabbing hold of the moving lorry "synthesizes all the didactic messages the film constantly presents" (60). Hence, the characters' roles, their narratives, and their actions serve to achieve a dialectical objective.

Ferent purports that how the characters are imaged helps to give the film its power.

> The great aesthetic emotion of the film is due to the importance placed on the faces of the peasants, on their distinctive looks. Also striking is the contact with nature, the agility of the children rushing down the stony incline, and the hands of the mother who weaves the basket. The narrative is entirely adapted to the repetitive time imposed by nature. (60)[20]

The close-ups serve to humanize the Ethiopian peasants, while the daily actions of the characters render their lives normal. Grunes notes that "Work is treated neutrally; it isn't

[20] La plus grande partie de l'émotion esthétique du film es due aux premiers plans sur les visages des paysans, sur les regards déchiffrés. Ce que frappe aussi, c'est ce contact avec la nature: l'agilité des enfants à dévaler les pentes caillouteuses, celle des mains de la mère qui tress la vannerie. Le récit est entièrement adapté à ce temps répétitive imposé par la nature.

sanctified in a silent Soviet manner, or identified with oppression." The spectators may identify with one character or another based on their own ideological position.

Willeman makes the claim that *Harvest: 3000 Years* belongs to a movement of social change films and that it uses cinematic strategies "appropriate to that project" ("Interview" 31). He further states that "[a]s a political film, *3000 Year Harvest* constitutes an attempt to analyse a specific aspect of a social formation from a political position aware of the fact that "the point is to change it" (Willeman, "Interview" 31). Memory, or re-memory, plays a role in the social change aspect of the film according to Cham and Delorme. Cham notes that a number of contemporary Ethiopian filmmakers, like Gerima, are challenging the official version of Ethiopian history and presenting versions of their own. "*Harvest: 3000 Years* casts a critical glance at the ways the feudal state under Haile Selassie, especially, manipulated legend and myth to perpetuate allegiance to a glorious past that was able to keep the vast majority of Ethiopian peasantry under feudal control" (Cham, "Film and History" 9). Delorme holds that "the process of memory acts like the detonator of an explosion of aesthetic emotions" (176). He states that the importance of memory is indicated in the title of the film. "The title, *3000 Year Harvest* is a metaphoric designation of the present situation in Ethiopia as being the product of 3000 years of colonial, imperialist and indigenous class oppression and the concomitant class struggles" (176). Safford and Triplett, on the other hand, interpret "harvest" as the symbolic realization of freedom from 3000 years of oppression (59).

According to Willemen, the spectator of *Harvest* is empowered by the film's narrative. He argues that, because there is no central character, the spectator is forced to

negotiate an alternative relationship with the film. "The complexity of the inter-relation of all these discourses, some rhetorical, some rhetoric-descriptive and others directly analytical, produces a mode of narration in which there is no real centrality, no central character for audience-identification" ("Interview" 31). Neil Young attributes the lack of a conventional hero, as well as Gerima's unconventional filmmaking style with disrupting passive spectatorship. The film's "elliptical and enigmatic" style "keeps viewers off-guard." However, Quan suggests that the film would do well with an indigenous Ethiopian audience (7). Perhaps, he believes, they would be able to relate to the film on a cultural level. Neil Young sees the film as having a broad appeal: "even audiences unfamiliar with Ethiopia's recent disasters would surely appreciate the force and originality of Gerima's depiction of his land and his people."

Negative criticism of *Harvest: 3000 Years* mainly comes from Neil Young who states that "the film occasionally crosses the line from stylistic innovation to flashy self-indulgent gimmickry and it's certainly too long by at least half an hour." Willemen, a champion of *Harvest: 3000 Years* weighs in on Western critics who exoticize the film and focus on the economic oppression of the peasants at the expense of the political and ideological oppression in the film ("Interview" 31). He is perhaps responding to critics like Hill who state that "Gerima has taken to task the plight of the entire Third World" (59). There is no evidence of a spectator-critic taking the resistance position where the film text is completely rejected. Though one could imagine that those of the Ethiopian land-owning or ruling class might reject Gerima's version of feudalistic Ethiopian society.

***Ashes and Embers (1982)***

*Ashes and Embers* (1982) was Gerima's third feature film. This 120-minute, 35 mm, color experimental narrative film follows the "readjustment" of black Vietnam veteran, Ned Charles, (John Anderson) to life in the United States. His story is situated in four distinct settings: Los Angeles, the rural South, Washington, D.C. and Vietnam.

The first scene takes place in Los Angeles. Ned Charles and his roommate, Randolph (Barry Wiggins) are out scouting the location of Randolph's acting audition for the next day. Through their conversation, it is revealed that they are struggling actors trying to make it in the Hollywood system. Their lighthearted conversation is abruptly interrupted when they are flagged down, pulled over, and forced to their knees by the police. This humiliating incident nearly pushes Ned Charles over the edge.

In a later scene, Randolph, who fully believes that his true talent will be rewarded in the Hollywood system, chastises Ned Charles for tying up the apartment phone line for fear he will miss a call from his agent. Ned Charles, on the other hand, is not so optimistic. He quickly discovers that jobs are limited for black actors and argues with his friend about the inequalities of the Hollywood film industry.

Ned leaves Los Angeles to visit his grandmother, Nana, (Evelyn A. Blackwell) in the South. Her rural home and farm offer Ned a needed respite from the city and war memories he is trying to escape. Nana is a small, but strong old woman with many years of experience evident in her weathered black skin. In Ned Charles' homecoming scene, he walks down a long path through crops. His grandmother stands on the porch, trying to decipher who is coming. Her face lights up as she recognizes Ned Charles. They run to

embrace each other. In Nana's home, he is temporarily safe from the destruction and discrimination of the outside world.

After a brief time with his grandmother, Ned Charles goes to his lover Liza Jane's (Kathy Flewellen's) home in Washington, D.C. She has a young son, Kimathi (Uwezo Flewellen), whose father was killed in Vietnam. Ned Charles tries to reintegrate himself into this nuclear family setting, but he is distant and sullen because his awake life is clouded by the nightmares and flashbacks of Vietnam. Liza Jane and Ned Charles' relationship is strained and there is a little interaction between Ned Charles and Kimanthi. Liza Jane is involved in a Black Nationalist group. They regularly gather at her apartment to discuss various books and strategies for affecting change in black America and Africa. Ned Charles displays distance from the group as he sits quietly listening to their arguments and diatribes on politics and pan-Africanism. He holds his tongue until a later meeting where the Nationalists criticize the soldiers in the Vietnam War. He lashes out, accusing them of being worthless intellectuals who have book knowledge but no knowledge of real-life experiences of war.

Ned Charles works at a small appliance repair shop. The owner Jim (Norman Blalock) is a wise older black man. He truly understands the turmoil that Ned Charles is feeling. He challenges Ned Charles to deal with his issues head-on and supports him in his journey back to himself. Ned Charles' blowups and sullenness do not rile Jim as he continues to dole out advice and offer support to Ned Charles.

Ned Charles' demons become more vicious as he experiences flashbacks of the war. He wanders the streets of Washington D.C., alienated, unable to relate to his lover, his employer, or his grandmother. The film climaxes in an encounter Ned Charles has

with Liza Jane and her son. He goes back to their apartment, which he had earlier fled and demands entry. Liza Jane comes out into the hall and tries to quiet him. He explodes with a story about seeing his platoon partner decapitated before his eyes. It is apparent that this breakdown and release will now allow him to open up to recovery with the help of Liza Jane and the community.

## Analysis

### The Filmmaker

Gerima names an incident he witnessed in Los Angeles as the catalyst for making *Ashes and Embers*. "In fact, my film *Ashes and Embers* was inspired by my seeing four brothers in California on their knees being held by the police with their hands up; it was as if half of me left. We went to see *Sunset Boulevard* after that and I couldn't even enjoy the movie. So I said, 'Hah, I have to intervene now'" (Alexander, "Haile Gerima" 204). It is possible to see, in *Ashes and Embers*, the reflection of various influences on Gerima's life since coming to the United States: such as studying in Chicago, studying in Hollywood, living and working in D.C., filmmaking and doing research in the South.[21] Gerima claims that Ned Charles has some autobiographical elements, but that he is, primarily, representative of the "the black man on the planet" (Pfaff, "From Africa" 206).

When Gerima made *Ashes and Embers*, he had been living on the East Coast and working as a professor at the historically black Howard University for several years. In

[21] In the 1970s, Gerima got funding to conduct research on southern black land ownership from the Emergency Land Fund of Atlanta, Georgia, a group committed to helping blacks retain their land. This venture into the South, as well as the research Gerima conducted on the historical South concerning slavery resistance, greatly influenced *Ashes and Embers*.

Washington, D.C., Gerima lived in the shadows of the symbols of American democracy and he witnessed first-hand the residuals of the Vietnam War in the black communities of D.C. Gerima was intimately affected by the Vietnam War since many of his contemporaries were Vietnam veterans. In addition, his first years in the United States were marked by the Vietnam War and student protests against the war.

Ned Charles' story is motivated by Gerima's desire to tell black people's stories and to counter Hollywood's interpretation of black people. Until *Ashes and Embers*, the black Vietnam veteran story had not been expressed in film, or other media, though blacks served and died in Vietnam in disproportionate numbers. Gerima was in the lap of the national capital, D.C., and was certainly exposed to the plight of black Vietnam veterans. These veterans met a fate similar to black veterans of earlier wars. After fighting for a foreign peoples' freedom, black vets found discrimination and lack of full citizenship at home. In addition, Vietnam was a war that many Americans came to strongly disagree with; hence, the veterans had sympathetic ears to share their experiences. Gerima had included the Vietnam veteran in two earlier films, *Child of Resistance* and *Bush Mama*, but in *Ashes and Em*bers, he fully explores the traumatic and unique experience of the black veteran.

*Ashes and Embers* addresses both the large national political issue of black Americans' search for full U.S. citizenship, and the more local issue of community healing. Gerima tapped into a number of issues facing black Americans at the time: post-war healing, loss of land, black images in Hollywood, Black Nationalism, and black connection to the South.

In the process of making this film, Gerima expressed that he struggled with "the problem of authentically depicting this reality" ("On Independent" 111). He grappled with showing the realities he witnessed or imagining the reality he wished to see. He chose to deal with reality and not, as he puts it, "help to perpetuate the misery of black people" (Gerima, "On Independent" 112).

**The Film**

This third feature film of Gerima is again non-linear, with surreal and dreamlike qualities. The sound track is original and powerful. Gerima uses multiple layers of image and sound to create the unsettled world of Ned Charles. *Ashes and Embers* exhibits characteristics of the Third Cinema remembrance stage in that the film offers one man's experience of post-war trauma and healing. However, Ned's story is representative of many black veterans. The film also exhibits characteristics of the combative stage of Third Cinema by making a critical examination of current history and its impact on daily contemporary life. As the first black film to deal with Vietnam, the film asks more questions than it answers about the meaning of black participation in the war. Gerima challenges U.S. foreign policy in Ned's exchange with Liza Jane's Black Nationalist group. Furthermore, he examines the human experience of witnessing and engaging in atrocities in the name of war through Ned's tormented visions. He ties in themes of African-American attachment to their ancestral land and the recent trend of white real estate developers seizing land from blacks through unscrupulous means. He examines the historical sacrifices blacks have made for land ownership and contemporary generations'

inability to understand its value. He makes a critique of Hollywood and blacks' place in that system.

*Ashes and Embers* is both topical and historical. Gerima does not make a call to arms but does propose a reorientation to the present situation by referencing Nana's past and her relationship to the land. He attempts to promote dialogue with the black community about healing after trauma, be it war or the residuals of slavery. He expresses that healing is a collective process accomplished through Black Nationalism, Third World independence struggles, elder wisdom, and a connection with ancestral land. He sets up the dichotomy of the welcoming and nurturing rural South versus the alienating and abusive urban North.

Gerima places the film in four distinct settings, or environments as Gerima calls them: Los Angeles, the rural South, Washington, D.C., and Vietnam. Ned Charles and the four supporting characters of the film are all distinctly a part of each setting. Randolph is placed in LA, Nana is placed in the rural South, Liza Jane and Jim are placed in Washington, D.C., and a part of Ned Charles is still in Vietnam. Gerima defines each environment and character in terms of their physical, sociological, and psychological characteristics.

> During the script writing process, I spend a great deal of time on what are known as *environment* and *character* development. The characters' development and growth are achieved by consistently analyzing, redefining, molding, and fashioning their individual characteristics and their circumstantial environment in which they are to interact. As a result the environment is believable and the characters are multi-dimensional and deeply reflective; they act to accomplish

their human objectives, whatever their class status or occupation. (Gerima, "Thoughts" 335)

According to Gerima, Los Angeles is a physical manifestation of capitalism, a sociological market of cultural images, and a psychological destroyer of souls. The rural southern countryside, on the other hand, is the physical root of life. Sociologically, it lacks opportunities for the youth and, psychologically, it is a site of both freedom and loneliness for those elders who remain there. Washington, D.C. is physically an organized urban center that glorifies white American history with its monuments, while marginalizing the black working class and poor. Sociologically, D.C. is a city riddled with crime, drugs, and unemployment, and psychologically it is the representation of white supremist cultural domination. And finally, Vietnam is a physical site of United States imperial aggression and Nate Charles' pain, the sociological representation of Nate Charles' complicity in U. S. imperial domination as an American G.I., and the psychological manifestation of his treating the Vietnamese in an inhuman way.

The characters were also developed with attention to the same three elements. Physically Nate Charles is young and strong, but he carries the wounds of Vietnam. Sociologically, he is working-class, working as a gas station attendant, an appliance repairman, and an aspiring actor; psychologically, he is weak due to his feelings of pain, alienation, humiliation, and dislocation. Randolph is also physically young and strong and sociologically working-class; though, psychologically, his self-image has been wounded by the unattainable Hollywood dream. Nana is physically old and frail, but beautiful and graceful. As for her social status, she is a farmer and she represents the historic struggle of blacks and labor in America. Psychologically, Nana is wise, though

she is worn out and just waiting for death. Physically, Jim is old, but still strong; he looks white, but he is truly comfortable in his black ethnicity. Sociologically, he is an entrepreneur who is able to employ others; and, psychologically, he is wise and a pillar in the community, regularly dispensing advice to Nate Charles and trying to help him work through his pain. Jim is Gerima's ode to black urban working class.

> Jim is a representational character developed in tribute to the many individuals of his type who have greatly benefited me and my contemporaries by soothing us with words of wisdom and providing us with a meaningful education – while cutting our hair, repairing our cars, or shining our shoes. (Gerima, "Thoughts" 345)

And finally, the character Liza Jane is physically young and strong. Sociologically, she is an activist and a single mother. Psychologically, she has not dealt with the death of her son's father who was killed in Vietnam and she actively opposes U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and elsewhere (Gerima, "Thoughts" 346).

**The Production**

As discussed in Chapter Two, *Ashes and Embers* was the first feature film Gerima made as a professor of film. As with the documentary *Wilmington 10 – U.S.A. 10,000* (1979), Gerima involved his Howard University students in the production of the film. Hence, Gerima used the film as an internship experience for future filmmakers, mentoring them in the Third cinema approach to filmmaking. Gerima received funding from Public Television, an entity that allowed him some autonomy. Public Televisions's mission is to give platform to underrepresented populations; hence, this was an

advantageous relationship. In addition, Gerima had at least one wide screening venue for the film – Public TV.[22]

Gerima puts great emphasis on doing original extensive research to inform the content of his films, as will be evidenced in *Sankofa*. The research he conducted with the Emergency Land Fund is carefully woven into the narrative of *Ashes and Embers*. The composition of the shots, the dialogue, and the action of the characters all work together to both explore and present the ethos of black southern life. The grandmother's frame house, the surrounding fields, and the country church are familiar sites in the rural south. The grandmother's weathered skin, eternal wisdom, and lonely existence evoke the forgotten treasure of the elders. Nate Charles' conversations with his grandmother exemplify her ability to provide the healing space he so desperately needs. She has been through the fire and has come out the other side burned, but not destroyed. Likewise, Nate Charles can come through his trauma.

Gerima shot the film on the three different domestic sites; the Vietnam setting was simulated. Gerima used each setting as a character. "I attempted from the onset to challenge the audience with multi layered meanings of these location sites through careful manipulation of structure and transitions (Gerima, "Thoughts" 336)." Varied lighting and filters were also employed to give each site a different texture. In the Los Angeles location, he stated that he adopted a fog lens to create a "dream-like state" The rural scenes were shot in warm tones, using shades of amber to evoke the black struggle. In addition, he stated that he used long, wide, and deep shots to show the characters "in sync with their environment." D.C., on the other hand, was shot using stark

[22] *Ashes and Embers* was shown in the Independent Focus series on WNET/Channel 13, May 26, 1985.

lighting that created sterility. And the Vietnam scenes were given a surreal effect through the use of distorted lighting (Gerima, "Thoughts" 338).

The $100,000 budget for the film was acquired from a number of sources: granting organizations (the National Endowment for the Arts and the D.C. Commission for the Arts), loans, and Gerima's own salary. Mypheduh also invested in the film with revenue from previous productions. The film took over four years to complete and was shot with no less than three different cinematographers, Augusto E. Cubano, Elliot Davis, and Charles Burnett (Pfaff, "Haile" 143).

As with his prior films, Gerima served as the editor on *Ashes and Embers* guaranteeing him control over the creative processes of the film's production. Gerima used music as an essential element of the film. It is as jarring and disturbing as Ned's visions. The non-linear editing is effective at placing the spectator inside the world of Nate Charles as he negotiates disjointed and unsettling experiences. Gerima effectively edits Nate Charles' movement from (and apparent alienation with) each starkly different location to illustrate the social-political impact of the environment and structure on the black vet's story.

**The Reception**

Reviews of *Ashes and Embers* reveal that the film was a welcome addition to the collection of films dealing with the Vietnam War. As mentioned earlier, none dealt with black involvement in the war. Critics expressed both assimilationist and accommodationist positions. The assimilationist position held that the black Vietnam veteran's experience was authentic and truthfully depicted. Sonnenberg of *The Nation*

writes that: "He tells most (about his horrible experiences in Vietnam) later to Liza Jane, in a speech of such truth and power as virtually to flatten the whole of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*." Shepard of *The New York Times* states that: "Mr. Gerima...creates characters that are human, rather than cardboard." In his critique of American films about Vietnam, Berg calls *Ashes and Embers* an "uncompromising psychological drama" in which Gerima demonstrates his understanding that the black veteran's "traumas are as much a product of the state of society, and the vet's place in it, as they are of the war" (124). Sonnenberg sees the issues raised by the black veteran story as holistic to the black condition. He writes: "Jarring episodes from each (of the film's four storylines) show incurable anger and alarm, futile escape and final despair at the order offered black veterans by our society" (64).

The accommodationist spectator position accepted elements of the film while rejecting other elements, failing to link Ned Charles' state to the larger structural and systemic problems for blacks in America. Although the sub-theme of Black Nationalism is commented on by several critics, the sub-themes of the unscrupulous land-grabbing white developers and black people's misrepresentation in Hollywood film are simply not mentioned at all. Shepard calls the sub-themes "vignettes" as if disconnected from the larger story and Maslin of the *The New York Times* characterized the film as "sprawling," suggesting that the film tried to cover too much territory and lacked focus (151). Hoberman, of *The Village Voice*, also criticizes the film for its lack of focus, though he suggests that this fault in the film lends itself to the effectiveness of the film. "The frenzied, discombobulated structure parallels Charles' own overwrought confusion" (Hoberman 151). Maslin is reluctant to give *Ashes and Embers* a critical review, instead

she offers a patronizing view that the film should be applauded simply because it exists. "But the rarity of new films about Blacks in America is reason enough to overlook some of the haziness of this one" (C30).

The reviews also looked at the technical aspects of the film, primarily focusing on the sound. The sound track was applauded for its powerfulness. "Constructed in a non-linear format with a forceful sound mix, *Ashes and Embers* offers an impressionistic account of a black American Vietnam veteran's tormented homecoming (Pfaff, "Haile" 147). The various experiences and opinions of black spectators would allow them to find points of departure for a dialectical examination of the themes presented in the film. Gerima sets up his narrative so that spectators may find themselves identifying with any one of the characters: Ned Charles, Liza Jane, Nana, Rudolph, or Jim. Each character represents a particular place in the African-American experience, each representing a point on the continuum of conscientization as well as representing the natural generational divide.

> The conflict in *Ashes and Embers* is built upon the struggle between the 'present' generation – symbolized by Nay (sic) Charles, Liza Jane, and Randolph–and Nay's (sic) grandmother and Jim, the TV repairman, who embody the wisdom and common sense of the passing generation. All the characters represent the dynamics of history: the pain and the pleasure, the aspiration, and the struggling within the two metaphorical polarities of becoming the ashes or the embers. (Gerima, "Thoughts" 344)

**Conclusion**

Throughout his body of work, it is apparent that Gerima is continuously experimenting with his art form, film. He fine-tunes his voice with each consecutive film. Though, his first two narrative films, *Hour Glass* and *Child of Resistance*, exhibit some of the unique filmic techniques that he is practicing with, it is not until *Harvest: 3000 Years* that he fully realizes his signature narrative style. His style exhibits Third Cinema influenced themes and a dialectical structure replete with a non-linear narrative, culturally specific symbolism, well-developed characters, distinct settings, prominent sound track, and experimental camera techniques.

Gerima aims to promote critical thought and meaningful dialogue through his films. His ideology of social change and liberation can be traced to the ideology of Franz Fanon, Paulo Friere and a number of pan-Africanists. The influence of the philosophy of Franz Fanon is apparent in Gerima's narratives that focus on cultural alienation and psychological trauma of living as a black American under white supremacy. Gerima examines the alienation and trauma then sets out to examine how these problems can be overcome. He proposes African solutions for African problems, critical education, and collective struggle as paths to liberation.

Gerima primarily explores the Third Cinema-influenced themes of oppression (economic, social, and political) and the liberation of African peoples in his narrative work. In his films, economic oppression is represented as unemployment, poor housing, lack of education, and exploitive capitalism. Social oppression is represented as white supremacy, cultural alienation and persecution under the guise of religion and/or gender

inequality. Political oppression is exhibited in the abuse of power by the police; the penal system; and the government against black people, women, children or the poor.

Both *Harvest: 3000 Years* and *Bush Mama* address economic oppression. The peasants in *Harvest: 3000 Years* live in huts, not much different from the cattle's shelter. Having access to formal education is but a fantasy. Both Beletech and Berehun express their dreams of attending school. In *Bush Mama*, Dorothy's apartment is like a prison cell--small, dismal, and tightly confined. Examples of exploitative capitalism are also evident in both films. In *Harvest: 3000 Years*, the landowner places a higher value on the life of a dead cow than on the life of Beletech who drowned trying to save the cow. In *Harvest: 3000 Years*, the peasants are but beasts of burden as revealed in Beletech's dream where her parents are hooked to the cattle's yoke. In *Bush Mama*, the streets that Dorothy frequents each day are full of wig shops and other signs of excessive consumerism. Dorothy and T.C.'s search for employment is at the center of the *Bush Mama* story. When T.C. finally lands a job, he and Dorothy fantasize about their new life together once he starts to work.

Instances of social oppression are found in all of Gerima's films. For the protagonist in *Hour Glass,* it comes in the form of cultural alienation. Raised by a white foster mother, he is cut off from his culture. As an adult and living outside the black community while attending university, he finds himself a spectacle for the "white gaze" of basketball fans. For the protagonist in *Child of Resistance* social oppression comes in the form of white supremacy. The Blaxploitation images that the protagonist cries out against depict hyper-sexual black masculinity and misogyny. The social ills of drug abuse and alcohol abuse also help to illuminate the social oppression theme in *Child of*

*Resistance*. Through Beletech's story in *Harvest: 3000 Years* and Dorothy's story in *Bush Mama,* some of the issues of gender equality are exposed. Beletech is excluded from the boys' games, though she does the same work as they do as a shepherd. Dorothy is badgered into considering an abortion by welfare authorities. Furthermore, Dorothy's daughter, Luann, is sexually assaulted, a scene which illuminates the sexual exploitation of black women at the hands of white male authoritative figures. Gerima again deals with this issue in *Child of Resistance* when the protagonist expresses her fear of the prison guard in a dream. The sexual exploitation of black women is a central theme in *Sankofa.*

In dealing with political oppression, Gerima looks at the police, the penal system, and the government. The theme of police brutality and oppressive state surveillance is introduced in *Child of Resistance* and is then explored in each film thereafter. In *Bush Mama*, Dorothy witnesses a cop shoot an unarmed man in the back and Nate Charles and Randolph are stopped and harassed by the police in *Ashes and Embers*. In *Child of Resistance* and *Bush Mama*, the protagonists are unjustly imprisoned. Furthermore, Dorothy is physically abused in prison causing her to miscarry. Berehun is constantly harassed by authorities because of his outspokenness against the government in *Harvest: 3000 Years*. U.S. governmental policies, in particular war and imperialism, are explored in *Child of Resistance*, *Bush Mama* and *Ashes and Embers* by looking at the residual effects of the Vietnam War on the African-American Vietnam veterans and their communities. In *Bush Mama* and *Ashes and Embers*, both Dorothy and LuAnn have a child fathered by a husband who was killed in Vietnam. Their present partners, T.C. in *Bush Mama* and Nate Charles in *Ashes and Embers,* are Vietnam veterans who are having difficulty readjusting to civilian life. *Child of Resistance* also makes a symbolic

reference to this theme in the scene where a nun intravenously feeds whiskey to a veteran, indicating the high incidence of drug-addicted veterans after the war.

In the trajectory of his narratives, Gerima moves from the issues of oppression to the means of empowerment and eventually to the theme of liberation. This transformation process may involve a move to conscientization and/or the process of healing from a traumatic past. The basketball player is liberated from his present life as a "gladiator" and his memories of being a culturally-alienated foster child. The political prisoner is liberated from her anxiety and concern for the black population when the revolutionaries she evokes destroy the symbols of oppression and she flees the prison. Dorothy is liberated from her complacency after she comes to internalize the teachings of her partner and she kills a symbol of her oppressor. Berehun is liberated from his destiny as a serf when Kebebe kills the landowner and Berehun jumps on the back of a truck to leave his village. Nate Charles is liberated from his trauma and pain as an agent of imperialism when he opens up and allows others in to help him work through his suffering. Gerima continues exploring this theme of liberation in *Sankofa*.

In each film, Gerima introduces a catalyst to set off the process of transformation. This catalyst helps to empower the protagonist giving the individual the tools to set himself or herself free. In *Hour Glass*, the protagonist begins his transformation through education and reading about the pan-African struggles, Black Nationalism, and liberatory theories. He is then able to make a critical reflection on his past and present situation, and take action for the future. In *Child of Resistance*, the protagonist's incarcerated state allows her to reflect on the present state of black America. As if writing letters to her community, she attempts to save the community from harmful behaviors by imploring

them to be critical of the situation. In *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Berehun begins his transformation through the knowledge that Kebebe shares with him. Kebebe offers a critique of modern Ethiopian society in his encounters with Berehun, the landowner, and his war buddies. In *Bush Mama*, Dorothy is educated through the letters she receives from T.C., visits of her young neighbor (who is also going through the process of conscientization) and conversations with Simmi. In *Ashes and Embers*, Nana, Liza Jane, and Jim all influence the transformation process of Nate Charles in different ways.

It is through well-developed characters and distinct environments that Gerima creates a dialectical narrative structure that encourages the spectator to empathize with the background, struggles, and aspirations of specific characters and to question and challenge the status quo. The environment plays an integral role in the protagonist's state of oppression and Gerima takes care to introduce the protagonist within a defined social and political environment.

Gerima builds his narrative around a set of characters who represent the stages of liberation, from the non-conscientized individual (who is usually the protagonist), to the transforming individual, and finally to the liberated individual. The central narrative follows the transition of the protagonist from a non-conscientized to a conscientized state. Curiously enough, it is possible to see Gerima's own personal journey (transformation and conscientization process) as an intellectual and filmmaker through the protagonists in the films. The young male protagonist in *Hour Glass* parallels Gerima's personal history as a young black male college student, while the female political prisoner in *Child of Resistance* reflects Gerima's budding revolutionary ideology. In *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Beletech's longing for equality echoes Gerima's ideology of gender and social equality,

while Berehun's escape from his village is symbolic of Gerima's own move from his home country to the United States in his pursuit of better opportunities. Dorothy's story in *Bush Mama* embodies post-Civil Rights disillusionment and the decline of the inner city in the U.S. Gerima totally identified with this struggle after his own adoption into the African-American community and especially, Watts, due to his affiliation with Watts native and fellow film student, Charles Burnett. The protagonist in *Ashes and Embers*, Nate Charles, experiences post-traumatic stress and acute alienation due to his involvement in the Vietnam War and his position as a black man in America. Nate Charles' struggle taps into Gerima's own alienation, and his recovery offers Gerima's prescription for Pan-African development. Gerima returns to this theme of post-traumatic stress more comprehensively in *Sankofa.*

The non-linear structure of Gerima's films facililate real and imagined narratives for his characters. They are no longer bound by the confines of time and space in their dreams or fantasies. Gerima employs flashback and flash-forward as narrative devices. The protagonist's story in *Hour Glass* is told through flashback. The protagonist's story in *Child of Resistance* is communicated through fantasy sequences. In *Harvest: 3000 Years* the unspoken desires of Kentu and fears of the landowner are communicated through fantasy sequences. Dorothy's fears are expressed through a frightening imagining of an abortion in *Bush Mama.* Dreams, fantasies, and surrealism characterize Nate Charles's struggle to heal from the trauma of war in *Ashes and Embers.*

Symbolism is essential in Gerima's narratives. In each subsequent film, he returns to many of the symbols that he first introduced in *Hour Glass*, such as the lynching rope, sleepwalking, ticking clock sounds, and the cross. In *Hour Glass*, the protagonist is

dragging around a rope that hangs from his neck, a rope that signifies his oppressive state as an athlete and foster child in a white environment. In *Child of Resistance*, similar imagery is used with the bar patrons who have chains around their ankles and another where a man is hanging. The bar patrons are enslaved by their diversions. The lynched black man who hangs in a jail cells represents the thousands of blacks who met their death at the hands of white oppressors. Gerima returns to the symbols of sleepwalking and the ticking clock sound in *Child of Resistance*. The protagonist appears to be in a dreamlike state, unable to communicate to the people in her dreams even though they are within her reach. The sound effect of the ticking clock in both *Bush Mama* and *Child of Resistance* signifies Gerima's call for urgent action. And, finally, the symbol of the cross is used to signify the oppressive aspects of Christianity (or oppression meted out under the guise of Christianity). The cross was first introduced in *Hour Glass* by the protagonist's foster mother. In *Child of Resistance,* the cross is juxtaposed against the electric chair. Gerima especially explores the role of Christianity in the oppression of African peoples in *Sankofa.*

The distinctive, forceful soundtracks of Gerima's films function to add another layer of dialogue to his narratives. *Hour Glass* and *Child of Resistance*, both non-sync sound films, feature the most experimental soundtracks of his films. Their sound tracks actually help to build the narrative; for instance, in *Hour Glass*, the speeches of black leaders are heard whenever there is a flashback to the protagonist's childhood. Additionally, djembe and reed flute instrumentals help to indicate the transitions between scenes and indicate the protagonist's process of transformation. All of Gerima's films use African-inspired music, evident in the rhythms, instrumentation, or lyrics. In *Harvest:*

*3000 Years* he specifically uses Ethiopian folk music and one of his father's own songs. With sync sound and a more linear narrative than in *Hour Glass* and *Child of Resistance*, Gerima creates complex, sophisticated soundtracks in *Harvest: 3000 Years* and *Bush Mama*. With *Ashes and Embers*, the sound track features music with dissonant elements that help to indicate the distorted world of Nate Charles. The original music in *Ashes and Embers* and Gerima's other narrative films is immediately noticeable. The music does not provide a backdrop, but it draws the spectator's attention to the action on the screen, sometimes screaming at the spectator.

Gerima manipulates the cinematography by experimenting with film stock, linearity, and camera techniques. Gerima uses black and white and color 8-mm film in *Hour Glass* and then black and white and color 16-mm film in *Child of Resistance.* These two inexpensive film stocks provided him opportunity to begin developing his distinctive film aesthetic. The feature length films *Harvest: 3000 Years* and *Bush Mama* were shot on 35-mm black and white film. Not hindered by the technicalities and expense of 35 mm color film, Gerima deftly works with lighting, staging, and contrasts to create the stark environments of these two films. For *Ashes and Embers*, he utilizes 35-mm color film. This choice greatly enhances the surreal quality of Nate Charles' post-Vietnam experiences, especially in Los Angeles and D.C.

After breaking with conventional cinema, Gerima's camera and lighting techniques serve the dialectical aim of his filmic style by jarring and engaging the spectator. He uses non-static and handheld camera to create an unsettled world as in Nate Charles' world in *Ashes and Embers*. He manipulates camera angles, shooting from low angles and from high angles, to give the spectator a unique point of view of the characters

as in *Harvest: 3000 Years* where he shoots from above the bald head of the land owner to signify his barrenness. He varies the camera lens to create different perspectives such as a tunnel shot to denote confinement or a wide angle to denote vast open space. Frequently, he employs natural lighting, which was particularly effective in *Harvest: 3000 Years* and *Bush Mama* to create the harsh worlds of the peasant family and Dorothy. Gerima used color filters in *Ashes and Embers* to distinguish the various settings of Hollywood, the rural South, and D.C.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Return to the Past, Moving Forward into the Future: Gerima's *Sankofa*

> ... the three components of critical theory find their dynamic wholeness in Phase III – the Combative Phase. Here the text and subtexts go through a radical shift and transformation – the chief formal and thematic concerns begin to alter the rules of grammar. Another film language and a system of new codes begin to manifest themselves. With regard to 'reception' we discover that the viewer or subject is no longer alienated because recognition is vested not only in genuine cultural grounds but also in an ideological cognition founded on the acknowledgement of the decolonisation of culture and total liberation.
> ~Teshome Gabriel ("Towards" 37)

This chapter focuses on Gerima's fourth and most famous feature narrative film, *Sankofa,* a landmark in black independent cinema. Specifically, I document the course of events in the *Sankofa* experience, from the film's inception to its 1994-1996 theatrical run in the United States. Employing the Triangular Communication model, I examine how the Third Cinema approach was operationalized in the *Sankofa* experience, looking at each element of the phenomenon, starting with the film's production, and then looking at distribution, exhibition, spectatorship, and the film text.

I use historical research methods to evaluate the production, distribution, exhibition, and popular reception of the film. Personal interviews with Gerima and Shirkiana Aina; press and journal articles; Mypheduh Films in-house documents; and film reviews from newspapers, magazines, and electronic list-serves all provide primary data for exploring the issues of production, distribution, exhibition, and popular reception.

The primary data for my critical analysis is the film text itself, including the dialogue, music, *mise-en-scène*, etc. Exploring *Sankofa* as a cultural artifact, I draw on the body of neo-slave narrative literature and critical reviews from scholarly works. I

look at the salience of this particular slave narrative for the African-American audience and the Triangular Cinema relationship between the creator, critic, and spectator.

In a 1995 question and answer session following a *Sankofa* screening in Amsterdam, Holland, Haile Gerima proclaimed, "There is no future without resolving and excising the past."[23] Gerima had just wrapped up a two-year tour with *Sankofa* (1993), an African retelling of a pivotal encounter between the West and Africa: the trans-Atlantic slave experience, and he was now prepared to reflect on that journey. Gerima's motivation for telling the story of *Sankofa* originated from his strong connections with the African-American community. He began to learn about slavery for the first time upon arriving in the United States. This discovery led him to want to tell the story of slavery in his own words, partly as a healing process for himself and partly as a healing process for black people on both sides of the Atlantic. "I felt so good to have done *Sankofa*, even if it did nothing else, it healed my ass of my own share of guilt" (Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998). He explains that he wanted to tell the story of slavery from a Pan-African perspective. However, the story of *Sankofa* was not just a history lesson, Gerima wanted to make social commentary of contemporary issues by looking into the collective history of African descendents.

With *Sankofa*, Haile Gerima was forced to put his Triangular Cinema approach into full force due to the mainstream industry's rejection of the film. This Triangular Cinema approach helped to propel the film to a new level of audience involvement. The relationship, particularly between filmmaker and community, was effectively cultivated creating the *Sankofa* experience. *Sankofa*'s structural and narrative elements require that

[23] Gerima, Haile. Public Address. Amsterdam, Holland. 3 December 1995.

the spectator be active in making meaning. *Sankofa*'s narrative offers a way of engaging in a painful history by calling on collective memory and working through it with fellow audience members. *Sankofa*'s characters recode hurtful stereotypes into living, breathing personalities who stay with the spectator and continue to endear, enlighten and enrage long after the viewing experience. It is hoped that by participating actively with the film, the black spectator may come closer to "excising the past."

*Sankofa* is an allegorical slave narrative told from a pan-African perspective through a female protagonist. Built around the themes of resistance and rebellion, *Sankofa* challenges the notion of the passive slave/colonial subject and benevolent slave/colonial master. *Sankofa* instead imagines an alternative empowering interpretation of slave history. Gerima masterfully creates a microcosm of western society on his mythical plantation that serves as a metaphor for the post-slave/colonial world. The setting of the plantation, somewhere in the Americas, is ambiguously coded, allowing most new world Africans to readily identify with it. Based on the physical characteristics of the plantation, particularly its crop and population, the location could be anywhere amid the southern United States, the Caribbean or South America. Based on content in the film, the time period of the film could be between 1795 and 1850, since the first sugar plantations were introduced in the United States around 1795. The slave trade was banned in 1808 and the character Nunu, now in her 40s, was brought from Africa as a teenager sometime before 1808. The sugar cane crop suggests Louisiana or the Caribbean islands. The absence of white female mistresses suggests someplace in Latin America. The Portuguese priest implies Brazil. The maroon community living in the surrounding hills suggests Jamaica, Haiti or Surinam. The varieties of accents spoken by the slaves

and maroons connect the plantation to the United States, the Caribbean and Africa. Like Sembene Ousmane's mythical village in *Ceddo* (1977), where he plays with history by bringing together an African princess, an Arab iman, a Christian missionary, and an American slave trader to execute his narrative, Gerima brings together unlikely parties to create a metaphorical post-slave/colonial world on which to play out his narrative.

### *Sankofa* (1993) Summary

*Sankofa* specifically explores the story of slavery through an African-American woman, Mona, who is a fashion model, totally disconnected from her past and cultural heritage. This fact is demonstrated by her total lack of respect for the sacred grounds of the slave dungeon, on the coast of Ghana, where she participates in a fashion photo-shoot. As she ventures through the bowels of the dungeon, she is transported back in time from present day to slavery days and is transformed into Shola, a slave woman who, like her modern-day counter-part, is not conscious of who she is. Shola is a complacent house-slave until the events of the story awaken her consciousness, compelling her to fight against her oppressors. The story is told in three parts, which I have identified as the slumber, the nightmare, and the awakening.

The film's opening sequence represents the slumber. Mona is doing a fashion modeling photo shoot on the beaches in front of the Elmina Slave Castle in Ghana. A praise singer and self-appointed keeper of the castle's history warns her to go back to her past to learn who she is and find out where she is going. Later, as she tours the dungeons of the castle, Mona is mystically carried back into slavery times. Hence, the title of the film, *Sankofa*, the Akan word and Adinkra symbol that means go back to one's past to

discover one's future, symbolizes the theme of the film. The sankofa symbol is that of a bird looking backwards toward its tail. Gerima positions this image at key points throughout the film.

In the second part of the film, the nightmare, Mona is now Shola, a house slave working on a sugarcane plantation, somewhere in the Americas. Shola is content to be a house slave and, as she puts it, "at least I'm not a field hand." While despising the work of the field hands, she is in love with Shango, one of the field slaves. She also looks to Nunu, another field hand, as her surrogate mother. We learn through Shola's flashbacks that the plantation master regularly rapes her and she longs to get revenge for this inhumane treatment. Shola's slow, but eventual, conscientization causes her to attempt escape. After her capture, she is relegated to the fields as punishment. In the end she aids in a slave revolt on the plantation.

In the final part of the film, the awakening, Mona is transported back to present day and she ascends from the slave dungeon with a new perspective on her past and her future as a black woman. She joins other blacks from the diaspora, including the praise singer, as they sit on the shores of the ocean and contemplate the future.

**The Inception**

The film that eventually came to be called *Sankofa* was conceived while Haile Gerima was still a student at UCLA and it was called *Nunu*. Gerima's motivation for telling this story originated from his strong connections with the African-American community, where he began to learn about slavery for the first time upon arriving in the United States. His discovery led him to want to tell this story in his own words, partly as

a healing process for himself and partly as a healing process for black people on both sides of the Atlantic. Gerima said that he had to work through those complex feelings of complicity:

> As an African, to do *Sankofa* was so important for me. For one thing I've had all this agony of selling black people... to come from Africa, to stare at black (American) people looking at you and saying you sold me. You sold my ass. Even invisibly, without saying it, they will say that to you. You still talk your language. When you talk Amharic with your brothers and sisters, they get mad at you... You denied me that language because you joined the white people and sold me away. Even for that, I felt so good to have done *Sankofa*, even if it didn't do nothing else, it healed my ass of my own share of guilt. (Gerima, Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Aside from doing research as a student at UCLA, Gerima traveled extensively over the next decade to the southern U.S., Jamaica, Cuba, Martinique and Venezuela to collect research for his script. He went through several drafts of the script in the 1970s and 1980s (Wright 28). Throughout the 1980s, Haile Gerima gathered together friends and local actors to read through his *Nunu* script (an earlier version of *Sankofa*). Gerima videotaped his script readings and auditions, then used the recordings as part of his fundraising efforts. With *Sankofa*, it is apparent that Haile Gerima explored some of the same themes of his earlier films, conscientization and empowerment. However, this film was unique because he was truly able to put his Triangular Cinema model into action by involving the community all along the way.

**The Production**

By 1985, Gerima started fundraising for the film. He secured some domestic funding from Rockefeller and the MacArthur Foundation, but the majority of his funding came from outside the United States and included: Burkinabe DiProCi TV, Ghanaian Commission on Culture, German Neue Deutsche Rundfunk TV, and British Television Channel 4 (Valentine 57). Though he was far from his projected budget of $800,000, Gerima and Aina, who was co-producer of *Sankofa*, had enough funding to start shooting the film in 1989. Shooting was completed in 1990 (Aina, Personal interview). Gerima had initially negotiated to film the slavery scenes of the film at a site in Louisiana. However, Gerima said that the contract fell through when the owners of the plantation discovered his film crew was black. "The first part of *Sankofa* is set on a plantation and my original plan was to shoot in Louisiana, but the minute I got there and they saw a black crew they jacked up the price of everything" (McKenna F17). Gerima regrouped and decided to shoot in Jamaica and Ghana instead.

The cast and crew traveled to Jamaica in 1989 where they filmed for six weeks on a sugar plantation. It was arduous journey for cast and crew, but Gerima described the shoot as a spiritual journey. When Aina came to join Gerima in Jamaica after a month, she witnessed a physical transformation of her husband and filmmaking partner. "So by the time I got there.... Haile had shaved his hair. Shaved his whole head. It was like this spiritual thing he went through to survive this shoot" (Aina, Personal interview). The production ran out of money, partly due to theft. Aina did some fundraising in the United States and brought much needed funds to finish the Jamaican shoot. Aina was also able to offer new ears and counsel to a weary and stressed crew and cast.

The following year, the production went to Ghana to finish the shoot. The Ghanian shoot lasted three weeks (Aina, Personal interview). Aina was able to secure a co-production arrangement with the Ghanaian Commission on Culture and the Burkinabe Film Institute. This was a significant collaboration as it marked the first time two African countries had collaborated to make a film about slavery. With the film shot, Gerima returned to the United States to edit and put together a rough cut of the film to secure more funding.

**The Distribution and Exhibition**

With *Sankofa* in the can and a two-year teaching sabbatical, Gerima embarked on his distribution journey at the onset of 1993. As common with a new film, Gerima began with the festival circuit. *Sankofa* was an official entry at several prestigious festivals in 1993, including the Berlin International Film Festival, FESPACO, and the Toronto International Film Festival. In February 1993 at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival, Gerima cited that *Sankofa* was well received and one critic thought it might win the grand prize (Neman C-1). And though ultimately *Sankofa* did not win, its selection marked the first time two independent films from the United States had been in the main festival competition.[24] Curiously enough, Gerima reported that the day after the film premiered, U.S. press cancelled a previously scheduled interview (Alim). Holloway of the *Hollywood Reporter* gave it a mixed review. Holloway praised the imagery and cinematography saying that the film struck a "potpourri of visual images." However, he

[24] The headline in the January 26, 1993 *Hollywood Reporter* read: Berlin wall falls for U.S. Indies Negod Gwad Productions: US firm will introduce new film at Berlin Festival, Germany. The other U.S. independent film in competition that year was Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet*.

criticized *Sankofa* for lacking focus and point of view, saying: "It's the lack of a rounded script that leaves one puzzled as to what the film is really trying to say" (53).

*Sankofa* had better success at its African premiere at the Burkina Faso-sponsored 13th FESPACO held later in February where it took home the Best Cinematography Award. After seeing the film at FESPACO, Fabio-Bradford correctly predicted that the film would find critical acclaim in the U.S. only after "being lauded throughout the rest of the world for its eloquence of vision" (21 -22). Turecamo, also at FESPACO, saw nothing redeeming in *Sankofa*, calling it a "dreadful...beautifully photographed one-note diatribe against slavery" (22).

In March, *Sankofa* and Gerima went back to Europe for the 3rd African Cinema Festival of Milan, where the film was awarded the Agip Grand Prize. *Sankofa* was invited to the American Film Institute (AFI) Fest in June and to the 18th Toronto International Film Festival in September (Williams 46). Nigerian playwright Segun Oyekunle expressed surprise and disbelief at the lack of acclaim Sankofa received at the AFI Film Festival. Writing for the *West Africa* magazine, Oyekunle remarked, "When (Sankofa) was first screened during the American Film Institute (AFI) Film Festival, it was by far the most significant epic, and the film most praised by the audiences, yet it hardly received any advance viewing from any of the Los Angeles film critics" (13-14). Reporting on the film's screening at the Toronto International Film Festival, film critic Laura Marks had a less favorable response to the film, calling the script "plodding." However Marks understood that the film connected with black spectators, marveling that Sankofa drew "an enthusiastic largely black audience" (4). The film garnished no prizes at either festival, nor did it come home with a distribution deal as Gerima had hoped.

*Sankofa* rounded out the year as an official entry in two festivals in November (the 3rd Pan African Film Festival, in Los Angeles, and the Greenwich Village Festival of Ideas and Images) and was warmly received at both. Oyekunle reported that the Sunset 5 Theater was forced to schedule more screening due to the film's popularity (4). Though Gerima entered *Sankofa* into the New York Film Festival in 1993, and other U.S. festivals, it was not accepted (Alim). According to Gerima, *Sankofa* was accepted at other international festivals, but he lacked the prints to screen at the competitions. "We turned down 20 or 30 film festivals around the world because we didn't have prints" (Gilliam). Gerima and *Sankofa* made an appearance in Johannesburg, South African at the Weekly Mail Film Festival in November (Gerima, "Afterwards" 208-211).

After successful festival screenings in Europe and Africa, Gerima approached American distributors, with a screening at the AFI/Los Angeles International Film Festival in the summer and at the Independent Feature Film Market in New York City in the fall. Gerima claims that after screening the film for major studios, it was rejected on the grounds that it had "no white point of entry" or that it was "too black." In addition, he states that they simply did not know to promote the film. Aina describes that journey: "We responded to a number of inquiries month after month after month. And we would get responses like well, 'I sat through your movie, it was a good movie, well done, but I don't know how to distribute it.' That was from Columbia Pictures" (Personal interview). Gerima said the depression that descended on him when no one would distribute his film was like none he had ever known. Around the same time, Gerima was asked to speak as part of a film retrospective at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. "All I could do is cry" in front of the audience, Gerima said. "I just realized all at once how racist and

vicious this society is that it could stop my film from being judged by the community." Gerima assessed that white distributors would not accept the film because it dealt with slavery in a non-sensational, non-romanticizing, non-spectacular manner (Hedges 119). Gerima and Aina forged on, but by the close of 1993, debtors were knocking and the Gerimas needed some relief. Throughout the gestational years of *Sankofa*, Gerima had already cultivated community-support for the film by local fundraising and involving local talent in developing the script. Always an activist filmmaker, Gerima turned to the black community of D.C. for help. Aina comments:

> I guess this was towards the end of summer, Haile just basically threw his arms up and said, "We are not going to let this movie sit on the shelf. What are we going to do?" So he just sort of desperately called people that had been coming to some of the script readings and things like that, and we showed the film in a small room at AFI that seats 50 people, and at the end of the movie, we just asked people what are you going to do? Because we can't do any more, it's worn us out. If you think it's a good movie, you have got to take the next step". And they did. (Personal interview)

Gerima and Aina drew on their principles of Third Cinema and turned to the African-American community for help in distributing the film. Gerima and Kay Shaw, a former political organizer, first screened the film to a group of D.C. stakeholders, or elders, as Gerima called them. Aina continues that Ackall Lynch, a University of Maryland Baltimore County professor, called a meeting at his home to organize. He used a local radio show to advertise the meeting (Personal interview). Aina came on as the liaison, and Shaw was hired as coordinator. This group, which included African-American

attorney Saundra Lincoln and Korean-American filmmaker Dashel Kim Gibson among others, came to make up the D.C. *Sankofa* Premiere Committee (French G1; NPR, "Small Film"). Aina further explained the process: "They put a P.R. package together. We would use our expertise in finding a theater etc. to premiere it, and they hooked into all kinds of mailing lists, organizations like that. Pulled off a very nice premiere, just a wonderful premiere" (Personal interview).

Shaw's film distribution company, KJM3, had just come off the heels of distributing Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, and Shaw was attuned to the particulars of marketing a non-Hollywood/conventional film to a black audience. Shaw, who eventually took on the job of booking agent and publicist, employed the "cultural event model of promotion" a strategy that utilizes cultural institutions and networks already in place in the black community. This strategy involved getting the word out to the community through appearing on local television and radio shows and distributing black and white posters and leaflets (Tassy D4:1). The campaign aimed to empower the community and educate them about the business of film distribution. Furthermore, the campaign tapped into the two important aspects of African-American culture, that is the importance of word-of-mouth and "call and response." With almost no advertising budget, the film was publicized through informal channels in the African-American community, like churches, civic organizations, and beauty salons. The strategy also targeted cultural nationalists as innovators because Shaw assumed they would find *Sankofa* particularly salient (Muhammad). "[Y]ou start with like minded-people, but each of these like-minded people have connections to other people who may be sympathetic,

supportive" (Shaw 71). Shaw called the *Sankofa* campaign the "most comprehensive independent self-distribution model that exists" in her experience (Shaw 69).

Other organizations associated with the film premiere campaign included Positive Productions Inc. (Gerima's own non-profit organization), the D.C. Commission of the Arts and Humanities, and the Ghanaian Embassy. There were two objectives of the initial campaign: first, hold a premiere that would raise enough money for a one-week theater rental and, second, screen the film for a week and use that revenue to pay bills and obtain the much needed inner negative print, so that the sole 35mm print of the film would be preserved and additional prints could be made at a lower cost.

> We were showing something that wasn't really a print. It was like an inner (pause), one of the samples that you get when you are going toward the final print. So it was a final version, but it wasn't a copy, the final copy that you are supposed to use for projection. So that's why we were saying at that time that it was going to cost us like five thousand dollars to get to the next stage, to get a print. That's why it was so expensive. So eventually we were able to raise that money to get that process taken care of so that we could get another print and another print. (Aina, Personal interview)

According to Shaw, the Washington, D.C. opening was strategically important because the city's "international, cosmopolitan" flavor lent itself to a word of mouth campaign (70).[25] To heighten excitement and increase press exposure for the upcoming premiere, two connected events were planned. A retrospective of Gerima's work,

[25] A comment about *Sankofa* by Julianne Malveaux in her nationally syndicated column in the *Sun Reporter*, in February 1994, confirmed Shaw's instincts about opening in Washington, D.C. Malveaux recounted that when she saw the film in D.C., she witnessed "young brothers and sisters who aren't usually quiet...muted by the power of a film that shows slaves fighting back." (Feb. 23, 1994, Vol. 50, Iss. 8, pg. 6)

including *Bush Mama*, *Harvest: 3000 Years*, *Ashes and Embers*, and *After Winter: Sterling Brown*, was held at the National Museum of African Art. The retrospective ran from October 16 until the film premiere on October 23. On the Tuesday before the premiere, October 19, the Ghanaian Embassy in D.C. held a special ceremony to consecrate the premiere, which featured the pouring of libations to honor ancestors and Ghanaian drumming. The Ghanaian event, like many events that followed over the next two years in connection with the film, had a noted spiritual tone. Coincidentally, Gerima was awarded the D.C. Mayor's Award for the Arts several days after the premiere only heightening his exposure in the D.C. area and bringing needed attention to *Sankofa*. The promotion strategy paid off with several articles in the mainstream press, the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*, featuring or mentioning Gerima and *Sankofa* in a two-week period.

In an effort to sustain and build audience for *Sankofa*, while at the same time generating much needed revenue, Shaw convinced Gerima to put his previous work on videotapes and make them available for sale at the theater. In addition, they sold handsome *Sankofa* tee-shirts borrowing from Spike Lee's savvy marketing strategy with *Malcolm X*. Wanting to avoid the art-house label, the premiere committee made the decision to open at a theater or multiplex where black patrons went to see "regular" films. Gerima insisted: "When I started out, part of the plan was I will never show Sankofa in an art theater period. Black people do not go to art theaters" (Personal interview 2 Dec. 1995). The Cineplex Odean Jenifer was "four-walled" for an initial one-week run.[26]

[26] Four-walling is a process whereby a filmmaker rents a theatre or a screen in a theater and all proceeds from ticket sales are kept by the filmmaker.

Enthusiastic audiences prompted a one-week extension and then another one. After each screening, someone from the film would address the audience. Turning it into, as Gerima called it, a "night school" for black independent cinema.[27] Aina explained: "Haile would tell them to go home and call ten people. People went home and called ten people. They took it very seriously, they really took it very seriously. ...And the phone began jumping off the hook from Baltimore, around the country" (Personal interview). The multi-faceted, grass-roots distribution strategy that featured the "cultural event model of promotion" was tweaked, institutionalized, and repeated city after city over the next two years.

The *Sankofa* distribution model developed into the six components. First, initial contact was made with select elders in the targeted city, or in some cases, Mypheduh was contacted by persons from a particular city. Second, a preview screening was held for that group of elders representing sponsoring organizations or community leaders. Third, a campaign coordinator, a paid position, was selected. Fourth, promotional activities were carried out as aforementioned, using low-cost posters, flyers, and local television and radio interviews. In addition, press releases were sent to media outlets in an attempt to generate press. Fifth, a fundraiser premiere, which often benefited an organization that served the black community was planned. Sixth, the fundraising premiere was followed by the official opening at a mainstream theater. After the opening of the film, the campaign did not end. It was expected that the committee would help to sustain the audience through its run, staff the tee-shirt and video sale table, monitor and report ticket

[27] This idea of thinking of film as an informal learning tool and calling it "night school" was borrowed from Ousmane Sembene.

sales, and coordinate post-screening discussions, thus ensuring that the viewing experience was not a passive activity (Shaw; McKenna F8).

In January of 1994, Gerima and his team began to more aggressively pursue their distribution model, starting in Boston. Similar to the D.C. museum retrospective, a retrospective was held at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts just prior to *Sankofa* opening at the museum on January 21. According to Gerima, the premiere was a huge success, as 500 people had to be turned away. *Sankofa*'s remaining run was held at an independent theater (Coolidge Corner Theater) where it stayed for three weeks. The print then moved to Baltimore and played from February though March for a 14-week, highly successful run. (Sumner 1C).

Spring 1994, *Sankofa* opened internationally in London, and domestically in Columbus, Ohio, and in the all-important New York City market.[28] The New York premiere at the Harlem Victoria 5 proved highly successful. James of the *New York Times* gave the film a glowing review, describing it as "poetic and precisely detailed" and "engrossing and provocative." Sinclair of the *Amsterdam News* raved that *Sankofa* was "an important addition to our historically relevant artistic archives" (28) and Boyd also of the *Amsterdam News* reported long lines (26). And while Brown of the *Village Voice* criticized the film for being "didactic and digressive," she also applauded *Sankofa*'s "lyrical passages" and its "appeal to (a) subliminal sensory experience" (56). *Sankofa* ran at the Harlem Victoria 5 to good houses for two months, according to Aina. She

[28] The run at the London Electric Theatre, an independently-owned theater, extended for 11 weeks.

described this run as one of the most memorable because of the way the audience connected with the film.

> It was just the most incredible experience. I mean it was like every time we showed the movie, and the audience would be packed, packed, almost every screening. People would have to be turned away.... It was just electrified. People understood Shango's accent. They knew every word he said, felt everything he said, and it was like they were on the screen, in the movie. Their response during the question and answer was just, you couldn't even stop the discussion.... You got to know people in the community right away, you know key people. The "mayor of Harlem" one sister calls herself. She runs the show for the Harlem premiere at that theater. Afterwards, she went a couple of blocks away and told them to open the restaurant. It was like one or two o'clock in the morning. Open the restaurant because we had to come here and talk to some more.... They just totally embraced you like they were warriors looking for a way to define where they had to go with their energy, and how they were going to attack, and I mean that in a most destructive way. I wouldn't say that to anybody but you because conventional media would take that the wrong way.... They were there with open hands and ready, and they already defined certain things for themselves. And for them to see a movie put things into play, that they already had much knowledge of I think, and to see it play itself out on the screen, with that emotional impact as well. It was just within you. It was just love the whole time. (Personal interview)

The National Black Programming Consortium sponsored the Columbus opening at the art house Drexel Theater.[29] I was at attendance at this sold-out event. The post-screening house where Gerima entertained questions and engaged in discussion for over an hour was brimming with emotion and pride. Frank Gabrenya of the *Columbus Dispatch* offered a mixed review of *Sankofa*, acknowledging the film's "fascinating look into the complexity of this unnatural world," though declaring that the "characters function more as devices than rounded human beings" (O4). In his final analysis, he admits that the film's flaws do not hamper the film's visual impact, and that "*Sankofa* fills an important void in world cinema" (O4).

In early summer, *Sankofa* opened in Pittsburg and Richmond, Virginia. The Richmond premiere benefited a medical group that provided health care for low-income individuals. Neman of the *Richmond Times* devoted two articles to the film, one a comprehensive interest piece where he interviewed Gerima and recounted the narrative of the film's production and distribution process, and the other a review of the film in which Neman gave the film 3 out of 4 stars, remarking that *Sankofa* was "made with more emotion than technical polish" (C-1).

By the end of July, *Sankofa* made its deep south premiere at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Georgia. The exposure at the bi-annual National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) was of particular importance because of the festival's geographically

[29] The National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC) receives its primary funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. NBPC's mandate is to fund and promote programming about the African Diaspora and offer it to PBS. *Sankofa* won a major prize at NBPC's 1994 Prized Pieces International Film Festival.

diverse and large audience (estimates of 500,000).[30] The NBAF premiere, similar to D.C., had a spiritual component. The Atlanta ceremony, "Remembrance: A Tribute to the Ancestors," the purpose of which was to acknowledge African ancestors lost to slavery was attended by Gerima and some cast members. *Sankofa*, named as a festival highlight by several newspapers, drew good crowds over the course of the 10-day festival and continued to do well during its 16-week run in Atlanta (Sumner, 1C).

The Philadelphia premiere in August was particularly noteworthy because it marked *Sankofa*'s first run at a national theater chain, United Artists. However, it also brought with it less favorable negotiation terms because, according to Shaw, *Sankofa* was no longer an "obsure little film" and the bookers "think there is money to be made" (Porter 68). The opening of the film was preceded and followed by extensive press coverage, including a feature in the entertainment section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* by film critic Carrie Rickey. She described the enthusiastic mood in the theater after the Philadelphia preview of the film.

> Erupting into rhythmic applause as *Sankofa*'s closing credits roll, 220 in the preview audience spring to their feet, their hands echoing the beat of the tribal drums that opened the film.... "The Ancestors have decreed that this film would be made!" pronounces a young woman in the audience, voicing the spirit suffusing the room. (E01)

Rickey further states that "*Sankofa* is thrillingly life-affirming" (E01). Fischer of the *Philadelphia Tribune* credits the film with restoring pride within the black community:

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[30] The outreaching importance of the NBAF screenings is demonstrated by the *St. Louis Dispatch* report on the Festival where Alim recounts: "The film highlight of the festival...was undoubtedly Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*."

"He reminds us of the struggles of an entire race which, had it not persevered, would never have survived to generate the lives of nearly every African-American today..." (2-E). After playing in five cities with only ten prints in circulation, *Sankofa* had grossed $850,000 by fall of 1994 (Rickey; Tucker).

The latter part of 1994 brought with it acclaim for *Sankofa* in a national radio show and in several national publications demonstrating the film's permeation into black national conversation.[31] National Public Radio (NPR) *Weekend Edition* ran a Scott Simon interview with film critic Elvis Mitchell who criticized Gerima's storytelling abilities, but exclaimed that the film had "incredible visual power." Articles in black-oriented magazines, *Essence* and *American Visions*, lauded Gerima's efforts, described *Sankofa*'s production and distribution process, and provided contact information for Mypheduh. In addition, the film grabbed mention in an *Interview* article where Henry Louis Gates, Jr. pointedly questions Spike Lee about the film, and in a *Time* article, journalist Jack White positions the film as part of a black neo-renaissance.

September brought a Chicago premiere and a move from Manhattan to Brooklyn; *Sankofa* was "booted" from Manhattan's Village East according to Shaw and continued its run at Brooklyn's Plaza Twin (Brown). Both Henderson and Preston of the *Chicago Tribune* gave *Sankofa* positive reviews. Henderson remarked: "*Sankofa* is a stunning poetic visionary about slavery and how it is connected to the psychological bondage blacks are chained by today" (45). Preston also stated *Sankofa* "is a visually and aurally potent tale of slavery in the New World. Detailed and unblinking, this feature tells an

[31] It should be noted that *Emerge* magazine ran an article on *Sankofa* as early as March, 1994; however, mention in these three publications in September and October did represent a cluster of attention.

even more compelling story than *Roots* or *Sugarcane Alley.*" Preston went on to compare Gerima to James Baldwin and Toni Morrison (20:2).

In October, *Sankofa* opened to solid reviews in Denver, Colorado. Calling *Sankofa* a "memory film," Denerstein of the *Rocky Mountain News* gave *Sankofa* a "B" and called attention to Gerima's break with conventional narrative style. "Gerima ... deserves credit for trying to break the shackles of narrative cinema in search of something epic in scope, a mixture of poetry and story that strives to reach a point of liberating catharsis" (6D). Movshovitz of the *Denver Post* also appreciated Gerima's non-conventional style and awarded the film 3 stars. "Gerima's genius is that he saves the film from dreary literal-minded account of ill treatment. ... Gerima works with indirection and hint. He comes at things from the side so that while you watch one line of action, the other runs just below it in persistent consciousness" (07). However, Movshovitz was critical of the film's ending which he described as one of "woe and revenge" and "like medicine" (07). The film trade newspaper *Variety*, which had begun to track *Sankofa*'s box office numbers in July, reported a particularly stellar month for the film in October when it grossed over $200,000 (Anon. 14). During the week of October 21, *Sankofa* was playing on only 7 screens, but it still beat the Oscar-nominated Hollywood film, *Blue Sky*, which was playing on 85 screens.[32]

Gerima and his team made a bold decision to rent a Brooklyn theater for a full six months. *Sankofa* opened at the Brooklyn Thalia Theater on October 14 where it averaged $1,800 a week. In its 26th week at the Thalia, *Sankofa* brought in over $4,000, displaying an unusual trend of gaining audience over time, instead of losing audience. This same

[32] *Sankofa* averaged $8,500 per screen, while *Blue Sky averaged* $700 per screen (Anon, *Variety*).

trend was repeated in Los Angeles where *Sankofa* also had a long run that gained momentum over time.

At the end of October, *Sankofa* premiered in Houston at the "African Holocaust Conference," an event featuring Gerima and two eminent black historians, Tony Martin and John Henrik Clarke (Martin 42). At the onset of its commercial theatrical run in Houston, Miller of the *Houston Chronicle* offered a negative review, declaring: "(*Sankofa*'s) narrative is confused, and its emotional impact is diminished by filmmaker Haile Gerima's art-cinema noodlings." However, *Sankofa* enjoyed a seven-week run (P1).

By January 1995, *Sankofa* had played in 13 U.S. cities and grossed over $2,000,000 and for the next six months, *Sankofa* criss-crossed the nation.[33] The film played in Durham, North Carolina, New Haven, Connecticut and Dallas, Texas in January alone. At Durham, it opened at a festival to a "packed, racially diverse house" and then began a two-week commercial run (Saunders B1). Morrison offers a positive review in the *News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, calling *Sankofa* "bold, riveting, passionate and tragically poetic." Morrison was particularly impressed with the cinematography, acting, and score, saying that he wished Gerima, as the "father of a new black film movement," were more prolific (WUP5).

The Dallas opening in January was also accompanied by good press. Sumner of the *Dallas Morning News* stated "Haile Gerima makes films the way Toni Morrison writes books – with potent images and soulful passion" (1C). At the Dallas premiere, Seitz of the *Dallas Observer* was struck by Gerima's protective and nurturing

[33] *Daily Variety*, Jan. 17, 1995.

relationship with *Sankofa*, comparing it to one's relationship to his child. Seitz's review swang from harsh criticism of Gerima's filmic techniques to high praise for the emotional impact of the film. And though Seitz asserted that "some viewers will be confused and even irritated by Gerima's stylistic conceits," the film enjoyed a 7-week run in Dallas.

Again demonstrating the grass-roots element of *Sankofa*'s distribution run, old friends of Gerima and Aina stepped in to coordinate the Cleveland run that also began in January, namely Barbara O, a former classmate of Gerima and star of *Bush Mama* and *Child of Resistance*, and Austin Allen, also a black independent filmmaker and college professor (Connors 1E). Barbara O took on the job of coordinator and brought together media personalities, community activists, and business professionals to form "Children of *Sankofa*" in Cleveland. The preview was a success as was the run that lasted nine weeks. Moore, in a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* editorial charged all African Americans to see *Sankofa* because, as he exclaimed: "I walked away from the theater proud. Proud to be African American. Proud to know that we collectively have overcome struggles. Proud to be me" (1E).

Aina appealed to high profile sponsors like the Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, a church with strong ties to the Civil Rights struggle; the NAACP; and black sorority Delta Sigma Theta, for the February opening of *Sankofa* in Aina's hometown of Detroit. Liz Stevens of *Detroit News* was impressed enough after attending the preview screening to predict that, even without conventional advertising, *Sankofa* would draw good audiences: "... you can bet the Friday night premiere of Haile Gerima's provocative film ... will be crowded" (C6:5). A *Michigan Citizen* article delved into the spiritual elements of the film, asking, "How does God communicate with us and intervene in the

lives of those who choose to listen?" (Anon. B1). The columnist answers that it is through a "divine messenger" – Gerima, insisting that *Sankofa* is not just a movie, but a message from God. *Sankofa* opened at a film festival in Portland, Oregon also during February, then began a commercial run.

The screenings in Philadelphia and Detroit prompted two opposite reviews from African-American newspapers. Praising the film as "powerful" and "poetic," Snodgrass of the *Philadelphia Tribune* made a passionate appeal to the public: "I strongly encourage you to take your family, community groups, co-workers, etc., to see this movie, *Sankofa*" (6-A). However, David Rambeau of the *Michigan Citizen* blasted Gerima's filmmaking, calling the film "mediocre" and Gerima a "failure" as a writer, director and editor (B1). According to Rambeau, the only redeeming quality of *Sankofa* was its cinematography. Paradoxically, he ends his review with an endorsement of the film. "In spite of this avalanche of critical analysis. ... The entirety of Gerima's film process is worth supporting.... Don't be discouraged by my comments. Forge ahead" (B1).

*Sankofa* made its way into California during the spring of 1995, opening in Sacramento, Oakland, San Francisco, Emeryville, Berkley, and eventually Los Angeles. The Sacramento run was spearheaded by a small group of prominent African-American women, including the press secretary to Willie Brown, Darolyn Davis, and TV reporter Alice Scott, who had seen the film at the National Black Arts Festival the previous year (Alim). The Bay Area premiere kicked off with a benefit brunch and *Sankofa* screening sponsored by Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, Inc. of Oakland. Rooks of the *Oakland Post* gave *Sankofa* a positive review claiming that "Gerima stunningly recreates the brutality of what he calls the 'African holocaust'" (7B). Mypheduh secured a deal with

United Artists for the Bay Area and Los Angeles screenings giving *Sankofa* premium screen space. *Sankofa* drew significant audiences; however, the film was repeatedly booted from theater after theater by Hollywood industry new-releases. According to Gerima and Shaw, this experience illustrated yet another capitalist, and perhaps racist, institutional barrier (Berkeley; Sheehan F03). Gerima called it an "incestuous relationship between Hollywood, theater owners and video stores." Asserting that if theaters don't take whatever came from the industry, they would be denied future films (McKenna F8).

In May 1995, Sankofa made a second appearance in *Essence*. Journalist and novelist Jill Nelson wished: "that everyone see Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*. Forget those manicured rows of cotton, the pickaninnies and kind Little Missy of Hollywood slavery. This film is the real thing: an African look at slavery, both physical and psychological. It will make you think differently about being a person of African descent" (298). *Sankofa* was named number 15 on Nelson's top 25 list in an *Essence* magazine feature.

A year and a half after its commercial release (May, 1995) *Sankofa* finally arrived in Los Angeles, Gerima's former home. The opening was boosted by a number of positive reviews in mainstream and black press. In an effusive review, Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that *Sankofa* all but proved Gerima's talent as a filmmaker. "(He) has brought a distinctive style and an often raw but always authoritative command of his medium to confront the horrors of slavery and its persisting significance, perhaps as no other filmmaker has" (Thomas). From the storytelling, to the music, to the acting, *Sankofa* demonstrated for Thomas "how important it is for people of color to tell their own stories." Reviews in the black press were just as enthusiastic. An anonymous review in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* focused on the spiritual elements of the film and

assured the public that "*Sankofa* is well worth traveling from all corners of the Southland to view." And that it was "Exactly what Black folks need" (B-4). Berry of the *Precinct Reporter* described *Sankofa* as "a chilling look into the life of a slave" and a film that "goes where 'Roots' dared not" (A-10). Berry insisted that viewers would so connect with Shola that they would vicariously experience her journey.

> When Shola runs to freedom, the audience runs with her. ...When she returns to herself as Mona, naked and shivering in the castle dungeons, and goes screaming her grief into the courtyards of the castle, filled with a knowledge and sorrow that cannot be given words, hers is a return to self that promises to change her tomorrows. Viewers, too, participants all, join her in that journey. (A-10)

To facilitate distribution on the west coast, Mypheduh opened an office in Los Angeles. The May 12 opening at the United Artists theaters in Marina Del Rey and Torrance proved to be highly successful, grossing $10,000 the first week, and over $20,000 for each of the following two weeks (Sheehan F03). However, according to Gerima and Shaw, tickets sales were ignored when theater management decided to abruptly end the contract on June 1--a decision Gerima deemed was not about business but about race (M. Brown A-13). Gerima and his team were left scrambling to find a theater for a primed audience.

> We had no power. We left. And the black community was up in arms and next thing we heard from Magic Johnson and so on, because they knew. They opened a twelve theater in the middle of the black community, and they knew *Sankofa* was their ticket, as an ambassador to the black community, and that's what happened. (Gerima, Personal interview 2 Dec. 1995).

A new business venture by former pro-basketballer Magic Johnson proved to be the answer for the Los Angeles "eviction," as Gerima coined it (McKenna F8). Shaw and Gerima negotiated a contract with the new theater and booked *Sankofa* as the premier attraction.

The June 30 grand opening of the Magic Theater Cineplex, Johnson's joint venture with Sony Theaters, in the black middle class neighborhood of Baldwin Hills, proved to be a perfect collaboration. *Sankofa*'s opening in the only black-owned cineplex in the nation was symbolic as well as a smart business move, as *Sankofa* brought a ready-made audience to the Magic Theater and produced good box office numbers. By its fifth week at the Magic Theater, *Sankofa* had grossed over $75,000 (D. Cox 43). The film's box office receipts prompted a feature in the *Daily Variety* where Weiner cited that Gerima had "carv(ed) a niche for his film" and reported the film's gross to date at $2.2 million. The distribution run, especially the last few months in California, really started to take a toll on the Gerima household, according to Aina.

> Our family life I know in particular was really affected very much, because Haile would be in California, for example, he'd be in L.A.and I'd be in the Bay area. There were two theaters in the Bay area, and there was the one in L.A.and we'd be talking every night, and basically, you know, living there weeks. Salome, my sister in-law, would be home with the kids, trying to make sure they ... The production itself took a huge toll on the family. So we were I guess paying that price to do what this kind of distribution technique required. (Personal interview)

Although Los Angeles took the spotlight, *Sankofa* had other spring and summer appearances in St. Louis, Norfolk, and Albany. *Sankofa* opened in St. Louis in May and

extended its stay for months due to a committed local campaign. Freeman of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* touted: "The film's life – in St. Louis, as elsewhere – has been nothing short of a miracle. ...(it) has been kept alive on a week-to-week basis by moviegoers who have adopted the film. So moved have been some that they call themselves the 'Children of *Sankofa*'"(11B). Gerima was scheduled to come to St. Louis in July to close out the run with a workshop, but he was forced to cancel due to illness brought on by exhaustion in facilitating the Los Angeles run. *Sankofa*'s Norfolk run in June drew a mostly favorable review from Vincent of the *Virginian-Pilot and the Ledger-Star* (E5). Focusing on the mood *Sankofa* evoked, Vincent declared, "The film effectively creates another world of morality, a world in which this type of inhumanity was not only tolerated but was considered the moral. The recreation of the world, with its unbelievable evil, is the film's greatest achievement" (E5).

By September, at the end of the commercial run, *Sankofa* had grossed over $3 million. Aina contended that the exact profit was difficult to determine because so much of the box office receipts had gone to theater rental. For example, one Manhattan theater's rental fee was $10,000 a week. Later, Mypheduh switched from four-walling and began to negotiate for percentages of the box. But even with this arrangement, Aina said that the theaters got the "lions share" (Personal interview). *Sankofa* and Gerima rounded out the end of 1995 and the beginning of 1996 appearing primarily at film festivals.

Though Mypheduh had done an independent theatrical distribution of *Sankofa*, Gerima and Aina turned to a national video chain, Blockbuster, to negotiate video sales

and rentals. However, according to Gerima, Blockbuster claimed there was no market for the film and they did not offer favorable terms.

> We approach them (Blockbuster). There is nothing we don't approach. We approach with our own interest. We are not just saying, just give us fame and take our life. We are saying let's have a fair distribution relationship, but most of them do not ..unless they take you for all your account, they do not believe in fair commerce, unless a white person owns us, and is making business for itself. But, the more we assert our own economic interest, there is no market. It's very much hostile. ...In fact we have letters (to) Blockbuster Video requesting to sell our films for distribution to video chains. They told us no, they don't have clientele for our type of movie. That is what they said. (11/5/98)

Aina came to look at the rejection by Blockbuster as working to their advantage in the end. In April 1996, Mypheduh released *Sankofa* on video, thus starting another distribution campaign.

> We had to ... create another distribution network with the black retail market, like black bookstores, and black video stores. ...So again these experiences just keep telling us that we have to be self reliant, and good for us in the long run. We are creating something that's going to stand. We are not just going to have, when they look through our history, if they ever do, upcoming generations ever look back to us, they are not going to just see a receipt or received document, such and such number of dollars from Blockbuster, big deal. No, they are going to see an institution in place hopefully, or at least an attempt, so they can look at the records and see where we failed, where we succeeded, and then where they can

pick up. It will be there, something that can really be used for a few generations to make a difference. So that's why we don't regret those rejections at all. They were God sent. (Aina, Personal interview)

Previously, Mypheduh had distributed films by other black filmmakers, but after this experience they began to distribute videotapes by black filmmakers through their website as well as rent and sell videos at the *Sankofa* bookstore. The bookstore has grown to become a performance space and, of late, a café.

**Textual Analysis**

For many people of African descent, particularly those descendants of slaves in the Americas, slavery remains an untold story on film. Certainly numerous slave narratives films have been produced over the past century. Most notable is the television mini-series Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977). *Roots* drew the largest television audience ever, with over one half of all U.S. households tuning in to the final episode (Bogle, *Primetime*). The depiction of slavery offered by *Roots* was the most accurate to date. However, conventional Hollywood studio-produced slave narratives offered uncritical interpretations of slave history ranging from overtly racist representations, like *Birth of a Nation* (1915), to racially exploitative versions, like *Mandingo* (1975), to palpable versions, like *Queenie* (1985). In the recent past, Hollywood has attempted to produce realistic slave narratives, with significant black creative input, particularly *Amistad* (1997) and *Beloved* (1998).

With *Sankofa*, Gerima puts his Triangular Cinema model into practice. He successfully engages the spectators, the critics and the filmmaker in a dialectical

exchange with the aim of transforming society. For Gerima, the transformation is a pan-African conscientization. Keeling surmises that, through Mona's transformation, *Sankofa*'s spectators are transformed. "Mona is decolonized, sent to experience the violence of slavery so that she can be reborn as an African. For the spectators, a similar operation is carried out" (55). Gerima specifically realizes his dialectical approach by employing five filmic techniques. First, he provides a point of entry for the black spectator by creating a sense of ownership of the film. Spectators feel that is "their story" because the film is told from an African/African-American point of view. Second, Gerima utilizes archetypal characters and settings, while at the same time playing against stereotypes to create characters and settings that read authentic to the black spectator. Third, Gerima creates a narrative with themes that speak to contemporary realities. Using allegory, Gerima provides a historical link between the past horrors of slavery and contemporary problems in black American society. Fourth, Gerima infuses the narrative of *Sankofa* with magical realist and mystical elements that work on a spiritual level to tap into the collective memory of African descendants and Africans. The black spectator adeptly navigates *Sankofa*'s narrative by establishing parasocial relationships with specific *Sankofa* characters, choosing and rejecting cultural elements of the film to suit his or her ideology. And finally, Gerima explores Third Cinema themes that empower and grant agency to the black spectator. These themes of resistance, solidarity and resilience allow the black spectator to ponder the "what if" and imagine an alternative future.

It is more useful to look at the literary genre of neo-slave narratives to analyze *Sankofa's* narrative within an appropriate cultural context. The neo-slave narrative

emerged from the Black Cultural Nationalist era of the 1960s and 1970s. Committed to creating critical work, the neo-slave narrative authors were in direct conversation with the new body of slave historiography that emerged during the same period. Though not working in literature, Haile Gerima's development as an artist is firmly planted within the Black Cultural Nationalism era and the subsequent Black Arts Movement. Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Sherley Ann Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* provide examples of neo-slave novels. These tales are distinct in the way their creators combine elements of fantasy, fiction, mysticism, and spiritualism, resulting in a re-invention of the slave testimonial convention that critiques slave historiography and contemporary society. Reading *Sankofa* as a neo-slave narrative allows for the understanding of the film text in the historical, cultural, and political context from which it rose.

While the neo-slave novel shares the antebellum slave narrative's form, conventions, and first person narration, it distinguishes itself from its predecessor in the way it re-imagines slave history making it usable for the present (Rushdy; Cox). Cox notes that a unique feature of the neo-slave narrative is the author's use of irony to create a "usable collective memory" that serves as a liberatory space where writers, readers, and the text "rehabilitate the past " robbing it of its pain and power (33). This present textual analysis explores *Sankofa*'s efficacy with black spectators using the Triangular Communication model where all elements of film practice, the filmmaker, the film, spectatorship, and production are examined through a cultural lens. The theoretical framework is influenced by Third Cinema and black independent cinema, Reid's Black

Womanist theory, and for the purposes of looking at the film, the neo-slave novel (*Redefining).*

**Point of Entry**

*Sankofa*'s opening image consists of an African carving of a woman and child. The accompanying soundtrack includes soaring music and a male voice reciting "Spirit of the Dead" a poem composed by Gerima (Appendix B). The voice-over calls to the spectators: "Lingering spirit of the dead, rise up and possess your Bird of Passage." Woolfork likens this poem to the slave-narrative's "authenticating document," the short introduction, penned by white abolitionists, that preceded the narratives and served to assure the validity of the text to its target audience, white sympathizers. Woolfork holds that while Gerima's audience is black, he nonetheless seeks to establish the veracity of his story by calling the spirit world to connect to the African-American audience (35). Woolfork states that the poem's "virtual roll call of the African diaspora" recalls physical abuse, labor, as well as the "liminal ontological condition of slaves *who hover between worlds of living and dead*" (35).

The narrative employs a common Third Cinema tactic of placing the disenfranchised at its center through a collective hero. In this case, that character is African-American female Mona/Shola. It is through her transformation that the spectator is challenged to question his or her knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about slavery. When Mona is first introduced to the spectator, she is wearing a blond wig and an animal print swimsuit. She is doing a fashion photo shoot on the beaches in front of the former slave dungeon in Ghana, Elmina Castle, while a white American photographer tells her, "Let

the camera do it to you. More sex." Lying on the beach in seductive poses, Mona is suddenly jolted by the appearance of a traditional African priest, the self-appointed keeper of the sacred grounds of the slave castle. He authoritatively stands above her holding a tall staff on which sits the *Sankofa* symbol. She screams and jumps behind the photographer for cover. The priest yells at Mona "*Sankofa*, *Sankofa*."

Later Mona tours the grounds of the Elmina Castle, following closely behind a group of white tourists and listening to the Ghanaian tour guide explain its history. Woolfork suggests that Gerima employs a tourism motif to carry the African-American spectator through a series of stimulations to render an understanding of the slavery experience (105). The priest appears and chastises the tourists, whom he accuses of disrespecting sacred ground. Armed soldiers cart the priest away. Though Mona cannot understand the priest's language, she is visibly shaken by his words. She separates from the other tourists and ventures through the dungeons alone. Mona seems to feel the presence of her ancestors as she touches the cold, dark walls. As she rounds a corner, she comes face to face with a room full of captured Africans who are chained together. Mona has been transported back in time. The captives reach out to Mona as if beckoning, "Come to us. We've been waiting for you." She runs away and into the arms of some white slave traders. They force her back into the dungeons, as she cries "I'm Mona. Don't you know who I am. I'm an American. I'm not an African." Her cries fall on deaf ears. Mona's clothes are torn from her torso and she is branded on the back with a hot iron. Her screams of pain crescendo with Mahalia Jackson singing the African-American spiritual "Precious Lord" underneath, "At the river, here I stand." After her baptism by fire, the other captured Africans attend to her.

Woolfork identifies the branding scene as a "traumatic moment for Mona, marking the fundamental break in her epistemology and her consciousness" (39). Furthermore, Woolfork asserts that Gerima again employs a slave narrative convention, that of marking the end of innocence through a violent act (39). Indeed, the branding scene is a pivotal point in the narrative because it is here that the spectator, and particularly the African-American spectator, is propelled to make a physical connection with Mona due to the racial identification of black skin and the common legacy of slavery. Gerima calls on an essentialized blackness rooted in Black Arts Movement and pan-African ideology. Keeling holds that *Sankofa* displayed the Black Arts Movement aim by asserting that "the designation 'black' is the result of an ontological unfolding toward a pure, natural, and authentic self poised to achieve self-determination in the form of an African nation" (52). In addition, Keeling suggests that the film encourages "blacks to recognize themselves in 'the African,' thereby returning to their source" (52). Gerima wishes to restore the link that he feels was broken. Cham describes this link as the "unbroken spiral –sankofa…(that) connect(s) the past to the past and present and (that) erase(s) geo-cultural boundaries between Africa and the Diaspora" ("The Past" 2).

The branding scene also introduces a key theme that Gerima explores throughout the narrative, Christianity. Mona's physical positioning accompanied by the African-American spiritual, comments on the role of Christianity in slavery. Mona, like Christ, must die for the sins of others. Keeling claims that Gerima uses the same tools to decolonize the spectator that were used to colonize or enslave (56). Specifically, Keeling points to the branding scene where Mona is left "to fall, arms spread apart, recalling

Christ's crucifixion -- a deftly orchestrated metaphor of Mona's martyrdom. She suffers for the blacks who, like her, have lost their way and become westernized."

Through Mona's contemplation of the horrible events that transpired in the dungeon, the spectator is also moved to contemplate this history. The spectator vicariously investigates these spaces of popular memory with Mona, so that when Mona is bound in a room full of enslaved Africans, the spectator is hailed by a barrage of feelings: pity, sorrow, horror, fear, anger, and curiosity. The visceralness of the act of branding is heightened by the sound of sizzling flesh and the high camera angle. The accompanying soundtrack of an African-American spiritual foreshadows the cultural carry-overs of Africa to America. Gerima's cinematic language introduces both Mona's physical transformation and redemption, a transition between past and present that is "marked by violence against her body" (Woolfork 38).

Mona's transmission back in time is represented by a montage of shots signifying the transition from contemporary Ghana to slavery times on the Lafayette sugar plantation in the Americas. The first shot of the montage is Cape Coast Castle. The second is of a buzzard, soaring through the sky. The third is of the sugar cane fields. The fourth shot shows of rows of slaves walking from the dungeons. Dramatic music mixed with the sounds of whips cracking and ocean waves can be heard under. Ukpododu says: "The presence of the bird of passage (the buzzard) becomes Gerima's technique of traversing the vast Atlantic Ocean (the Middle Passage) from Africa to the Americas" (72). Furthermore, Grayson adds: "Through *Sankofa*'s personification of the buzzard, the film seems to create a link to these traditional West African beliefs and others like them about vultures, as well as symbolize the ways in which these traditions continued in

North America" (29). Gerima employs a cultural marker to stress the role that African spirituality and cultural retentions play in connecting African-Americans to *Sankofa*.

The scene that follows shows Mona as the captured African Shola looking up to the sky. Shola, in voice-over, describes her position on the Lafayette Plantation. Again, Gerima uses a slave narrative convention, that of first person narration, to both authenticate and personalize his tale. Shola tells us that she is a house slave and glad of it. Shola, like her alter ego, Mona, is subjugated but ignorant of her circumstances. Mona/Shola provides the point of entry into the story and literally onto the plantation. Once on the plantation, Gerima introduces a host of additional characters with whom the spectator may identify, Nunu the African matriarch, Joe the troubled mulatto headman, Shango the noble warrior, and Noble Ali the down-trodden Uncle Tom.

**Recoding the Slave Narrative**

Both the characters and the setting of the plantation help to challenge the traditional Hollywood version of slave history, which represents slaves as content and the plantation as a peaceful, idyllic home. bell hooks (101) and Keeling (53) both assert that *Sankofa* uses a Hollywood form that audiences are familiar with. hooks holds that *Sankofa* "broke its act with Hollywood only in the way it challenged audiences to see slavery from the standpoint of the pain and anguish of the enslaved" (101). In fact, hooks claims that Gerima fails "to give audiences progressive, nonsexist images of black womanhood" (102).

However, I hold that Gerima successfully recodes that slave narrative in his development of the setting and characters. Gerima creates a composite plantation that has

characteristics of plantations in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Latin America. Gerima purposely mixes populations, dialects, and crops to create a location that does not adhere to any one experience. Kande argues that Gerima's choice to set the plantation in a non-specific place or time is problematic because of specifics of geography and economics dictated *forms of resistance;* however, it is precisely this non-specificity that establishes the allegorical nature of *Sankofa* (130*)*.

In creating the slave history of *Sankofa*, Gerima draws on the archetypal characters drawn from the American plantation drama and the European colonial epic. He successfully recodes the black characters, making them recognizable and meaningful to black spectators, while adhering to familiar stereotypes for the white characters. Whereas, in the typical Hollywood slave narrative, black characters might be stereotyped as the buck, the mammy, the Uncle Tom, the tragic mulatto, and the coon (Bogle, *Toms* 3-18), Gerima re-presents them as multi-dimensional characters. Cham notes that the manner in which Gerima paints his characters advantages the spectator ("The Past" 1). However, the primary white characters, with the exception of Father Raphael, remain caricatures and are represented in a fixed unidimensional manner. In this case, the white characters become the backdrop for the black characters' drama.

According to Woolfork, *Sankofa*'s "urgently representational strategy imaginatively deploys slave-narrative conventions to render them in a symbolic and literal cinematic language" (106). Grayson adds that Gerima's focus on the characters' "individual identities and motives" (25) breaks from what Gerima has labeled the "plantation school of cinema" (Woolford 92).

However, both Kande and Keeling criticize *Sankofa*'s characters as one dimensional and didactic. Keeling acknowledges that these characters may be "satisfying" to black spectators, but she asserts that the effect of these characters is damaging in the long run: "[I]t is hardly the stuff of a transformed sociopolitical landscape or image-scape" (57). Kande adds that the film "reproduces the Hollywood paradigm," the very thing he asserts that Gerima claims to oppose, and thus fails to provide new social constructions and identities (Kande 136-137).

Through voice-over, Shola introduces the various characters. She begins with Nunu, who she describes as a strong matriarch and a compassionate, surrogate mother to many, including herself. Shola explains that Nunu was brought from Africa to the plantation as a young woman and she still speaks her language and retains her traditional spiritual beliefs. In a mainstream slave film, Nunu would likely have served as the stereotypic mammy figure, but in *Sankofa* she is mother Africa (Bogle, *Toms*). "Nunu acts as the repository of a *valorized African past* projected into a hopeful African-in-America present. As the bearer of the past, Nunu functions to bring about the transformation necessary to envisioning a libratory black future" (Steven 97). Hook completely disagrees with this assessment, calling Nunu a "contemporary remake of Annie in the *Imitation of Life*" (101). However, like Steven, I hold that the audience saw Nunu as a more complex character and one that dismantled the Mammy stereotype through her actions and words.

Through Nunu's characterization, Gerima employs the Third Cinema convention of culturally grounding his work. Nunu's preservation of oral tradition and traditional beliefs provides a space for the African-American spectator to re-establish a relationship

with Africa. Grayson insists: "In spirit, Nunu still lives in Africa" (30). In her role as a leader of the slave revolt, she calls on the spirit of Asantewaa, the Asante queen mother who resisted British colonial forces, for strength. Gerima uses Nunu's death to symbolize diasporan Africans' loss of knowledge about their African roots. Ukpudoku calls this loss an unnatural break, one that goes against nature and human nature, adding that: "matricide is the most serious offense that must be examined from the perspective of African culture" (74). According to Tomaselli, Shepard, and Eke, Nunu exemplifies: "The integration of the spiritual and the material (that) is partly found in the oral tradition that many African societies have sustained through the centuries of colonization and Westernization" (32). Nunu is the missing link.

Shango, who in the stereotypic slave film would be the black buck, is instead portrayed as a noble, resistance leader (Bogle, *Toms*). Not one to be broken, Shango evokes the character of Kunte Kente from the television mini-series *Roots*.[34] Shango is a devoted lover, demonstrated by his relationship with Shola. Brave and self-sacrificing, Shango, puts his own life in danger to stop a pregnant slave woman from being whipped. He is a member of the secret society that is planning rebellion. He is strong and fearless, even in the face of the slave master, making him the most dangerous kind of slave (Patterson).

Joe, who as a slave film stereotype would be the tragic mulatto, plays against type and portrays a deeply conflicted man who, in the end, comes to terms with his heritages (Bogle, *Toms*). Biracial, the product of Nunu's rape on the slave ship, Joe stands as the

[34] The *Roots* character, Kunte Kente, was a captured African who refused to be broken. His name is still evoked in popular culture to refer to someone who has a strong and defiant disposition.

prototypic African of the Americas. Not totally African and not totally of the Americas, Joe represents "the incarnation of hybridity" (Kande 138) or Bhabba's mimic man. However, Kande argues that like the mule, mulatto Joe is rendered impotent and ineffective by his racial impurity, which eventually results in his death (139-140). Steven asserts that Joe's story confirms that only the inauthentic can come from the violent union that resulted in his conception (101). I hold that Joe is set apart not only because he is biracial, but also because he is a literate, devote Christian. His full embrace of Father Raphael leads him to adopt Raphael's warped brand of Christianity that denies black people's humanity. His faith alienates him from his community and renders him unable to express familial or romantic love. Hence, he rejects Lucy in a moment of passion and murders his mother when she is trying to save him. In the end, Joe evolves into a man who questions his life and attempts to set things right.

Noble Ali, the Uncle Tom in the stereotypic slave narrative or trickster in African-American folklore, is also fleshed out as a deeply troubled man (Bogle, *Toms*). In order to maintain his status, he dutifully carries out the tasks assigned him, though he is increasingly conflicted by them. When he returns from tracking down a group of runaways, including Kuta, and is then ordered to whip them, he desperately tries to joke his way out of the job, prompting the white overseer to sneer, "What's wrong with you boy. You gettin' soft. You used to run to whip those black hides." Joe often plays the fool to hide his true feelings. However, he reveals his true nature when he secretly professes to Nunu that he is tired of being a headman. Some time later he joins the secret society, marking the beginning of his conscientization. Even though he has made this transition, he continues to grin in the slave master's face, demonstrating the constant deception in

the master-slave relationships, or double consciousness, that served as a survival tactic in slavery times. DiMarco assesses that while Joe's mimicry is debilitating, Ali's mimicry is subversive and gives him a degree of agency.

Contrary to Keeling and Kande's assertion that the white characters in *Sankofa* fail to rise beyond stereotype, Ukpoduku argues that Father Raphael holds a key position in the story and fully demonstrates Gerima command of the filmmaking form.

> The maturity of Gerima's artistic vision is clearly visible in his use of Father Raphael, seemingly at the periphery of the Africanist vision of the film to assume a central role unobtrusively. The vision of a center controlled by the periphery or by the marginalized bespeaks an oxymoron. By placing a white priest at the margins of a black center and giving him manipulative control of the center, Gerima widens the scope of the film's intellectual horizon. (73)

Certainly, in Raphael Gerima creates a complex character who moves beyond the stereotypic benevolent patriarch found in the traditional slave narrative. Raphael serves to demonstrate the historical contradictory relationship of Christianity and slavery. Father Raphael, we learn in Shola's voice-over, is responsible for her conversion. However, in one scene, Raphael participates in a brutal whipping of Shola, her punishment for attempting escape. He sprinkles "holy water" on her nude, bound body as the slave master whips her back. He serves as a spiritual mentor for Joe, explaining the Christian gospel of sacrifice and love, conveniently omitting the Christian principle of equality. Father Raphael elevates Joe to honorary white status because of his religious devotion. However, when Joe brings Nunu's corpse into the chapel and places her on the alter, Raphael sheds his benevolent cloak and orders Joe to remove "that heathen" from the

church. Joe's break from Raphael resonates with black spectators because it provides a dialectical examination of Christianity and its role in slavery and colonialism.

**Allegorical Elements**

A common filmic device in Third Cinema is allegory. A carry over from second cinema, allegory allows the filmmaker to create the film's narrative with a certain economy of images to represent an ideological position. In some situations, allegory also provides the filmmaker with a degree of freedom from oppressive governmental censorship. *Sankofa* was produced the in United States where there are no overt problems with censorship. However, gate keeping measures, such as access to funding, distribution, and exhibition channels, are covert forms of censorship that directly affect whose voices are heard or muted. Gerima effectively employs allegory in *Sankofa* in making his political economic critique of contemporary African-American society. *Sankofa*'s allegorical elements also serve to realize the neo-slave narrative theme of exploring contemporary race relations and post-modern issues of identity.

Gerima uses the highly stratified social structure of a slave plantation to serve as an allegory of contemporary American society and to explore the residuals of the legacy of slavery, such as racism, class divisions, self-hate, destruction of the family, and economic disenfranchisement. Gerima's stark dichotomy between house slaves and field slaves, at times, comes off as overly simplistic and without critical analysis of the complexities of status, power, and agency. Kande argues that *Sankofa* is nostalgic for a "sacralized past" and ignores today's problems (132). Woolfork admonishes Gerima for

being heavy-handed in his approach: "Instead of a bully pulpit, Gerima has *Sankofa*, and his orthodoxy is a realist representation mode that chastens and urges viewers to see the light of his beliefs" (105-6). However, it is necessary to look to Third Cinema convention and its aim to render ideological intent transparent. I would argue that Gerima's ideological intent is never hidden or in question and the target audience saw itself in the film's characters.

The stratification of the plantation is based on race and labor status. Among the whites, who proclaim themselves the undeniable masters over the black slaves, there is the plantation owner, Master James, the unnamed overseer, and the Catholic priest, Father Raphael. The master reigns over the overseer and the entire plantation, while the priest reigns over the church and spiritual matters. The slaves are divided into three categories according to labor duties, house slaves, headmen, and field slaves. Reducing *Sankofa* to a "ghetto-action-adventure" film, Kande fails to see any merit in Gerima's critique of intra-race and class discrimination (137).

> It seems that *Sankofa*, without rising to the level of the epic, cleaves to the discourse of legitimation, and does not go beyond this kind of one dimensionality. The plantation site of Gerima's 'ghetto-action-adventure' film, is divided by Du Bois's 'color line'—no longer a specific characteristic of 20th century America, presented by the filmmakers as the sine qua non of race relations in general. (Kande 137)

Kande assumes a post-modern analysis of United States race relations. However, Gerima is clearly working in the traditions of Black Arts Movement and Third Cinema

movements, where it is assumed that the agents of oppression, racism, classism, sexism and so on, are still relevant and salient.

The two principle white characters in the film, Master James and Father Raphael, represent the state, capitalism, and western religion. As previously noted, except for Father Raphael, these white characters, for the most part, fail to move beyond their slave film stereotype. Though, Kande notes that Raphael's Catholic Church symbolizes western colonialism, he deems it "Gerima's hasty Ethiopianist reading" (139). It is common knowledge that the Bible and the gun were used in conjunction to subjugate populations in slavery and colonialism. As an allegorical device, James and Raphael's conflation of religion and violence further illustrates why Gerima chose to only use these two characters to represent the West. The contemporary reading of James and Raphael recognizes the manipulation and deception meted out in the name of capitalism and Christianity, though Kande notes that Gerima fails to fully examine the complicity of blacks in the enslavement of other blacks.

The field slaves are the most numerous on the plantation and the most physically exploited. They perform the grueling, dangerous work of harvesting sugar cane, to which limbs are often lost. They are at the mercy of natural elements as laborers of the field. Their clothing is ragged and they dwell in sparse living quarters, a distance from the master's house giving them some degree of autonomy. In *Sankofa*, the field slaves observe indigenous beliefs as illustrated by their involvement in the secret society. The field slaves are the ever-present eyes that watch and record the abuses and exploitation on

the plantation in popular historical memory. Keeling rightly names them the "seer - slaves." However, she asserts that they are paralyzed and only able to watch.

> *Sankofa* ignores the possible alternative of and for the human that exists in both its slaves and its audience's present perception. Instead of directing the spectators' attention toward those alternative conceptions, *Sankofa* chooses to pursue a black humanity that relies on rendering the slaves immobile. (Keeling 62)

Keeling argues further that the seer-slaves, and thus the audience, are only allowed one path to humanness: violence ending in death. Those who are not willing to risk death, she concludes, are excluded from the pan-Africanist ideal (63).

The field slaves are indeed the silent recorders of history, but they also act as agents of change. Cham asserts that Sankofa's "narrative thrust pushes toward change and liberation, and the spectator put on alert from the very beginning to orient her/himself to this direction" ("The Past" 2). Thus, the various forms of resistance and the examples of resilience offered in the film demonstrate to the spectator other paths to humanness. Though the field slaves are constantly under the surveillance of the overseers and headmen who coerce them through violence, the field slaves regularly show resistance in the form of Kuta's escape, the secret society meetings, and the insurrections.

The field slaves' value is directly linked to their ability to produce and contribute to the economy of the plantation as illustrated by Nunu's story. She is taken away from the plantation to be sold because she is deemed old and unproductive; however, she is brought back a few days later because, as Nunu explains, "Finally, I am too old for the white man." Her "value" is so low that her owner stands to gain even less economically

by selling her. In contemporary society, the field slaves represent the masses, particularly the most disenfranchised of black American society--the black underclass. Gerima offers, through his allegory of the secret society, a prescription of systematic political, economic, and cultural organizing in order to bring about a just society.

The head slaves and house slaves belong to a small group of "privileged" slaves. For the headmen, these perks make the abhorrent duties of subjugating their own people more palatable. However, they are constantly threatened with the possibility of their privileges being revoked or being demoted to "field slave" status if they fail to obey the master. This is evident when Master James threatens to demote Noble Ali because he pleads for Nunu not to be sold away. The head slaves are despised by the field slaves because they work as an extension of the master, as illustrated by Nunu's adverse feelings toward Joe and Ali for being headmen. In the slave narrative, characters like Joe are common. As a literate, Christian, faithful slave, Joe parallels the contemporary African-American intellectual for Gerima. This formally-educated population has access to resources that could build the black community, but their priorities are to gain and maintain acceptance in the majority society.

> Black intelligensia here and in Africa and in Latin America compromise black people ... for personal agenda we compromise the interest of black people. Any war we win, any battle we triumphed is compromised in conference rooms in negotiations, under a pretext of negotiations, our black agendas are compromised. (Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

Gerima presents the house slaves as loyal, Christian servants who dutifully cook and clean for the master's household. They require little or no physical coercion because their identity and fulfillment comes through serving the master. House slaves enjoy the most significant privileges of better food, clothing, and housing. However, because of their close proximity, they are constantly at the disposal of the master. Shola explains, in voice-over, how there is always tension in the big house.[35] When the slaves are plotting rebellion, the whites tend to feel a heightened tension that the master takes out on Shola. One scene portrays the master descending the stairs from the big house and grabbing Shola who is in the yard. He throws her to the ground and rapes her.

Gerima would liken the house slaves to contemporary middle-class blacks who are comfortable enough with the trappings of United States society to forget all who struggled for the opportunities and privileges that they enjoy. Their identity and validation is measured against white-American-society standards. Gerima puts certain black intellectuals, wealthy artists, and alienated middle-class blacks in this category. Like their counterparts in plantation culture they berate black people and black culture and they choose to live in predominantly white or upper-class black neighborhoods, surrounding themselves with whites or like-minded blacks. The house slave mentality is challenged through the stories of Shola and Noble Ali. Both Shola and Noble Ali go through a transformation in the film from complacency and acceptance of their roles as house slave and head slave to conscientization and agency. Gerima proposes that even Uncle Toms can change if challenged by the truth and supported by the community.

[35] In her seminal text *Aren't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* Deborah Gray White gives a detailed account of the sexual exploitation that slave women endured in all positions on the slave plantation.

Steven suggests that *Sankofa* works along phenotypic lines, the blacker the more authentic. "*Sankofa* might have suggested another mode of agency taken up during the period of enslavement that could work against the very strong biologistic arguments for racial categories and their centrality to social structure of domination" (102). However, Gerima gives all of his black characters paths to conscientization, even the lightest skin black, Joe. Though Joe's transformation comes after he tragically murders his mother, he is unflappable in his determination to confront the source of his oppression, Raphael, and demand that he confess his lies.

**African Spiritualism**

Spirituality is an essential element of African-American culture. Although over 90% of African Americans identify as Christian, many are familiar with a not-too-distant past where their ancestors practiced other forms of spirituality rooted in indigenous African beliefs. Gerima evokes these cultural retentions by weaving mystical elements throughout the narrative of *Sankofa*. The alternative spirituality that Gerima illuminates opens the door to the spirit world and the magical realism that follows. Gerima contextualizes mystical elements drawn from African spirituality, folklore and symbolism, making them appear "natural" and no longer taboo to black spectators.

In the conventional slave narrative, Christian conversion and Christian faith are central to the author's process of self-actualization and liberation. Gerima adopts this trope to critique how Christianity is used as a tool by the priest and slaveholder to subjugate and oppress. At the same time, Gerima introduces an African-rooted

spirituality that empowers and liberates. Morrison takes on a similar theme in *Beloved*, when Suggs creates a culturally relevant worship space that serves the needs of her followers, giving them strength and healing.

In the first segment of *Sankofa*, the sacred drummer calls on the spirits of the dead to rise up and claim their bird of passage (the *Sankofa* symbol). Grayson notes that the buzzard Gerima uses to transport Mona into the past is a spirit of passage in Asona cosmology. "Only with the buzzard's cooperation is the journey possible, for he takes people to the past and returns them to the present" (Grayson 27). The priest initiates Mona's possession through his ritual chanting and drumming to call forth the spirits of the dead (Ukpokodu 71). Mona's newly created memory of slavery is a collective memory shared by black spectators and African slave ancestors. Through Mona's experience, *Sankofa* creates a space for spectators to explore memories that are, on the one hand, too painful to retain but, on the other hand, too important to release.

The fact that Gerima uses a black female as the vessel for his story advances the Third Cinema aim of giving a voice to the disenfranchised. In addition, Grayson suggests that Gerima's artistic choices of employing Asante cosmology and centering his story around a woman tap into African-Americans' cultural retentions, promote black history, and advance third cinema aims of gender equality--here, black womanism.

> *Sankofa* represents another worldview connected to traditional Asante culture in which black women are central in and through history. Mona's journey puts her in contact with part of the memory of her past, Nunu who (through her chants) opens a window into Asante cosmogony, creating a network that ties Mona to the spirits

> of Asona, as well as the spirits of the women who founded the Asante clans, ohemma, and female chiefs. (Grayson 36)

hooks argues that indeed Gerima considered gender in Sankofa, but he failed "to give audiences progressive, nonsexist images of black womanhood" (102). Shola and Nunu, hooks continues, only serve to reinforce existing Jezabel and Mammy stereotypes.

The slave's connection to African spirituality is achieved through the characters of Nunu and Shango, and the secret society. At a secret society meeting, a group of slaves intently listens as Jumma, a female slave, recounts a tale of Nunu causing a slave master to fall over dead by staring at him and saying something in Akan, her mother tongue. In another scene, Nunu calls on the spirits (Asantewaa) to help her to cut the baby from the abdomen of Kuta who has been whipped to death. Later, at another secret society meeting, Nunu reminds others of events in Asante history where the ancestors showed bravery and strength against the colonial aggressor. She specifically names the founding of Asante clans and the war Yaa Asantewaa led against British forces as periods of pride. She thanks the spirits for safety. She invites the Asona ancestors to join the slave community and she specifically evokes the spirit of Prempah, an ancient Asante royalty, to eat and drink with them (Grayson 31). Nunu's African spirituality continues to be a source of power and strength even into her afterlife. When Nunu's corpse supposedly burns in the chapel fire, Shola recounts, in voice-over, that her body was never found and it was believed that Nunu flew back to Africa. Like Dash in *Daughters of the Dust*, Gerima evokes African-American folklore of flying African captives, a common tale of escape.

Shango calls on the spirits for protection in his role as a conjurer. Shango explains to Shola how the spiritual power in the *Sankofa* charm has protected him and how he believes it will protect her. Shango makes a potion at Lucy's request to "bring that man (Joe) round to her." Shango is the one who performs the initiation ceremony for Shola when she finally decides to join the secret society. Shola turns to Shango and his indigenous African beliefs after deciding that her prayers to the Christian God for deliverance have gone unheard. Raphael's spirituality, represented by the chapel, the religious statues, and the sacraments, appears constricted and oppressive. In contrast, Shango's spirituality, represented by nature, medicines derived from roots and leaves, and oaths devoted to solidarity and liberation, is one of just action.

The secret society draws its power from the spirit world and it is this spiritual power that enables the society to carry out its rebellion. Likewise in the Alea's *Last Supper*, Sebastian calls on the spiritual world to wage his seemingly impossible battle against the Count and his military forces. The secret society requires that each initiate engage in an oath-taking ritual for spiritual bonding and as a sign of solidarity. The initiates dress in white robes and red scarves, attire which brings to mind Yoroba spiritual traditions. Both Nunu and Shango act as initiators for the secret society and use African languages in those rituals. The path to freedom and humanity is achieved through encounters with nature and spiritual roots, and Nunu and Shango embody these characteristics (Steven 96 - 98). "Gerima," asserts Steven, "makes of nature and the *Sankofa* spirit it represents, the transcendent and continuous foundation for the moments of suffering, resistance, and personal transformation the film depicts" (97). Grayson holds

that it is Nunu's use of folktales that specifically provides the spectator with a "a place to remember (their home, origin), as well as people to remember (the family members who they were ripped away from when enslaved)" (31).

Father Raphael strove to make a distinct break between Christianity and African indigenous beliefs, however many slave and maroon societies did not make this break. The amalgamation of religions that came out of these societies is evidenced in contemporary societies in Haiti with voodoo, in Cuba with Santaria, and in the American South with hoodoo. And though the black spectator may not admit to practicing or believing in African indigenous beliefs, this spirituality is rooted in the collective memory of African descendents and *Sankofa* calls on these memories. Indeed, the film also highlights the contradictions of Christianity. Ukpokodu argues that *Sankofa* serves to "awaken a people's memory to the often unspoken, perhaps unknown, history of the role of Christianity in slavery" in an "alliance of spiritualism and secularism," or what he has coined as the theology of slavery (77).

The buzzard, the tunnel, water, and the tree are four prominent symbols drawing meaning from both African and African-American folklore. The buzzard opens and closes the film and is seen soaring through the sky at different transitions in the film. In the film, the bird holds two meaning. The Akan meaning is "*Sankofa*," or returning to one's past to go into the future. Another common meaning comes from slave folklore and cosmology. From time to time, it was said that slaves sprouted wings or mounted birds and flew back to Africa to escape slavery. In creating Mona's circular flight, Gerima, again, taps into familiar African-American folklore of the flight to freedom, the

central narrative in the neo-slave novel and films. This flight is portrayed in literal and surrealistic terms in Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Williams' *Dessa Rose* and Morrison's *Beloved.* Hence, near the end of the film, the buzzard soars back to Africa with Nunu and Shola/Mona, which allows for Mona to re-emerge from the tunnel a transformed woman.

The tunnel leading from the Cape Coast dungeon to the ocean serves as metaphor for transition. Shola/Mona's new birth or initiation experiences are grounded in both Christian doctrine and African cosmologies. Mona, along with millions of slaves, passed through this tunnel or tunnels like it (such as Goree Island's "point of no return"), before journeying to the West. The tunnel transitions one from the old world to the new world and from freedom to enslavement. On her return to Africa, the tunnel serves as the site for Mona's transformation to conscientization and her rebirth. At the end of the film, Mona emerges nude from the tunnel (or birth canal) on the African side. She is a changed woman, who knows her roots, and is now able to face her present and future.

The symbol of water runs throughout the narrative of *Sankofa*. A powerful symbol in African-American folklore, its different forms (the ocean, the river, rain) all serve to reinforce the theme of transformation. Sounds from the ocean are heard when Mona transitions from the free world of Ghana to the slave world of Shola on the Layfayette Plantation. Water, in the form of a river, is the site for transitions of life to death as in the drowning of Nunu and the death-to-life as in Joe's transition to a conscientizied man. The river is also the site of initiation into the secret society for Shola and Ali. Ironically, Father Raphael uses "holy water" in his Christian ritual of cleansing Shola of her evil when she is whipped. Ukpudoku claims that the rainstorm that ensues

when Nunu is killed symbolizes divine disapproval, while a later light rain shower symbolizes divine approval when Nunu is brought to the alter (75).

In many traditional African belief systems, the tree signifies spiritual rootedness. A sacred tree stands at the center of many African communities and serves as a source of protection. The tree is the meeting place for governing councils, as demonstrated in *Sankofa*. The secret society holds court beneath a massive tree. In African-American folklore, the bottle tree, a tree on which glass bottles were hung as protection from evil spirits, was a common feature of southern properties. Ionia's property in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* is decorated with a colorful bottle tree. Morrison plays on the symbol of the tree in *Beloved* by literally branding Sethe's body with a tree. The chokeberry tree found on Sethe's back is testimony of the physical abuse that she has suffered under slavery and Paul D's tender caress of that scar robs its pain and reclaims it as a source of strength.

**Third Cinema Themes**

Gerima's cultural experimentation with filmic technique and form, as well as his exploration of Third Cinema themes serve to empower the spectator. In Third Cinema fashion, his filmic techniques draw on African diasporic aesthetics and culture. Keeling labels Gerima's use of culture a "purifying vehicle" (51). Even when Gerima employs conventional techniques, he subverts them to serve the African-American audience. Keeling notes that Gerima uses the conventional technique of continuity editing to "organize audience's attention and (to) direct its understanding" (56). Steven, on the

otherhand, comments on Gerima's break from convention, specifically Gerima's use of direct address and direct camera gaze to the effect of forcing the spectator to interact with the film (98). In form, Gerima uses fantasy to empower the spectator by providing him or her a space to imagine alternative possibilities. Keeling asserts: "*Sankofa*'s return to slavery is, above all, a revision of mass cultural memory-images that are capable of affecting the formation of the Black" (60). Hence, the alternative set of images for the memory is broadened, allowing for a different perception of slavery and of black identity (Keeling 60). *Sankofa* employs common Third Cinema themes of resistance, solidarity and resilience. These themes privilege the black spectator's reading of the film. Empowered by the narrative, the black spectator is able to imagine a nobler past and a more hopeful future. Furthermore, Gerima's pan-African mission posits that: "As a collective identity, 'Black' is capable of self-determination and poised to achieve nationhood" (Keeling 51).

Both themes of mental and physical resistance run through the narrative of *Sankofa*. Acts of mental and physical resistance in slavery took on many forms, as exemplified by the various characters and the secondary storyline in *Sankofa*. Maintaining mental resistance was of tantamount importance since losing the battle for the mind meant complete enslavement (Patterson). Stevens argues that the subjects of *Sankofa* are able to inhabit an "imagined community of survival and rebellion" which in turn produces a more "humanized notion of blackness in relation to natural connection with Africa" (99). However Stevens counters that Gerima relied too heavily on easily coded racial phenotype to define black identity and liberation. "*Sankofa* might have

suggested another mode of agency taken up during the period of enslavement that could work against the very strong biologistic arguments for racial categories and their centrality to social structure of domination" (Stevens 101). The characters of Kuta, Shango, Nunu and Noble Ali help to illustrate various forms of mental resistance. As Shola explains, Kuta's attempt to escape is driven by her strong sense of mental resistance, "Kuta wanted to run 'cause she wanted to have her baby in a free place." Of course, in this case, Kuta's act of mental resistance prompts her act of physical resistance.

Nunu provides other examples of resistance. Nunu's mental resistance was unflappable, as illustrated by her cries when Joe restrains her from coming to the aid of Kuta, who is about to be whipped: "You can never do nothing to my soul. This is the only claim they have on us (pointing to her skin). We could fly away from here."[36] Nunu's defiant act of taking Kuta's corpse from the whipping post and delivering her baby demonstrates Nunu's physical resistance to her enslavement. Shango also demonstrates his mental resistance to slavery by his uncompromising stance on carrying out rebellion. Alea's Sebastian in *The Last Supper* and Williams' Dessa in *Dessa Rose* serve as other neo-slave hero/ines who refuse to be mentally enslaved. This trait of bravery proved invaluable in leading others out of slavery.

Physical resistance and the willingness to engage in physical violence are closely tied to mental resistance as demonstrated by Shango's actions throughout *Sankofa*. Fanon discusses the inevitableness of violence as an answer to violent oppression (*Wretched*). Likewise, Third Cinema in its gestational years called for transformation through armed

[36] This scene always brings me to audible sobs. I am reminded that if not for the strength of forebearers, like Nunu, African Americans would not have survived slavery. I am also reminded that African Americans did not come through the experience unscarred.

rebellion. Gerima offers the spectator a way to vicariously participate in a violent rebellion by placing the actions on Shango and allowing him to act it out on screen. Shango has the audacity to ask Shola to put poison in the food in the big house. Though, Shola refuses, based on her Christian morals, saying that killing is wrong no matter what the reason; she also reasons that the other house slaves who eat the same food would also be poisoned, to which Shango replies that that is the price for freedom. He further demonstrates his physical resistance by refusing to eat the food Shola has brought him from the big house though he is obviously famished. It is Shango who physically resists the slaveholders by charging Kuta's punishers as they whip her; this is an action for which he is shot. Shango's commitment to resistance is clear when he attends to Shola after she has been whipped. While administering healing herbs to her wounds, he declares that he does not fear death for he has lost everyone close to him and has nothing to lose.

Gerima's characterization of Noble Ali is inspired by the African-American folkloric trickster character. By "playing the fool" for the white master, Ali is able to stave off undesirable work. Ali's mask is a survival tactic that the African-American spectator is familiar with. Even after Ali's transformation and conscientization, he continues to play the trickster by day to make the whites comfortable, while he plots insurrection with the secret society by night.

After Shola's transformation, she demonstrates her first open act of resistance by running away. And though she is caught and made a field slave as punishment, she relishes that she is happier to be farther away from the master's threat of rape. Shola shows her final act of rebellion in the film, by killing her master and participating in the

rebellion. Grayson claims that Mona/Shola "breaks the cycle of passive existence" through her bold and aggressive actions (25).

Gerima creates a black society that survives through solidarity, a vision borrowed from his black cultural nationalist and pan-African ideology. Keeling criticizes Gerima's definition of the black authentic subject as working through exclusion (61). She asserts that *Sankofa* specifically offers a "diasporic identity as a more 'natural' state of being black" (61). *Sankofa*'s scenes portraying solidarity between the maroon community and the slave community demonstrates Gerima's full embrace of an essential blackness. Kande questions Gerima's choice portrayal of maroonism as a symbol of solidarity because of the complex nature of maroon societies and their cooperation with the State (138-139). But, like *Sankofa*'s non-specific location, the maroon society serves more as a symbol of the historical possibilities than as a historical fact. In the first secret society scene, an elderly maroon man gives an account of the number of hoes, seeds, and weapons that have been gathered. The supplies, he reminds the slaves, will help them to establish themselves once they are free. Hence, the necessity for collective activity to insure future independence is established in the scene.

Gerima effectively demonstrates the theme of solidarity in a scene where the field slaves come to the aid of Kuta after she is whipped. According to Woolfork, this beating scene serves as a slave narrative convention. She compares Kuta's beating to the one Frederick Douglass' aunt suffered. Through witnessing his aunt's abuse, Douglass as well as the reader experienced a loss of innocence in regards to slavery and gained a new understanding of its harsh realities. "Kuta's beating, coupled with Mona's rape scene, is a crucial element of Gerima's realist approach to slavery's representation. He presents

images and scenes in a complex format that serve as the viewer's inauguration into slavery" (Woolfork 41). Hence, through witnessing Kuta's beating, not only does the *Sankofa* spectator gain a new understanding of slavery but he or she is also compelled to join the fight for freedom. Gerima revises the slave narrative convention in two ways. First, by having fellow blacks execute the beating, Gerima illustrates some of the complexities and barriers to building solidarity within the slave community. Second, Gerima portrays Kuta as "a rebel whose gaze challenges her oppressor" (Woolfork 41). He portrays Kuta not as a victim, but as an active agent of change even when death is imminent. At Kuta's death, the slaves, in succinct movement, form a tight, protective, outwardly facing circle around Kuta's slain body. Joe and the overseers point guns at the circle; however, the slaves unflinchingly stand their ground and deliver Kuta's baby. Their solidarity gives rise to new life.

And finally, the theme of resilience, featuring prominently in *Sankofa*'s narrative, speaks to the history of Africans in the Americas who not only persevered through centuries of slavery, but also continue to demonstrate strength in the face of post-slavery adversity. In *Sankofa*, Gerima demonstrates resilience through an exploration of both African cultural retentions and the concept of the unbreakable spirit. In regard to African cultural retentions, Nunu has fully retained her language and beliefs and is admired for it. In fact, Shola seeks out Nunu to hear stories about Africa and restore her African cultural ties. The concept of the unbreakable spirit is illustrated through Shango's character. He confides to Shola that even though everyone close to him has been killed, he will not be broken. Even when he is severely punished for his rebellious actions, he remains directed and unwavering in the struggle for freedom.

The creation and maintenance of loving relationships and family, in spite of an institution that totally denied one's humanity, is the supreme act of resilience. Gerima effectively portrays the "private elements of the slave community" (Grayson 25). Other creators of neo-slave narratives emphasized the powerful trope of love. It is the central theme in Morrison's *Beloved*, Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Shola and Shango are devoted to one another. Lucy and Joe are in love, despite Joe's confusion about his religious identity. Noble Ali expresses his love for Nunu, though she demands that Ali must stop being a headman if he wants her. Familial love is also apparent in Shola's attachment to Nunu as her surrogate mother. Nunu demonstrates a mother's undying love for her son, Joe, even though he rejects her. The slave community, represented by Nunu and Ali, demonstrates their love for the Kuta's newborn by promising to raise him as a community. Love, then, becomes an act of resilience for it provides some sense of normalcy in an abnormal world.

**Conclusion**

In exploring the function of a slave history on film, it is apparent that Haile Gerima's filmic devices result in a story that reflects a black point of view, relies on black cultural codes to create the narrative, speaks to contemporary issues, incorporates African spiritualism, and employs the Third Cinema themes of resistance, solidarity and resilience. These elements all serve to privilege and empower the African-American audience. Curiously, Gerima confesses that his motivations were partially selfish and he did not know the extent to which his film would resonate with black audiences.

> My own justification for making the film, was amazing, unspoken about, undocumented neglected history of the resistance of African descendents in the Americas.... Now most black people who saw the film left talking about healing. So the spiritual dimension that people brought into the picture, you know, opened my eyes. (Personal interview 5 Nov. 1998)

However, Gerima's harshest critics expressed that the film offered a limited definition of blackness and an equally limited path to liberation. However, those critics do little to acknowledge or explore the power of the dynamic relationship between *Sankofa's* text, the spectator, and Gerima for it is within this relationship that a true analysis of *Sankofa* as Third Cinema must be made.

Gerima's *Sankofa* challenges many notions of the slave/colonial narrative by presenting slave characters who resisted slavery, rebelled against and plotted to kill their white masters, considered their indigenous beliefs equal to Christianity, banded together to protect and care for one another, and understood that though they were enslaved of the body, they were not enslaved of the mind and spirit. In addition, Gerima explores the destructiveness of mimicry on the subject and society at large. In addition, Gerima shows through Joe and other mimic characters, Shola and Noble Ali, alternative narratives and the contradictions of mimicry. In the end, Shola and Noble Ali reject their mimic stance, join the resistance movement, and help carry out a slave rebellion. *Sankofa* and Gerima's final message is that everyone has the ability to transform.

# CONCLUSIONS

## The Lasting Impact of Gerima's Cinematic Contributions

> We have to make a commentary about our life on this planet. It's a footprint we live, we leave [it] behind [and] it's imperfect. In the imperfection, we find our language.
> ~Haile Gerima (Turner and Kamdibe 19)

In September 2008, Haile Gerima released his sixth feature narrative film, *Teza*, a story of an Ethiopian ex-patriot intellectual, Anberber, who returns home to Ethiopia after living in Germany for many years. Anberber is a medical doctor intent on giving back to the country he left in his youth. However, Anberber finds Ethiopia under dictator Mengistu Haile a different place from the one he left years earlier. No longer at home in Ethiopia, and no longer at home in Europe, Anberber's story stands for the millions of immigrants like Gerima who straddle two worlds. *Teza* has garnered major awards at many prestigious film festivals--FESPACO, the Venice Film Festival, the Carthage Film Festival, and the Rotterdam Film Festival, to name a few. And though it would appear that Gerima's career peaked with the release and distribution of *Sankofa*, the early reception of *Teza* might prove otherwise. In fact, CNN's *African Voices* news magazine has deemed Gerima Africa's most celebrated filmmaker. With *Teza*, Gerima continues to demonstrate his mission of initiating a dialogue of change through cinema.

This study set out to discover how and to what effect the Third Cinema approach could be applied in the African-American context. I explored how the film artist and the Third Cinema inspired film could contribute to positive socio-political change in black America. I questioned how the Third Cinema approach developed in the cinema of Haile Gerima and, specifically, how this approach was realized in the *Sankofa* experience, in

relation to the film's text, production, distribution, exhibition, and spectatorship. In my exploration of the *Sankofa* experience, I asked what were the unique circumstances impacting the African-American community's relationship with *Sankofa*, in terms of the historical moment, the salience of the slave narrative, and Gerima's cinematic philosophy and form, specifically his Triangular Cinema model. And finally, I set out to learn what was the lasting impact of the *Sankofa* experience for black spectators and black film history.

I adopted the Triangular Communication model as the theoretical framework for looking at the phenomena of the Third Cinema approach in the African-American context. Third Cinema theory as explicated by Teshome Gabriel provided the foundation for the Triangular Communication model, while Gerima's Triangular Cinema model and Reid's Black Womanist Spectator Theory rounded out the theoretical framework. The Triangular Communication model provided a cultural-critical framework for not only exploring the artist-filmmaker, the cultural production-film, and the community-spectator/critic, but also the social, political and historical issues that impacted the film's production, distribution and exhibition.

I chose Haile Gerima as exemplary of a filmmaker who practices Third Cinema techniques in the African-American context. I argued that Haile Gerima's contributions to Third Cinema and black cinema were significant and worthy of in-depth study and documentation. In addition, I proposed that the *Sankofa* experience, that is the production, distribution, and exhibition of the film, was a unique Third Cinema and black film historical event that warranted documentation and analysis. Finally, I argued that Gerima's cinema and the *Sankofa* experience provided a viable model for practicing

independent filmmakers. To conduct my study, I consulted as primary data, interviews with Haile Gerima and his wife/producer, Shirikiana Aina, the writings of Gerima and the narrative films of Gerima from 1971 – 1993, and as secondary data, critical analysis of Gerima's films, popular reviews of Gerima's films, and popular press covering the distribution and exhibition of *Sankofa*.

My major findings were that Gerima's body of work illustrates an operationalization of Third Cinema techniques in the African-American context. I found that Third Cinema in the work of Gerima is culturally-grounded, socially relevant, and politically powerful. Gerima's narrative films portray a Third Cinema influenced transformation process that takes his protagonist from an oppressed state, to an empowered state, and finally to a liberated state. Furthermore, Gerima creates characters in his narratives that represent the different states in the transformation process. Thus, the characters model levels of conscientization and the spectator is invited to vicariously experience, through the protagonist and other characters, ways of responding to the forces of racial, imperialistic, and sexual oppression.

I found that Gerima's experimentation with film form and language over the past 30 years offers innovative and effective ways of engaging spectators in a dialectical film experience. Specifically, Gerima's three distinctive narrative techniques (non-linearity, fantasy, and symbolism) offer the spectator alternative ways of thinking about his or her world. In addition, Gerima's cinematographic techniques and the elements of his soundtracks provide emotional and intellectual points of entry that challenge the spectator's worldview.

In this study, I found that Gerima's non-linear narrative techniques manipulated space and time in ways similar to African and African-American literature, or oral culture, as Gabriel proposed in his Third Cinema theory. The non-linearity of Gerima's work blurs the lines between past, present, and future. Hence, positive social change is no longer on a progressive continuum, but on a critical path that takes past, present and future into account.

Gerima's use of fantasy in his narratives allows for the spectators to imagine innovative and alternative futures. Thus, fantasy becomes a liberating device for the filmmaker, the characters, and the spectator. The filmmaker has no boundries in the fantasy world that exist in reality. Characters can act on their desires and work through difficult situations. The spectator can, in turn, try on roles and explore new possibilities along with the characters.

Gerima's narrative films draw on symbolism and allegory as narrative devices. The symbolism effectively broadens the impact of the story and the characters' appeal, while tapping into specific cultural signs. The spiritual symbolism in *Sankofa* provided a way for spectators to explore indigenous belief systems in a non-exoticized manner, and critique mainstream religion's relationship to oppression. Gerima employs symbolism with an allegorical effect. The allegorical elements of *Sankofa* were particularly effective in providing its audience members with ways to understand the story of Shola's story as both a historical and contemporary one. It helped spectatators to make connections between past racial and sexual injustices and present structural inequities.

I found that Gerima's cinematographic techniques privilege and empower oppressed characters. The camera angles foreground his characters eventually showing

them as agents of change in their environment. Furthermore, the characters are presented as connected and molded by their environments. Thus, the environment, or setting, becomes a character in its own right. Spectators are invited into both familiar and new environments through the characters experiences. Through the transformation process of the protagonist, spectators come to better understand familiar environments and discover new environments.

Gerima creates complex, experimental soundtracks that serve as another layer of narration. In addition, the spectator experiences a soundtrack that is both jarring and reassuring at the same time. My findings indicate that Gerima uses culturally relevant, and recognizable songs, spoken word, and instrumentals that are emotionally stimulating and intellectually challenging. Unlike the soundtracks of conventional cinema, Gerima's soundtracks serve to inform the spectator, as another voice in the film.

The findings in this study contribute to a better and more complex understanding of the breath and flexibility of Third Cinema. Additionally, the findings offer a way of looking at black progressive films through a theoretical framework that is as multifaceted as the films. Gabriel proposed three phases of Third Cinema in his theory. While I found that Gerima's Third Cinema influenced film is not in the combative phase, it demonstrates a variation of the combative phase that does not call for a change in leadership, but advocates for a radical change in historical representation and ideology. This study illustrates how Third Cinema theory and other alternative theories offer analytical frameworks to look at the social, political, and historical underpinnings of the black Third Cinema influenced films. And finally, the findings of this study contribute to black cinema history by providing an in-depth biography of a maverick of black

independent film and global African film. The film philosophy and approach of Haile Gerima offer black independent filmmakers a viable model for film production and distribution in a capitalist, and sometimes, hostile society.

It is important for future scholars to make in-depth studies of other Third Cinema influenced filmmakers and films in the African-American context. Building on this study may reveal patterns, techniques, innovations, and challenges for the continued development of a black independent film culture. It could help to establish linkages as well as breaks in black independent film history and global African film history. Future areas of research should look at the history of black film culture and institutions in the United States. In addition, future research should examine the collaborations between filmmakers within global African filmmakers. These are but a few of the areas of research concerning Third Cinema influenced film in the global African context that have been greatly neglected and warrant further attention.

**Future Challenges of Black Independent Film and Third Cinema**

In the past 15 years, the production of black independent film has become more accessible than ever before. The increased accessibility can be attributed to three main factors, the introduction of the digital film format, the increase of film and video production schools and programs, and the opening of movie studios by several black entertainers and entreprenuers. The digital format allows for increased mobility, decreased cost for equipment, supplies, and processing, and faster production time. However, in comparison to celluloid film, the digital format can often lack production value-making distribution even more difficult. The increase in film and video production

schools and programs has opened the door for more people, particularly people of color, to learn the craft of film and video making. In addition, these schools and programs grant film students and filmmakers access to expensive equipment and supplies at a more affordable cost. The trend of black-owned studios has been on the rise in the past 15 years with actor Tim Reed opening New Millennium Studios in Virginia in 1987, BET founder Robert Johnson opening Our Stories in Los Angeles in 2000, and actor-director Tyler Perry opening Tyler Perry Studios in Georgia in 2008. Each of these studios provides increased opportunity for black independents to produce their films. The increased accessibility of film production serves the Third Cinema ideals of demystifying and democratizing cinema.

Little has changed in respect to independent film funding in the past 15 years. Black independent filmmakers find the same, or perhaps increased, barriers to securing financing for their projects due to the barriers put in place by gatekeepers, a decreased pool of grant monies, and the increased competition for existing funding. The gatekeepers of funding organizations and production houses often fail to support films that are too experimental, overtly political, or critical of the status quo. At present, black filmmaking is narrowly defined to appeal to a cross-over mass audience. Presently this trend includes romantic comedies, family comedies and religious dramas. Even where a rare person of color has the power to fund projects, such as BET's CEO Debra Lee, the confines of the corporate structure make that individual unable to support black independent film work. It should be noted that there is a history of organizations that support the production of independent black films, such as the Black Programming Consortium, founded in 1979, and the Black Filmmakers Foundation, founded in 1978. However, their influence has

been in decline recently due to decreased grant funding and a seeming loss of purpose. There remains a need for infrastructure to support black independent filmmakers as Gerima advocates.

Funding from government agencies and grant organizations is presently experiencing leaner times. The conservative political climate of the last 8 years saw cuts in public broadcasting funding and federal grants, such as the National Endowment for the Arts. And while the Obama administration supports the public arts, the present economic downturn may prevent a reversal of Bush's cuts for some time. The increase in trained filmmakers over the course of the last 15 years has increased competition for film funding. Though some inroads have been made in educating and building a base of investors in black independent film, there is still much work to be done.

The distribution and exhibition of black independent cinema remains the biggest obstacle for black independent filmmakers. Little has changed in theatrical distribution in the past decade and a half. Thus, outside of industry-produced or industry-distributed black film, almost no black independent films have found national distribution. However, technology, specifically the Internet, has created alternative distribution opportunities and promotional sites. The Internet has ushered in new distribution outlets, such as podcasting and webcasting; online video rental and purchase services like Netflix; and websites and listserves such as "First Weekend Club," devoted to promoting black cinema.[37]

Another positive development for black independent cinema in the area of distribution and exhibition is the up-tick in high profile national black-oriented film

[37] "First Weekend Club" is a website and listserve dedicated to promoting black cinema by encouraging listserve members to attend black films during their opening weekend.

festivals, cable stations, and black theater ownership. Urbanworld Film Festival and Artmattan Film Festival, both held in New York City, American Black Film Festival, held in Miami, and the Pan-African Film Festival, held in Los Angeles, feature both black industry and independent films. Film festivals provide much needed exposure, build audience, and create networking opportunities for black independent filmmakers. Cable stations such as BET, TV One (a black owned station), HBO, TMC, MTV, IFC and Sundance program black independent films. BET, HBO, and MTV occasionally produce black films. An increase in black-owned theaters has also helped distribution and exhibition to a small degree. The Magic Johnson Theatres, presently in Harlem, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Houston, D.C. area, and Cleveland, and the Meridian Entertainment Group in Chicago are two black-owned theater chains. These theaters have provided screen space that black independents are unable to secure in mainstream theaters.

This study has contributed to a better understanding of the black spectator in relation to Third Cinema. The *Sankofa* experience demonstrated that Gerima's idea of Triangular Cinema where spectatorship is an interplay between committed parties who all help each other to transform and bring about change can be achieved with a great deal of groundwork put in place, the right film, and the right socio-political-historical climate. The dialectical process that the spectators experienced encouraged a more critical look at slave history and the business of filmmaking. The *Sankofa's* message resonated deeply with African-American spectators who left the theater proud and empowered. Black independent filmmakers are charged to continue to build on what Gerima and *Sankofa* accomplished.

In this present period of black independent cinema, the ideals set forth by Third Cinema are greatly challenged by the changing nature of spectatorship and shifts in world politics. Spectatorship is no longer primarily a communal activity occurring in theaters, living rooms, and community centers; the advent and availability of the computer, portable DVD players, and other technologies make it possible for any space to be a viewing venue and for the act of spectatorship to occur in solo. Additionally, the socialist leanings of early Third Cinema filmmakers, has been dwarfed by the expansion of capitalism, and the revolutionaries they idealized have been co-opted, silenced, or eliminated. The rise in multi-nationals and the concentration of power in the world economy challenges the concept of sovereign nationhood, and has rendered Third Cinema's goal of promoting and maintaining national culture tenuous. Third Cinema must continue to be firmly grounded in the cultural, political, and economic realities of a nation or a people. However, as the definition of nation shifts, this tenet becomes more complex.

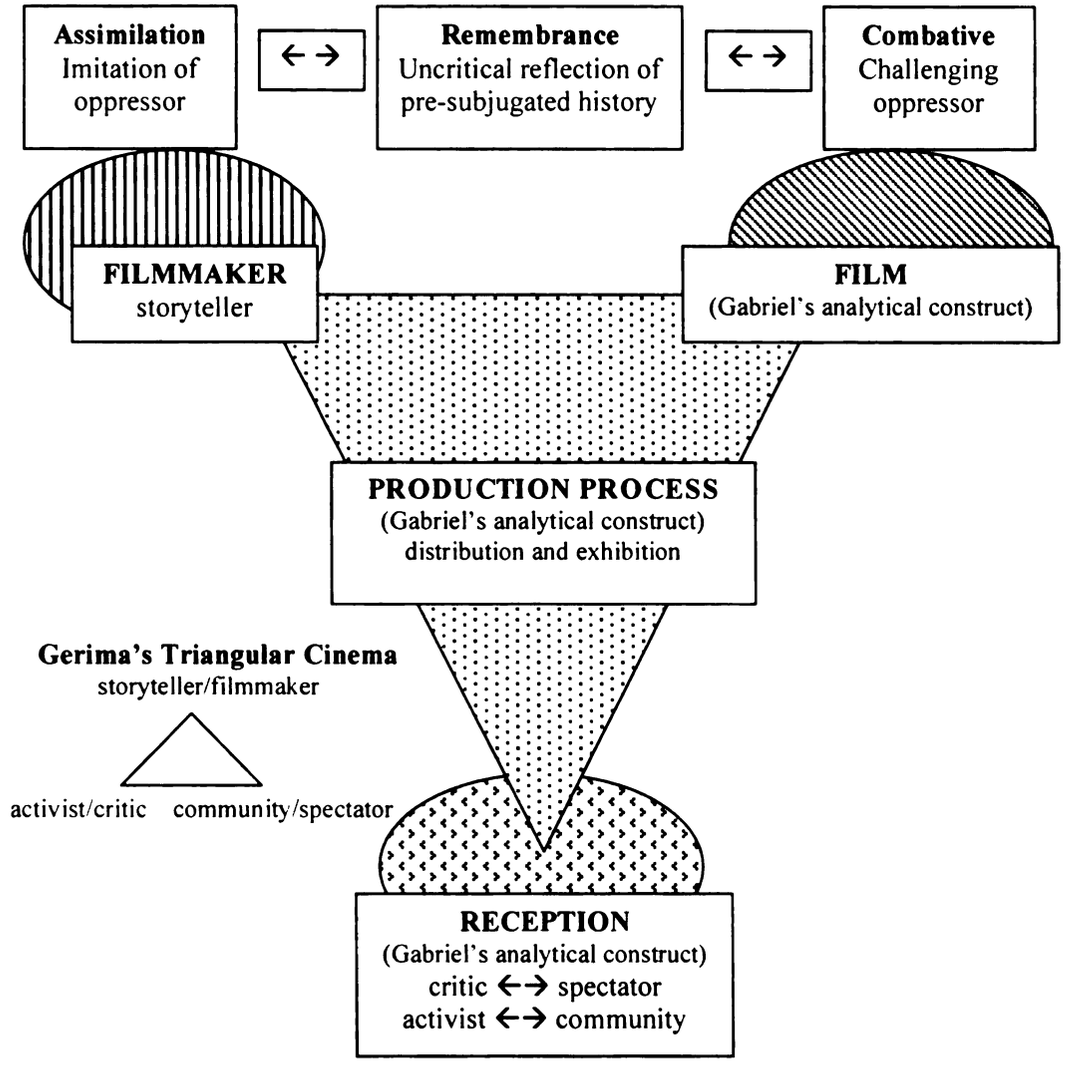
The Third Cinema movement today is indeed shifting to meet the needs of the times. The new Third Cinema paradigm must account for the complexities of today's global situation, such as the material and cultural flows and exchanges between countries and the divisions within particular nations. In addition, it must assume a more sophisticated, media-savvy spectator who is fully aware of his/her agency. Chanan holds that Third Cinema is expanding into new spaces (I would add geographic and ideological) and should be relabeled nomadic cinema, a term coined by Gabriel Teshome. This cinema exists outside national borders and is increasingly mobile and people-centered with the advent of cheaper and more accessible video, digital, and electronic

technologies. The concentration of media ownership coupled with the narrowness of ideology reflected in global media channels intensifies the need for creativity and grassroots efforts in production, distribution and exhibition, and the launch of a revamped Third Cinema movement.

## APPENDIX A

### TRIANGULAR COMMUNICATION MODEL

**Gabriel's Evolutionary Phases of Third World Film Culture**




**Reid's Black Womanist Spectator Positions (*Redefining*)**

| Assimilation | Accommodation | Resistance |
|---|---|---|
| Fully accepts film text as realistic and promotes authoritarian confirmation between filmmaker, film, and spectator | Accepts or rejects cultural elements of the film text depending on spectator's ideological stance | Rejects film text due to disconnect between the cultural subjectivity of spectator and his/her representation on film |

## APPENDIX B

### SPIRIT OF THE DEAD

Spirit of the Dead rise up,

Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your bird of passage.
Those stolen Africans step out of the ocean from the wombs of the ships and claim your story.

Spirit of the Dead rise up,

Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your vessel.
Those Africans shackled in leg irons and enslaved,
Step out of the acres of cane fields and cotton fields and tell your story.

Spirit of the Dead rise up,

Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your bird of passage.
Those lynched in the magnolias,
swinging on the limbs of the weeping willows,
rotting food for the vultures,
Step down and claim your story.

Spirit of the Dead rise up,

Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your vessel.
Those tied, bound, and whipped from Brazil to Mississippi
Step out and tell your story.
Those in Jamaica,
in the fields of Cuba,
in the swamps of Florida,
the rice fields of Carolina
You waiting Africans step out and tell your story.

Spirit of the Dead rise up,

Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your bird of passage.
From Alabama to Suriname,
Up to the caves of Louisiana.
Come out! You African Spirits,
Step out! And claim your stories.

## SPIRIT OF THE DEAD (cont.)

You raped,
Slave bred,
Castrated,
Burned,
Tarred and feathered,
Roasted, chopped, lobotomized,
Bound and gagged.
YOU African Spirits!!! Spirit of the Dead rise up,
Lingering Spirits of the Dead rise up and possess your bird of passage.

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*Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976)

*Wilmington 10 – U.S.A. 10,000* (1979)

*Ashes and Embers* (1982)

*After Winter: Sterling Brown* (1985)

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*Imperfect Journey* (1994)

*Adwa* (1999)

*TEZA* (2008)

*Adwa Part II: the Children of Adwa* (in post-production)

*The Maroons Film Project* (in post-production)