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Dissertation

“You Must Be African!”

A Heuristic Deconstruction of Black Identity Production Through the Use of African Elements in African American Film

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Abstract

In dieser Arbeit werden sowohl afrikanische Charaktere als auch Repräsentationen von Kleidung, Musik, Zeichen oder Symbolen, deren Ästhetik als afrozentrisch beschrieben werden kann, identifiziert und kritisch betrachtet. Zusammenfassend als „afrikanische Elemente“ bezeichnet, dient ihre Präsenz oft der Kontrastierung der in den Vordergrund gestellten afroamerikanischen Charaktere und Geschichten und operiert in dieser Kapazität zwischen der gleichzeitigen Sehnsucht nach und der Ablehnung Afrikas, die sich in den afroamerikanischen Identitäten ablesen lassen.

Obwohl in anderen Teildisziplinen der African American Studies - wie etwa den Literatur- oder Theaterwissenschaften - die Beziehungen zu und die Bezugnahme auf Afrika bereits untersucht wurden, sind ähnliche Ansätze auf dem Gebiet der Filmwissenschaften noch deutlich unterrepräsentiert. Die Intention dieser Arbeit liegt deshalb darin, die bestehende Forschung um die Fragestellung zu ergänzen, auf welche Weise diese Elemente dargestellt werden. Wie tragen sie zu den Narrativen bei, in die sie eingeflochten sind und wie spiegelt ihre Einbindung in die ausgewählten Filme die jeweilige Politik, die kulturelle Ästhetik und die sozialen Entwicklungen ihrer Entstehungsära wider?

Den konzeptionellen Rahmen der Arbeit bildet eine kumulative Vorgehensweise. Es werden jene Faktoren untersucht, die zur Auswahl, visuellen Umsetzung und Repräsentation der afrikanischen Elemente, auf die Bezug genommen wird, beigetragen haben. Die Arbeit verhandelt dabei auch die Frage, wie und warum bestimmte Auffassungen von Afrika und seinen Bewohnern in den besprochenen Filmen fortbestehen. Schließlich soll mit der Arbeit innerhalb der derzeit bestehenden Forschung ein Grundstein für die differenziertere Betrachtung Schwarzer Erfahrungen in den ausgewählten Filmen gelegt werden.

Abstract

This study identifies and critically assesses African characters as well as representations of dress, music, signs or symbols, which may be described as Africacentric in their aesthetic, in African American film. Collectively termed as African elements, their presence in the selected films is often distinguished from the foregrounded African American characters and stories, and in this capacity, operates between the concurrent desires and negations of Africa in the assertions of African American identities.

Although within other scholarly disciplines in African American studies, such as literature or theatre studies, the relations and references to Africa have been explored, similar explorations in the area of film studies are arguably underrepresented. The specific contribution of this study therefore intends to expand on the existing body of work in its assessment of the ways in which these elements are presented, how they contribute to the narratives they are engaged in and how their inclusion in the selected films reflect the contemporary politics, cultural aesthetic and social trends of the era in which they are produced.

The conceptual framework of the thesis follows a cumulative approach where the respective determinants that have contributed to the choice, visualisation, and representations of the referenced African elements are examined. The thesis thereby negotiates questions of how and why particular perceptions of Africa and Africans in the selected films persist. Ultimately, it establishes a premise for why in the current scholarship there should be a place for a more differentiated analysis of black experiences within the discussed films.

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Table of Contents

1. Complicit Constructions: Film and the Constituting of Black Identities

I travelled to New York in October 2008 and was therefore present in the final, heady weeks that preceded the election of Barack Obama into office. Here was a relative unknown to the wider US American public, who not only had the academics and public service experience to back his apparent charm, he identified as African American and was now knocking on the door of the presidency. His running and his being a strong contender not only spoke to the popular, "American Dream" contention that "hard work leads to success," it also seemed to lend credence to the insistent argument that the US at the time was a "post-racial" nation, which was now demonstrably valuing merit above all. For Black and minority communities in the US, Obama became a powerful, unifying symbol of resilience that challenged the racist systems developed and maintained to oppress this demographic.

Being based in Brooklyn and surrounded by politically conscious African Americans during that time afforded me the invaluable experience of witnessing the positive, galvanising power of the community around me, noted especially in the last-minute pro-Obama get-togethers that proliferated. As a result, when I returned home, I followed with novel interest the US presidential race, and the debates and discussions around not only the historical impact and legacy of that election, but also of who Obama was.

As I followed, I noticed that increasingly (though still remaining on the fringes of "real" debate), discussions which negotiated the significance of naming him the first "African American president of the United States," occasionally found traction on media sites and prompted commentary and further contestation around this topic. In other words, I found that debate on the election and on his character and qualifications, gave way to debate about the authenticity of his African Americanness and thus the legitimacy of his being called "the first African American president," as opposed to "the first black president of the United States" or "the first mixed-race president," as Morgan Freeman famously stated in an interview on NPR (Freeman 2012).[1] Such discussion reminded me of one of the chief oversights which persist in Black empowerment rhetoric (notable in music, film and television, literature, or movements like Black Power or Afrocentrism) which insist on policing the definitions of "black" and ascribing value according to these perceived differences.

[1] National Public Radio (NPR) is a reputable American non-profit news and cultural media organisation in the United States. The interview with Freeman was broadcast as part of the NPR-produced news-talk show *Tell Me More* on July 3rd, 2012. Arguably, it was Debra Dickerson's claim that "… Obama isn't black" in an article for *Salon* that triggered the involvement of a broader public audience in this problematic discussion (Dickerson 2007).

Coupled with a few choice experiences of my own whilst in New York regarding which black identity I was seen to represent, this flawed discussion on the classification of Obama's blackness re-engaged my personal interest on the subject of black identities, and fixed more determinedly in my mind the desire for a more thorough pursuit of the subject, with a focus on the popular cultural medium of film.

1.1 Film as a Cultural Industry

In a global society whose industries are becoming increasingly visually mediated, the role of images as a form of cultural expression and/or cultural allegiance, becomes an important contributor to social and political definition, particularly in terms of individual and group identity construction. Collective nationalisms[2] and ideas of citizenship within them constitute social particularisms which are continuously maintained in various, abundant ways (though not exclusively) in areas such as sports, job types or roles and cultural industries. The latter, I suggest, include food, music, literature, cinema, television, and other forms of artistic expression, including "fine" or "street" art, blogging, tweeting and/or Instagramming. Within these industries, further divisions can be made between what is perceived as commercial and non-commercial.

It should be noted, however, that affinities to these "collective nationalisms" and their ideas of citizenship does not mean that individuals are fixed in whichever identity they choose or are seen to represent. These processes are much more fluid and therefore more complex than may be understood by my construction. I therefore want to be explicit in stating that the elements which contribute to individual (and eventually, collective) identity constructions are in constant flux because of the increased connectivity of the global community, due in part to the use of social media and therefore transnational connections, and to cheaper and more pervasive travel options. Consequently, individuals have greater exposure to and experience alternate ideas of selfhood which are arguably outside the rigid implications of the traditional forms I cited, and which are also likely to be more readily accepted by the wider community if a shift should occur in an individual's idea of Self.

Reflecting the increasing importance of the visual form in every aspect of our lives today, and the increasing transmission of control of image production to one which is more individual-centred, identities, their constructions, and constitutive elements continue to

[2] I use this term here to mean any idea of the Self as part of a notional community in which members are seen to be part of a collective which represents unitary, socially or politically constructed objectives.

become increasingly dynamic and expansive, as do the roles of the "maintaining elements" briefly cited as examples above (i.e., cultural industries, job types or roles or sports).

As written by Stuart Hall in *Looking and Subjectivity*, "[the] visual sign's ability to import meaning remains as a potential unless these meanings are produced. This production of meaning insists on the subjective process of looking and interpreting to inject meaning into the virtual presentations" (Evans and Hall 1999: 310). In this way, film can act as a medium of cultural communication whose messages have an impact on the perception of the identities they have had a part in constructing via their narratives. Thus, at a base level, film theory makes the assertion that watching a film involves the implicit and necessary engagement of both denotative and connotative interpretations, the latter of which relies on familiarity of the film's underlying social, political and cultural contexts. For without such knowledge, the intended meaning behind the narrative and aesthetic choices in the film would be lost (Lapsley and Westlake vi). Thus, as posited by Manthia Diawara *Black British Cultural Studies*, the viewer is necessarily placed in a position of agency (293).[3] As such, the audience is as equally complicit in this production of meaning as the makers of the film (i.e., the writers, directors, producers, editors, etc).

1.1.1 Black Identities in Film

Just as group or individual identities are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in relation to one another, black identities (namely, Africans, diasporic Africans,[4] Caribbeans and African American identities) inform each other with varying outcomes of cultural and political expression, dependent on the degrees of value that one puts on the other. By looking at how this "construction and reconstruction" occurs in the African American films selected for this study, focusing on the dynamics between African and African American identities in particular, the analyses presented here intend to highlight and examine the complexities of such processes and the subsequent necessity of its discussion in African American film scholarship.

Alluding again to the transformative potential of the spectator's complicity in the production of meaning in a film, Diawara notes: "The spectator and the objects on the screen are locked together in a struggle that modifies both their identities" (1996: 295). It is this

[3] "...just as the subject holds a sentence together through his/her/its relation to the different parts of the sentence, the spectator too occupies a position without which the film is a meaningless discursive fragment" (Diawara 1996: 293).
[4] A continually contested term meant to identify all black-identifying people outside the African continent. See Gilroy 1993, Appiah 1993, Arthur 2010, Falola 2013, Manning 2013, Irele 2001, hooks 2013.

"struggle" that is of particular interest here especially in its suggestion that how the viewer reads or experiences the film changes the value of the film, depending on what they take from it, combined with what the film wants to transport to its audience. Positive responses by the spectator to the representational quality of the film and/or to the strength of the narrative, legitimate a film's success which is reflected financially or by a continued favourable reception in the form of good reviews or audience recommendations. At the same time, the necessity of spectatorship in film means that it is constantly shaping alternate ideas of Self for every person that watches, which ultimately, as Stuart Hall writes, ". . . enable[s] us to discover who we are" (2000: 714).

The biggest players in the global commercial culture industries are currently Western-based (i.e., in Europe or North America), a contention which is validated by the fact that both measure ideas of success on whether or not whichever music album, film or sports star each has exported, has been received favourably on the other side of the ocean. When a television series, film or a song is produced from these sites, the powerful distribution networks employed on their behalves ensure that these products are disseminated as widely as possible, thereby contributing to the universal definitions and standardisation of whichever social conventions or cultural presentations the production transports. It also subsequently sets and reifies the paradigms of commercial "success" to the less powerful players in these industries. These western-based industries thus occupy a position of power in the construction and maintenance of global cultural and social convention.

Some of North America's most prolific and influential transnational cultural exports are sociologically ascribed to African America or are African Americans. Though in the peculiar position of being agents and non-agents (given the commercialisation strategies of the predominantly white-run US American culture industries), what is broadcast as "African American," is often understood as "black," with the associated celebrities as the vehicles of this. By virtue of being citizens[5] of one of the most powerful and influential members of this "West," African Americans when encountering Africa and Africans are simultaneously treated and behave in a way that reflects the experience and power of being Western. In other words, as a consequence of the hierarchy of inscribed value in cultural productions of "blackness," African Americans occupy a dominant position, which is ultimately expressed in relations between Africans and African Americans. What often quickly becomes apparent at such a convergence (i.e., when Africans and African Americans interact in both real or

[5] A complex debate rages about the validity of such a statement, which I will be returning to later in this chapter.

imagined contexts) is the either subconscious or active difference-making or idealisation and/or idolisation by and between the two black identities.

These encounters also hold the potential for positive associations and connections via a mutual identification as "black," which is due in part to the idea of shared oppression experienced by both black identities because of their black skins. For as Patricia Hill Collins notes,

> African Americans have not been alone in suffering the economic penalties associated with Blackness. People of African descent and those who are sociologically constructed as "Black" within their societies (for example, indigenous people in Canada, Afro-Brazilians under policies of racial democracy, and darker-skinned people within the caste system of India) are routinely disadvantaged in this global economy (2006: 7).

In terms of power relations however – either motivated by capital or perceived cultural superiority by either black identity – in such an encounter, there necessarily exists a subject and a dominant black identity, which can shift depending on what the circumstances of the meeting are. Although these are not fixed occurrences, they still resonate in contemporary experiences between African Americans and Africans.[6] Referencing Michel Foucault, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said's elucidations of how knowledge, which is defined by how the one who claims it is able to demonstrate a complete, comprehensive overview of the Other it is describing, and of how that translates to power, serves as an apt premise regarding a reading of the subject and dominant power relations that exist between these black identities. Though at first, such an assertion appears to be an over-reached attempt at qualifying this contention, my interest here is in the understanding and explanation of the processes of difference-making and the power ascribed to that.

As articulated and reflected in the films I will refer to below, the "knowledge" of Africa and Africans (which, in effect, consequently produces "Africans" as well as a culture, history and geography of the continent), is constituted in and on terms defined by both African American and the white US American interests that facilitated the films' productions. In these films, the dominant actor (i.e., African Americans) stands in contrast to the subject Other (in this instance, African) whose function within such a relationship establishes and validates the former.

The understanding behind the use of "Other" here does not suggest in the Hegelian vein that in these contexts African American identities cease to exist without the presence

[6] See "*Americanah*" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her July 14th, 2013 *Boston Review* interview by Aaron Bady about the book, which suggests that although it is fictional, it is inspired by non-fictional experiences and impressions. More will be made of this association later in this chapter.

and subjectivised positioning of the African. It is meant to highlight the exploitation inherent to the selective incorporation of African cultural expressions in African American self-construction. This process is considered "exploitative" because I argue that while this happens, there fails to be an equal degree of value derived from both sides in these filmic encounters.

To add to the nuances of "Othering," as Lacan suggests in discussing this dichotomy, the "Other" and the Self share a likeness. This means that the construction of the Self through the Other can occur because of recognition. Seeing (a part or the whole of) itself reflected in the Other, the Self becomes "real" or is able to recognise and thus contextualise its own existence (Mellard 225-27).

Thus, conceptually, what an "African American is," is necessarily defined by contrasting with what it believes it is not, (as exemplified in the strong subtext of the discussion on the legitimacy of Barack Obama's African Americanness), while at the same time through self-recognition in the African Other. The claiming of African Americanness through processes of creating an excluded Other while simultaneously revelling in a likeness in the way that it happens in the discussed films, forms an important part of the enquiries of this thesis. As such, how Africa and Africans are reproduced or represented on African American screens from the perspective of African American identity-construction politics will comprise the centre of the argumentations presented here.

As the political themes of the films selected for this study deal with defining an African American identity by addressing issues of US citizenship and creating avenues for positive group-associations, they necessarily require the defining of an African American identity. Though succinctly worded, this process is most decidedly not, and any foray into the matter involves a series of complex and infinite considerations that are not only beyond the scope of this thesis but should be free from any cursory conflation. The analyses will therefore not seek or propose an answer to this issue. It will, however, address the generally perceived consensus that at the centre of an indisputable mutual identification between African Americans as a whole, is the place of Africa in African American histories.

Due to the pervasiveness of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, this process often unavoidably necessitates identification with the continent as a whole, meaning representations of Africa or Africans in African American art, literature, films, or as part of black consciousness projects, are often subsequently reductionist in execution and arbitrary. By using popularly available, biased impressions as a springboard, the constructed cultural suppositions of Africans therefore lead to tensions between perceived African and African

American identities.

1.1.2 African American Cinema and African Elements

Within the framework presented above regarding the necessary complicity of the viewer in the reception of a film, "African American film" here will refer to those in which the language, settings and/or narrative can be sociologically ascribed to African America, because in such films, the focus of the diegetic and extra-diegetic references insists on reading them within African American contexts or identifying them as such. In other words, in order to "read" the film as it is intended, one must be aware of the references which inform the actions taking place in the film. For example, stories like those in Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977) address the experiences of slavery and the loss and construction of African American cultural history, while films like *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973) or *Higher Learning* (1995) deal with African American citizenship, as well as the importance of the acquisition of knowledge for an effective and necessary black empowerment in and for the process of defining that citizenship. The term "African American film" in this study therefore refers to films whose principal cast is black, or which have been written, directed and produced by black people and/or which are recognised by a black audience as a film whose narrative and aesthetic are directed at them.[7] The selected films are those which drew relatively big audiences and/or had a significant following. These are films which therefore contributed to and were informed by contemporary African American popular cultural trends.

The body of filmic works that will be explored include: *Shaft in Africa* (1973), *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), *Coming to America* (1988), *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), *Sankofa* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), and *Barbershop* (2002). These films challenged in their varied ways, racism and issues around African American individual and collective agency. Some seek to re-imagine and re-interpret history from an African American point of view, claiming authenticity with reference to meticulous research, while others whose explorations are openly experimental in their narrative and stylistic approaches, blur the borders of fact and fantasy.

The influences of contemporary political developments occurring outside the US (i.e., in Africa, Asia and Latin America), on ideas of African American self-determination can be

[7] The term "black" is used here because in films like *Shaft in Africa* for example, there are other members of the cast who are Black British or Ethiopian, or in others like *Sankofa*, directors or crew who do not identify as African American. Additionally, these films reach a wider audience outside the US, who identify as black and are not African American.

noted throughout the timeline in which the above-mentioned films were produced. Moreover, these films reflect the changing role of Africa in the black consciousness movements of the US, whose influence can be observed in their narratives.[8] The political themes of these films are often concerned with African American empowerment which, as is posited above, is often rooted in an Africa-based foundation. Consequently, the plots and character developments in the films often call into play popular perceptions of Africa and Africans and how these contribute to the situating of African American identities.

This research project will therefore be dealing with the inclusion and representations of, specifically, African references in African American film. To this end, African characters as well as representations of dress, music, signs or symbols, which may be described as Africa-centric[9] in their aesthetic in African American film will be identified and critically assessed. These will collectively be termed "African elements," an expression used by Richard Dyer in his study, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (85 ff.). The body of this investigation is formed by exploring the three primary ways in which these elements operate: firstly, in their presentation, secondly, in their contributions to the narratives, and thirdly, how their inclusion reflects the contemporary politics, cultural aesthetic and social trends of the era in which the films are produced.

Central to this exploration will be observations of how and why the employment of African elements in the films discussed can reflect not only the dominant popular-culture politics at the time of production (e.g., Afrocentrism or Black Power) and their specific effect on narratives and characters in African American film, but also the simultaneous embracing and rejecting of Africa and the idealistic constructions of the continent (including literally, as in the case of *Coming to America*). These African elements constitute sound (i.e., spoken phrases, including accents, names, Africa-centric hand-drumming, ululations and choral incantations), hairstyles, clothing (i.e., jewellery, colours and prints on dress and head-wear), props (i.e., maps, posters, sculptures and flags), settings (i.e., jungles or the former slave fort, Elmina) and African-based spiritual references (i.e., associations to and affinities with "ancestors").

[8] Though decidedly less overtly political in this sense, *Barbershop* (2002) and other films which were made in the 2000s point to perceptions of Africa and Africans which have been informed as a result of the processes of globalisation, whose influences resonated culturally amongst African Americans.

[9] This term, here and for the remainder of this thesis, refers to any object, which, in its visual and aural aesthetic and expression, is synonymous with Africa or is African.

1.2 Intersections: Influences, Themes, Objectives and Receptions

The intersection of influences, themes and objectives, with the reception and resonances in these films demand closer enquiry because of the predicament that this convergence reveals about ideas of what it means to be "black,"[10] what it means to be a "black" man or woman in America, as well as on how conceptions of black identities – when used as a unifying, collective term – affect views of Africa and Africans. Taking into consideration the timeline of the selected films, I will present how the urgency to improve the subject, "non"-citizen status that African Americans occupied historically in the US became more pronounced, and how the search for a unifying cultural heritage thus put Africa at the centre.

As has been argued, "black" is not a homogenous identity. Although it may be dealt with as such in figurative terms through black empowerment ideologies or philosophies (i.e., "on paper"), it is not dealt with as such in reality.[11] The observations that will emerge from this premise will stress that a salient consequence of this conundrum is a difficult intersection of appropriation, rejection and dependence, brought on by the necessary processes of objectification inherent in the construction of one identity by another. Coupled with ideologies and philosophies presented in the black consciousness movements – who at their cores reject division within the collective identity they are trying to form and reify – this conundrum causes a curious confusion, which arguably, ultimately undermines the objectives of these emancipatory, all-encompassing ideologies and philosophies.

1.2.1 Influences: Black Consciousness and African American Self-Determination

[10] I use inverted commas here in order to distinguish this use of the term black from my previous use, in order to highlight that in this context (i.e., the way it is used in the films), it refers to the term as used by African Americans to mean "African American," and the subsequent reference to an idea of a culturally "authentic" conception of African Americanness.

[11] Malcolm X's 1964 speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, makes reference to this peculiarity:

> Right now, in this country, if you and I, 22 million African-Americans -- that's what we are -- Africans who are in America. You're nothing but Africans. Nothing but Africans. In fact, you'd get farther calling yourself African instead of Negro. Africans don't catch hell. You're the only one catching hell. They don't have to pass civil-rights bills for Africans. An African can go anywhere he wants right now. All you've got to do is tie your head up. That's right, go anywhere you want. Just stop being a Negro. Change your name to Hoogagagooba. That'll show you how silly the white man is. You're dealing with a silly man. A friend of mine who's very dark put a turban on his head and went into a restaurant in Atlanta before they called themselves desegregated. He went into a white restaurant, he sat down, they served him, and he said, "What would happen if a Negro came in here? And there he's sitting, black as night, but because he had his head wrapped up the waitress looked back at him and says, "Why, there wouldn't no nigger dare come in here. "

The challenges which grew from the interminable denial of a common US American national identity for African Americans, brought the Du Boisian "strife"[12] to the forefront of many political and cultural dialogues which proliferated from the turn of the 20th century on. The call to construct a new identity disassociated from prevailing negative stereotypes and set in an ideology which encourages a sense of self-worth and collective dignity found particularly vigorous, public action and voice between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s.

> Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee -- the cry is always the same: 'We want to be free' (King Jr. 1968).

As can be heard in Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech, the successful independence struggles in Asia and those in Africa – beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1970s – were motivating factors in the emergence of the civil rights activities that dominated the 1960s in the US. African American political voices like Martin Luther King Jr.'s, alluded to these triumphs over white political and cultural colonisation which indicated a rhetorical shift from previous references, that saw Africa and Africans as a continent and a people which would benefit from African American influence, as was envisaged by black nationalist activists like Martin R. Delany.[13] Delany's reference to a rich heritage, "[the] shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx" (46), together with Marcus Garvey's speculation, "[it] is only a question of a few more years when Africa will be completely colonized by Negroes" (52), seemed to finally be taking shape with the establishment of these new, independent African countries.

Historically excluded from the wider economy and considered pariahs by white America, it could be argued that African Americans were both citizens and non-citizens of a nation which systematically kept them segregated and exploited, thereby necessitating and encouraging the search for other ways of creating community cohesion and positive self-identification. Widely publicised by the works and actions of Garvey and Du Bois, Pan-Africanism was seen as a way in which African Americans and indeed black people worldwide could become a force of united empowerment against the racist, imperialist challenges presented by white political and societal hegemony. Pan-Africanism is an

[12] "One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (Du Bois 45).

[13] Delany, for example, in his publication, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, conceived a railway which would run from East to West Africa, promoting trade across the continent.

ideology which promotes the unity of all black people based on the principle of a shared African heritage, as well as the active desire to build and maintain social and political networks which would serve the economic betterment of all black people.[14] By virtue of their successful decolonisation campaigns, African independence leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Samora Machel, Ahmed Sékou Touré, Gamal Abd El Nasser, and many other outspoken advocates of Pan-Africanism, leant credence to the ideology which meant that it found renewed vigour during the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, many of its concepts can be detected in later black consciousness ideologies that have since developed and evolved, such as Black Power or Afrocentrism.

From blaxploitation (1970s) to the hood film (1990s) phases of the African cinematic record, the influence of the contemporary black consciousness movements on conceptions of a unified, group identity as well as their references to real or imagined Africa and/or Africans, are an important part of the narratives of the selected films. The political themes within this cinematic record frequently deal with matters of citizenship and collective uplift, which both require in the first place, the defining of an African American identity. As has been posited, this involves viewing Africa as a central point of origin and as a source of history for the purposes of an Africa-centric cultural rootedness. Eventually, as notable in the hood and post-hood film phases, these "political themes" turned to focus more on urban realities in specific cities or neighbourhoods and the challenges faced by the African American communities in them (i.e., drugs and poverty in *New Jack City*, or the destruction of the community by capitalist interests as shown in *Barbershop*). In these cases Africa as a unifying element is not dealt with in the narratives in as direct terms as it had been previously (e.g., in *Shaft in Africa* or *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*). When the emphasis in the popular political ideologies and philosophies explored in some of these African American films begins to shift to focus more on an African American identity with particular, discernible cultural markers, as a corollary, the narratives in these films tend to concentrate more on the need to differentiate African Americans from Africans (and other black identities). In such circumstances it is sometimes then only important for the filmmakers and actors to, for example, simply show that "this is an African" as a way of highlighting some aspect of an African American character, or in setting these black identities apart from each other.

[14] From a wealth of scholarly material which affirms this definition, see for example, Agboton 2012, Geiss 1974, Gilroy 1993, or James 2012.

1.2.2 Themes and Objectives

The engagement of African elements can be identified at various points of the African American cinematic record and thus cannot be confined to any one era, genre or production mode (i.e., mainstream or independent cinema). Because the use of African elements transcends these usually distinct cinematic categories, their employment will be explored here as a theme, alternating in its utilisation with each film.

African elements function or operate in several ways, often varying with the genre and the target audience. They either, 1) are engaged in a way that draws on historical facts and events in order to establish African American connections with Africa, 2) contribute to and facilitate the comedy of the scenes they occupy, 3) are employed in a way that erotically objectifies African bodies and/or makes references to their supposed excessive sexuality, or 4) remain uncommented on although they signify a larger thematic complex beyond their actual existence within the film. These four key categories of employment will form the basis of investigation in this thesis. They are discussed separately for the sake of a conceptual analysis although often two or more of these categories overlap and interplay with one another.

I would like momentarily to refer to the proposed selection of films in order to highlight the engagement of African elements in them. The purpose of such a demonstration is to reveal how, and to what end, trends in the themes of the films and their affinities to their respective contemporary popular black consciousness activities, incorporate African elements into their narratives. This brief undertaking will illustrate how these popular and successful African American films reproduce and nurture contentious impressions of Africa and Africans in their quest to establish and/or maintain a distinct African American identity. Ultimately, it will also establish the premise for why in the current scholarship there should be a place for a more differentiated analysis of black experiences within the discussed films, though some have already been subject to academic discussion.

For example, in relation to the above-referenced comedic contributions, in the commercially successful, *Barbershop*, the role of the African character, Dinka (Leonard Earl Howze), like Imani Izzi's (Vanessa Bell Calloway) in *Coming to America* (whose role is also subject to the misogynist overcurrent present throughout the film), is both limited and controlled because within the story, the African American characters (as well as the actors and films' producers) retain the power to reiterate and interpret what is shown to be African practices, looks and speech, either through performance or in dialogue. As a result, the

"Africans" become useful springboards insofar as they assist the progress of the African American characters or simply provide comic relief or humorous situations.

As a by-product of comedies such as *Coming to America* (1988) or as seen in the drama *Jungle Fever* (1991), the erotic objectification of African bodies and references to their supposed excessive sexuality also facilitate the development of the African American characters. For example, in *Coming to America*, this can be observed in the characterisation of the African women portrayed therein. In *Jungle Fever*, Inez (Theresa Randle) claims to reconcile her "full spectrum" dating by making "a pilgrimage to Africa, the motherland [to] find [herself] a true tribesman." By "full spectrum dating," Inez means all men irrespective of ethnicity. As the conversation continues, the women refer to the size of this imaginary tribesman's genitals. Thus, in order to rectify her perceived transgressions against the African American community, Inez suggests being with an African man to "clean her slate."

African characters rendered in this capacity often have little or no agency and/or merely seem to fulfil sexual desires. Be it subservient women or endlessly potent men, the sexual availability of the African characters in such narratives is always already a given.

In terms of a historiographic engagement, *Sankofa* and *Daughters of the Dust* use African elements to reinforce the idea of a resilient ancestral connection which allows (and has allowed) the African American characters in the stories to transcend their physical and/or mental imprisonment, (i.e., slavery and/or the legacy of slavery). These characters find strength to meet their challenges because they acknowledge and accept an Africa-centric cultural origin. Whilst making connections with Africa by focusing on a spiritual legacy that survived the slave trade, the use of the African elements in these films thus becomes a way in which an African American viewership can construct a strong collective identity through a process of (re)discovery from a self-determinist perspective. At the same time, the two films highlight the fluidity of that "origin;" that it is impossible to define and is therefore necessarily created and recreated by the individual. Such films (and series like *Roots*) draw on historical facts and events to establish African American's connections with Africa.

The visual remaking of life in an African village in *Roots*, attempts to reproduce the Africa that Kunta Kinte (LeVar Burton) came from. The Africa created and performed here is imagined as a positive symbolic space. Moreover, presenting Islam as Kunta's faith (which reflects aspects of the then burgeoning black nationalist ideology and which was the religion chosen by those African Americans who sought to identify themselves more closely with an African heritage) whilst at the same time including a loose reproduction of some aspects of West African cultural practices (like the boys' initiation ceremony), hints at the very

subjective process of interpreting or producing Africa. In a paradoxical shift from the films described in the comic or sexual categories above, such reproductions are usually atavistic in their approach. Conversely, although also engaged in the creation of an African geography, *Coming to America's* kingdom of Zamunda is an obvious work of fantasy, with the object of showcasing an ostentatiously wealthy, hyper-civilised African society. The formalities and stringent codes of conduct displayed point to an Africa which, in its Edenic perfection, allows the viewer to vacillate between longing to be there and the relief that they are not. The film thus presents the opportunity for a double reading of the "idyllic Africa" trope, which is arguably contrary to the impression left by the one presented in *Roots*.

Although inspired by similar motivations for the narrative objectives of *Roots*, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* takes on a different approach. Unlike *Roots*, the story takes place in one setting where all the generations are presented together – including an unborn child who is also the narrator. It has a more spiritual and poetic emphasis and by constructing the narrative in an isolated setting, Dash allows herself the possibility of creating a world of her making, independent of the limitations which would affect a story which is trying to fit a particular history.

Ultimately, despite making a link to contemporary African America by following a genealogy (*Roots*), focusing on a preserved culture in an isolated location (*Daughters of the Dust*), or reinvigorating visions of powerful African kingdoms as *Coming to America* does, each emphasises an imagined Africa and/or African cultural practice(s). As the historically white privilege of writing and interpreting American history has shaped (and been shaped by) the available visual images, these filmic works seek to re-imagine and re-interpret history and Africa from an African American point of view, which, as will be illustrated in chapters three and four, has the dual and limiting effect of simultaneously creating an Africa and Africans who are reductionist and fixed in their representations.

There is also a considerable collection of films in which African elements are present yet disjointed from a direct relationship with African characters, though they signify a larger thematic complex which transcends their function within the film. These elements are often props and costume which remain uncommented on, although they, in narratives which portray struggles against white domination in films like *Higher Learning*, invoke images and a rhetoric of Africa, arguably, to create a connection to the struggle for and the success of winning independence from white political power, such as those led by African countries during decolonisation. In *Higher Learning*, the resolute, defiant African American character, Fudge (O'Shea Jackson, known as Ice Cube), is often presented displaying such affiliations

and knowledge, for example in the way his room is decorated, or in various parts of his dialogues.[15]

In one of the dramatic high points of *New Jack City* which is accompanied by an energetic hand-drum soundtrack, the hero, Scotty Appleton (Ice-T, also, Tracy Marrow) grabs at a leather pendent which displays the map of Africa worn by the villain and rhetorically questions his allegiance to the community nationalism inspired by Afrocentrism and its endeavours for collective, community uplift: "How the hell you gon' wear this and sell poison to our people? You ain't shit!" At this point, Scotty rips off the leather pendant he is referring to (01:28:29 minutes).

As in *Higher Learning*, the African elements in *New Jack City*,[16] appear as props, costume and extra-diegetic music, and their employment again suggests strength derived from the acknowledgement and establishing of common denominators with African identities in order to overcome the challenges they are faced with, stemming from the white American hegemony presented in the film.

Similar to these narratives, films like *Shaft in Africa* and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (*The Spook*) emphasise that freedom from white oppression as experienced by African Americans is precipitated by self-determination and collective pride. In *The Spook*, references are made to how independence in Africa and Asia were won through organised guerrilla action and how these fights were motivated by the self-determination of the oppressed peoples. Most importantly however, as the lead character Dan Freeman (Lawrence Cook) states, the narrative stresses that this fight should not be rooted in "hate for white people" as a consequence of their historically conflicted relations, but in the desire for community betterment.[17] That is: African Americans should not only be able to identify who the "real enemy" is (i.e., the dominant white American hegemony), they should be fighting for proactive as opposed to reactive reasons; that African Americans should fight because they want to improve their social and political positions from a place of pride rather than one of anger. In *Shaft in Africa*, this desire for freedom from white oppression is demonstrated by the fact that the plot is centred on a slave trade, which takes Africans out of Africa to be used for the financial betterment of European powers. This mirrors the history of African Americans in America. Shaft, who is characterized as the embodiment of defiance and individual pride, destroys it; an African American who, now presented with the chance,

[15] An elaboration of this example will be presented in chapter three.
[16] This is with the exception of the scene of the final "show down" between Scotty and the villain, where Scotty verbally (and therefore directly) addresses the African element worn by his adversary.
[17] See *The Spook* 00:47:38 to 00:48:16 minutes.

valiantly stamps out slavery. Despite being peripheral to the narrative as a whole, the African elements nevertheless act in a catalytic capacity for whichever African American character they are associated with.[18]

1.2.3 Receptions

American film scholarship notes the way in which both mainstream and independent African American cinemas have been informed and influenced by shifting social movements and politics. They also examine and offer up critical ways of assessing representations of African American characters in US American mainstream film. Within this body of scholarship, there are some critical works which touch on the contributions of African elements, and from these, I would like to highlight the works of Richard Dyer (1986), Louis Chude-Sokei (2006) and Paula J. Massood (2003).

While demonstrating how these works touch on the subjects and themes this study aims to deal with, examples from the selected films will be introduced as a way of explicating how further investigation into what these scholarly texts present with regard to African elements in the films they discuss and the angles of their approaches, could have been enriched by further assessments, had the scholars considered them. Although the main foci of these academic investigations are not dedicated to the presence of African elements in African American film, each has given important impulse to this thesis.

In *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer examines the filmic works of Paul Robeson and their employment of African elements for the sake of authentication. He critically approaches the way in which Robeson confronts and represents Africa and Africans. He addresses this process of authentication, writing that ". . . when confronting Africa, the black Westerner has to cope with the fact that she or he is of the West" (86). He notes that Robeson, relying on contemporary ethnographic material available on Africa and bringing in, for example, "real" African dancers, sought to bring authenticity to his narratives. These ethnographic recordings however, went unexplained, and thus were left open to the interpretation of the Western eye. Taken out of context and seen through the consciousness of the Westerners who compiled the material, these representations perpetuated ideas of primitiveness (Dyer 90).

Even though today one does not see images of African savages or cannibalism,

[18] This, however, differs with historically-focused films, as African American connections with Africa are made visible by setting extensive parts of the narrative in Africa. Here, for obvious reasons, a focus is on Africans e.g., Kunta Kinte in *Roots*) whose actions and development carry the plot.

African American film still transports modernised ideas of savagery[19] in Africa, albeit with contemporary accents. This, for example, can be observed in *Barbershop* when Dinka's entrance initiates the following dialogue:

> CHECKER FRED. Uh-oh, here come Jumbo Mutombo.[20]
> DINKA. Where I come from, to have girth is a sign of opulence.
> CUSTOMER IN RICKY'S CHAIR. Yo, what the hell did he say?
> RICKY. He said in Africa fat people got loot.
> CUSTOMER IN RICKY'S CHAIR. I heard they circumcise the women too.
> RICKY. Now how you gon' do that?[21]
> CALVIN'S CUSTOMER. Anything that's extra, they just clip it off.
> ALL. Oooooh! (00:17:31 to 00:17:46 minutes)

Dinka is instantly set apart by his grand choice of words, so much so that Ricky and his customer find it necessary to translate or interpret his response to the "jumbo Mutombo" remark, as if he were speaking another language. The subsequent reference to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which, taken out of its discursive context and seen through the eyes of the male African American characters, is read (and is meant to be read) as an act of savagery. If we are to consider that the object of this conversation is to establish Dinka as the Other black in this African American community, the narrative could not have found a more suitable tool because the seemingly non-sequitur reference creates a more profound sense of distance between the world of the African and that of African Americans. Not only is he "made" different linguistically, he is also different by virtue of his associated cultural practice, which we sense operates outside the moral context created in the film because of the response it generates. The customer's conflation of the reason why this practice happens in the first place extends the incredulous response, thereby solidifying or further defining the distance between Dinka and the others.

In another supporting example, a scene in *Shaft in Africa* shows an Ethiopian local engaging John Shaft in a stick fight. Following the man's defeat, the local crowd (echoing the

[19] "Savagery: the condition of being primitive or uncivilised; a primitive state of human society." (Oxford English Dictionary)
[20] This is a reference to Dikembe Mutombo, the NBA player from the Democratic Republic of Congo, with "jumbo" referring to Dinka's weight.
[21] A question meaning: "Why would you do that?" which could also be rhetorical.

bloodthirsty mob of a gladiatorial arena) appears to chant for Shaft to "finish" his opponent off. With this form of combat and their rudimentary clothing, Ethiopia as represented in *Shaft in Africa*, stands in stark contrast to the urban modernity and sophistication of Shaft's native New York.

In discussing Robeson and some of his films, and finding Robeson's processes of authentication and representation of Africa and Africans problematic in their essentialist and highly selective approach, Dyer touches upon the reliance on "Africa" (a sphere of imagination rather than an actual place) in reifying African American identities. "In principle embracing Africa as a homeland, his film and stage work is implicitly a rejection of the idea of Africa ..." (85). It is this interplay of simultaneously embracing and rejecting Africa, as it manifests itself in African American film and its outcomes that are relevant to this thesis.

Louis Chude-Sokei's book, *The Last "Darky,"* is a detailed critique and chronology of Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams, a comedian and vaudeville performer at the turn of the 20th century. Williams, who came from the West Indies, impersonated a variety of African American archetypes, donning blackface to execute his performance for both black and white audiences. As a black man he successfully impersonated black characters culturally different from his own origins, laying emphasis on creating the Otherness of these black archetypes through movement, accent and clothes. As has been previously articulated, this similarity can be observed in Howze's performance of Dinka, whose Otherness is first created and then remarked upon. This also occurs in *Shaft in Africa* when Shaft plays an African en-route to Ethiopia. The man sitting next to him concludes after their stunted exchange that he "must be African!" (00:27:19 minutes). Shaft has thus successfully met this man's cultural expectations of what it means to be African. The same can be said of Prince Akeem (Eddie Murphy) and his entire entourage and family, who are all non-African actors performing "African," using similar methods, garnering similar statements of confirmation from other characters in the film.

Furthermore, as Chude-Sokei explains, when Williams and his partner, George Walker, produced the popular spectacle, *In Dahomey*, not only was *Africanness* created through performance, the two also "made the symbolic space of 'Africa' function in the black popular imagination" as something positive, an aspect which would become vital for the Pan-Africanism to come (Chude-Sokei 8). As can be observed in the idyll presented in *Roots* or the utopian representation of the opulent and peaceful Africa in *Coming to America*, the imaginary space of Africa still has its place in contemporary African American film. Thus, what is especially relevant to this study is Chude-Sokei's exploration of the performativity of

Africanness and the interest Williams and Walker had in presenting an authentic Africa in their musicals. Despite their attempts however, the Africa Williams and Walker created was nevertheless an idealistic construction and a site of phantasmagory. Although differing in their reasons for constructing an imagined Africa in their narratives, *Coming to America* and *Roots* do the same, notwithstanding the contemporary, available knowledge and information of and/or from the continent. In the former, Africa is a place of unreserved fantasy while the latter, although based on a possible reality, does not actually exist.

In her study of urban landscapes in "black" film, *Black City Cinema*, Paula Massood discusses Melvin van Peebles' 1971 independent film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song.* The main character, Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles), is wrongly accused of a crime and forced to escape from an urban setting into the desert. Massood notes that this change of location is accompanied by a change of music "to African-based rhythms" (100) in order "to connect Sweetback to a diasporic cultural context" (101). According to Massood, Sweetback's intuitive use of a folk remedy to heal a wound also suggests a reversion to his African origins, which in effect enables him to survive (100).

Similarly, in *Higher Learning* and *New Jack City*, undulating, rhythmic hand-drums form the background music which accompanies the pivotal fight scenes in which the main characters physically confront their enemies and triumph. In *Sankofa* and *Daughters of the Dust*, to reference just one example from each where this happens, "African-based rhythms" or reversions to an African-based knowledge signify internal or spiritual confrontations, which again result in the overcoming of challenges presented to the lead characters. In *Sankofa* this happens when, for example, Nunu (Alexandra Duah) saves the baby of a dying pregnant mother, and in *Daughters of the Dust* when Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day) saves her family. Both are shown as being able to do so as a consequence of their prayer and incanting to the ancestors.

Massood therefore not only identifies the use of African elements within *Sweetback* and other films, she also links it to the political sentiments and visions of the era, namely "the growing Afrocentrism of the black community in the late 1960s and early 1970s," (100) as well as a "Pan-African collectivity" (113).

The above-mentioned critiques as well as other scholarly contributions to African American film studies, though both informative and essential to African American film scholarship, often focus on black-white oppositions and the varied ways in which these are played out on screen. In so doing, the terms "black cinema" and "African American cinema" come to be used interchangeably, which implicitly negates the existence of other black

identities (which, in the case of African American films that this research project deals with, are specifically African identities), thereby rendering them invisible. This becomes problematic as it means that other black identities represented in the films have therefore been perceived as inconsequential within these academic discussions, although as will be argued here, their inclusion in and contributions to the narratives and to the character developments serve an important function. Furthermore, addressing the afore-mentioned black consciousness projects in the context of African American cultural identity formations, as well as in the context of conceptions of Africa and Africans in this cinematic timeline, is an inescapable feature. The analyses presented here will therefore address disparities within the existing scholarly work regarding the role of Africa and Africans in African American identity constructions whilst building on those that do, by dealing directly with the inclusion and representations of African references in African American film.

1.3 Resonances and the Case for Conscientising

The reach of these films and their messages extend beyond the borders of the United States and therefore have a wide impact on the perception of the identities they have had a part in constructing. For through the commercially-determined film distribution networks, the commodified African American cultural elements and political undercurrents showcased in these films are broadcast globally, where, borrowing a term from Paul Gilroy, they are often "reaccentuated" by other black peoples for the purposes of their own constitutive processes of identity-making (1993: 15). Ultimately, this could result in, for example, the situation that viewers who may be wholly unfamiliar with Africa, its geography, history and peoples, would be convinced that what has been presented as "Africa and Africans" is a true reproduction, or at the very least has elements which reflect reality. This is due in part to the representational qualities of the film genre, because as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam articulate in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, "[filmic] fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships" (179). This in communion with the fact that the audience necessarily brings "their own personal and cultural knowledge" to the viewing experience means that it would be erroneous to take for granted that all audiences recognise stock characterisation or imagined geographies and the dangers inherent in such representations (178). In her most recent novel, *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores how much of these representations, through repetition and re-articulation, have taken root in the public

imagination and have contributed to impressions of Africa and Africans which result in her characters' experiences in the book.[22]

It should be pointed out here however, that though it is clear that many of the discussed films are financed, produced, distributed and/or written by people who are part of the Hollywood film industry and who can be arguably assumed to be white, one should not ignore the agency and complicity of the African American writers, actors and/or producers involved in these representations, nor the support of the films' audiences in the creation and dissemination of them (Shohat and Stam 184- 87).

By elaborating in turn on African elements in the presentation of the afore-mentioned scholarly works, I argue for a more critical reading of their renderings, thereby establishing a "case for conscientising." Just as such readings have spurned the production of more favourable African American filmic representations historically, better attention to constructions of African characters and settings may contribute to the urgent task of creating more suitable or informed portrayals. Ultimately then, at these sites of cinematic convergence, both African American and African spectators alike can feel mutually empowered by resistant black stories, characters and shared histories.

Like Robeson's endeavours at creating an "authentic Africa," as discussed by Dyer, I posit that wherever this occurs within African American cinema, similar quandaries are presented. For despite his attentions (and intentions) Robeson's attempts ultimately became as equally complicit in the reproduction of questionable representations of Africa and Africans, arguably because his ideas of the continent and its peoples were born out of his experiences as an American and therefore as a Westerner. As has already been articulated, informed by his own ethnocentric education, taken out-of-context and without sufficient development, his reproductions meant that what was communicated about Africa and Africans were much like contemporary archetypes (albeit more sympathetic) which asserted a Western (white) superiority, as displayed by what was considered "savage" versus what was considered "civilised." Ideas of "African savagery" imply a distance from civility and therefore from being a member of those who represent "fuller human development" that "civilization" purports to uphold. John Shaft's incredulity and comments on Aleme's (Vonetta McGee) understandings of marriage and sexual intercourse in *Shaft in Africa* for example, and the film's focus (when in Ethiopia) on rural, intuitively guided African

[22] Although fictional, it echoes her experiences or observations, as she states in an interview with Aaron Bady from the *Boston Review*: " Imagination doesn't fall from the sky; you have to work with something. My fiction borrows from my life, but even more so from the lives of other people. And because I write realistic fiction, it doesn't fall from the sky" (Bady 2013).

characters, develops in the viewers the sense that the Africa they are being shown is a simple, aboriginal Africa which would stand in contrast to the urban, Western experiences of the primary audience. To expand on this point further, in a second example, Dinka's child-like characterisation by virtue of his articulated innocence, or the referenced cultural practices that he may be associated with, again make this assertion.

Performing "African" and the ways this is executed in all the films discussed here prompts another avenue for constructive enquiry, because all the actors in the films who play African characters (except Debede Eshetu and Zenebech Tadesse from *Shaft in Africa* who are Ethiopian) are either Black British or African American. How this is done by one who could by outward appearance pass for African has meant that the filmmakers and actors elect a singular and popular characterisation: attire that could unambiguously be from Africa for any audience, an undulating accent with an affected cadence, and an either solemn, unwavering (for the noble or wealthy African representation) or wide-eyed and eager facial expression (for the rest); all usually in concert with a cursory reference to an outmoded or misconstrued cultural practice. Often, these representations demonstrate an obvious inattention to the multiplicity of African accents and peoples, dress (which are often a mix of different national dresses and styles from different countries, and which ignore the probability that at the time of the film's release, most Africans would probably choose to wear contemporary global styles, as fashion dictates) and more popularly accepted cultural practices. Heavy-handed generalisations of what is perceived as "an African," which has remained relatively unchanged from the 1970s to 2000s, disregards the diversity of African people and simultaneously ignores the existence of "real-Africa." The similar characterisation of John Shaft as an Ethiopian (executed in 1973), Prince Akeem (1988) and Dinka (2002 and in the sequel in 2004) serve as testament to this argumentation.

The reversions that Massood discusses that allow Sweetback to survive and the overriding messages of *Higher Learning*, *Sankofa* and *Daughters of the Dust* which emphasise the importance of an Africa-centric knowledge base and religious syncretism, binds Africa to a spiritually-centred past, which ignores the contemporary state of African spirituality, most of which is, ironically, overwhelmingly rooted in monotheistic religions (i.e., Christianity and Islam), and fervently so.

By disengaging from a constructive discussion about these persisting presentations of Africa and Africans, there will only ever be a revisiting of the deficient representations described above without the consciousness required to begin in earnest to look for more appropriate ways of dealing with Africa and Africans in especially commercial, globally-

distributed visual mediums. For example, without referencing music, fashions and art forms, there are still innumerable examples from other films where this stunted engagement persists. Some examples include *Trading Places* (1983), in which Eddie Murphy's character disguises as Nanga Eboko, a Cameroonian student who dons an unlocatable boubou, head gear and fly swat, misuses English phrases and exhibits intrusively happy, child-like behaviour. In his stand-up routine *Raw* (1987), Murphy talks about wanting to find a wife in Africa because American women are too demanding and money-hungry: "If I ever get married, I have to go off to the woods of Africa and find me some crazy, naked, zebra bitch that knows nothing about money. She got to be butt naked on a zebra with a big bone in her nose and a big plate lip and a big, fucked-up Afro!" (00:38:41 minutes). In the episode "Working Nine to Nine-Fifteen" (1994) of the popular 1990s sitcom *Living Single,* some of the characters mock their friend and flat mate Regine by breaking into "African" song and dance, ululation and animal cries when she enters the room wearing a dashiki and head band.

These are but a few examples, and it is without surprise that such portrayals contribute to the insinuated hostility of the discussion of Barack Obama's legitimacy as an "African American," the estrangement expressed by Adichie in her 2013 novel *Americanah*,[23] or in the defensive aggression from Africans towards African Americans that she articulates in an interview in the *Boston Review* of the same year: "An African American man called me "sister" once, and I was like 'No, no, no, I'm not your sister, I'm not doing that.'"

> The proposition that the post-slave cultures of the Atlantic world are in some significant way related to one another and to the African cultures from which they partly derive has long been a matter of great controversy capable of arousing intense feeling which goes far beyond dispassionate scholastic contemplation. The situation is rendered even more complex by the fact that the fragile psychological, emotional, and cultural correspondences which connect diaspora populations in spite of their manifest differences are often apprehended only fleetingly and in ways that persistently confound the protocols of academic orthodoxy (Gilroy, 1993: 81).

I suggest a process of conscientisation which, as Gilroy phrases it, more adequately speaks to the " . . . connectedness that arise as much from the transformation of Africa by diaspora cultures, as from the affiliation of diaspora cultures to Africa and the traces of Africa that those diaspora cultures enclose" (1993: 199). The ongoing debate about the degree to which African Americans constitute "diaspora cultures," that they could even be called that, though important and necessary is not meant to distract from the point I am

[23] "...but Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American in the same way" (Adichie, *Americanah* 2013: 11).

raising in using the former quote here. What is pertinent to my objective in referencing Gilroy's statement is the notion of "connectedness" and the inherent processes of mutual transformations, which I argue (and which I appreciate is necessarily dependent upon insistence) always has the potential to create opportunities or discourses which seek and reflect more suitable representations, through more constructive dialogue via the widely-distributed, commercial cultural industries, which are produced relentlessly from both sides of the Atlantic. What would be productive is a conscientisation regarding African representations in African American cinema, grounded in a critical reflection of past and present, recurring or re-imagined examples. This process of re-education, however, should be initiated by both Africans and African Americans (and should be inclusive of other black diasporic experiences), as demonstrated by Adichie in her conversation with Aaron Bady:

> It took about a year of reading, learning, watching, for me to really come around and realize that there's a context— you know, I read African American history and I'm just amazed at how recent some of the things that happened were . . . I've come to deeply, deeply admire African American history and African American people (Bady 2013).

1.4 Methodology (Tools and Contextualisation)

As has already been hinted at by the afore-referenced scholarship and approaches to the presented discursive points, my analyses will necessarily be cross-contextual, with an emphasis on a reading of the African elements as signs and their subsequent employment. Thus, how African elements are combined with the narratives to a particular effect, how each adds value to the scenes, characters or sequences, what these African elements represent, and how meaning is constructed from them will shape my argumentations.

The conceptual framework of the thesis will follow a cumulative approach where the respective determinants that have contributed to the choice, visualisation, and representations of the referenced African elements and their subsequent impact in the narratives of each film, will be presented. To this end, chapter two will chart the black consciousness movements that influenced the messages in the films. For these purposes, succinct presentations of the socio-political contexts that triggered their developments, and the shortcomings that stimulated their permutations and diminished their potency will be rendered and assessed. The plot progressions and the cautionary, advisory or moralising messages within the narratives of the films will form the body of chapter three. After having established the contextual frameworks with which to analyse the African elements, these will be re-introduced and examined in

chapter four.

In exploring the operating mechanisms of the African elements as signs in chapter four, I use film theory which explicates how they produce meaning, thereby developing a basis with which to understand the spectator-film relationship and to subsequently appreciate the impact of their representational qualities. Grounded in the contextual explorations of chapters two and three which, broadly summarised, negotiate black nationalisms and deal with related conceptions of masculinities, I also make use of scholarly resources which track the cited historical events, as well as the works of cultural and gender theorists whose expositions substantiate my theses. Chapter five will summarise the overall arguments presented through elucidations drawn in chapters two to four, and will subsequently provide a constructive basis for suggested approaches, which I argue are necessary for an ameliorated conscientisation in the field of African American cinema.

1.4.1 African Elements As Signs

In the construction of meaning, the producers of the signs[24] (in this case, the directors, writers, editors, etc.) need to communicate with the audience for whom those signs are associated and for whom further connections should be made through the encounter (i.e. through watching the film), in order for the African elements (i.e. the signs) to transcend their presentation in the films, and thus to point to a wider agenda (like Pan-Africanism, Black Power and Afrocentrism and their political and community/social intentions/objectives). The value of what each of these African elements signify is enhanced or diminished by how much background knowledge the spectator brings to the viewing experience. In the selected films, where this possibility is considered, the meaning and intention behind the use of some elements (such as those considered of more value to the overall objectives of the film) are often also rearticulated in different forms throughout the narrative. Accordingly, in Dash's work for example, the extent of Nana Peazant's (Cora Lee Day) connection with her African ancestors or spirits is not only signified by, say, her choice of hairstyle (dreadlocks, a natural[25] hairstyle), it is also reiterated in statements she makes in her internal voiceover or in conversations, as well as in the rituals she is shown practicing.

Albeit more subtle in their approach (though equally as visually dominant as in

[24] "Signs" constitute the African elements within their associated sequences, sequences which in turn collectively comprise the film.

[25] This term is meant to indicate that no chemicals have been used which would change the texture of the hair. It also precludes the use of weaves or wigs.

Daughters of the Dust), the constantly present African elements in *New Jack City* demand that the audience understand the meanings behind the characters' choices in fashion. Being able to correctly identify what, for example, wearing a leather pendant with the map of Africa around your neck signifies, adds requisite value to the hero's afore-referenced rhetorical question in their final confrontation. Additionally, Scotty's personal choice in wearing kente-print clothing when off-duty further demonstrates his commitment to the contemporary Afrocentrist project and as such, to the betterment of his community. It is thus made clear that although it may be a fashion choice, the pendant, as a sign, points to the broader theme of African American empowerment as articulated by the Afrocentrist ideologies which informed this aspect of the film's production.

In the cases of *Coming to America*, *Barbershop* and *Shaft in Africa* where Africa (real or imagined) is and/or Africans are presented, the producers of the films use both paradigmatic and syntagmatic combinations of the African elements to create and maintain this impression. In these films where in the plot it is also necessary to distinguish the African characters from the African American ones, the actor's body becomes the medium through which the popularly perceived differences between the two identities are articulated. Their dress, facial expressions, gestures and speech become the vehicles of difference-making. African characters, played by African American or Black British actors signify their African[26] characterisations in the following ways: Dinka in *Barbershop* is distinguished from the other black characters by his wearing of beads, a Nigerian *fila* hat and a leather pendant of the African map around his neck throughout the film. But, in order to differentiate him from any other black person from outside Africa who could have simply made an Afrocentrist fashion choice by wearing the hat and beads, the character is also given an accent, a particular vocal cadence and enunciation, based on the actor's general interpretation of a West African accent. Richard Roundtree becomes "African" in *Shaft in Africa* by making similar choices in his speech and voice. (Later, this transformation would also include clothing). In both these examples, other characters also remark on their being African which is another way the makers of the films reinforce the intended signification of these combined elements. A syntagmatic combination of accent, sentence construction and visual or physical appearance are signifying elements of these African characters. Thus, in playing "African," Eddie Murphy, Richard Roundtree and Leonard Earl Howze not only affect a stilted, formal cadence and often use more complex (presumably with the intention of sounding

[26] When in its diegetic capacity, or used in reference to Africa or Africans, the term will appear without quotation marks.

sophisticated) language when speaking, their clothing, facial expressions and intra-character interactions also contribute to their distinction from the African Americans. The fact that over the years (i.e., between when *Shaft in Africa* and *Barbershop* were made) performing "African" has been so similar in its execution indicates that a general assumption about what an African is and therefore what the corresponding appearance and mannerisms would be, exists.

In addition, extra-diegetic sounds with accompanying visuals of Africa and/or Africans direct the viewer to be able to identify these signifiers as such when they appear on screen. For example, the opening sequences of *Coming to America* use a combination of music comprised of sounds and harmonies which are synonymous with Africa (i.e., a-cappella choral harmonies, ululations and lyrics like Solomon Linda's *Mbube*) and sweeping visuals of dense jungle, to contribute to the impression of the African kingdom of Zamunda. Unlike in *Shaft in Africa* and *Barbershop*, here, in addition to performing "African" is the creation of the "Kingdom of Zamunda" where Prince Akeem and his family come from. The inclusion of zebras, elephants and giraffes further contribute to this imagery of Africa.

1.4.2 Contextualising

It has already been put forward that in these films, the US American filmmakers have decided what Africa is, and who and how Africans are. These are also narratives told from African American perspectives with objectives that seek to uplift or empower African American communities. However, in all but two of the cited films (namely, *Sankofa* and *Shaft in Africa*), no one part of Africa is distinguished, which indicates the one-sided objectives of such processes of identity constructions.

The subsequent representations in these films therefore undermine the unifying goals of the black consciousness objectives apparent in their plots because as has been explained, one black identity becomes dominant and the other submissive when one has the power to decide what the other is in order to fulfill their particular objectives. Furthermore, the co-opting of popular, all-encompassing imagery of Africa and Africans in order to limit production costs or in order to fulfill peripheral script requirements for the benefit of the overall story, also plays a part in the construction of inappropriate characterisation of Africa and Africans. This stratification of power in relation to the discussed black identities does not then allow each to see the other on an equal footing. In this way, it becomes evident how in the processes of establishing alternate ways of framing African American identities through

black cultural nationalist projects, these reconfigurations initiate the simultaneous development of antagonistic language and goals which sabotage their unificatory and egalitarian aspirations, by causing difficult or problematic dynamics of communication and expression within the black body politic.

These "problematic dynamics" stem from three points, which I shall address in turn. The first of these are issues related to the inclusion of black consciousness ideologies and philosophies in the films narratives. Secondly, the reach of these films mean that representations of either black identities can subsequently prompt complexities in the potential for positive interactions, or foster misunderstandings between Africans and African Americans when the two perceived identities encounter each other in "the real world." Thirdly, the financial realities and the money-making nature of the film industry and the dilemmas arising out of such objectives are addressed by looking at how these factors affect the range of visual representations of African identities in the films.

1) How black consciousness movements and ideologies such as Pan-Africanism, Civil Rights, Black Power and Afrocentrism influenced cultural trends as expressed through pop-culture mediums like film will be an important feature of this study. Some of the selected films incorporate the philosophies of the contemporary, popular black consciousness ideologies or philosophies (i.e., Pan-Africanism, Black Power and Afrocentrism) into their narratives, consequently inheriting the discrepancies within them, as articulated in prevailing scholarship on the subject.[27] Thus, when analysing the discussed films through their related "black consciousness lens" and exploring how they incorporate black consciousness ideologies into their narratives, it can be argued that the films subsequently also absorb the oversights (i.e., the gendered, unspecified and/or all-encompassing ideas of "black" identities) apparent in them.

In the first instance, general mass-mobilising forces which seek to unify diverse communities and backgrounds under one umbrella, and which seek to include (while simultaneously excluding) a wide scope of perspectives, objectives and people, often reveal their shortcomings when put into practice or when they are applied in practical terms. Consequently, during their practical applications, what may have been perceived as minor points of discussion in the formulation of these movements' ideologies or philosophies, become divisive elements which could ultimately cause shifts and breaks within the movement. This is notable in the examples of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X's break

[27] I elaborate on these in chapter two when discussing in more detail the relevant movements.

with it, or Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" project, which ultimately failed to meet its ambitious objectives. The model intentions of the unifying project are thus undermined. The legacy of such an outcome is usually the development of or evolution into a new unifying project (e.g., from Civil Rights to Black Power).

Furthermore, the inherent difficulties around representing ideas visually and transporting ideologies or messages through the medium of film, illuminates another area where the process of integrating black consciousness philosophies into film can become problematic. This is due to one of the important objectives of especially commercial films, namely that they must appeal to a wider public, which may include an audience who are not (nor are interested in being) politicised. To this end, the superficial presentation of black consciousness politics by the filmmakers through their plots and visual tools, oversimplifies or glosses over the important political message behind the related black consciousness project because of the constraints brought on by fitting these into the film format and/or the commercial aims of film and its requisite need to appeal to as many people as possible. For example, the casual Ethiopianist references in *Shaft in Africa* never induce further discussion. As such, the origins of this discourse are not revealed and the audience does not learn more about the referenced ancient kingdom.

In another example, in *New Jack City*, Scotty believes that Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes), who is the biggest drug dealer in the community, should not be wearing the Africa pendant, which signifies empowering black consciousness politics, because he acts against such ideologies by destroying his community through the sale of drugs. Scotty's rhetorical statement is not followed up, nor is it given any significance earlier in the film.

2) The homogenisation of the term "black" in black empowerment language presents another area of concern. For, as it is commonly used, figuratively-speaking, there is no distinction made regarding what the word encapsulates. In practical terms however distinctions do exist, manifesting positively in various, mutually beneficial ways (notably in food, music or fashions), but also negatively – that is, whenever one black identity becomes subject to another and is ridiculed, dismissed or offensively misrepresented (e.g., South Africans and the common representation of Nigerians as gangsters and drug dealers in, for example, public opinion or filmic depictions like *District 9*). Thus, the oppositional black identity is made subject to or is subjugated by the dominant black identity.

As can be observed in some of the selected films, the dominant black identity either has the power to dictate what the other is and does, or has the freedom to select what parts of the other strengthen or define what they are. This is perceptible in the character and narrative

choices made in *Shaft in Africa*: the Ethiopian Emir and his people need John Shaft's assistance in destroying the syndicate that operates a slave trade which is affecting their community. The Africans and Africa that the audiences and Shaft are introduced to, with the exception of the Ethiopian villain, are noble, judicious and honourable because of their purported tribal ways. At the same time, however, they are presented as primitive and stymied for these same reasons.

A familiar plotline, these often portray Africans requiring outside assistance in order to overcome a society-wide challenge, where usually, failure to modernise their persistent tribal ways (which may also have prevented the communities from questioning their local, criminal authorities), contributes to their society's destruction. Thus, the dominant actor (i.e., US American filmmakers, characters or actors) makes Africa and Africans objects (i.e. something defined by the "dominant actor") by making choices of what cultural markers and practices, what history and geography to show, emphasise or reconstruct. In this way, the dominant actor presents and/or highlights what it is, which may (varying with degrees of relevance) form and reform its own identity or self-definition where or if necessary.

As transnational movements which encourage mass activism and which are concerned with social and political mobilisation, constructing a homogenous identity is an important starting point. The main objectives encouraged by these philosophies or ideologies (i.e., the uplift of all black peoples), such as Pan-Africanism, necessitates a connection between the various black identities, which often insists on the much-disputed notion that group identification is based on recognisable, physical and/or cultural markers of "blackness." Consequently, collective identification based on phenotypical markers[28] (and the experienced oppression that comes with such identification) become valid, and inherently refers back to one central point of origin for peoples which fit such a description, namely Africa. The concept of a shared point of origin therefore makes Africa cultural currency for all people who are identified and/or identify as black. Therefore, with the myriad arguments which illustrate the points of contention in some of the grounding elements of some of these ideologies or philosophies (e.g., that often they are male-centred and heterosexist[29]), comes the added complication of attempting to define (and subsequently police) a black collective identity.

[28] That is, those supposed physical and sociological attributes associated with "the race" and, in the case of anyone outside the construction of "white people," all the attendant social and political constructions for maintaining these, like the one-drop rule or emphasis on degrees of miscegenation.

[29] For a discussion of the prevalent heterosexism of these ideologies, see for example Gilroy 1993, hooks 1992 and 1996, Hill Collins 2000 and 2006.

Thus, because of the stratification of power relations between the perceived black identities occupying the same discursive space (the film narratives), the subsequent representation of Africa and Africans as reflected in these popular and/or commercially successful films end up undermining the unifying objectives of the narratives as demonstrated by the inclusion of black consciousness ideologies or philosophies in them.

3) An important awareness central to any investigation of representations in any filmic production is that an inescapable feature of cinema is its use of popular social, political and cultural assumptions in all presented relationships or interactions. Additionally, it should be understood that the narrative and creative processes of cinema require significant degrees of spectator correspondence or input, making what and how the chosen images are represented and received, crucial to the film's success. In order for a literary, visual or listening experience to make any impression on its audience (which often guarantees desired success), the intended viewership have to be able to relate to or identify with parts or all of what is being represented, even if what the audience ends up relating to is the opposite of what is being shown. Thus, a film can become an avenue for cultural expression because of the necessity of spectator participation.

Moreover, the nature of the global film industry (which is defined ostensibly by Hollywood) is largely determined by the costs involved in producing films. This means that most films hope to appeal to as broad an audience as possible in order to offset financial obligations. As such, films often then co-opt perspectives of social and cultural expectations which are common or popular because this would potentially ensure the financially necessary broader viewership. As part of this industry, African American films operate within the same parameters. Consequently, such films end up perpetuating problematic representations of Africa and Africans.

The convergence of the above-mentioned factors in the selected African American films therefore demonstrates how each of the three elucidated points contribute to the control or denial of African agency, or of what is perceived as African in terms of cultural practices, history and mannerisms, as well as African geography and spatial imaginings. For, ultimately this creates areas of contention between the two black identities; a contrary result to the unifying inference of the term "black."

2. Black Empowerment Philosophies, Ideologies and Movements

> And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet.
> (X 1964)

Black nationalisms for the purposes of black empowerment in the US, whether oscillating in their objectives between supporting the abolition of slavery, supporting calls for a separate black nation or employed as a threat of violence in its opposition to race oppression, have, as James Lance Taylor writes, "essentially been an articulation of the desire for self-determination in relation to white structures of power . . . on black people's terms, facilitated most fundamentally in forms of group solidarity" (Taylor 113-14). Fifty years after Malcolm X's speech, the struggle for "citizenship" – to be treated and viewed as citizens with shared and equal statuses – remains, for many, a contemporary struggle, as expressed in the recent racially-motivated attacks on members of the African American community by white law-enforcement officers, namely the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, to name but two from the historical record. Thus, in light of these events (and others, including socio-political resonances in the aftermath of events like Hurricane Katrina), there has been a tentative revisiting of popular black consciousness politics which is discernible in the various contemporary communication mediums like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or in blogs.

The history of political agitation and black consciousness in North America has a long, complex and rich development which spans the entirety of the African American experience. My concentration on the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power and Afrocentrism is deliberate and is produced as a means of contextualising the messages or guiding objectives of the films discussed. For, as I have noted in chapter one, without such contextualisation, a necessary sense of awareness is lost during the interpretative processes of watching these films. Accordingly, the principle articulations in these black consciousness politics will be addressed, thereby responding directly to how they have been reconstituted and expressed in the messages of the films. To be clear, this means discussing the utilisation of Civil Rights, Black Power and Afrocentric discourses by focuses on their main thrusts.

Applicable too at differing levels of engagement,[30] a subsequently concise presentation and analyses of movements and philosophies for black empowerment in the US entails taking stock of the myriad ways black nationalisms were and continue to be

[30] Namely, as Patricia Hill Collins surmises, "to individual African Americans searching for meaning within their everyday lives; in its utility in mobilizing African Americans as a collectivity for quite diverse activities that are not overtly political; and in its versatility to have diverse meanings for segments of African American civil society distinguished by social class, colour, gender, immigrant status, and religion" (2006: 76-77).

constructed in opposition to the various articulations of white American racist hegemonies by African Americans; It includes looking at how these deployments, dependant on how each person construes the central ideas of the relevant black consciousness movement or philosophy, can and have been modified in their practical applications to suit the differing objectives. In the main however (within the scope of this thesis), the specific area of concentration for a constructive presentation and analyses, will be on how the discussed black consciousness movements and philosophies incorporate conceptions of Africa and Africans into their foundational elements. For as has already been posited, in all the films selected for this study, the incorporation of the range of popular, widely publicised black nationalist ideologies shaped the reproductions or representations of Africa and Africans in them.

As such, for the purposes of developing and contributing to a fuller assessment of the themes and objectives in these films it is necessary to have a clearer presentation of what each related black consciousness movement was, what their particular objectives were, and the resonances of these objectives in the context of the movement's unifying philosophy for the black identities they spoke for. To this end, the relevant black consciousness movements will first be presented within their historical, socio-political contexts. They will also be contextualised within the symbiotic relationship between socio-political developments in the US and contemporary events on the African continent, as both factors influenced conceptions and narrative developments in the films. Though none of the black consciousness movements' progressions and evolution were linear (due to the inherent cross-referencing, common aspirations and simultaneous developments), they are introduced chronologically here in order to highlight how each influenced the other or to illustrate how one gave way to the next. Another reason for selecting this approach to assessing the addressed black consciousness movements is to better conceptualise their emergence and their consequent resonances in the timeline of the films.

The chapter will begin with an account of the social and political climate and historical events which influenced the productions of *Shaft in Africa* and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (*The Spook*) in the early 1970s and will culminate with those which saw the releases of *Coming to America*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *New Jack City*, *Sankofa*, *Higher Learning*, and *Barbershop* from the late 1980s to the 2000s. In the former, influences of Black Power politics and objectives are a discernible feature of the narratives, while in the latter, differences in concentrations of Afrocentric philosophies (with some arguably informed by politics shaped from aspects of Black Power too), are reflected. In this way, this

chapter on African American black consciousness movements will ultimately serve as a basis for the contention that by incorporating the black nationalist messages within the referenced cultural and political movements into their filmic presentations, these films also absorb and re-project the impediments apparent in these from their inceptions. Significantly, as these films, by way of their distribution networks, are and have been watched by audiences outside the US, the subsequent inconsistencies in their politics, compounded with their problematic renderings of Africa and Africans are thus replicated ad nauseam, thereby fixing the transported representations of these in the general imagination.

The overall intention of this chapter should therefore not be viewed simply as an attempt at mapping the emergence and development of various black consciousness movements in North America. It should instead be read as a necessary starting point for a meaningful exploration of how each has been utilised in response to socio-political challenges faced by different generations of African American communities and the resonances of these in the public sphere through their representations in film, which also includes global black identities.

2.1 From Civil Rights to Black Power

At the time that *Shaft in Africa* (1973) and *The Spook* (1973) were produced, the country was engaged in major international conflicts (including the nuclear war threats of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War, as well as the war in Vietnam), and was also experiencing a wave of counter-cultural activity and radical thought, which contributed to the general sense of agitation that was sweeping across the country. A volatile era in US politics, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, as well as the rioting and racially-motivated violence lead "young people immersed in activist circles" to believe that civil war or revolution in America was imminent, if not already underway (Austin 2006: 74). A call to arms in response to the continued injustices experienced by African Americans propagated by black consciousness leaders such as Malcolm X or Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), were inspired by global decolonisation movements, as this period simultaneously saw the birth and promise of several newly independent African and Asian countries. To quote Azza Salama Layton from her book, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941 – 1960*, "[the] implications of [these and other waves] of independence were numerous. Decolonization abroad energized African Americans in their own struggles for racial reforms" (144).

Thus, as stated in the previous chapter, galvanised by these major, global political shifts, the African American struggle for racial discrimination reforms became re-stimulated. Black nationalist leaders such as Ture were likening the contemporary position of African Americans to that of a colonised people.[31] These decades also marked an increase in interaction between Africans and African Americans and reflected an upsurge in interest and the opportunity (and possibility) of exploring links and connections between all black people in the diaspora. For example, in his book, *In Search of Africa*, Manthia Diawara writes that by the beginning of the 1970s, "many black Americans visited Monrovia. Some were Black Muslims, and some were members of the Black Panthers or the Black Power Party" (248). He also notes the mutual fascination experienced by both sides by describing how for example, conversely, Africans in Liberia identified with African America, even referring to North America as "home" (247-48).

Describing African Americans as colonial subjects in a white US American hegemony and therefore viewing the disenfranchisement or limitations of African American political power in the US as resonating with the condition of colonised subjects as articulated by Ture, Malcolm X, and W.E.B DuBois, to name but three, meant that global decolonisation served as a positive example of a successful outcome of the fight against systemised white power, articulated in contemporary vernacular as "The Man." In popular media, as expressed in blaxploitation era films, fighting "The Man" or references to "his" omnipresence was often a strong undercurrent in plotlines.

2.1.1 Civil Rights

Control and access to African and Asian resources, which was implicitly linked to economic and political affiliations (i.e., the burgeoning communist and socialist models of government), and as Layton writes, the "ensuing competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for African and Asian allies," compelled "certain political actors in the United States to heed international criticism of its racial policies" (75). Thus, as a result of decolonisation, as well as the subsequent revision of domestic policy, the 1960s heralded a series of revolutionary political events in the US, the most dominant of which were those which comprised the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Through the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans and other minorities sought to "end segregation in education and public facilities, secure voting rights, improve job

31 A fuller reference to the colonial analogy will be addressed shortly, under the sub-heading "Black Power."

opportunities, housing and living conditions and to be accorded the same basic human rights that the white majority" enjoyed (Upchurch 6). According to Layton, the first governmental efforts to reform North America's racist laws that precede the modern Civil Rights Movement can be traced back to the Truman administration, following the formation of the United Nations in 1946 (78):

> [T]he formation of the United Nations paved the way for debates over preventing discrimination and upholding international human rights. These debates left the United States in an awkward position . . . (Layton 79-80).

Advocating equality and a set of basic rights that all human beings should be afforded, whilst also facing international criticism because they themselves fell short of these expectations due to their own racist practices, meant that the United States was forced to apply these ideologies to their own constitution. Despite the legal changes, however, the US government failed in the practical application of any of the Civil Rights Acts passed from 1957 to 1965. This led to the sit-ins, boycotts and marches which characterised the Civil Rights Movement.

Although it was successful in dismantling legal segregation in many parts of the country, the Civil Rights Movement eventually started to lose credibility amongst African Americans as a vehicle for liberation from the white American political and economic hegemony (Taylor 221). Charles V. Hamilton and Kwame Ture, both key figures in Black Power politics, argued in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, that the Civil Rights Movement had become inadequate (50). They posited that for most African Americans the practice of integration and insistence upon non-violent protest in the face of violent white backlash were failing concepts:

> In fact, their objective day-to-day condition worsened. The unemployment rate among black people increased while that among whites declined. Housing conditions in the black communities deteriorated. Schools in the black ghettos continued to plod along on outmoded techniques, inadequate curricula, and with all too many tired and indifferent teachers. Meanwhile, the President picked the refrain of 'We Shall Overcome' while the Congress passed civil rights law after civil rights law, only to have them effectively nullified by deliberately weak enforcement (51).

White responses to civil rights protests, as well as the continued rejection of integrationist laws by white businesses, contributed to the growing frustration in black communities.[32] Consequently, appeal of the threats of violent retaliation espoused in the

[32] For detailed examples of the protests and their violent responses, see Upchurch.

politics of Black Power and the Nation of Islam (particularly under Malcolm X) took precedence and gained momentum out of these perceived deficiencies.

The Spook, which came out at the time when the Civil Rights Movement had lost its mass appeal, is a textbook example of this sentiment as it presents a critical view of the contemporary integrationist policies (a prominent element in the politics of the Civil Rights era) and the racist ironies and reluctance of the white institutions in applying them. The film also makes overt references to the idea of African Americans as colonised subjects and that African Americans were at war with white structures of power in the form of the US state. These aspects of the narrative were therefore very much in tune with the burgeoning Black Power sentiment of "fighting The Man."

2.1.2 Black Power

> The black community will have a positive image of itself that *it* has created ... Only when black people fully develop this sense of community, of themselves, can they begin to deal effectively with the problems of racism in *this* country. This is what we mean by a new consciousness; this is the vital first step (sic) (Carmichael and Hamilton 239-40).

Although it came to be identified with popular black nationalist activists such as Kwame Ture, Huey P. Newton and Amiri Baraka, Black Power was first "inspired by Christian liberal integrationists in the South, Richard Wright and Adam Clayton Powell in the North, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Islamic nationalism of Elijah Muhammad and, especially Malcolm X" (Austin 2006: 86).

When politician Adam Clayton Powell called the first national Black Power conference in 1966, the participants agreed that Black Power was to be understood as "the effective control and self-determination by men of color in their own areas. Power is total control of the economic, political, educational, and social life of our community from the top to the bottom" (qtd. in Austin 2006: 83). At the 1970 Atlanta conference, then known as the African Congress, the key elements of Black Power, it was decided, would refer to the following: "self-determination, self-sufficiency, self-respect and self-defense for black Americans" (Austin 2006: 84). Affirming this, Hamilton and Ture in their contribution in *Black Power and Student Rebellion*, explicate the need for African American redefinition by reclaiming their history and tracing "their roots to Africa," by questioning the "values" and institutions of society, to "consolidate behind their own," and thus "build a sense of community" (Carmichael and Hamilton 237-52). Furthermore, they call for a break from the

rhetoric and tone of the Civil Rights Movement, which they reason is in many ways incompatible with the expression of its politics.

> The advocates of Black Power reject the old slogans and meaningless rhetoric of previous years in the civil rights struggle. The language of yesterday is indeed irrelevant: progress, non-violence, integration, fear of "white backlash," coalition (Carmichael and Hamilton 248).

A crucial difference between the two approaches to African American liberation (namely, the Civil Rights Movement versus Black Power) was the attitude towards violent retaliation. Hamilton and Ture's sentiment that white America "… must be made to understand that they must stop messing with black people, or the blacks will fight back!" was shared by an increasing number of the African American community (Hamilton and Ture 53).

> As activists turned away from the political strategy of civil rights to that of Black Power, they also began to turn their identities away from America and toward Africa. If blacks were not allowed the full rights of American citizens, then maybe blacks were not American. These activists came to believe that black Americans, like Africans, were a colonized people (Austin 2006: 69).

Encouraged by the success of the African independence struggles, Black Power sought to redefine African American identities through the creation and maintenance of a unified African American community, which would be built upon reclaiming their shared history and culture, and by leading and supporting their own social and political organisations (Hamilton and Ture 1992: 37, 44). Hamilton and Ture's chapter, *White Power: The Colonial Situation*, in which they liken the African American people to a colonised people, reaffirms the African colonial/"African American colony" analogy; a point of mutual identification (2-32).

Notably, as the decade progressed, Black Power activists found it necessary to distinguish themselves from other less politicised African Americans and civil rights believers by referring to themselves as "Black" and then by the 1970s as "Afrikan/African," as opposed to "negroes" or "Uncle Toms." Austin attributes this insistence to the increase in Pan-Africanist influences and the need to define what a "true black" person was (Austin 2006: 59-60). This concern over terminology which ascribes qualities of blackness and therefore "authenticity" to an African American, and its correlation to the individual's

commitment to black empowerment is reflected in *The Spook*.[33] Writing on the qualities inscribed to language which defined African Americans, Todd Boyd notes in his essay, "Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self: The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture," which discusses the hip-hop group Arrested Development, the political quality of their music and their messages in opposition to "gangsta" rap music, that

> 'African' has recently been used to signify a spiritual connection with the continent and an Afrocentric political connection . . . Calling oneself African is supposed to demonstrate an advanced consciousness that eliminates any connection to America, and affirms one's links with an Afrocentric cultural, political, and spiritual base . . . and African as defined by intellectual and political sophistication (331-32).

Pan-Africanism as articulated by Organization Us,[34] "has the emotional dimension of a common sense of belonging together, of a common origin of history, of common struggle and common projects to free African people – continental and diaspora . . . " (Conyers 116). Accordingly, African representatives from the continent and other black diasporans were invited, welcomed and present at all Black Power conferences, beginning with the second in 1967, and it was even hoped that the fourth conference could be held in Tanzania (Austin 2006: 85).

Pan-Africanist influences were perceptible at each conference as more attendees now had African names and chose to wear African clothing. From within the range of these fashions, the kente cloth design became synonymous with black cultural nationalist expression, thereby illustrating how, as Carol Magee concludes in *Africa in the American Imagination*, " . . . kente . . . shifted from identifying a social class (royalty) of an ethnic group (the Asante) to also identifying a modern nation-state (Ghana), a continent (Africa), and a diasporic population (African Americans). In these instances dress quite literally fashions an identity" (101-02).

The Black Panthers, Organization Us and other Black Power organisations agreed (following selected Pan-Africanist principles) that educating African Americans, particularly young people in a way that developed in them a sense of pride and self-worth, was crucial to their struggle. Consequently, independent black schools, which were established to put into practice Pan-Africanist values, proliferated from 1970 onwards (Austin 2006: 101). These

[33] In this chapter, under the sub-heading "Afrocentrism," the matter of measuring qualities of black authenticity arises again, though on this occasion via the degree of application of Afrocentric philosophies to daily lives as a benchmark. It is taken up again in chapter three in a discussion of the term "Uncle Tom" and its use in *The Spook*.

[34] In his book, *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*, Maulana Karenga – a founding member of the group – in his dedication refers to this political body in this way, as opposed to the commonly referenced "US Organization," or "Us Organization." Thus, it is referenced as such in this thesis.

schools were centred on especially black male re-socialisation, through which, it was hoped, the disaffected youth could ultimately become useful members of their communities, thereby contributing to the prosperity rather than the violence in them. Keith Mayes in his chapter, "A Holiday of Our Own," in *The Black Power Movement*, gives a brief account of the genesis of these independent schools, which he notes took off from the African Congress held in 1970: Though four years later he would distance himself from Organization Us and Maulana Karenga's brand of black cultural nationalism, Amiri Baraka, " . . . in 1970, gathered a significant group of national and international black political activists in Atlanta, Georgia" for the African Congress. There,

> . . . the Political Liberation workshop highlighted pan-Africanism as a possibility for an independent black nation . . . The education workshop established definitions for education and assessed the viability of Black Studies programs, Black Student Unions, black teachers and administrators, black colleges, and independent black schools (Mayes 239-40).

Peniel E. Joseph in his articulation of the resonances among African American political activists of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in *The Black Power Movement* writes, for example, that

> [this] assassination, along with the Cuban Revolution and African decolonization efforts, provided the practical and ideological building blocks for a black radical solidarity that was fuelled by a resurgence in black nationalism, street corner speaking, study groups, and community organizing. African Americans learned important lessons from these experiences (256).

In contrast to the Civil Rights Movement whose activities were generally attributed to four organisations, the Southern Christian Liberal Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality (SCLC, NAACP, SNCC and CORE), the Black Power movement was more multifaceted and intricate in its structural organisation. It comprised several groups, such as the popular Black Panthers, Organization Us, or the Black Arts Movement (BAM), with varying arenas of activity, whose shared interest was in achieving black autonomy as a means to liberation (Austin 2006: 86-87).

Although Algernon Austin suggests that the rapid establishment of Black Power organisations should be seen as proof of the strength of the Black Power vision rather than a weakness (2009: 86), it could be argued that the conflicts between the ideological objectives or their implementation took much of the wind out of Black Power (Taylor 225). For

example, Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers felt that Organization Us's "focus on the arts and African traditions" were "reactionary," while others claimed that such a focus "ignores the political and concrete, and concentrates on myth and fantasy" (Austin 2006: 88-89).

As a second example, the Nation of Islam, founded by Fard Muhammad, a man of Pakistani and New Zealand origin, insisted on the recognition that African Americans were descendants of the "Original People" of The Tribe of Shabazz, who were of "Asiatic" identity (Taylor 92). These assertions were contrary to the Pan-Africanist camps that argued that black people in America were from "black African" and not Arab or Asiatic descent (Austin 2006: 45).

Ultimately however, all these organisations were fighting for the same, fundamental ideal. As an example, Malcolm X highlighted this assertion when, following his break from The Nation, he insisted in his speech *The Ballot or the Bullet*, that black nationalism goes beyond individual religious preferences because he believed it to be a philosophy that inherently counters group divisions and conflicts:

> What is so good about it is you can stay right in the church where you are and still take Black nationalism as your philosophy; you can stay in any kind of civic organization you belong to and still take Black nationalism as your philosophy; you can be an atheist and still take Black nationalism as your philosophy; this is the philosophy that eliminates the necessity for division and arguing.

This "same ideal" was that all African Americans, in order to transcend their current subject status in white America, should "develop an awareness of their cultural heritage," which dates back to that which began in Africa (Hamilton and Ture 38).

2.2 Afrocentrism

Following the Civil Rights and the Black Power activity, the promise of increased political agency, better employment and education opportunities, as well as improved living conditions fell short of the expectations inspired by the introduction of related governmental policies. This is illustrated in a study by the *Committee on the Status of Black Americans*, published in 1989 by the *National Academy of Sciences*:

> Since the mid-1970s, many signs of stagnation or even retrogression have appeared in some important measures of income, health, education, and conditions of black community and family life: increased poverty, a decrease in college enrolment of blacks, an increased proportion of households headed by poor single women, and continuing high unemployment of both men and women (Jaynes and Williams 45).

The report further suggests when addressing crime and gang-related violence that,

> [I]n black communities, trafficking in drugs is a source of tremendous rivalry and conflict between competing sellers. The sale of drugs has become an available source of income for unemployed black youth and adults . . . (463).

A combination of these social problems and the impact of Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs,[35] which led to the increased policing and incarceration of members of black and Latino communities, as well as government cuts,[36] heightened social tensions which resulted in explosive responses, exemplified by the LA riots. These developments are largely associated with the Reagan and George Bush Sr administrations. Thus, in the years which followed the high points of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the continuing combination of acute social and political tensions linked to unemployment and inadequate education opportunities to improve both these circumstances, as well as increasing economic inequality, continued to fracture African American communities. In addition, the impact of drug-related violence and crime resulted in the increased detention and the subsequent demonising of African American and Latino communities (Massood 2003: 150-51).

With these factors in mind, the tenets of the "American Dream," which pledges that hard work begets an auspicious future, thereby suggesting individual accountability for failure to achieve or improve one's social and political station, thus places the affected African American demographic in the frustrating position of being isolated – literally in the ghettos and figuratively – in the responsibility for the degradation that surrounds them and in the subsequent struggle to rise up from under it (Hill Collins 2006: 4-5). In other words, there was a reformulation in the conception of why the subject position of the African American body politic persisted. The subsumption in this way of the effects of entrenched racist systems which still contributed to denying African Americans equal opportunities in employment and education, and to fair practice in social sectors and consumer industries, compounded by the continued impact of poverty, defines what Patricia Hill Collins terms, "new colorblind racism" (2006: 3). Impediments to African American socio-political upward mobility under this elusive brand of racism gave rise to the predominance of Afrocentrism, whose language and tone necessarily incorporated on one hand, black cultural nationalisms

[35] For details of this governmental policy, see Shahid M. Shahidulah.
[36] Cuts in subsidised housing, job training programs, compensatory education programs, school lunches, unemployment insurance, food stamps as well as budget and tax policies adopted since 1980, reduced the incomes of low and middle-income families, largely represented by African Americans, while increasing the incomes of the higher earners.

and militaristic elements of Black Power, and on the other hand, for the conservatives, a Civil Rights era rhetoric which supported the meritocracy implied by the directives of the "American Dream." Thus, as Hill Collins argues, ". . . many African Americans no longer believe that racial integration," as the "primary strategy pursued by the Civil Rights Movement . . . constitutes a realistic strategy for Black empowerment," a view which, by the 1990s, was widely absorbed into popular culture through expressive vehicles like hip-hop (2006: 4-10).

The Afrocentric period of black consciousness in the US became more pronounced as the dominance and intensity of Black Power politics receded. Gaining prominence out of arguments for a more sustainable black nationalism which grew from emergent Africacentric cultural ideas in Black Power, Afrocentrism sought to foster a unique, black cultural identity for the purposes of self- and community empowerment, as endorsed by educators like Molefe Kete Asante, Amiri Baraka, and Maulana Karenga. This approach finds its roots in what Mayes terms, the "cultural Black Power" energised by Amiri Baraka's "calls" in the mid-1960s for alternative holidays which empower and promote African American identities by celebrating – using distinct, African-based cultural practices – an African American heritage. Mayes concludes by noting that " . . . what [this] . . . underscored was the politicization of black culture . . . " (sic) (230). Consequently, Karenga's "Kwanzaa," for example, fulfilled this ambition.

Kwanzaa marks a period at the end of the calendar year in which its practitioners gather together to celebrate in thanksgiving, and to collectively engage in series of events and spiritual observations that promote and strengthen a sense of community. The apportioned or fixed time of its occurrence and the spiritual observations that characterise the celebration, suggests that Kwanzaa amounts to elements of what Hill Collins terms the "civil religion" of Afrocentrism (2006: 85-94).[37] As notable in the practical application of many Afrocentrist principles, Kwanzaa was developed from a process of editing a pre-existing traditional Zulu harvest festival to suit its African American audience and US American setting (Mayes 230).

"Maat," which is intended as a guiding moral principle for African Americans, presents another example of the response to the desire for alternative cultural practices for shaping empowered African American communities (Karenga 3). On Maat and the reasons for his explorations into it, Karenga writes that

[37] A discussion of this term will be taken up later in the chapter.

> [in] addition to its primary purpose, this work is also part of an ongoing intellectual project of constantly *dialoguing with African culture*. By dialoguing with African culture, I mean constantly asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental concerns of humankind. Moreover, it is to continuously bring forth from this quest the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense, speak this special cultural truth to the world, and use it make a unique contribution to the forward flow of human history (409).

He states that "[this] project is essentially a project of moral philosophy . . . " of which he writes that his interests lie "in extracting from the available texts a reliable portrait and understanding of ancient Egypt's highest moral standards, its delineation of right and wrong, its definitive concepts of relational obligations and rules of conduct and other data which composed and informed the ancient Egyptian moral universe." He sets out to do this with the purpose of "exploring the usefulness of Maatian ethical thought as a resource for modern moral discourse and philosophical reflection on critical moral issues" (3).

Molefi Kete Asante defines the Afrocentric philosophy as the fruit of intellectual and cultural critique of "an oppressive situation" for "Africans in America," which places "African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior" (2).[38] Accordingly, Afrocentrism, which Hill Collins characterises as an "ethnic mobilization," insists on grounding critical reflections of the socio-political challenges faced by African Americans in language and contexts that oppose Eurocentric frames of reference (2006: 82). In this way, it emphasises African American agency which is distanced from a Eurocentric perspective's implicit negation of African American (and black) histories, culture and experiences. Discussing some of its qualities, Gilroy describes "Africentrism," as a "heavily mytholigised Africanity . . . stamped by its origins not in Africa but in a variety of Pan-African ideology produced most recently by black America" (1993: 86-87). In affirmation, Hill Collins states that, "[by] seeing their connections with Africa and defining themselves as African people, the lost children of Africa who were enslaved in America can reclaim a Black consciousness and once again become centred in a true African personality" (2006: 88). She further argues:

> Some see the resurgence of African American interest in Black nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s as a direct result of an increasingly conservative political climate in the United States, the deteriorating economic base in African American communities resulting from changes in global capitalism, and the persistence of an increasingly sophisticated racial segregation (2006: 96).

[38] The philosophies incorporated into Afrocentrism can arguably be traced back to earlier black nationalist thinkers such as W.E.B Du Bois et al. and therefore includes a number of other noteworthy scholars and educators. See Barbara Ransby's chapter in *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront African American Experience* for a succinct rendering of these political actors.

Scholars like Austin posit that the rise to prominence of Afrocentrism is attributed to the necessity of combating the symptoms of societal decay (for example, drug and alcohol-related violence, poor or limited educational opportunities, increased incarcerations) experienced by African American communities in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Additionally, elements within Afrocentrist camps promoted ideas that black poverty and other social problems were, amongst others, cultural – not political and economic – and were thus problems that required a cultural solution.

Calls for black solidarity in the face of continued white oppression insisted on the recognition of an African American identity shaped by African Americans themselves with a rhetoric that appeared to reject the idea of being "American" (which implied conforming to white America, as many increasingly believed the Civil Rights Movement was doing), in favour of the need to identify as "black"[39] and re-identifying with Africa, though with strong emphases on cultural nationalist approaches.[40] Hill Collins captures the logic behind these conceptions succinctly in the following:

> As a step toward recovering their identity and subjectivity, Black people needed to undergo a conversion experience from "Negroes" to "Black." "Negroes" mesmerized by Whiteness could be distinguished from authentic Black people prepared to participate in liberation struggles by completing a conversion experience. Completing a four-stage transformation – moving through stages of re-encounter, encounter with Whites, immersion in Black culture, and internalization of a new Black identity – constituted the path toward a new black identity (2006: 89).

One of the ways in which Afrocentrism was seen to respond to the afore-mentioned socio-political challenges was in, for example, the creation of the independent black schools. These comprised one of the arenas for the dissemination of its black cultural nationalist agenda and focused on educating African American children with the consequent objective of establishing and maintaining strong African American communities. Their educational programmes and reading materials, as evidenced by the blurb and by the titles of workbooks created by Jawanja Kunjufu and Folami Prescott, aimed to "tackle self-esteem issues that many African American youths face in today's media-driven culture." The reasoning was that by developing a sense of self-worth and a feeling of community cohesion grounded in

[39] As previously discussed, "black" here is meant to identify "African Americans," (who in this context, are expressly politically-conscious and "pro-black").
[40] See, for example, Hamilton and Ture's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*.

common cultural connections, African Americans could create and protect resilient communities, free from the ideological hurdles of the contemporary struggles.

As a black nationalism whose resistance is expressed through cultural forms, it follows that Afrocentrist messages found an avenue in contemporary pop mediums. In this regard, as Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews write in their contribution to *Race and Class*, "[it] is in this barren and politically hostile landscape that we witness the resurgence of a very narrowly defined cultural nationalism, the popular version of which manifests itself in some sectors of the Hip Hop community and in nostalgic hero-worship, and the academic wing of which comes under the banner of Afrocentrism" (58). Thus, hip-hop and the culture which characterised it, became another avenue for the articulation of black nationalism. Further to this, in his discussion of the urgent desire for African Americans to control "their images in literature and beyond" (20) and citing the hip-hop group Public Enemy's reference to minstrelsy in some of their lyrics as evidence of this, Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar writes that

> [the] visibility of black people . . . increased concomitantly with their distance from an ostensibly white middle-class cultural standard and aesthetic. The organic consciousness of this dilemma became pronounced as hip-hop entered the era dominated by conscious artists who laced lyrics with a hard-edged black militancy (22).

With rap music as its literal mouthpiece, hip-hop was, as Angela Ards writes, the "artistic expression" developed by black and Latino youths from within a "tradition of defiance, of creating 'somethin' outta nothin'," that allegedly first emerged from the South Bronx in New York city (312).[41] An "underground world" constituted of "crews" who were, as Ards describes, "the peaceful alternative to gangs," hip-hop, whose art was defined by commenting on and responding to the immediate, decaying, urban environments in which the artists lived, meant that this form of artistic expression became sources of social commentary and thus created spaces for critiquing the conditions in which they lived, thereby reactivating expressive social and political consciousness to a new generation of African Americans (312). Due to the fact that within the body of rap music are tracks with lyrics that contained critical socio-political commentary, as hip-hop evolved, aspects of its messages began to play a more pronounced role in reviving sentiments of the black consciousness movements of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. This is because, as Forman notes in his work *The 'Hood Comes First*,

[41] From a wide range of available scholarship, see, for example, Forman and Neal 2004, Ogbar 2007, Krims 2000 for a genealogy of the hip-hop's emergence and the politics which inspired it.

"through a more pronounced ideological discourse and explicit cultural agenda, rap artists established strong and consistent links between issues of race, space, and youth identities" (2002: 158).

Responses to the afore-mentioned socio-political conditions in pop media are notable especially through the burgeoning hip-hop culture (which includes rap, djing, dance, graffiti art, and fashion) and the emergence of hood films, which amounted to the visual representation of the geopolitical landscape affiliated with hip-hop culture (Massood 2003: 148). Like the artists and content of hip-hop culture, hood films, as Massood writes, "are characterized by identifiable urban settings" (2003: 145) with a "specific cinematic technique that connote both temporal immediacy and documentary verisimilitude" and which "incorporate the music, clothing, speech idioms, and personalities from their respective cultural contexts, thus echoing through visual and aural signposts" (2003:146) an urban, African American audience's lived experiences. Hood films thus demonstrated their correlation to hip-hop because they too claimed to reflect the lives of urban African American communities affected by the consequences of contemporary government initiatives and legislations, and the selling and use of hard drugs and the subsequent incarcerations that resulted from these. In this way, both use what Massood terms, "the iconography of the inner city" as grim representations of the realities of the ghetto with the resultant prominence of gangs and gangsters (2003: 152). The expressed ghetto experience was thereby necessarily tied to notions of authenticity, the absence or presence of which determined the value of the hood film or other articulations of hip-hop culture in the opinions of the consumers.[42] Moreover, as the subject matter of their artistic material was the environment in which they lived, the reputations and credibility of hip-hop artists and rappers was signified by their relation to the lived experiences vocalised in their rap lyrics.

When the visual and vocal expression or articulation of a lifestyle or state of being becomes associated with a particular vernacular, aesthetic or demographic by both those within and those who are perceived to be outside of these (like the terms hip-hop, punk, hippie etc., signify), they can become, in the language of marketing, brandable. For, as Gilroy notes,

> [I]dentity has even been taken into the viscera of postmodern commerce, where the goal of planetary marketing promotes not just the targeting of objects and services to the identities of particular consumers but the idea that any product whatsoever can be suffused with identity (2000: 98).

[42] For an assessment of this assertion, see Forman and Neal 2002/2004, Hill Collins 2006 and Massood 2003.

Recognising what the terms hip-hop or punk, and hippie infer signifies its transcendence from politicised personal expressions to an externalised sphere, which invites any who subscribe to or identify with the tenets that define what politics or social commentary the terms are affiliated with, to adopt or appropriate the externally expressed visualisation of them, so that they too are identified as being "hip-hop, punk or hippie" by others. At this juncture, the culture becomes exploitable and authenticity becomes a marketable element of this exploitation with terms like "imitation" or "fake" setting the value level, a process summarised by hooks as follows:

> When young black people mouth 1960s' black nationalist rhetoric, don kente cloth, gold medallions, dread their hair, and diss white folks they hang out with, they expose the way meaningless commodification strips these signs of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption (sic) (1992: 33).

As asserted in this quote, as the art form evolved, there was a noticeable shift in thematic concentrations from the one of political agitation in "message" rap to the materialism espoused in "gangsta" rap. Todd Boyd, writing on the devaluation of the political themes within hip-hop culture and rap in *That's the Joint!*, cites the "emergence of gangsta rap" and its "open rejection of politics by those involved," as well as what he calls the "mainstreaming" of black nationalist politics exemplified by Spike Lee's rendering of Malcolm X in a film of the same title released in 1992, "events [that marked] the end of political flirtation in rap music and, by extension, African American popular culture" (325). In referencing the mainstreaming of black nationalism in the way that it was done through *Malcolm X*, Boyd is alluding to the oft-cited correlation between the commercialisation of African American lives and cultural history and the subsequent dilution of the black consciousness expressed within them. Furthermore, the Afrocentric fashions worn by some hip-hop practitioners as a demonstration of their Africacentric black cultural nationalist politics became, as Boyd posits, "easily devalued as it is transformed into a mass commodity" (328). As will be shown in chapter three, the character of this depoliticization is referenced by Haile Gerima in his 1993 film, *Sankofa*.

Thus, as a consequence of the "new colorblind racism" and the manoeuvrings of the commodification processes referred to above, as Boyd writes, " . . . the issue of class struggle has been reduced to mere spectacle, as opposed to a sustained critical interrogation of

domination and oppression (327).

As alluded to above, the nature of hip-hop culture's commercialisation accommodated a marketing strategy that was able to sell it as a brand, which therefore came with identifiable signifiers of this brand, thus corresponding with the marketing of hood films. In this way, hood films became another important spin-off medium representing the commodification of hip-hop culture. Writing on the subsequent visibility of African American youth in connection with hip-hop culture, Bakari Kitwana notes that, ". . . [having] proven themselves as marketable entertainers with successful music careers, rappers star in television sit-coms and film and regularly endorse corporate products. . ." (341-42). The young urban African American thus became "both invisible (by way of their "ghettoization") and hypervisible" through what Hill Collins has characterised as "a multibillion-dollar hip-hop industry" (2006: 3-4). As a consequence of African American cultural commodification by way of hip-hop cultures (through rap music and videos, as well as through hood films) the power of the political language and expression in Afrocentrism, like Black Power before it, were subsumed by the profit-driven machinery of Hollywood and hip-hop.

Furthermore, in illustrating more of the tensions which characterised elements of hip-hop culture, Kitwana documents that

> [In] the late 1980s when gangsta rap first emerged, community activists and mainstream politicians of the civil rights generation began to challenge rap's content . . . The key concern was Black cultural integrity . . . Central to this discussion was the pervasive use of offensive epithets in rap lyrics . . . which reinforce negative stereotypes about Blacks (344).

Hip-hop, rap music, urban poverty, ghettos gangsterism and angry youth become synonymous with African American inner-city lives, and therefore mark a distinct expression of African American culture. With the added feature of being aggressively marketed on the radio and in film, as well as in subsequent published articles, posters, photos etc., there were those in the African American community who did not want to be identified or associated with this rendering of "black culture."

Arguments for the new black nationalism promoted in segments of the hip-hop culture, pointed out however, "[that] a positive, racialized self-awareness was assumed among early hip-hoppers as essential to how we note hip-hop's own collective identity and its desire to appeal to those outside of its immediate community" (Ogbar 18). For, as Forman writes of its first articulations, ". . . as a popular musical form, rap was situated as a black music, made for and by black and Latino youths who lived primarily in America's urban

environments" (2002: 111). Thus, from whichever perspective it is argued, hip-hop, in propelling urban African American to the forefront of media, could not be but political. The very position of its practitioners was political and the way they chose to express was political, even when or if the culture promotes the violence and aggression that characterises some of its flawed rhetoric.

All the films discussed in this study, (excluding *Shaft in Africa* and *The Spook*) in their varied ways, incorporate into their narratives the social and political frustrations described above, as well as many Afrocentric ideas. As will be addressed in the following chapter, *Daughters of the Dust*, like *Sankofa*, for example, is heavily informed by Afrocentric politics. Additionally, in the both, not only are Afrocentric assertions for a return to a cultural African past, or for an educational development centred on African American roots as a means of empowerment prevalent, in *Sankofa* the commercialisation of Afrocentric thought as expressed in contemporary fashions is also commented on. Similarly, in *New Jack City* the consumerist culture mushrooming around black cultural nationalism is also referenced in terms of fashion, via the interrogation of the leather pendent worn by the drug-lord and villain. In *Higher Learning* the choice Malik (Omar Epps) and Deja (Tyra Banks) make in wearing the wooden, African masks to the Halloween party is another conscious displaying of the values of both their politicisation, and John Singleton's simultaneous dissemination to the audience, the message of the significance of such fashion choices as a political act.

Conceptions of Africa and Africans in this timeline of black consciousness movements (i.e., from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Power, to Afrocentrism) indicate a gradual distancing from contemporary Africa and events on the continent, which could serve as examples of successful struggles against white hegemonic structures. For example, the fact that, in *Coming to America*, the Zamundan royal family's outfits are arguably modelled on the infamous dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, and that the rest of the people in the kingdom are costumed in a combination of various national dresses from across West Africa and to an African colonial past in general, speaks to this distance.

2.3 Emergent Pitfalls

The necessity and benefits of black consciousness politics in the US are, as stated at the start of this chapter, not only represented by the three broad categorisations introduced here. The presence of black consciousness in its various articulations endures and abounds through contemporary public discussion, within academic settings and in the innumerable

arts and media spaces. Furthermore, as each share and were, as Hill Collins writes, "stimulated by the three orienting strategies of . . . self-definition (cultural), self-determination (political), and self-reliance (economic) . . . ," it is limiting to conceive of them as completely independent of each other (10). The delineation has however been useful in attempting to clarify what each was and therefore noting which influenced the selected films. In continuation, I now address a summation of scholarship that are exemplary of the critiques each movement has garnered as a means of contextualising their resonances in the film plots.

The widely articulated scholarship on the shortcomings of the Civil Rights that gave rise to Black Power and parallel black nationalisms generally converge on the argument that its integrationist approaches could not hold up against the economic and socio-political systems which were created to maintain white US American hegemony. Black Power, with its militaristic renunciation of integrating into a racist societal system, ran into difficulties when attempting to construct sustainable alternatives to the Eurocentric structures they were repudiating, principally because they had incorporated some of these very frameworks into their politics. Notably, the subsequent definition of ethnically-based membership presented further complexities as it sought to construct boundaries of what that membership included and excluded. The black cultural nationalism expressed through Afrocentrism vacillated between core tenets of its black consciousness predecessors, thereby reflecting its own formation out of both. Consequently, it inherited the weaknesses from each and compounded to these, contemporary nuances of "colorblind racism," in addition to the glamourisation of African American poverty through hip-hop's commercialisation.

Hill Collins makes the observation that " . . . a new politics of representation emerged whereby Black people were integrated into existing social structures one by one . . . leaving a politics of group representation that became increasingly fragmented . . . " (10-11). As a result, neither black consciousness movement could be sustained as forces for collective empowerment in the face of "colorblind racism." In the main, the discussed black consciousness movements were ultimately undermined by individualist readings of integrationist and conservatist suggestions that problems of African American communities stemmed from ineptitude and/or weak male leadership in family units, and in their quest to define a unifying, positive cultural heritage, centred on ideas and values of blackness.

> One important criticism of academic Afrocentrism that fostered its demise as a social theory concerned its exclusionary practices – in particular, its creation of narrow, essentialist definitions of Blackness. Because rituals determine categories of belonging, some versions of academic Afrocentrism degenerated into policing the ever shrinking boundaries of authentic Blackness (Hill Collins 2006: 90).

To expand on this quote from Hill Collins, I add that in establishing the boundaries of the discussed black nationalist philosophies and organisations in terms of what they stand for or against, and what they address in doing so, thus introduces into their doctrines ideas of what constitutes collective memberships. As has already been premised in chapter one, this centres on notions of what "to be an African American" is or means. As hinted at by Malcolm X's assertions in his speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," simply defining that membership based on skin colour or degrees of "African Americanness" or authenticity (as in the case of Barack Obama) is inadequate. Furthermore, as Gilroy expresses, the notions of collective identity in political discourse is flawed because through such a focus, "the distinctive rules that define modern political culture are consciously set aside in favor of . . . mythic varieties of kinship that are mistakenly believed to be more profound" (2000: 106). The increasing value placed on commercially-driven individualism reveal how such identity constructions are incompatible with the collective identities pursued by political movements. Thus, conceiving of a cohesive African American culture which stands in unison with other black identities and hence the implied boundaries which encapsulate this, present conditions for exclusion and for choosy definitions of what it means to be an African American individual (and/or a politicised one at that). Additionally, there is an emphasis on that definition being bound in ideas of "culture" and what that would be for African Americans and how that is connected with Africa. Further to the overdetermined, oppositional discourse on "authenticity," E. Patrick Johnson writes that

> [w]hen black Americans have employed a rhetoric of authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included. The multiple ways in which we construct blackness within and outside black American culture is contingent on the historical moment in which we live and our ever-shifting subject positions . . . Indeed, if one were to look at blackness in the context of black American history, one would find that, even in relation to nationalism, the notion of an "authentic" blackness has always been contested (3).

It is therefore perceptible that exclusive ideas of blackness and what constitutes the collective in the quest to construct and maintain a national African American identity, as implied within these politics, are intrinsically unsound.

They can be said to be so in the following ways: The rise and decline in pubic zealousness with regard to the application of these black consciousness movements within the afore-mentioned African American socio-political contexts, hints in part at Fanonian "pitfalls" which arguably precipitated their devaluation in public fervour. Franz Fanon, in his discussion of African anti- and post-colonial nation-building and nationalism in *The*

Wretched of the Earth, argues that by replicating the models of power exercised by colonial administrations, the new post-colonial nations faced an implicitly handicapped future. He notes the inherited systems of economy which meant continued dependence on the former colonial masters, and the ways in which the leaders of these independent nations, who he describes as the "bourgeoisie," incorporated the same dynamics of power between them and the native population as it was played out between coloniser and colonised. These elements were key operating mechanisms which contributed to the "pitfalls" of the new nations Fanon describes.[43] Assuming social and political structures which were part of the racist machinery that characterises African American oppression as a suggested foundation for black empowerment as became clear in the emergent conservative, meritocracy arguments espoused in black consciousness philosophies, is one such example.

For example, utilising the same frameworks entrenched by white US America which contributed to African American oppression in order to uplift and empower African American communities generate obvious quandaries. Such frameworks, for example, deny the impact of a racist system in their measurement of accountability in African American social, political and economic advancement, which Hill Collins articulates in her discussion of "new racism."

As Angela Y. Davis notes in *Women, Race and Class*, viewing the perceived failures of African American domestic life as consequences of problems with African American male socialisation presents another problematic framework. Arguments which claimed that societal issues in African American communities are a consequence of unstable matriarchal family units, were propagated by "[t]he notorious 1965 government study on the 'Negro Family' – popularly known as the 'Moynihan Report'" (Davis 13). The focus in black cultural nationalism on "black male socialisation" thus resonates with the logic of this controversial report, thereby exemplifying the futility in using racist frameworks as a starting point for building a cohesive black consciousness.

As such, these movements for African American liberation, with their gendered stress on a masculine-centred expression of militancy and defiance (also linked with sexual potency and virility), and the added emphasis of associating manhood (which includes ideas paradigms of the "ideal man") with conservative family values, expose further areas of contention.[44] For example, as Alexander-Floyd argues, the Million Man March which was a

[43] See Fanon 1961.
[44] See for example, Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.

political campaign called by Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, "identified rectifying the failures and ineptitude of Black men as the key to stabilizing and re-building "the Black community." Thus, as he continues, " . . . the critical component in stabilizing the Black community lay not in combating racism per se, or in directing demands to government for redress, but in providing an opportunity for Black men to be macho" (193). The fact that the campaign excluded women, not to mention the myriad other identities who do not identify with the patriarchy, conservatism and homophobia of The Nation reveals how such forms of black nationalisms cannot be said to earnestly address the system of racism which affects diverse members of the African American body politic.

The deference to African American masculinity as central to the solution of African American socio-political problems points to a salient issue inherent to the ideas shared and articulated by these movements.

> Nationalist appeals for a unitary representation of blackness tend to emphasize notions of authenticity that uphold a vision of patriarchal family life and of nationhood as the only possible structures wherein the crisis of black identity can be resolved . . . many African Americans desperately cling to the assumption that the pain in black life can be healed by establishing patriarchy and black nationalist identity (hooks 1995: 244).

In *Killing Rage*, bell hooks critically addresses how black consciousness principles supported by the various organisations reveal problematic perspectives on gender and how these obstruct processes of empowerment and consequent emancipation. Firstly, ignoring the very particular and brutal history of African American women's lives in the US and the subsequent necessity of their voice in the construction of empowered and resistant African American communities, mean that such approaches to African American liberation therefore cannot (and do not) address and challenge the effects, in their entirety, of white hegemonic oppression, which the movements sought to do.

Secondly, the suggestion that a return to a heteronormative, family configuration which puts a man at the head, simultaneously constructing secondary and tertiary roles for the woman and children within it, not only dismiss the commensurate hardships faced by African American women and hence their important and necessary contribution to African American collective uplift, they also exclude the existence of alternate family structures (e.g., single parent or grandparent-run households, etc), gay or queer-identifying African Americans and those attendant, multiplicit experiences of systems of oppression, including bigotry, racism, homophobia and social stigmatisation linked to such circumstances or affinities.

Additionally, in the words of Austin, the "conservative, values-based approach" to the mounting socio-political problems which suggest that "problems are brought on by the individuals not the system," compromise the overall empowerment objectives of Black Power and Afrocentrism, as these hope to speak for all African Americans affected (in obviously diverse ways given the varied economic backgrounds, gender or ages of African American communities) by racism and its various reverberations (2009: 118).

2.3.1 Repercussions

> It is possible to argue that the acquisition of roots became an urgent issue only when diaspora blacks sought to construct a political agenda in which the ideal rootedness was identified as a prerequisite for the forms of cultural integrity that could guarantee the nationhood and statehood to which they aspired. The need to locate cultural or ethnic roots and then to use the idea of being in touch with them as a means to refigure the cartography of dispersal and exile is perhaps best understood as a simple and direct response to the varieties of racism which have denied the historical character of black experience and the integrity of black cultures (Gilroy 1993: 112).

Leading off from Gilroy's argument on the genesis of the cultural black nationalist facet of Afrocentrism, and going beyond the afore-mentioned arguments about conservative moral and communal aspirations emerging from popular black consciousness movements (as exemplified by some of the teachings in the independent black schools), the afrocentrically imagined Africa does not take into account the reality of the experiences and challenges of the continent itself. The "mythologised Africanity" of Afrocentrism as described by Gilroy, also incorporates subjective representations of "African history and culture" in the broad sense of both terms (Gilroy 1993: 87).

Hill Collins argues that, in essence, Afrocentrism can be viewed as a "civil religion" based on the criteria that it includes "repetitive practices [that] are designed to build solidarity among the community of true believers," and the incorporation of initiation or conversion ceremonies whereby an individual adopts "an African name" and an Africa-centric personal style. As such, she posits that such practices engendered exclusionary circumstances which meant that "some segments of the African American community could *never* become 'Black enough.'" Consequently, many African Americans rejected these expectations. She thus concludes by stating that "[i]n essence, sexism and homophobia within academic Afrocentrism" which she describes as a "peculiar hybrid identity" of a "civil religion" and as "science of Blackness," thus "compromised its own claims for a comprehensive love ethic and fostered its demise" (sic) (2006: 85-91).

Moreover, in constructing an African American cultural base which focuses on great and ancient African civilisations, or creating celebrations like Kwanzaa by reconceptualising elements of a Zulu traditional practice, adopting ancient Egyptian principles as Maat does, or incorporating fragments of the Kiswahili language, contributes to the premise that a romanticised, selective conceiving of Africa necessarily ignores the cited country's own reflections on the specified cultural forms and the contemporary political, economic and societal actors that define the continent. It cannot in earnest be said to be "dialoguing with Africa" as Karenga states. Another pitfall within these black consciousness ideas can therefore be noted in the ways in which Africa is employed or featured in their principles.

In referencing decolonialism as Black Power activists did, or executing the afore-mentioned cultural constructions, applications of some of the black consciousness objectives thus engendered processes of appropriation which were highly selective and which focused principally on ways in which African Americans could articulate their questions of identity and the status of their American citizenship, without a requisite conscientising of what these processes actually meant with regard to the subsequent development of limited and limiting conceptions of Africa and Africans.

Furthermore, as these messages in Black Power and/or Afrocentrism found expression in popular media and music forms like the films discussed or in the various avenues of hip-hop culture, the informing political value which motivated these black cultural explorations and their implementations by African American educators such as Karenga and Kunjufu diminishes, leaving the uncomfortable arena of relations or contact between Africans and African Americans raised in the preceding chapter.[45] Thus, a corollary of these processes of selective appropriation as encouraged and widely disseminated through black nationalist vehicles such as Black Power and Afrocentrism, has led to the creation and maintenance of problematic perceptions (and subsequent filmic representations) of Africa and Africans.

The film industry is implicitly commercial in its need for the broadest possible audience in order to offset production costs. Consequently, the production of a narrative structure, message and images are hinged on representations that multitudes can relate to through spectrums of familiarity (e.g., resembles things known or seen, or experienced). The incorporation of African elements as I argue they are meant to be understood in the films discussed, reflect hooks' contention that "commodification strips these signs [black nationalist rhetoric] of political integrity" (1992: 33). For while this statement refers to the

[45] See chapter one, under sub-heading "Black Identities in Film"

African American cultural black nationalist articulations such as the representations of Afrocentric fashions in *Sankofa*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and *New Jack City*, a similar desiccation of substance happens when, as discussed above, fractions of African cultures are recomposed for African American consumption, and then preserved in this reconstituted form by the repetition of this use in the various mediums.

3. Narrative Messages in the Selected Films

The films discussed in this thesis have been selected for their popularity which, I argue, is always related to any and/or all combinations of what messages they transport, the vehicles of that message, the plot and its strength, and the dialogue and the actions that take place, which work parallel to the plot.

To be clear, the messages are necessarily contemporaneous, and the actors who carry the plot are generally familiar and wildly popular African American icons. Moreover, as there are relatively so few African Americans represented in Hollywood, those who succeed are cast in numerous films and series, which adds to their visibility. As a result, it is not surprising to find features which cast many of these icons together.[46] Some are simultaneously successful hip-hop stars, which adds to their iconic statuses. In short, these are people who would have strong crowd-pulling power because their abundant representation in commercialised, popular mediums, most notably those targeted for black audiences.[47] The plots of these films are usually pitted against "the system" or "The Man" (meaning racist institutions and/or capitalist endeavours), or, in other words, against mechanisms that maintain their position of power by systematically oppressing African American communities and individuals.

Furthermore, each film has a message which is always connected to the politics, historical events and societal circumstances (such as living conditions, education, employment and political representation) of the contemporary African American communities of the time in which they were produced. As such, the messages in these films often deal primarily with concepts of black unity as a force against white hegemonic power, citing black empowerment, self-determination, and conviction in these as ways of defeating the afore-mentioned oppressive elements. To expand, "black empowerment," as it is always presented in the films, comes first from re-educating oneself from an Africa-centric perspective. "Self-determination" entails being motivated to improve individual and collective circumstances from a position of self-love and not "hate for white folk" as Dan Freeman, the main character in *The Spook* articulates (00:47:38 minutes). "Conviction in these" connotes standing steadfastly by these principles and being prepared to use force if necessary, as a means of achieving black unity and empowerment, or in the face of social

[46] Examples include *Waiting to Exhale* (1995; Dir: Forest Whitaker), *The Best Man* (1999; Dir: Malcolm D. Lee) or *Precious* (2009; Dir: Lee Daniels).
[47] If, for example, the actors were also hip-hop artists, then they would be cast to appeal to their crossover hip-hop audiences too.

backlash, by which I mean verbal castigation, or duplicity in, for example, scenarios where token job positions are given to African American staff in order to appear integrated.

So pervasive are these institutionalised oppressive conditions, that it is implausible to have a film about African American communities, or with African American characters in principle roles which does not address the experienced inequalities in some way, especially if the film or series wants to be as representationally realistic as possible. Accordingly, this body of films thus deals with the denial of African Americans, the equal rights due to all citizens of the United States.[48]

The black consciousness politics that emerge from this fight, and which are strong undercurrents in the messages of these films, often refer to "black" empowerment and unity. However, as a result of such a conflation, they thereby incorporate the exclusion of Other identities by subsuming or appropriating elements of these, and/or by making tenets that speak to one, often conservative idea of blackness.[49] For although the nationalisms invoked by black consciousness movements call for and speak as a unified black collective, there are apparent conflicts that emerge, due to the fact that these nationalistic processes tend to highlight the implicit processes of exclusion and objectification by one identity of the other. This serves to undermine the aspects of black consciousness principles which require and encourage a cohesive collective identity in order to fulfil their emancipatory objectives. As a result, depending on the messages and the way in which these are voiced, this could mean that a viewer who cannot relate to the narrative, characters or diegetic representations can feel excluded from all or part of the socio-political themes explored in these films, and in some, their unifying intentions.

Moreover, as has been posited in chapter one, in order to produce or read the messages incorporated into the narratives, the viewer has to interpret the array of signs presented. As a corollary of such a process (observing, deciphering and transcoding the sounds and images in order to make meaning from them), the identity of the viewer is in an implicit state of construction and re-construction as they are constantly positioning themselves in relation or opposition to the signs presented throughout.

Because in these films the featured identities are African American identities, these are therefore continually constructed and reconstructed in relation to each other, as well as to Africa and Africans because for obvious reasons, the African American identities that are introduced and developed are often presented as being centred on acknowledging an Africa-

[48] This is arguably a continuing struggle; a premise which will be revisited in the final chapter of this thesis.
[49] See chapter two for a full rendering of this view.

based origin. The strength of that character and the authenticity of his/her blackness are subsequently rooted in the degree to which he/she assumes this Africa-based origin as part of their physical and cultural heritage, which is also sometimes combined with taking pride in distinctly African American cultural markers.[50]

While it can be seen as positive that Africa or Africans are incorporated into these African American films and their black consciousness messages, it should be noted that this also creates uncomfortable sites of identity construction for viewers who, though also identifying as black, are African. In almost all of the films I discuss, the imagined, romanticised or homogenous Africa and Africans represented, (i.e., representations that cannot be identified as belonging to any particular African country, people, history or culture despite claiming to do so in the films) might place the African spectator in an uncomfortable position of reconciling their own ideas of their identity in relation to the indeterminate characterisation on screen. The African viewer is thus confronted with a representation of Africa or Africans that they cannot or do not wish to identify with. Ultimately, this means that the African viewer is left to deal not only with an historically Eurocentric approach to the continent and its people, which stands in direct opposition to the black nationalist message embedded in the narrative, they also have to accommodate the subsequent distancing created between them and the overarching black consciousness message in the films and the African American characters, actors, narrative and imagery that transports it.

The following chapter will analyse the uneasy confluence of appropriation, denial and dependence cultivated by the unavoidable processes of objectification intrinsic to the construction of Africa and Africans in the chosen films, which essentially contribute to the emphasis of difference between both black identities. It is therefore important and necessary to be familiar with the messages and their contexts and thus be able to conceive of the subsequent position of the viewer. To this end, I will briefly introduce these contexts, present the messages interwoven into the plots and will then address the employment of African elements within these. I adopt a chronological approach in the production of this analysis in order to mirror the changing political contexts of the messages – namely, from blaxploitation to the post-hood films – thereby elucidating more clearly, the impact of these socio-political progressions.

[50] This is notable in the inclusion of the scene where the Peazant family in *Daughters of the Dust* gathers together to eat the lavish spread of soul food (01:18:37 to 01:19:10 minutes). This contention is elaborated on further in this chapter, on pages 17-18, under the subheading, "Independent Films, Crossover Stars: *Daughters of the Dust.*"

3.1 Blaxploitation and Beyond: The Politics of *The Spook* and *Shaft in Africa*

At the time of the Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s, pressures from the NAACP and the Ministry of Justice in particular forced Hollywood to re-evaluate their hiring practices and their approach to the African American market. Threats for economic boycott of the industry and discrimination suits were made because of the continued absence of African Americans in their workforce, and thus, Hollywood's slow response in the application of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Grant 34). Additionally, with the emerging militancy of Black Power politics and the fact that African Americans were increasingly identifying with urban environments, it became necessary for the studios to make films that appealed to this demographic, especially as they accounted for a noteworthy percentage of the total box office, which according to Paula J. Massood, was " . . . somewhere between 30 and 40 percent . . ." (2003: 82).

Modelled on B-movie or exploitation film production codes, blaxploitation films were action films made on a small budget with a principal cast that were African American, and which sought to attract big audiences through their sensationalist narratives and uncensored violence and sexual displays (Dunn 46). They were, as Stephane Dunn describes, the dozens upon dozens of "black-hero-winning motif" films made between 1971 and 1973, set primarily in an urban environment (48). Although this period of African American filmmaking is generally referred to as the "blaxploitation era," there are a number of films which did not adhere to the general characteristics ascribed to this genre, but which still made an important contribution to the African American cinematic record. The phenomenon of blaxploitation opened the door to other types of films which reflected more obviously the Black Power politics of the time such as Ivan Dixon's *The Spook,* the television series, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977) and from the popular *Shaft* movies, the second sequel, *Shaft in Africa*.

Shaft in Africa and *The Spook* have been selected for analysis because besides their popularity, their narratives and messages serve as useful examples for the overall argumentation in this thesis.[51] For, the rationale behind the production of blaxploitation films was not only that the industry had to create more possibilities in the production processes for

[51] Namely, that in incorporating black consciousness politics, thereby necessarily including contemporary African American perceptions of Africa and Africans, coupled with the commodification processes inherent to producing a film for mass appeal, these films thus transport controversial impressions and representations of Africa and Africans. Furthermore, this in itself constitutes only one aspect of the pitfalls present in these films resulting from the incorporation of the expressed black consciousness discourses.

African Americans to be involved in, they were also meant to generate revenue by appealing to and entertaining mainstream, African American audiences. The films therefore had to speak to these audiences. To this end, the two films focused their narrative plots around popular cultural discourses.[52] As discussed in chapter two (and as will be briefly referenced below), these included tenets of Black Power politics which were openly critical of the Civil Rights Movement's approach to tackling the oppressive white power structures. Secondly, in the continuing search for ways of unifying disparate African American communities who no longer believed in the strength of Civil Rights era politics, the development of a cultural nationalism which would connect African Americans with Africa and the black diaspora, focused on linking African American struggles with decolonisation – a process for which educating African Americans about African histories and traditions was deemed a necessary part of.

Released in 1973, *The Spook*, with its strong guerrilla-militancy subtext, reflects the influences of a political arena and a society marked by the repercussions of the Civil Rights Movement, the stirrings of Black Power and global decolonisation, as well as the heightened sense of frustration experienced by contemporary African American communities. The opening scene of the film is exemplary of this sentiment.

The audience is first presented with a scene of senator Hennington (Joseph Mascolo) in a discussion with his wife and secretary. He is a politician and the audience quickly learns that he needs more votes for his re-election, whether or not he believes in what he has to do to get them. His African American secretary, whose mechanical speech and cadence transport her resemblance to a machine, delivers reports and makes suggestions based on statistics and findings generated through a computer, thus advising him on his chances of re-election. When he asks about polls and his chances of being re-elected, she tells him that a commission ran an "ethnic study" in which he did not fare well because based on this study especially, the computer found that the chances are he will lose the elections. "The computers don't lie," he says (00:01:29 minutes). She continues, stating that although he seems to be doing well with "the Jewish vote," that "the negroes are the trouble spot" (01:38:00 minutes). "The negroes!" he exclaims, with irritation, "I'm the best man those people have in Washington!" (00:01:42 minutes). A few minutes later, suddenly aware of the political incorrectness of using the word "negroes," he interrupts and corrects himself. "First, how do we retrieve the lost ne…black vote?" (00:02:09 minutes). Hennington seems irritated by having to do so, underscoring the

[52] Perhaps tellingly, *Shaft in Africa* was written and directed by white US American and British men. One would therefore assume that the research for the script was likely informed by contemporary popular African American cultural references.

emptiness of these and other types of cosmetic changes in the contemporary anti-discrimination language and rhetoric. Visually, this is re-articulated when Dan Freeman (Lawrence Cook) is finally employed as mail room personnel, despite proving to be a top agent in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This echoes Black Power contentions that Hamilton and Ture posit, that "Black visibility is not Black Power" (245).

It is then decided that in order to win the lost votes, senator Hennington needs to put into effect anti-discrimination laws, using a high profile governmental organisation, namely, the CIA. Mrs Hennington (Elaine Aiken) suggests accusing them of "a racially discriminatory hiring policy," arguing that, "They have no negroes, except on a menial level you know" (00:02:15 minutes). She foregoes using the politically correct term and he does not correct her, which reinforces the superficiality of the change in term (i.e. "negro" to "black"). The idea that the application of these laws is superficial and is solely a way in which men like Hennington can achieve their political ends is another political matter the film addresses.

Later in the plot, a CIA training interview scene has been included. It depicts a process of indoctrination which produces the endorsed response to accusations of racism in America:

> CIA RECRUIT. If I were undercover as a political or economic officer in an embassy and I was questioned about racism in the United States, I'd point out that they also have racial and religious troubles; that a thing like that isn't resolved overnight and that our country is firmly behind racial progress and great strides are being made here. (00:04:05 minutes)

The African American man says this to a panel of white men, who seem to be satisfied with this answer. Greenlee and Dixon are thereby implying that this response is one that a white US American might use in defence of the ironic position their country had found itself in as leaders of the newly formed United Nations (UN), who at the same time appeared to be the least progressive in terms of domestic equality.

The spuriousness in such measures is again highlighted when the African American lead character, Dan Freeman is hired to be the "face of integration" at the CIA, but ultimately works in a servile position within the organisation. Moreover, given the contemporary political context (post-1960s), *The Spook* is not only commenting on the fact that some of the

efforts to observe the anti-discriminatory laws were insincere in their intentions and application, it also claims that both African American and white Americans were very well aware of this. In an allegorical sense, the CIA could be read as white US America and all its institutions and Freeman, the stoic and sober central character, as an example of the concientised African American who is fully aware of this false display of progress, but proactive enough to use it to his advantage.

Just before the conclusion of the opening sequences, the secretary foretells that "whoever they select will be the best-known spy since 007," which is more for the audience than for the people with her in the office (00:02:34 minutes).[53] The idea is thus already planted in the viewers' minds that what they are about to witness is the black answer to the white 007. He will be comparable to 007. He will possess all the qualities of 007 – a smart, fearless, agile and sexually intoxicating man. As has already been suggested by the similitude in her mannerisms to a computer or machine, the secretary is not likely to make a false prediction, and so the audience can assume (at least subconsciously) that she may be correct.

Ultimately, the writer and director first establish and then illustrate through a series of examples how Freeman fits with the idea of "the black answer to 007" as the secretary had predicted, thus making him a potent Black Power weapon. Maintaining an inconspicuous profile that allows him to remain undetected by the watchful white CIA agents is one of his principle spy tactics. Because Freeman executes this so well, he is able to build and train fighters in various cities who would later engage the country in rebellion. One such example in action is observable when Freeman is accused of being an "Uncle Tom" by one of the other CIA recruits during an altercation. An "Uncle Tom" or "Tom" is a derogatory remark meant to indicate a black person who makes himself less threatening to white people by appearing to be eager to please them. Later in film Freeman literally demonstrates this definition by quickly offering to light the general's cigar before the waiter has time to do so. The entirety of this particular scene is an example of this stereotype, with Freeman responding affirmatively to the racist statements the general is making (00:28:05 minutes).

The film, whose narrative is developed around Dan Freeman and his actions, is an adaptation of a book authored by Sam Greenlee, published in 1969. Through Freeman, a black nationalist who infiltrates the CIA, the film suggests that the only way African Americans can challenge and overcome the pervasive institutional racism they experience, is

[53] "007" is the alternative name given to James Bond, the famous lead character of the hugely successful Box Office franchise.

by organising themselves into a formidable and intelligent fighting unit. The proposed strategy is to use guerrilla warfare tactics, which had proved successful in Asian and African countries during their respective fights for independence from European imperialist powers. Obvious links are subsequently made to how independence in Africa and Asia were won through organised guerrilla action and how these fights were motivated by the self-determination of the oppressed peoples. Freeman makes a direct reference to such associations as inspiration and as a way of galvanising African Americans:

> DAN FREEMAN. We are gonna get our own. Stop begging for crumbs.
> COBRA. How?
> DAN FREEMAN. What we got now is a colony. But what we wanna create is a new nation. In order to do that we gotta pay a different kind of dues. Freedom dues.
> STUD DAVIS. Right on. (00:56:43 minutes)

Thus, *The Spook* not only rearticulates the conviction that armed revolution in the US is imminent and necessary, it also reflects the contemporary Pan-Africanist and Black Power ideological agenda in its referencing of African Americans as colonial subjects.[54]

Accordingly, when Freeman returns to his native Chicago to initiate the next phase of the revolution, this message of the film again steps fully out from the shadows so to speak, and starts to espouse its overarching theme through his character. In a gathering in his home, Freeman, following the above-referenced dialogue, addresses the contemporary representations of African Americans on television. "No chains, no whips; a bunch of happy darkies just waiting on Master Charlie and his family, and diggin' it" (00:57:18 minutes). The men then play out a typical post-civil war scene (as shown in contemporary cinemas and on television) of a white confederate soldier returning home to his loyal slave, George. George comforts the "master" for the confederate army's loss. When the play scene has drawn to a close, Freeman and Stud start performing the soundtrack for this play – guitar and thigh-slapping. They laugh. Freeman then says, "You have just played out the American dream." There is a close up of his now serious expression. "And now we're gonna turn it into a nightmare" (00:58:44 minutes). The narrative message has now been fully reiterated; the colonial subjects will rise up, putting an end to the presently comfortable system of racism

[54] See for example, "White Power: The Colonial Situation" by Hamilton and Ture in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, or Simon Wendt's and Peniel E. Joseph's contributions in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*.

and exploitation administered and experienced by white US America. This leads the audience into the scenes which precede the revolution and urban war.

As a second example of colonial referencing, the sequences which follow the conversation in Hennington's office, show a group of African American men at different stages of the CIA recruitment process. After quoting the pledge, they are seen getting physicals in their underwear (much like prisoners) while being inspected and probed by white doctors, mirroring, one could argue, similar experiences in any colonial setting.

In order to ensure that the viewer is fully aware of what the narrative's message is, the point is repeated again in a scene which precedes the fighting. One of the Cobras poses the question:

> STUD. What we trying to do man?
> DAN FREEMAN. Fight whitey to a standstill. Force him to make a choice between the two things which he seems to dig most of all. There is no way that the United States can police the world[55] and keep us on our ass too, unless we co-operate. (01:05:06 minutes)

Sam Greenlee, who wrote both the novel of the same title and the screenplay for *The Spook,* is making a distinction here between African Americans and white US America – which Freeman has referred to as "the United States." This is a popular association (as noted in, for example, *Higher Learning* which was released twenty-two years after *The Spook*), which highlights the perception amongst politicised African Americans that as a collective, they remain non-citizens of the US, a nation which appears to work only in the interests of its white denizens. In Freeman's opinion, the state has overstretched itself "policing the world" ignoring or undermining the "mess in their own backyard." Freeman continues: "When we revolt, we reduce it to a simple choice. Whitey finds out he can't make even" (01:05:29 minutes). He finishes this contention by asserting that, "[African Americans] can paralyse this country" (01:06:00 minutes). This is later proven when, during the rebellion, the General (Byron Morrow) suggests cordoning off this "war-torn" (as described by a reporter at the scene of the fighting) part of city. His suggestion is rebuffed when it is revealed that when they "sealed off the ghetto last week, it paralysed the city". This contention is informed by the argument, which Greenlee is drawing attention to, that African Americans are part of the

[55] A critique here to the role of the United States in the UN and to its contemporary foreign policies which saw them engaged in war with Vietnam.

body of labour that keeps the US afloat by means of the various jobs they perform in the unskilled employment sector. By doing the factory work, driving the buses and trains, cleaning, opening doors, operating lifts – occupying these unskilled and/or menial jobs which comprise a big part of the North American economy, means that if they stop working, African Americans could have a profound impact on it. This could also be a suggestion to the audience that this form of boycotting when needs are not being addressed might be effective since the people in power will be forced to negotiate out of necessity. Further, in its hint at the power of an African American boycott, Greenlee, following the definitions of what the colony/colonised dichotomy encompasses, thereby makes allusions to the imperial nature of white supremacy in the US.[56]

In addition to this unambiguous political position, as Freeman repeatedly articulates, African Americans should not only be able to identify who the "real enemy" is (i.e., white US America), they should be fighting for proactive as opposed to reactive reasons. That is: their revolution should not be rooted in hate for white people as a consequence of their historically conflicted relations, but in the desire for self-determination and community betterment.

> DAN FREEMAN. It's simple Willie. I just want to be free. How 'bout you?
> PRETTY WILLIE. So do I. And I hate white folks.
> Dan Freeman: Hate white folks? This is not about "hate white folks." It's about loving freedom enough to die or kill for it if necessary. Now you gonna need more than hate to sustain you when this thing begins. Now if you feel that way, you're no good to us and you're no good to yourself (00:47:38 to 00:48:16 minutes).

The trigger for the revolution once again serves as a moment in which this premise is re-stated: A man is gunned down by two chasing policemen; one black and one white. When Freeman gets a phone call from Stud about it, he is told this man was Shorty (Anthony Ray) – an old friend and the first person he communicated with on his return to Chicago. As a consequence of this, a riot has started. Stud confirms, "Yeah, after all the training, looks like shit's gonna start over a jive-ass pusher" (01:07:14 minutes). This echoes the frustrated

[56] In *Africa in the American Imagination*, Carol Magee writes of imperialism in its relation to the US, that it " . . . is the processes and policies by which a nation dominates (for its own benefit) the resources – land, labor, markets, people – of another. Historically, this domination has been considered primarily in economic or political terms (97).

sentiment amongst black consciousness activists, that popular, large scale revolt is not, as it should be, driven from the anger generated from the re-educating of African Americans through concientising causes and processes, but rather because people are instead spurred to action through a random, very violent and decidedly racist act.

Shaft in Africa, by contrast, is less overtly political and didactic in its narrative objectives. John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) is a private detective for hire who therefore takes on jobs for money. His interest is to ensure that he is able to maintain the life he has created for himself which is always on his own terms and consequently a little outside the socially expected margins. He does not care for authority and is guided by his own moral compass. His latest mission, which turned out to be his last, as no more *Shaft* films were made after this release, was to end a slave trade which starts in Ethiopia and ends in Europe (Italy and France). Unlike Freeman, Shaft's decision to accept the mission and stop this slave trade does not stem from his intention to galvanise the African American community as a whole to take up arms against the white power structures in the United States. It is motivated by his personal anger at the idea that slavery, which is part of his history as an African American, still exists in his lifetime. His motivations are also buoyed by the sizable income he will receive upon completing the mission. So, although Shaft is similar to Freeman in that he is a well-trained, fearless and sharp character who has a way with women, this is where the resemblance in both films becomes less apparent.

Nonetheless, as has been previously stated, although not as explicitly political as *The Spook*, the premise for this story is still very loaded: A well-spoken man of African nobility is sending John Shaft, a blaxploitation icon of defiance and survival to Ethiopia – a place associated with ancient power and prestige – to end a slave trade. In terms of mirroring contemporary black consciousness contentions, featuring Ethiopia and referencing a glorious past civilisation connects the politics in the message of this film to the contemporary discourses for the desire for Africa-centric constructions of African American identities.

Ethiopia, recognised especially for remaining independent during the period of colonialism, also represented an idealised, central point of origin for African Americans. The latter conception was developed out of a reference in the Bible,[57] and was advanced and advocated for the uplift of African Americans. "Ethiopianism," as it is termed, is thus the belief that in a pre-destined future, Africa and its people, including those in the diaspora, would return to this former greatness. *Shaft in Africa* subsequently reflects another spectrum

[57] "Princes shall come of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (Psalms 68:31 KJV).

of the black nationalist discourse of the time because it makes references to the hitherto romanticised history of the Ethiopia (and thus constitutes Ethiopianism) which the pioneers of black nationalism in the US (such as Du Bois and Garvey) employed in order to disprove the myriad ways in which white power structures argued that black people as a whole, were mentally and culturally inferior.

W. E. B Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia* was an NAACP-sponsored exhibition which brought to the public, history and information of Africa and African Americans as surmised by Du Bois (Quirin 6). Through it, Du Bois made connections between the ancient African kingdoms, the origins of western civilisation and the historical experiences of African Americans, and a return to that power for the future of all black people. The influences of Ethiopianism can be observed in various subsequent black nationalist discourses, such as that of the Nation of Islam and other black popular culture movements, like Afrocentrism.

In *Shaft in Africa*, the Emir's daughter, Aleme (Vonetta McGee), describes a society which had "a spoken culture: their drums, their copper spears, their beaded crowns . . . Nobody knows what happened to them, but our tribes are descended from these proud ancestors" (00:22:45 minutes). She does so in the first lesson she gives Shaft when he is told that he should learn the Manta dialect and about the people he is going to impersonate and save. In this way, both he and the audience are informed of her people's history, which fits the romanticised version of Africa that African Americans may have been familiar with. It gives credence to a version of Ethiopia, which suggests that the Emir and his people are direct descendants of a once powerful empire, thereby literally connecting Shaft as representative of African America to it.

Shaft laughs after she informs him of this, and when she reprimands him for it, says he is laughing at the fact that they are learning about William Shakespeare in school while her people, these Africans, were making poetry a 1000 years earlier. Aleme is thereby educating him and by default the audience (who would have been a sizable number of African Americans at the time) about a history that has been suppressed, because it showed that Africans (therefore, black people) were experiencing the high culture that is defined by an art form like poetry, long before the much-revered white cultural icon, Shakespeare.

Here, the film thus echoes decades of early black nationalist discourse which posited that the pre-transatlantic slave trade Africans, and therefore the Africans that African Americans are descended from, already had the hallmarks of "civilised" society as conceived of by modern standards because they had fixed social institutions with requisite infrastructure like Christianity (the monotheistic religious practice most favoured and practiced by the

western world) and a centralised government with a powerful leader.

Simultaneously however, given Shaft's limited responses to or total ignoring of the references to Ethiopia's ancient power and time-honoured civilisation, the film does not seem to want to make much more of this discourse. In other words, there are references to ideas of powerful African civilisations which Shaft (and so, the film) does not address more, beyond this single-lined response or by making a joke. He does not explore the idea as persistently as Dan Freeman and *The Spook* do in, for example, Freeman's earnest explanation of the beauty (and pride in it) of the Dahomeyan queens.[58] Towards the end of the film, after reporting his findings of the slave trade to the French authorities, Shaft says he wishes to go after Mr Amafi (Frank Finlay), the ringleader of the slave trade, himself because it is "personal." This prompts another reiteration of the Ethiopianism referenced earlier in the film. For in the scene, the French police chief responds to Shaft's intention by saying, "I remind you monsieur you are now back in a civilised country where due process of law prevails." Colonel Gonder (Marne Maitland), the Ethiopian Emir's right-hand man, responds in turn. "Inspector, I resent that implication. My country was building churches while your people were still living in caves" (01:36:16 to 01:36:31 minutes). While the inspector is apologising, Shaft dismisses any chance of further discussion by interrupting and demanding that the stenographer be brought in.

In a second example, replicating the muted politicisation of the film, the narrative returns to addressing John Shaft's motivations for taking on the mission. Although it appears that Shaft has accepted the job for the money offered, it becomes evident that he may also be doing it because he has a chance to stop a slave trade, something that he obviously could not do for his own people.

> COLONEL GONDER. Only money brings you here?
> SHAFT. Hell no. I just love to have my picture taken with lions.
> COLONEL GONDER. Your forbearers were dragged here in chains from this continent and dumped onto the cotton plantations of America. I should think you'd want this assignment for stronger motives than money.
> SHAFT. Now you wrong. See my folks weren't in cotton, they were in tobacco.
> (00:33:50 to 00:34:09 minutes)

[58] See *The Spook* 00:13:41 to 00:15:44 minutes for the conversation between Dan Freeman and Dahomey Queen (Paula Kelly).

Shaft seems agitated and his response is sarcastic, indicating that while the money did affect his decision, he is hereby confirming that he may perhaps have assented for other reasons too.

Furthermore, the film cultivates conditions in which the viewer can see the similarities or is able to draw parallels between the elements of this mission and the transatlantic slave trade experiences, but then simultaneously depicts the stark contrasts or inconsistencies of such a comparison. For example, unlike the transatlantic slave trade, these modern-day slaves "go willingly," even queuing up to get recruited – although this is because they are unaware of what awaits them. But then conversely, echoing the machinations of the transatlantic slave trade, they cross on a ship in cramped conditions, are bundled into overcrowded and unsafe transportation and housed in dirty and confined accommodations, forced to do hard labour for too many hours, with little sleep and no remuneration.

This engagement and then swift disengagement as the film does, speaks to its reluctance at making a political film, concurrently showing though that this would be unrealistic in terms of trying to connect with the contemporary African American audience for whom Black Power politics were a salient talking point and thus a part of popular public sentiment.

Not one to be moved by popular opinion however, it makes sense that Shaft is not a participant in this trend – it fits his non-conformist character; such that not even the referenced Black Power discourses provoke him to engage with its politics, unless it is directly affecting his well-being or circumstances. For instance, in the scenes where the diegetic Africans are introduced to him, he interrogates the unquestioning acceptance of allegiance (a unified black collective) that Black Power politics incites; namely, that amongst other things, African people are also "brothers and sisters:" In the opening sequences of the film, the audience learns that Shaft's services are being sought by what the car attendant describes as "some Africans" (00:07:00 minutes). Shaft responds by saying, "I don't know no Africans brother," and continues his confident, swaggering walk, with his head high.[59] Accordingly, a few minutes into the film, when the African delegation asks him to go on their mission, he says, "I don't do business with strangers" (00:08:34 minutes). As Africans are strangers to him, the delegation will be treated as he would treat any other unfamiliar person. Shaft is thereby shirking the black nationalist discourse which insisted on the connectedness

[59] As is implied by his statement when he meets the diegetic Africans, he presumably has a mental set of rules that only he is privy to which insists that he does business only with people he knows, which one would assume is part of his survival strategy.

of black people in the diaspora, which would thus negate the term "strangers." Thus, unlike Freeman's character, Shaft is immediately shown to be a-political as far as the black consciousness politics of the time demanded. These statements, "I don't know no Africans" and "I never do business with strangers," establishes a distance between him and Africa and Africans, which was contrary to some of the objectives of the contemporary black nationalist philosophies.

On this occasion however, Shaft does not have much choice. He is kidnapped and then subjected to rigorous tests in a secret location outside the city by his future employer, Emir Ramila (Cy Grant), who is described by his aide Wassa (Debebe Eshetu) as the "leader of the Manta tribe in East Africa" (00:15:43 minutes).

At the same time, it could be argued that this is a way the film asserts that Shaft *is* the very definition of "black power" because he is able to live on his own terms, independent of any allegiances and obligations. He is also physically fit, clever and quick-witted; characteristics which serve to make him a survivor. These attributes are literally demonstrated in his overcoming of the challenges presented by the training tests, where he is for the first time exposed to environments and conditions, like being naked in "desert-like conditions," and using a stick to fight. Thus, as a literal example of black power, the narrative is arguably stating that this in itself is or should be enough.

Moreover, *Shaft in Africa* is a narrative centred on the single-handed dismantling of a modern-day slave trade by one man. Shaft, like Dan Freeman, (and like other male leads in action and exploitation films of the time, such as James Bond), is confident, charismatic and independent. This allows him to live outside the constraints of a society governed by pervasive racist institutions, identified at the time as "The Man." The embodiment of "sticking it to The Man," Shaft not only prevails, he delivers the captured men to freedom (simultaneously saving Aleme from a potentially unhappy sexual future) and kills the villain. This outcome preserves the hero ("badass") qualities bestowed on him, and on a broader scale, on the leading men in blaxploitation films. Like them, Shaft is a man unto himself who makes and follows his own rules. "Fuck the Law!" he says when in the end, the French inspector argues that the law will punish Mr Amafi for his crimes (00:37:38 minutes).

> JOHN SHAFT. What's the law doing about shitheads who charge a 100 Francs a month to stay in a crap house like this? Why don't you really clamp down on the slave trade? I'll tell you why. Because the black ghettos of Paris is as far away from the Champs Elysée as 125th

> street is from Park Avenue. You need a bunch of po' bastards to work on your roads and your goddamn kitchens! So don't lay any of that "law will punish 'em" shit on me![60] (00:37:40 to 00:38:00 minutes)

After this burst of frustration and anger, Shaft goes out and exacts justice on Mr Amafi on his own terms.

Ultimately, though somewhat different in the delivery of their overall political statements, both films are highly representative of the blaxploitation genre with regards to the impetus behind the development of films that fit this mode of production, as well as the popular culture that received and demanded it. Although this characterisation of an African American man was not new as Paula J. Massood points out in Black City Cinema, as a central character, he was the antithesis of those played by Sidney Poitier in the former years, hence his appeal 2003: 82). Nonetheless, despite the initially positive response to this flurry of filmmaking, the kind of stereotyping employed in this characterisation, instigated protest from directors and actors (Maynard 2). Such films eventually lost their appeal for audiences and subsequently for Hollywood and their interests in its profit-making potential.

3.2 New Black Cinema, Independent Films, Crossover Stars

By the time *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sankofa* were made (1991 and 1993 respectively), the Afrocentric ideology had emerged as a leading cultural compass in African American popular discourses and media, and noticeably informed the production processes of these films. As such, the films are simultaneously a product of, as well as an active contributor to the popular culture which inspired it. An example of a cultural nationalism, Afrocentrism in its most basic interpretation is the expression of "the ethnic conception of blackness, which treats black identity as a matter of shared ancestry and common cultural heritage" (Shelby 209). It also promotes the necessity of reclaiming and taking pride in a cohesive African American history and culture, each in concert with and informed by an Africa-centric one.

Responding to the call, as Ntongela Masilela writes, to "find a film form unique to their historical situation and cultural experience," film students from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), or the "L.A. Rebellion" as they have come to be known,

[60] With regard to commenting on contemporary popular politics (and although there are, as previously described, more subtle indicators of such commentary within *Shaft in Africa*), this is as overt and challenging as John Shaft and this film gets.

produced films that were later filed under "New Black Cinema" (108). The latter indicates a wave of filmmaking that utilised aesthetic and narrative techniques that emphasise an empowering black consciousness plot. As Diawara defines, these are films which "involve Black folklore, religion, and the oral traditions which link Black Americans to the African diaspora. The narrative style is symbolic . . . [and confronts] its characters with obstacles ahead of them" (1993: 10). Films which fall under this categorisation may also be considered "independent films." As the term implies, independent films are those which are made without financial backing from Hollywood, generally because such stories have themes or a narrative developmental structure that do not follow the standard expectations demanded by the industry. Accordingly, in the context of this thesis and as Diawara surmises, "Black independent cinema is any Black-produced film outside the constraints of major studios (1993: 7)," which thus includes *Daughters of the Dust*, *Sankofa* and *The Spook*.

Haile Gerima affirms this when speaking about the term "independent cinema" and its application to his work: "In my case, and with many others, independence is a declaration. We believe that the existing system fails to respond to our cultural needs . . . The issue is not to make a statement. The issue is do you control your statement – the aesthetics and the benefit of that product" (Safford and Triplett 1983: 61).

A marketing concept meant to signify the increased viewing potential of a film, "crossover" thus indicates its appeal to black and white audiences alike (Donalson 278). The term is also applicable to African American stars such as Eddie Murphy, Will Smith and Whoopi Goldberg. The concept is applicable in other contexts and within varying parameters, like music. As such, rap music and its icons could therefore also be seen to have "crossover appeal" (albeit in a global, multicultural context), as is notable by the success and influence of films like *New Jack City*, *Barbershop*, *Friday* or *Boyz N the Hood*.

Eddie Murphy and his roles in 1980s "buddy movies," like the *Beverly Hills Cop* sequels, or in films like *Trading Places* where, as Ed Guerrero writes, the "Black star [is] surrounded and appropriated by a White context and narrative for the pleasure of a dominant consumer audience," who are white, exemplify his attractiveness to such viewership (sic) (237).

> Throughout the films in which [Eddie] Murphy has starred . . . his persona is that of the streetwise Afro-American dude, which might appear somewhat threatening. Yet in each narrative Murphy's character is deterritorialised from a Black milieu and transferred to a predominantly White world . . . (Diawara 1993: 215).

Presenting more examples by describing scenarios in which similar contrasts are executed, Diawara in his elucidation of how and why Murphy inspires a tense reception in such films from an African American audience, simultaneously speaks to his crossover appeal. For in such a deployment, Murphy's black character is "contained" and thus enlisted to "subtly reaffirm dominant society's traditional racial order" (Guerrero 237).

As an extension of this characterisation, *Coming to America*, though entirely black cast, is still considered a crossover film because the story is equally insulated from a potentially discomfiting representation of African American lives, and is carried by Eddie Murphy and recognisable humour.

3.2.1 *Daughters of the Dust*

Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (hereafter: *Daughters*) is set at the turn of the 20th century on the Gullah Islands off the coastlines of South Carolina and Georgia. The small community settled there are preparing to make their migration to "the mainland," possibly leaving the islands for good. Thus, on the face of it, the film utilises the popular trope of "south to north", "rural to urban" as a backdrop to the narrative, and tracks the ever-evolving complexities surrounding African American migration in the US. This journey is often characterised as beginning with the hope and optimism, as well as the promise of opportunity and social betterment that is associated with "going north." Viola Peazant (Cheryl Lynn Bruce), in one of her first lines in the film for example, exclaims that "culture, education and wealth" is her expectation of the family's experience on the mainland (00:06:14 minutes). As one of three major themes explored in the film, there is the concept of the idyll as imagined by most of the migrating Gullah Island community versus a lived experience of the mainland, which simultaneously introduces the disillusionment of that dream. Yellow Mary (Barbara-O) becomes the embodiment of the anticlimactic experience they may face. Her return to the Islands brings added tension to the excitable, agitated energy. It could be argued that this is because she is an example of someone from the community who made it out, but despite all that the north promises, returns (to their minds) broken. Moreover, in direct opposition to the implication that once they leave they will not want to return, she has chosen to come back. *Why would you ever want to return*? The unanswered questions her homecoming subconsciously generates could be a hidden source of their anger towards her.

Yellow Mary enters the story on a boat with her companion, Trula (Trula Hoosier). Her appearance in a pristine white, lace dress and a big hat, puts her in stark contrast to the

three men steering the boat, who are poorly dressed and unkempt. There is a close-up of her gloved hand touching a pendant around her neck.[61] Framed in this way, she seems like a wealthy outsider who is adventuring into territory she is unfamiliar with, who is consequently touching something that must bring her some comfort or reassurance. When the shot changes, the audience recognises that this was Viola's point-of-view.

Viola rises as she sees the boat approaching. She is dressed more modestly than Yellow Mary, but is still better presented than the men steering the boat. By her side is Mr Snead (Tommy Redmond Hicks). The viewer quickly learns that Mr Snead has been commissioned by Viola to take photographs of the Peazants ahead of their migration to the mainland. She seems very happy and optimistic about the prospect. As previously cited, "culture, education and wealth" is what she expects the family will be introduced to. She asks for consensus from Yellow Mary regarding this statement, but her question is met only with laughter. Viola seems a little annoyed by the response and looks back out over the water, going back to her thoughts. Out of context, Yellow Mary's response is confusing though only until her contrary experiences on the mainland are later explained.

Judging by the reactions of some of the other women to her, Yellow Mary may have fallen into some disrepute in her life outside the Gullah Islands.[62] Dash, however, tempers the notion of judgments (and therefore the divisions this incites) by acknowledging the two-sidedness of all stories. For further on in the film, Eula Peazant (Alva Rogers) confronts the women on their hypocrisy for judging Yellow Mary so harshly for having "ruined herself."

> EULA PEAZANT. I'm ruined too . . . As far as this place is concerned, we never was a pure woman . . . Even though you're going up north, you're gon' think about being ruined too. You think you can cross over to the mainland and run 'way from it? You're going to be so sorry if you don't change your way of thinking 'fore you leave this place . . . We the daughters of all those . . . Nana carryin' in her tin can . . . We wear our scars like armour for protection; thick, hard ugly scars that no one can pass through that ever hurt us again. (01:34:48 to 01:38:19 minutes)

[61] It is a medal of Saint Christopher, commonly celebrated as the "patron saint of travellers."
[62] "The shameless hussy" (*Daughters* 00:35:27 minutes).

This monologue makes an explicit connection to the sanctioned rape of black women's bodies which was endemic to the experiences of slavery, and which as a consequence of this historical fact is therefore a part of the genealogy of most African Americans.[63] It suggests that no African American can truly be distanced from that history and challenges anyone who claims otherwise.

Detailing in other ways the "stain" of slavery, Dash also includes several visualisations of the labour the enslaved people on the Sea Islands were engaged in. The production of indigo and dying are a constant feature in the film via short, intercut frames of members of the community now presumably gone. Nana's own stained hands symbolise the physical impact of the slave past on African American bodies, though the freedom of her spirituality and mind reveal the potential of transcending the pain of that history, without having to ignore and/or diminish those inexorable, torturous experiences.

Although Yellow Mary finds the islanders way of life somewhat too primitive for her tastes ("you live like savages back over in here" she says in the midst of frustratedly swatting gnats), she finds comfort and a sense of belonging on the Islands. "It's been a long time since I had some good gumbo . . ." (00:46:16 minutes).

It could thus be argued that Dash is using the character of Yellow Mary as an example of the ideal temperament the family needs for this move. That is, in order for them to survive the migration, they should not idealise the north and what may come; they should not disregard or devalue the religious beliefs or ways of the Islands and dismiss them as "old" or "heathen," but rather keep them close to their hearts and be flexible enough to adopt other systems of belief that may help them cope with adversity while they are on the mainland.

An equally important and present feature in the narrative is the active process of seeking and exploring the foundations for a tangible African American identity that Dash embarks on:

> [W]e came from an Afrocentric approach to everything: from set design, the costumes, from the hair to the way the makeup was put on. You know, the way Black women put on makeup: they put liner on the inside of their eye – that comes from wearing khol in the dessert regions of Africa (Irene Zainabu Davis 17).

True to this intention, *Daughters* addresses a number of complex issues regarding African American cultural memory and identity. Its non-linear approach to storytelling and

[63] See Angela Y. Davis 1983.

the high degree of symbolic referencing makes it optimal for numerous subjective or individualised interpretations within this spectrum.

Consequently, in it, the featured characters address but do not resolve the questions Du Bois raises in his reflections of the "two-ness" of African American identities. These characters, Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day), Yellow Mary and Viola, are contradictory and conflicted, which Dash acknowledges and verbalises consistently throughout the film. Each of them is forced to live in a suspended identity: Nana was born a slave, but now no longer is, Viola who came from those islands and therefore grew up practicing their ancestral belief system is now a staunch Christian, and Yellow Mary is something in-between – clutching her Saint Christopher medallion, whilst simultaneously accepting the belief systems practiced on the island. The double-articulation expressed in the identities of these characters is reiterated through Nana's statement near the close of the film.

> NANA PEASANT. We are as two people in one body; Last of the old, first of the new. We will always feel this double life here, 'cause we from the sea. We came here in chains and we must survive (01:28:30 minutes).

It could thus be argued that Dash, echoing the contemporary Afrocentrist discourse, suggests in her film that trying to respond to the issues stemming from this internal conflict can only begin with learning about, respecting and remembering or (re)discovering one's roots.

Dash thereby introduces a second anchoring theme in the film, namely, that simply "recalling" or "remembering" is not enough. What is suggested is that one should and can be flexible about how this African past can be included in contemporary African American lives. In other words, being too much in the past, unnecessarily complicates and/or prevents the necessary practicality of existing or functioning in the present. The film expresses this contention through Nana, an intricate character whose deep spiritualism helps her transcend or cope with the effects of her enslavement, though at the same time prevents her from migrating north with the family. Nana, however, remains the principal tool in this empowered re-telling of African American history and its links with Africa, and her role is articulated especially through the rendering of the oral and spiritual traditions maintained on the Gullah Islands.

As such, the audience is soon presented with a visual suggestion of how maintaining an Africa-centric accent in one's life does not preclude the Eurocentrically-framed lifestyle expected in the north: In a final communal observation, the islanders attend a church service before saying their final goodbyes to Nana. Here, in a literal gesture of the embracing of both Christianity and the spirit/ancestral belief system practiced there, Nana has wrapped a bible in what Haagar Peazant (Kaycee Moore) describes as "herbs and roots" and the others are kissing it as they bid her farewell (01:41:00 to 01:42:00 minutes.) Viola and Haagar, the two stalwarts of Christianity and spokespeople for the "values of Western civilisation" in the film, are upset by this rite. Indignant, Haagar swats away one of her children, preventing her from doing the same before walking away herself. Nana calls after her to participate, but Haagar ignores her. Viola, however, ultimately kisses the embellished bible too, though only after Mr Snead does. Thus it is suggested that Viola may embrace this mixture of belief systems after all because although she rejects it quite vehemently at the start of the film, and even seems upset when she sees Nana adorning the bible in this fashion, she too observes the ritual by kissing it.

The matter of belief systems and its relation to ideas about self-identification and self-worth in *Daughters* therefore demonstrates that each chosen spirituality need not necessarily cancel the other out. Nevertheless, in order to construct an empowering spirituality, Dash infers that as African Americans, one should show a willingness to learn about Africa-centric variants, such as those presented through the plot.

To begin with, Nana and Bilal Muhammad's (Umar Abdurrahamn) religious observations represent the alternate Africa-centric spiritualities in the film. For when the viewer is introduced to her, Nana is standing, fully-dressed and waist-deep in water, bathing ceremoniously. In the moment the scene of Nana in the water is presented to the audience, it is not apparent that this is Nana, nor is what is being performed clear. Conversely, what is obvious is that it is the start or end of the day, indicated by Dash's intercutting of a sunrise or sunset. Furthermore, through a paradigmatic elimination process, the viewer must conclude that she is in prayer, as she does not appear to be taking a bath. At this point, the first voiceover begins: "I am the first and the last. I am the honoured one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one . . . " (00:02:25 minutes). The sum of contrary descriptions of what the voiceover is and is not, insists that it becomes representative of all or everything simultaneously. From a religious standpoint, this could fit the description of an omniscient spirit, like God. This contention is affirmed by the fact that it has been sourced from the *Nag Hammadi* verses in "The Thunder: Perfect Mind" (MacRae and Parrott 295). A collection of

ancient books found in Egypt, the *Nag Hammadi* comprises "a collection of religious texts" (Robinson 1). The association Dash thus makes here with ancient Egypt resonates with the black cultural nationalism of Afrocentrism which, as observable in the adoption of philosophies like Maat, seeks to connect African Americans to these civilisations and their traditions.

> In content *Thund*. is virtually unique in the *Nag Hammadi* library and very unusual. It is a revelation discourse by a female figure who is, except possibly for the title, otherwise not specifically identified. The work has no apparent structural divisions but is written throughout in the first person, interweaving and combining three types of statement: self-proclamation . . . exhortations . . . and reproaches (sic) (295).

Most notably however, parallels to the film can be drawn with this book, as it is spoken by a female and eludes a definitive rendering of its purpose in the library. Moreover, as implied by the spiritualism depicted in *Daughters*, "[i]n terms of the religious traditions represented in the Nag Hammadi collection, [this section] is difficult to classify" (MacRae and Parrott 296). This thereby imbues a multi-interpretational quality to it and the film, which, as a consequence of continually new revelations from a varied viewer/readership, adds to the longevity of these cultural artefacts.

In the same block of opening sequences, Bilal Muhammad (Umar Abdurrahamn), is introduced and is shown performing his morning prayer. A slightly enigmatic Muslim character, Bilal was born in Africa and, as is thus implied, brought his religious practice with him to the Islands. This contributes to the impression that Islam is an original belief system of choice for Africans, rather than the religion forced upon African Americans by white slave-owners. Featuring Islam in this way thereby fulfils calls for re-conceptualising African American identities within Africa-centric frameworks by expressive cultural black nationalisms like Afrocentrism.

At the point in the film when he is first presented, the viewer though not aware that he is Muslim, can still infer that this must be, as Nana's performance was, a religious observation. The significance of both these visuals specifically find their value when we get to know the characters and the story in earnest. Here they seem abstract and anonymous and therefore to the mind of the viewer, contribute mainly to the setting of the tone: namely, that this is a story of spiritual journeys. What it comes to mean in retrospect is the affinity that Dash apparently sees in both spiritual practices, which she attributes to their shared introduction on the Islands, from Africa.

By introducing Islam through Bilal, means it is then read as being more African and thus more honest and/or authentic in the sense that this film is trying to create. Moreover, Christianity, judging by Viola and Haagar's interpretation, insists on throwing out the perceived African belief systems in exclusive favour of it. This makes it incompatible with the objectives of constructing identification frameworks alternative to Eurocentric ones, which advocates Christianity as a preferred spirituality. At the same time however, Dash shows that choosing one exclusively over the other is not necessary, perhaps in an attempt not to alienate sizable members of her audience, who may be observant followers of Christianity; the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr was after all a Baptist preacher. As Hill Collins notes, " . . . for African Americans religion in general, and Christianity in particular, evolved in response to African American suffering under American racism" (2006: 84).

A final important theme is expressed in the assertion that African Americans should preserve and celebrate African-based cultures that are a part of their identity, as a means of overcoming the expected challenges of living in a world which devalues those cultures. Dash thus enlists the Unborn Child (Kai-Lynn Warren) as a means of keeping the family together in a foreseen future.

The Unborn Child is specially summoned by Nana as a way of rooting the family in their African-based values and spirituality before they migrate. She is represented as the voice of a girl who will be born into the Peazant family lineage in the future. "My story begins on the eve of my family's migration north. My story begins and ends before I was born." Nana Peazant had had a vision of her family "coming apart," and so in order to try and remedy this problem, she "prayed and the old souls guided [the young narrator] into the new world" (00:07:00 to 00:08:04 minutes).

The value of the Unborn Child is implied in the scene of a conversation between Nana Peazant and her son Eli (Adisa Anderson). As Nana is not going to be migrating to the mainland with the rest of the family, she decides to give Eli some advice.

> NANA PEAZANT. Man's power don't end with death. We just move onto another place. A place where we go and watch over our living family. Respect your elders. Respect your family. Respect your ancestors . . . The ancestor and the womb; they one, they the same. Those in this grave, like those what across the sea, they with us. They're all the same: The ancestor and the womb. Call on your

> ancestors Eli, let 'em guide. You need their strength. Eli, I need for you to make the family strong again, like we used to be (00:18:50 to 00:19:55 minutes).

The ensuing dialogue reiterates the importance of recollection in order to keep the family together against the odds which Nana Peazant has foretold they will face when they travel north. She ends by asking him to "celebrate [their] ways" (*Daughters* 00:24:00 minutes). In maintaining as much as possible of their African heritage, Nana thus asserts that this practice would serve to remind the migrating islanders that they are not alone; that they belong to a wider, bigger family which goes back infinitely, who are watching over and guiding them. Beyond the diegesis of the film, this also expresses that such knowledge could serve as a unifying element for all African Americans in a potentially divisive environment.

Another visual embodiment of a celebration of African American ways in the film, can also be said to be noted in Dash's active inclusion of food and the social processes involving it (i.e., the preparation and the ceremony of sitting and eating together, despite differences). From what is shown, the viewer can see that they eat gumbo, corn, crab, boiled eggs, greens, cornbread and shrimp; dishes attributed to the Soul Food kitchen. As such, some or all of what is presented are commonly offered in a traditionally African American menu.

Soul Food and its significance as an African American cultural reference is employed as a unifying tool here, in that via its inclusion, Dash is acknowledging the roots of this type of cooking, namely slavery and its connections to West African foods and cooking. At the same time, the reference counters conservative elements of African American politics which seek to disassociate African Americans from such markers of alleged incivility (Curtis 207). For example, Elijah Mohammed, one of the founders of the Nation of Islam, famously links Soul Food with "slave food" and therefore a cultural reference which he posits adds to the further contamination of an exemplary African American identity as a consequence of the association with this part of history, rather than the perceived glorious, pre-slavery one (Muhammad 7). Dash must disagree with this assessment of Soul Food since she has included an assenting rendering in her narrative. Featuring it thus allows Soul Food to be another shared, positive point of reference in African American heritage, and indeed another cultural practice worth retaining.

Another homage to the concept of preservation, Dash incorporates into the narrative the role of visual renderings. Mirroring Julie Dash's own camera, Mr Snead's role in the film

not only continues the meta-message of preservation in it, it turns the attention of the viewer to the function of the camera in such a task. Though an inanimate machine, as a consequence of its operational requirements, what it captures reflects the selective objectives, visions and ambitions of the one who controls it. The camera therefore becomes animated in its use. Like Mr Snead, when Julie Dash set out to film at the Sea Islands, she had a vision for how the finished product could look and how the filming should proceed (as per pre-production knowledge and from her years of research). Both had an idea of what they needed to capture, but the more they discovered, the more they wanted to know:

> I knew then that the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories. Soon I was off, running faster and faster, trying to find more and more information that would allow me to uncover this story (Dash 1995: 379).

The signification of the camera thus reflects Dash's long-standing desire of working in film, as well as the degree of serendipity involved in that part of her life story and thus her spiritual calling to the medium. Furthermore, her relationship to the lens therefore connects with Mr Snead's use of the camera in its part in the task of preserving the history and culture of the Gullah Islands. More than preserving by retelling, she captures this history in the unique, poetic visualisation of spirituality and transcendence that has come to characterise this work. Her manipulation of cinematic codes of time and space to achieve this alternative cinema shows her resistance to being bound by the inanimateness of the camera, instead revelling in its potential.

3.2.2 *Sankofa*

As with *Daughters*, *Sankofa* reinforces the idea of recalling and recognising an Africa--centric heritage, and thus also promotes the cultural black nationalist politics of the contemporary Afrocentrism.

The sound of hand-beaten drums and exclaiming vocals fill the audience's ears in the film's opening sequences. The first shot glides up a wooden sculpture of an African woman and child adorned with beads. Twenty-three seconds in, this shot ends, cutting to a slate with the titles of the co-producers. The shot quickly returns to the sculpture. In the audio, there is a

second voice now expressing passionately in Twi.[64] The voice then exclaims the film title, "Sankofa!" Between the fast frame changes and the complex sensory overload of sounds and visual montages of these sequences, *Sankofa* demands the audience's full attention from the onset. Additionally, appearing twice in quick flashes, is a slate with the text, "Listen!" (00:03:08 minutes). Haile Gerima uses the medium of a griot[65] to introduce the film. An integral part of grioting is performing and being dynamic in that performance. One could argue that the rapid interchanging of symbolic imagery, coupled with rhythmic incantations and drumming in these opening sequences, creates a type of visual grioting. The griot is drumming and incanting in Elmina, the fort on the coast of Ghana from which millions of enslaved people began their doomed journey to the plantations of The Americas and of the Caribbean islands. Furthermore, the language of his incantations is recognisable as Twi and the word "Sankofa" is an Akan word and Adinkra symbol for "looking back" (Salm and Falola 89).

Accordingly, this is a story of an African American model, Mona (Oyafunmike Ogunlano), who meets Sankofa, the physical manifestation of the concept. The audience learns of this when later, a guide, in an effort to calm awe-struck tourists, tells them that, "He's called Sankofa. He's a self-appointed guardian of this castle and he claims to be the communicator for the dead" (00:08:53 minutes). Sankofa sets Mona on a spiritual pilgrimage to the past where she is forced to confront her African and slave history, and through this process connects with a slave woman called Shola.[66]

Mona has travelled to Ghana for a photoshoot where she poses wearing beads, an outfit and hat with kente-cloth print on one day, and a zebra-print bathing costume with a golden wig on another. Carol Magee discusses the appropriation of what is perceived to be ethnically African in contemporary fashions and thus describes a similar rendering to what is depicted in these photoshoot scenes. Gerima must also share her elucidations, namely, that though this iconography references a "counternarrative" which in its inception sought to define "beauty for blacks on their own terms," when it " . . . gets incorporated into mainstream culture . . . [the] costumes' specific references are lost, and they become signs simply of ethnic Otherness and exoticism" (Magee 53-55). In offering a reason for the necessity of recollection, Gerima in his inclusion of this photoshoot has found his paragon.

[64] An Akan language spoken in Ghana, where this part of the film is shot.
[65] A praise singer and/or poet who is simultaneously a historian, musician and storyteller.
[66] The role of Shola is also played by Oyafunmike Ogunlano, which reifies their connectedness.

The fact that Mona seems unaware of the significance of the location and its connection to the kente reprinted onto her outfits, intimates the dilution of meaning in the original ideas for wearing these styles. The use of kente is an apt example. Though now a Ghanaian national symbol and popular, globally-recognised pattern, Kente was originally associated with royalty, and the symbolism incorporated into it revealed the intricacy in this art of weaving.[67] Thus, to borrow Magee's phrasing, kente thereby " . . . conveys messages specifically through proverbs and generally in terms of national/cultural identity," which in turn points to the significance of the cloth and its use in *Sankofa*, and Gerima's subsequent comment on its devaluation via commercialisation (100-01).

The photoshoot takes place on the beach in front of Elmina castle. Formerly a principal port in the slave trade, it is now a tourist destination complete with guides and a small museum. While Mona is posing for her pictures, Sankofa, looking at her sternly, commands her in Twi, "Return to your source!" He then turns to the photographer and all the white tourists who have now formed a small audience, slams his staff into the ground and demands:

> SANKOFA. What do you want here? Where do you come from? Here is sacred ground, covered with the blood of people who suffered. It is from here that our people were snatched and taken by the white man. Get away from here! Leave this ground! [He turns back to the model.] And you! Return to your past! (00:07:39 to 00:08:00 minutes)

Using the photoshoot as a trigger, the film thereby critiques the commodification of Afrocentrism which, as a result of popular interpretations of its Africa-centric politics, had encouraged the wearing of African-inspired fashions, which therefore became a visible expression of this mind-set, consequently emptying this aspect of the Afrocentric philosophy of its political value. As is also communicated in *New Jack City* (which will be addressed later in this chapter), this is because the consciousness politics implied by adopting such fashions becomes lost as a consequence of this process. Thus, as demonstrated through Mona's fashion shoot in Elmina, Gerima is critiquing this culture of consumption and its repercussions.

[67] See Shea Clark Smith's article, *Kente Cloth Motifs*, on the kente as it presents a detailed account of the symbolism woven into the cloths and the processes involved with its production.

When Sankofa responds to the cited misappropriation by commanding her to "return to [her] source," Mona does not laugh and hide behind the photographer as she did on the previous occasion of their meeting. Sankofa has made an impression on her. Now that Gerima has ensured that not only the viewers but Mona too are paying attention (that is, "listening"), the journey to the past can begin.

> NARRATOR. Spirit of the Dead, rise up . . . Lingering Spirits 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. Spirits of the Dead rise up . . . (00:01:10 to 00:01:29 minutes)

With a loud crash, a new scene unfolds of chained enslaved people bound around a fire, and aurally, this imagery is filled with the sound of unified voices chanting rhythmically. The chorus continues and grows louder. Akin to what is known to initiate a spiritual trip or trance, a second sensory deluge in the film, supported by chanting or similar vocal repetitions, is what casts the audience into the spiritual retroversion this film takes. A few moments later, the physicality of Mona is transported to a slave history which begins in the fort, hundreds of years before. Here, she inhabits the spirit of a slave called Shola, a fact that neither she nor the audience are aware of until a few seconds later.

> MONA. Wait! Stop! . . . You're making a mistake! I'm not an African! . . . I'm an American! . . . No! (00:13:50 to 00:14:50 minutes)

In this new scene, Mona is being dragged by the slavers. The other enslaved people in chains look on impassively. "I'm not an Afric-!" She stops herself and looks at the faces around her, as if aware that her remonstrations are in vain. Gerima is obviously suggesting otherwise because by interpreting the silence and sedated expressions of the Africans that hear her cries, including the fact that she is being seen and treated in the same way by the slavers as the others are, he demonstrates that despite her initial protestations, there is no difference between her and the African enslaved people. Conversely though, Gerima does not explicitly say that she is – Mona never says, "I am an African." What is therefore suggested via this scene is the premise that as an African American, one cannot dismiss a shared identity with African people outright. It implies that the aspect of African American identities

which is marked by an African and a slave history as it is explored in the film, cannot (and should not) be disregarded.

The white men strip off Mona's clothes. The other enslaved people continue to watch in their vacant or resigned manner. The music in the soundtrack at this moment is of an African American gospel/folk sound. It says "baaack!" In this way, the aural signifiers which Gerima has chosen to culturally mark African American and the presented African identities, have come together and are thus both exclaiming "back" or "return!"

Up until this point, Gerima has made much use of auditory signifiers as a means of indicating an identity (e.g., a distinctly Twi one through spoken language and incantations via the griot). He arguably maintains this signifying device to introduce into the minds of the viewer the connectedness of both (West African drumming and incanting, and African American gospel songs), and as a reminder of these aural cues in the genealogy of African American history (accordingly, the next audio cue is the sound of whipping).

Mona is branded, marking the moment her spirit connects with that of Shola's, the slave woman through whom Mona experiences her African American slave history. Consequently, the enslaved people – for the first time – physically interact with her, in that they gather around and crouch down towards her. There is no doubt now both in hers and the audience's minds that for the moment "Mona" is gone, as is the time in which she lives.

After an extended sequence of montages of chained black men and women, rows of sugarcane fields and the sound of whipping overlaid into the extra-diegetic soundtrack, the audience is introduced to Shola. Shola is a house slave on the Lafayette plantation. In a voiceover, she speaks of how it was easier to accept slavery if you were born into it as she was. She says this to perhaps explain why this attitude was contrary to her love interest, Shango's (Mutabaruka), who is considered a "troublemaker." Shango was given a wooden carving of the Sankofa spirit bird to put around his neck by his father, to which he attributes his rebellious nature. "After he put the bird on my neck, I became a rebel," he says (01:12:29 minutes). This reasoning resonates Dan Freeman's contention in *The Spook*, that knowing who you are as an African American agitates white racist power structures because it means that they can no longer control such an individual because he/she will have claimed ownership of their identity. As a corollary, such ownership will provide the individual with the confidence they would need to continue to demand their visibility by standing up for their interests, which in this instance, is freedom from the oppression meted out by the slavers.

Sankofa furnishes us with an example of this assertion in the character of Nunu (Alexandra Duah). Nunu, like Nana Peazant in *Daughters*, occupies a matriarchal position in

the slave community. Similarly, Gerima imbues her character with spiritual powers, which, it is suggested, she possesses because, as Shola states, she is still close to her "African past." Nunu, who connects the enslaved people to a powerful spiritual past, is fearless and is emboldened by this knowledge: "What trouble? They can never do nothing to me – they can never! You are useless!" she says to a white overseer (00:31:48 minutes).

As in *Daughters*, *Sankofa* also features an African American character who is conflicted about their identity. In keeping with this rendering, the individual, whilst aspiring to fit a white model of a US citizen, becomes aware that he/she is unable to reconcile such a concept comfortably without actively denying an African, slave past, which despite their efforts, remains a persistent part of their identity. The role of the conflicted African American is thus characterised by the black overseer, Joe (Nick Medley). To add to his complexity, it is revealed that he is Nunu's child and the product of her rape by a white slave merchant on her journey from the West African coast. Rape as an integral element in the transatlantic slave trade is a pronounced feature in *Sankofa*, and is unambiguously expressed through Shola, Joe and Nunu.

Similar to the character of Viola Peazant in *Daughters*, Joe seeks spiritual salvation and personal valorisation through Christianity and is an ardent practitioner of it. Joe's affinity to Christianity has a violent outcome however, as he ends up killing his mother (Nunu) in defence of it. While she is comforting him with a lullaby following his near-fatality as a result of ingesting a mixture prepared by Shango and administered by an admirer, Nunu grabs at his pendant of Mary of Nazareth and rips it off. For her, it would seem, Christianity is incompatible with her African spirituality and/or she sees it as another way of his subjugation. Following her action, he is immediately roused and fights her, causing her death by drowning.

Like Viola, Joe ultimately acquiesces to the belief system of the matriarch in the narrative. Galvanised by what he has done and by the discovery that she was his mother, Joe turns against Father Raphael (Reggie Carter), thereby, Christianity, declaring that "the heathen is my mother" and that the priest refrain from "disrespecting her." Moreover, Father Raphael's language choice in referring to Nunu as "heathen" suggests, as is asserted in *Daughters*, that African belief systems should be dismissed upon accepting Christianity (01:21:50 to 01:23:15 minutes). Dramatically, Joe kills the priest in the church. Shola's voiceover narrates what follows this incident: The church is burnt down, along with the priest's body. Nunu's body is never found however. "Some folks believe [. . .] she never died. They said they saw this big bird swoop down and take her to Africa" (01:25:25

minutes). Syntagmatically, the only conclusion left for the viewer to draw is that this bird must be the Sankofa spirit bird.

Shola sought help from Christianity in response to her continual rape at the hands of the slave owner. Finding no solace there, she questioned its validity in her life as a source of salvation: ". . . prayin' wasn't working, so I just stopped altogether" (00:58:13 minutes). She remains conflicted about renouncing Christianity altogether at this point in the film though and so does not because she is remains a devoted believer. This is indicated in a voiceover from a scene in an earlier part of the film where she confesses that it "was the church" in her that prevented her from being initiated into Nunu's religious practices.

After Nunu's death however, Shango finally initiates her, and when the slave owner again approaches with the intention of raping her (Gerima uses a cut-away to a previous rape scene to illustrate this), she kills him. In the accompanying voiceover she narrates that after this confrontation, she ran from the people and the chasing dogs. "Next thing I know, I'm in the air going up and up and up. This old earth is getting smaller . . . " (01:32:02 minutes). Like Nunu, she has been taken up into the sky by Sankofa, or is imbibed by the spirit of Sankofa, joining the realm of the ancestors.

Nunu and Shola are Gerima's contribution of what Angela Y. Davis describes in the following: " . . . Black women . . . also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery. They resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their families and participated in work stoppages and revolts" (19). Ultimately, their strength lives on as inferred by their spiritual induction and in their role in the generation of what the audience now assumes will be another empowered woman in Mona.

In keeping with the spiritual, multi-interpretational close to Shola's life, in the final sequences Mona is seen sitting among a group of people at the fort in Elmina, looking out over the ocean. Also sat among them is Nunu. She smiles and nods at Mona through tears. Whether Mona still exists though can now see the spirits as a consequence of her journey, or if she is among the ancestors herself as the spirit of Shola, form some of the abstruse questions impressed upon the audience by *Sankofa*. Regardless of whichever answers one leans more towards, what endures is the film's conspicuous suggestion that a revisiting of the past and an active participation in such a process (either through celebrating "the old ways" or by recreating hybrid ones) by incorporating elements of both past and present spiritualities, will ensure African American survival in a figurative sense. It proposes that in accepting and taking pride in an African American identity which acknowledges a connection with an

African past, will grow resilient or, at the very least, will be able to weather the systematic attempt at erasing that past.

3.2.3 *Coming to America*

Like a fairy tale romance, the film's plotline co-opts the messages behind scenarios in this genre and follows the standard narrative arc of most Hollywood-made romantic comedies. In this regard, the lead character (if he is male) expresses dissatisfaction with an aspect of his current life. He then embarks on an internally or externally expressed journey to address this unhappiness, which results in his remedying the source of the discontent. Necessarily, this resolution is expressed in a spectacular gala event which promises a happily ever after future. *Coming to America* deviates very little from this paradigm.

Prince Akeem (Eddie Murphy) is a young man who appears to be unhappy with his life and especially with the fact that he has no say, despite his relative position of power as the prince, in whom he will marry. Within the first twenty minutes of the film, a plan to resolve this anxiety is set in motion. Subsequently, the day on which the narrative begins not only marks Akeem's 21st birthday, it also marks the start of the rebellion which would confront and challenge the tradition of arranged marriages in the kingdom of Zamunda, a process which encompasses the entirety of the film's plot. Although an arguably worthwhile cause, this quest and storyline does not develop beyond the misogynist overtones presented in all fairy tales (and indeed in most films with a leading male character).

Fittingly, the overt patriarchy and misogyny of *Coming to America* is apparent from the moment the first characters are introduced. The stark contrast in dress alone between the kingdom's staff make an apt an example of this. The differentiation in attire between the royal attendant, Oha (Paul Bates) and the petal-throwers, between the female bathers and the male guards and orchestra, illustrates the gendered double standard presented throughout. Although this observation is already implied by the film's parallels with the fairy tale romance genre,[68] it is exaggerated to the point of absurdity most notably in the parts of the narrative which are set in Zamunda, ergo the diegetic Africa. The film thus presents a curious mix of messages through its excessive narrative and aesthetic depictions. For while it mocks

[68] This aspect of the film fits the model of a fairy tale because it can be argued that the genre is concerned with framing explicit ideas of female beauty, and presenting vulnerability and submissiveness as attractive and glamorous. Crucially, a combination of these qualities is ultimately rewarded.

the extravagance of the assumptions people make about Africans and Africa, matrimony and love, it also makes and validates eccentric conjectures of its own in this regard.

References or questions about what is assumed to be common practice in Africa are posed to Prince Akeem and his aide Semmi (Arsenio Hall), which, in a way that befits his measured temperament, Akeem always answers politely. For example, Landlord (Frankie Faison), the owner of the building where they have found accommodation, whilst giving them an orientation of the building and its facilities says, "But you boys from Africa are used to that . . . " in reference to the "insect problem" in the bathroom and what he perceives is the subsequent futility in having to explain the matter further (00:29:06 minutes). In another scene which, by its inclusion can be read as a critique of inaccurate but popular perceptions of Africans and their relations to wild animals, Darryl Jenks (Eriq La Salle) remarks to the prince, " . . . I bet you learned all that stuff fighting lions and tigers . . . " following the attempted robbery in which Akeem defeats Hold-up Man (Samuel L. Jackson) in physical combat (1:04:49 minutes). Additionally, as reflected in the scene which takes place at a basketball match, there are other occasions where Akeem's otherness is referenced, including situations which are intended to humiliate him. For example, Patrice McDowell (Allison Dean), Darryl, Lisa McDowell (Shari Headley) and Akeem are at a basketball game where, with the intention of belittling Akeem in front of Lisa, Darryl makes continual jibes at him: "Wearing clothes must be a new experience for you," he retorts (00:57:13 minutes).

An effect of these remarks is that the spectator is put in the position to judge the landlord or Darryl as ignorant because the experiences of the particular Africans they are mocking are quite contrary to what is assumed, whether matter-of-fact or spiteful in their intention. Consequently, there is a double-sided effect of using popular derogatory suppositions of Africans who, though only because the audience knows that the Africans the landlord and Jenks are referring the statements to, do not fit that description. These, however, are suppositions which are not disputed in themselves within the film. In other words, the film does not say that the generalising remarks by the landlord and Jenks are wrong per say, it simply suggests that they are wrong for the people those comments are addressing directly.

Nevertheless, these are some of the ways in which the film in an extra-diegetic sense ridicules examples of popular perceptions people may have of Africa and Africans. Furthermore, the negative stereotyping implied by the landlord and Jenks's statements are played off to humorous effect and so the controversy inherent in them is arguably subsumed or dulled. Though this may be evident however, as has been alluded to above, the film also sets up and presents equally fanciful impressions of its own.

In keeping with Eddie Murphy's brand of comedy, which is characteristically extrovert and bombastic, this is a comedy which allows for "beyond real" explorations. It is therefore expected that not everything that is presented to the viewer should be taken as "truth." However, even after considering the reasoning that it is a comedy and is therefore expected to display such qualities, the film as a whole can also be read as another expression of a reduction of Afrocentrist political principles through processes stemming from the commercialisation of some of its politics. For, in centering the narrative on Africans and Africa via Akeem (a well-presented, well-mannered and honest African prince) and Zamunda, (a peaceful, wealthy and civilised Africa), the film could be said to be affirming a romanticised representation of Africa and Africans, as espoused in Afrocentric cultural rhetoric. What is more, this royal Africa and Africans are ultimately connected to African America by way of Akeem's marriage to Lisa McDowell (Shari Headley).

From another perspective, one could also argue that because the film, with consideration of its massive budget and the subsequent necessity of its successful distribution,[69] needed to appeal to African American and crossover audiences, it had to speak to this broad viewership. It therefore capitalised on the contemporary interest in the marketable version of Africa which emerged as a corollary of a resurgence in interest of popularly perceived African cultural signifiers, expressed through mediums like fashions and idealised African kingdoms of immeasurable power and wealth, as vivified by Afrocentrism.

Furthermore, the African fairy tale of Zamunda with its order and sophisticated nobility, is set in contrast to the ignorance and corruption depicted of US Americans, who are shown as greedy, stingy, or duplicitous. Although the idea of presenting an idealised, and subsequently "positive" conception of Africa and Africans may have been earnest, as will be addressed in detail in the next chapter, their representations in *Coming to America* ultimately undermine such intentions.

3.2.4 *Barbershop*

> EDDIE. This is the barbershop. The place where the black man means something. Cornerstone of the neighbourhood. Our own country club. I mean, can't you see that? (1:17:00 minutes)

[69] According to Joel Waldo Finler, in his book, *The Hollywood Story*, the total production costs for *Coming to America* amounted to $64,9 million dollars (191). A distribution deal with a well-connected company (Paramount Pictures) is critical for films with such budgets because it ensures that these expenses are eventually balanced out, with an added bonus of being able to potentially generate a profit.

The barbershop as shown through the film's narrative matches popular renderings of the institution it represents. This institution, as described by Trudier Harris in her 1979 article "The Barbershop in Black Literature," is "usually locally owned and casually operated . . . is not only 'homey' in its attitude and psychological warmth, it is also homey in its physical characteristics" (112). From the film's opening sequences of stock photographs of African American barbershops, to the diegetic setting of the films main character's (Calvin Palmer, played by O'Shea Jackson, also known as Ice Cube) family-owned barbershop, this is the visual depiction of what Harris describes in her text. Calvin's barbershop is located in Chicago's Southside, situated in the middle of a street with other African American-owned businesses, and is frequented by locals who, as can be inferred from their conversation and interactions, have lived and worked there most of their lives. Additionally, because these businesses are often frequented by people from the immediate area, talk in the barbershop is generally in relation to local activities and personalities, making it linguistically- and neighbourhood-specific. As such, it is a familiar public space, which, as a part of the neighbourhood, is in touch with what is going on through gossip and/or the conversation inspired by the relaxed, discursive atmosphere maintained by its idiosyncratic setting and customer base.

The plot in *Barbershop* pivots on Calvin's (and his customers') resistance to the capitalist-motivated business incursions on the street where his barbershop is located. The businesses across the street represent competing commercial interests in the neighbourhood, notably a flashy new barbershop which Calvin fears will take what little income he makes away. He is forced to make a decision about whether to keep his barbershop open despite threats of foreclosure, consequently having to let go of the possibility of exploring new business ideas he has with the money he could potentially make from selling it. Ultimately, he stands his ground, thereby saving the "cornerstone" of his community.

It could also be argued that black barbershops constitute a site which challenges white hegemonic power because it insists on the patronage of black people due to the fact that it deals with black hair and is usually located in or near black neighbourhoods. Correspondingly, impervious to the oppressive elements brought on by the white hegemony, the barbershop is a place where African American men in the community can congregate for grooming, social or politically-focused updates and/or social escape with potentially relative comfort. Furthermore, Eddie's quote speaks directly to what Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd terms the "Black cultural pathology narrative," in that it implies that the barbershop acts as an

empowering space where black men (who are endangered) can nurture and (re)build a sense of themselves, which would ultimately benefit the community as a whole.

As can be observed in the historical record, African Americans have not been afforded the same treatment at various levels of society and politics as white US Americans, thereby arguably positioning them as secondary citizens of the United States. To varying degrees of application, it can be contended that this problem persists. Given these conditions, it follows that the absence of the hierarchy of masculinities established through a white US American hegemony by entering another which is focused on African American male interests as it does in a barbershop setting, allows for the existence of a space where a "black man means something." The film draws attention to this assertion through the character of Isaac Rosenberg (Troy Garity). As a white man who works in the black, masculine hegemony of the barbershop, the character of Isaac presents an effective example of this reversal of power roles.

Isaac needs the acknowledgement and approval of the black masculinities that occupy the barbershop space to survive because while his chair remains empty, he cannot earn an income. As it happens, he does not win any customers, which implies that the African American clientele do not trust that as a white man, he is able to cut their hair as well as the African American barbers, if at all. It is however simultaneously indicated that the men in the shop do not see him as "white." For example, with Isaac sat in front of him, Eddie begins a monologue in which he discredits revered African American icons and convictions with, "Now, I probably wouldn't say this is front of white folk, but in front of ya'll I'm gonna speak my mind . . . " (00:55:15 minutes).[70]

Added to the complexity of Isaac's reception as a white man in a black hegemonic space, another message embedded in his rejection as a barber is that he, as a white man, is being prevented from an easy appropriation of this "cornerstone" of the African American community for his financial and/or social advantage (00:17:54 to 00:18:00 minutes). He can socialise in a barbershop, have an African American girlfriend, listen to hip-hop, dress hip-hop, speak in the local African American vernacular and claim that these constitute "who [he is];" even declaring that these attributes make him "more black" than one of his African American colleagues. This emerges from a final confrontation he has with Jimmy James (Sean Patrick Thomas). In this scene, Isaac declares, "This is who I am!" in response to digs Jimmy makes about the authenticity of Isaac's character and the integrity of his ambitions to

[70] For a second example, see *Barbershop* 01:13:44 minutes.

own a black barbershop (01:26:00 minutes). So, while Isaac may be "black" judging from his lifestyle choices and in the way he chooses to express his identity culturally (i.e., in his use of African American-identified vernacular, fashions, music tastes etc.), permission to pass into an environment whose business is concerned with an innate signifier of "blackness" (i.e., in the form of hair), is mediated under the wary eye of the guardians of that "blackness," (namely, all the black masculinities that frequent the space).

He eventually does pass: as if to demonstrate what the film expounds is the egalitarian nature of the barbershop space which respects and approves of earnestly-rooted motivations, it turns out Isaac cuts black hair well which leaves the viewer with impression that he may in the foreseeable future continue to do so based on that merit (notably, this permission is granted only after the approval of a black man). The narrative thus propounds that supporting and taking pride in what is understood as African American culture is not hinged on a person's skin colour, but on a shared respect and interest in it. Most significantly however, by allowing Isaac into that space and permitting him to literally survive the oppressions of a white-focused, capitalist-favoured society (by way of earning a wage from giving haircuts) and figuratively (like the other black men for whom the barbershop represents a site of returned power), *Barbershop* pronounces, in the vein of conservative Afrocentric politics, that skin colour is irrelevant when it comes to a sincere pursuit of economic, social and thus political advancement. Moreover, this rhetoric contends that discussing skin colour and its correlation to oppression and thus the resulting disempowerment, is counter-productive, implying that it is the individual who impedes their own betterment by resigning themselves to such thoughts.[71]

Though a barbershop is a habitually-frequented environment in which current local, national or international news and events are raised and discussed, this space can at the same time also be exclusionary as it is limited in the range of subjects available for conversation. This is because, as a place for grooming almost exclusively frequented by people identifying as male, the perceived need to police and construct degrees of masculinity are arguably heightened in such an environment. As a corollary, within such a setting, topics which are, for example, gender conscious, which reference homosexuality or which raise discourses connected to these themes are not viable or encouraged because they conflict with the expectations of the type of masculinity displayed in the barbershop set-up. In this way, an African American barbershop like the one depicted in the film (which seeks to mirror a

[71] This point will be expanded on later in this subsection.

typical barbershop atmosphere), which focuses on nourishing paradigms of "manhood" and concentrates on issues around black male socialisation, thus also becomes a place which is exemplary of the non-inclusive, conservative value-based Afrocentrist discourses. Appropriately, *Barbershop's* Calvin Palmer epitomises these attributes.

Barbershop presents a plurality of black masculine identities as well as the "hierarchy" of these in the space. For the most part, Calvin, who is at the top of the hierarchy of masculinities presented in the barbershop, is to be read as a positive character. For though he is flawed (which is necessary for the tensions arising in the plot), he is a married man and father-to-be who reluctantly observes his responsibilities to the shop by opening it up for business daily, despite his unwillingness and unhappiness in doing so. It is made apparent that Calvin has aspirations to earn a sizable fortune for which he has hatched several plans. However, given the nature of the barbershop business with its "relaxed physical and business setting," he will never accumulate monetary wealth from it (Harris 113). His subsequent internal reconciliation with this inevitability is an essential part of his characterisation as it highlights an important element of the film's message, which suggests that individually-based desires to gain financial wealth are not only selfish, but counter-productive to the betterment of the community. This assertion is illustrated explicitly through the villainous character, Lester Wallace (Keith David), who is a gangster and a pimp, feared and loathed by the community. In this way, Calvin's characterisation of being a "good man" is tied to Afrocentrist patriarchal notions that educators like Jawanza Kunjufu posit, namely, that "one of the most revolutionary things you can do is to keep your marriage intact and raise your children." (qtd. Austin 2009: 120)

As part of his paternalistic attributes, Calvin, for example, controls music levels and times when "rap music" can be played in the barbershop, mediates bad language, breaks up heated arguments, looks after his employees (as displayed in his attentions to Michael Ealy's Ricky Nash), and generally maintains the peace. Furthermore, through him, the omnipresent message of the film is repeated again, which asserts that like a parent, Calvin (i.e., all responsibly-minded African American men) must make sacrifices for the greater good. To furnish a few examples of those who have sacrificed for this "greater good," Calvin himself names "The Panthers . . . Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson . . . [and] Rosa Parks . . . " (00:54:34 minutes).

The measure of a man as expressed in *Barbershop* proclaims through every featured male character that respect is earned and kept when each faces up to his particular diegetic challenge and remains accountable for that action, regardless of the outcome. In short,

another didactic message coursing through *Barbershop's* plot continuously demands that each character "man up," whilst simultaneously affirming that there is more to a person than what one is presented with at face value.

By setting some of the characters up against each other, forcing one to fail while the other succeeds in its quest to define its idea of an exemplary "manhood," the film constructs rudimentary dialectical oppositions between character and action in each, with obvious indications of which "character and action" is ultimately right or wrong. So, for example, as can be observed through the interactions between Jimmy James and Isaac Rosenberg, the didactical lessons here are that a better man does not put another down by insulting him and/or by instigating physical violence. A better man should remain humble and must understand that knowledge is not only obtained through higher education. Knowledge has to also extend to the Self, for a true acceptance and familiarity of one's individual skills and interests allows one to develop into a respected man, who in turn can contribute positively to the community. These and other dichotomous messages are reiterated throughout the film.

Jimmy forms part of the body of men who are presented in unfavourable ways, and who therefore serve as antagonistic examples of the measure of an "ideal man," as advocated by the film. The others include Lester Wallace (Keith David), Kevin (Jason George), J.D. (Anthony Anderson) and his co-conspirator, and Detective Williams (Tom Wright).

When Jimmy is introduced, he is carrying a newspaper under his arm and is patronising when making a complex coffee order. Not only is he consequently shown as actively literate (i.e., reading the paper, thereby keeping abreast of current, newsworthy affairs), he instantly comes off as pretentious and arrogant. He is confrontational throughout the film because he insists that he knows more than the others in all the conversations he is a part of. It is also made clear that the source of his conceitedness is that he is the character in the barbershop that has gone to college. From every interaction he has with the other characters however (which is almost always with his particular brand of condescension), he is proved wrong. Thus, as stated above, the film is suggesting that having gone through higher education does not necessarily equate to possessing "knowledge."

By contrast, Isaac not only stands up for the value of the barbering profession when Jimmy dismisses the potential of a viable future in the business, he announces his steadfast intention to run a barbershop for black hair. Though the others do not take this dream seriously because Isaac is white, the viewer is given the impression that a future for him in black barbering may be possible when, near the close of the film, he successfully trims Jimmy's hair following a second argument between the two. Thus, as mentioned earlier, what

is implied by this narrative turn is that, ultimately, Isaac may win customers based on the merit of his talent and not on the assumption that in order to cut black hair, one has to be black. The film also simultaneously shows that this could in fact be the opposite, as is evidenced by Jimmy's mistake, when he accidentally shaves a hole into a customer's head (00:26:10 minutes).

While Isaac is flashy with the way he flaunts what he has and appears self-assured, in the end, the narrative reveals that his ambition to be a barber is as humble as the profession itself. He wishes to own a barbershop because he finds pleasure in the work and believes he has the required skills. The resulting message emerging from Jimmy's role is that education necessarily includes the act of listening. It is through this action that he learns of Isaac's earnestness in his intention to barber black hair and his skill in it, and thus the value in having an ambition and endeavouring to achieve it, as Isaac exemplifies. Furthermore, as proved by the outcome of this scene the directive is that being humble and listening first before sharing what you know also makes for a better person (and man, in this case).

Another prominent lesson stemming from the principle that each man is accountable to himself and is responsible for his actions and choices, is evinced through the character of Ricky Nash. Ricky is the broody, attractive barber with an element of danger in his characterisation due to the fact that he has recently spent time in prison. Though he never uses it, he also carries a gun which he hides in his locker, and which completes the construction of him as a "bad-boy type" in the audience's mind. However, in keeping with the narrative thematic in *Barbershop* which constructs ostensibly polarising attributes for each character in order to deliver its message, the audience is consistently shown that words and clarity of mind are Ricky's most powerful weapon. Thus, if any viewer might have initially dismissed him as "no good," they would be shown otherwise, thereby reinforcing the adage that there is more to any character than meets the eye.

Towards the close of the film, at the tail end of a loose discussion on the subject of reparations for African Americans, Ricky literally voices elements of the conservative Afrocentrist argument he signifies.

> RICKY NASH. We don't need reparations a'ight, we need restraint. Restraint. Some discipline. Don't go out and buy a range rover when you livin' wit yo mama! And pay your mama some rent. And can we please, please try and teach our kids somethin' other than The

> Chronic album?[72] And please black people, be on time for somethin' other than 'free before 11' at the club. (1:13:00 minutes)

Besides reasserting arguments that implicitly controvert the extent to which racist power structures impact African American lives, it suggests that the problems of African American communities are rooted in the denial of self-accountability; that once African American men seek self-empowerment through responsibility-driven actions, the community as a whole would benefit. This is demonstrated by way of the side story which shows the men in the barbershop coming together to raise money for Johnnie Brown's shoes. Those who come into the shop are invited to contribute to the fund so that the neighbourhood's promising athlete, who cannot afford the necessary shoes, can therewith achieve the next step in his sporting career. When they succeed and Johnnie is observed by Calvin receiving his shoes, Calvin decides to give Lester back the money he borrowed from him because he sees the value in the barbershop to the community and how together they achieved something that will help elevate another member of that community (00:18:52 minutes).

The neighbourhood depicted in *Barbershop* is in a state of change, marked by the influx of new businesses and by the need for it to accept and include into its definition as "an African American community," people who are Asian (Samir, the Indian store owner from across the street from the barbershop, played by Parvesh Cheena), and white (Isaac). In light of these changes, the plot focuses on ways in which this Southside locale unites through the actions of the men in the community, who must overcome their individualist agendas and join forces to save the institution of the barbershop, and thus its constituents. The narrative therefore concentrates on African American male socialisation and its correlation to notions of an ideal African American masculinity. As such, *Barbershop* spends the entirety of its plot constructing the male identities it implies are required to meet the objective of saving the fragmenting community.

The various masculinities presented in the film are primarily defined by the roles, actions and reactions ascribed to them, and so are characterised in a way that fit examples of what the film asserts are typical male identities that frequent African American barbershops. These male identities have to be performed and commented on within the narrative in order for the audience to connect them to the recognisable stereotypes that they are modelled after. In this way, the film illustrates from the outset that, as Connell and Messerschmidt write,

[72] A reference to the popular album by hip-hop artist Dr. Dre, released in 1992 by Death Row Records.

"[m]asculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action . . . " (2005: 836). Accordingly, the example of an "ideal man" that the film is ultimately constructing is always tested in various scenarios, and is thus expressed when these leading men successfully confront their related obstacles and when other characters assent to this accomplishment. The desirable character traits of the "ideal man" (who is indubitably a member of the hegemonic masculinities) are also contrasted with foil characteristics exhibited by other, peripheral masculinities.

The "ideal man" is thus a combination of all the favourable qualities exhibited by each featured character, set against a combination of all the contrasting qualities possessed by the unfavourable masculinities. In the barbershop the latter comprise the marginal masculinities and includes, Lester Wallace – the local gangster boss, Detective Williams, Kevin (Jason George) – a cheating boyfriend, the two petty thieves, J.D. and his accomplice, and Dinka (Leonard Earl Howze) – the African apprentice who tidies the shop and sweeps up the hair. Unlike Jimmy, Lester, Kevin, the detective and the thieves, Dinka is not malicious in his deviation from the accepted masculinity in the barbershop. Rather, he is more like a child who needs (and finds) direction.

Because the petty thieves and Dinka are not perceived as threats by the rest of the cast in the way that, for example, Lester or Detective Williams are, these men serve as humorous distractions in the plot, which is made apparent by the way other characters interact with them (e.g., by mocking or laughing at their actions and statements). This also means that they are dismissed or ignored by the dominant masculinities, among whom authority in the film rotates.

Calvin, as the proprietor of the barbershop and the centre of the plot, is the constantly dominant masculinity. Further, depending on the particular actions in a scene, the dominant masculinity in the hierarchy presented in the shop oscillates between the lead characters, Eddie, Jimmy, Ricky, and Isaac. Thus on most of these occasions, the character who temporarily occupies the role of the dominant masculinity (i.e., wielding authority without using physical violence to enforce it) has been assigned that power by Calvin in his directing conversation or attention towards the person.

Dinka signifies an African masculinity, though the harmless, non-sexualised, childlike variety, as opposed to the popularly referenced noble, virile, temperate one. He is a man in love but is unable to win the attentions of his love interest, Terri Jones (Eve). In order to remedy this, he solicits advice from Ricky, who is also the only person who speaks to and interacts with Dinka with some semblance of courtesy. Irritable and on his lunch break,

Ricky concedes and exercises patience by sharing with Dinka, tips on how to court women.

> DINKA. So Ricky, what advice can you offer a guy like me on the art of wooing women?
> RICKY. On what?
> DINKA. You know, getting de hook up? De digits, de skins. Il nana. Snappy walley occhi wallee.
> RICKY. Yo, just be yourself.
> DINKA. I'm big-boned Rick. Hefty. Rotund. De's too much of myself to go around.
> RICKY. Hold tight. There's plenty of fat brothers pulling good ass. Look at Biggie, Heavy D.
> DINKA. They are world-famous rappers. I, on the other hand, am an overweight barber from West Africa with a fondness for poetry.
> RICKY. Attitude will put you on. Confidence.
> DINKA. Okay. (00:50:19 to 00:51:27 minutes)

Ricky also emphasises that Dinka should be prepared to defend that woman's dignity by "putting that pimp hand down" if any man ever "disrespects" her. Following this conversation, Dinka, evidently very happy with the advice, grins jubilantly and picks Ricky up in a tight hug, repeating his gratitude.

As will momentarily be expanded upon, in the phallocentric hegemony presented by the male character constructions in *Barbershop*, how one relates to women defines an important part of that masculinity. Dinka, who is unceasingly shown wanting in this regard, aims to achieve this expectation of masculinity, as is expressed by his seeking advice from Ricky, which, as intimated by his involvement in a scuffle in defence of Terri, he may ultimately achieve. In this manner, the film is suggesting that Dinka's African identity does not meet this aspect of the standard set for the "ideal man" being constructed in this context. His inability to pursue women is one of a few ways in which the film constructs him as a subordinate, and therefore, marginalised masculinity. As a way of highlighting this, for example, moments before Dinka's dialogue with Ricky, a young boy comes into the shop to deliver some apple juice to Terri. He sports an afro and thus reveals an empowered African American identity, which serves to compound his self-assuredness. Apparently intimately familiar with the "advice" that has just been given to Dinka, after Terri thanks him, he

confidently responds with, "You're welcome my beautiful black sister" (00:45:25 minutes). As such, it is expressly demonstrated that even boys can outdo Dinka in the "art of wooing women."

To add to the construction of the exclusionary, phallocentrically oriented masculine environment of the barbershop, the writers have chosen to script a conversation about women's "asses" as the opening conversation between the customers and the barbers (00:12:40 to 00:13:30 minutes). Described as a matter of competing ratios, Ricky carefully reveals the mathematics behind his deductions of what "a big ass woman" versus "a woman with a big ass" means to the men in the barbershop, and, by default, to the audience.

The effect of this is an instant sanctioning and reinforcement of the barbershop as a heteronormative, male-centred territory, with the predictable object of de-homosexualising the space (as is often done in, say, an all-male poker game or a men's locker room). A heterosexual vernacular is thus immediately established, which again links the film's diegesis to the accepted and expected conception of a typical barbershop environment. This opening conversation also sets a precedent in the film, which recurs in many scenes that follow, which advances that the value of a woman is effectively boiled down to the quality of her "ass," which necessarily works in concert with what the men universally perceive and acknowledge as an attractive face.

Furthermore, the relations of each featured male identity to women enhances the dimensions of their characterisation: 1) For instance, Ricky's intelligence, which, it is implied, has been obtained from his lived experiences, and which gives him a suave and self-possessed air, is given added value by his insights on women, as is demonstrated by the certainty in which he advises Dinka on "the art of wooing women," and in his assessment of women's "asses." 2) Calvin, who is struggling with the degree of his responsibilities is restless, which results in him taking rash actions based on feelings of insecurity. He finds his courage or resolve and finds better alternatives or solutions after tempering conversations with his wife, which stem from her disapproval of his knee-jerk reactions and resulting "get-rich-quick schemes" (00:39:35 minutes). 3) Isaac's ostentatious confidence is mirrored in the public displaying of affection he and his girlfriend share before she drives off in his correspondingly showy car. 4) Dinka with his guileless earnestness is besotted with Terri in equalling measure. What is more, the position of Dinka's masculinity within the barbershop hierarchy is elevated when he comes to Terri's defence against Kevin.

In accentuating their character traits by way of their responses to and about women, *Barbershop* is applying, as hooks writes, " . . . a phallocentric model, where what the male

does with his penis becomes a greater and certainly more accessible way to assert his masculine status" (1992: 94).[73] The hegemonic masculinities project a confident affinity to women, as displayed by the fact that some have girlfriends and wives, (indicating success in their ability to "woo" women), or by the way in which the rest discuss or conduct themselves around the film's female cast. Women in *Barbershop* are thus represented in relation to the construction of the masculine identities the film wants to foreground, which, as previously stated, are constructed through the film's presentations of the either exemplary or ineligible masculine qualities exhibited by the various male characters. The way in which Terri is introduced further supports this assertion.

Terri is the only female character (besides Calvin's wife) who is seen interacting on more than one occasion with any of the featured cast. When the audience first meets her, she is shown discovering her boyfriend Kevin's infidelity. In her next appearance she is rebuffing Dinka's romantic advances. Though the audience does not see a dynamic change in her as is observable in most of the other featured characters, both Dinka and Kevin – who arguably occupy the bottom rungs of the masculine hierarchies in the film – are set up to either develop around her (e.g., Dinka), or are simply exposed as objectionable examples of a man (i.e., Kevin).

Kevin is not given any redeeming qualities. His treatment of both the women who are subjected to his betrayal highlights his complete disregard for either of their feelings. The disagreeability of his character is further amplified when he comes to the barbershop, and in a half-hearted attempt at winning Terri back, verbally abuses Dinka, which ends in a physical altercation. What is thus being transported through the type of masculinity Kevin typifies in *Barbershop* suggests that in his failure to remain faithful, and therefore in respecting the woman whose attentions he was won, Kevin demonstrates his inability at limiting his sexual desires to one woman as per the dictates of a heterosexual, monogamous relationship structure endorsed by the film. This subsequently betrays a lack of self-respect in his character because the disloyalty reflects a dishonest and thus immature personality. An elevated masculinity as defined by this film is therefore achieved not by mistreating women in the way Kevin does, but in exhibiting maturity by exercising self-control (including resisting sexual or material urges as in the cases of Kevin and Calvin respectively), or by using it as a means of mastering one's nerves (which translates to confidence) as Dinka eventually does.

[73] Tellingly, Calvin, who occupies the top of the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinities in the barbershop, is the only married man.

Additionally, an "elevated masculinity" does not condone violence or criminal activity, as seen by the narrative ridiculing of the petty thieves and Lester Wallace, and by Calvin's support of Ricky who has just been released from prison. However, given that it was included in the narrative, an apparently permissible form of violence is that which is executed in defence of a woman, which amplifies the film's patriarchal agenda.

The *Barbershop* narrative is thus concerned with constructing and maintaining a particular African American, masculine environment and exhibiting the hierarchy within the space. It is interested in showcasing what kind of man earns and retains respect based on the merit of their actions. This merit is necessarily tied to conservative Afrocentrist ideas of responsibility and accountability, as well as the way in which a man treats and keeps the opinions, love and attentions of a woman. *Barbershop* and its message are therefore intrinsically predicated upon unproductive conditions of masculinity and their definitions, which thus opens the film up to all the shortcomings imposed by such limitations.

3.3 The influence of Hood Films: *New Jack City*

The plot in *New Jack City* unfolds primarily through the activities of feared and powerful drug lord, Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) and his undercover adversary, Scotty Appleton (Tracy Marrow, also known as Ice-T). Set in New York City between 1986 and 1991, *New Jack City* portrays the rise of crack cocaine and its crippling effects on African American communities and reiterates in different ways the fact that "crack kills" not only people, but the communities it affects.[74] Furthermore, beginning with the first sequences of Harlem that the audience is introduced to, the film fastidiously depicts the effects of a drug and poverty-torn environment.[75] Suggesting the causes which left urban, African American neighbourhoods more easily susceptible to the proliferation of drugs like crack and thus their subsequent collapse, the film incorporates audio of news reports which tally increasing levels of unemployment, contrasted with news that the wealthier demographic are "getting richer." These are followed by crack statistics which reference resulting deaths. This in turn is followed by news of arrests or deaths of drug pushers or gang members in the trade. In the midst of these reports, "Hopelessness is at an all-time high" is audibly pronounced.

[74] See *New Jack City* 00:14:31 minutes, 00:19:28 minutes, 01:05:30 minutes and 01:09:07 minutes for visuals and/or statements which transport this message.

[75] See *New Jack City* 00:32:25 minutes, where Pookie (Chris Rock) recalls the scene of the courtyard at the Carter Apartments, the centre of Nino Brown's operation. Choosing to describe what he saw as a "nightmare" populated by a "nation of zombies" is a succinct verbal articulation of this "drug and poverty-torn" imagery.

The correlating lust for wealth and the desire to escape the hopelessness, poverty and constraints presented by ghetto environs seems attainable via the financial gains offered by the drug economy, whose turnover is characteristically fast, and which only requires, at a basic level, knowledge of the geography and the locales in which to sell the drugs. Moreover, seeing an opportunity to profit from the dejection around him, and remaining true to his ruthless business ethic, Nino reasons that in "[times] like these, people wanna get high. Real high and real fast . . . and make us rich" (00:12:23 minutes). A unifying detail in the narrative of *New Jack City* is thus the message that the rise of drug use, its constitutive elements and the repercussions it has on especially urban, African American society, can be understood as an extension of the systems of oppression on these communities by the white hegemony. Further, as a way of further emphasising the part government plays in illegal economies, Selina (Michael Michele) makes a reference to the criminal history of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr, John F. Kennedy's father. "I think my cousin also likes the fact that you're in the tradition of Joe Kennedy" (00:11:59 minutes).

> NINO BROWN. You gotta rob to get rich in the Reagan era!
> (00:12:06 minutes)

In order to affirm this premise, Nino is thus connecting his career in drug trafficking to government (i.e., structures of power), which, he argues, appears to be working against the upward mobility of its African American citizens. In his lesson, Nino is presumably implicating government policies, such as Reagan's *War on Drugs*, which exacerbated the social inequalities they were allegedly instituted to redress.

> NINO BROWN. They running a strange programme ya'll. I mean more po' and disenfranchised folks than this place has ever seen. You see, they try to put this shit off like it don't exist.
> GEE MONEY. Meanwhile, the rich get richer …
> KAREEM AKBAR. . . . And the poor don't get a fuckin' thing.
> (00:12:06 minutes)

Fulfilling his ". . . entrepreneurial spirit – the new American dream," Nino initiates his plans and barbarously establishes his drug empire (00:34:33 minutes).

Biblical references in *New Jack City* abound. Articulated especially through the character of Old Man (Bill Cobbs) who consistently addresses Nino as an "idolater" or the "devil," or threatens him with statements like "you shall reap what you sow,"[76] these biblical extracts arguably reveal the film's cautionary lesson, namely, that though the law may fail at exacting appropriate punishment for crimes which have had a devastating effect on a society, there is a higher and omnipotent authority that will see that justice done. To cement this rationale, before he shoots and kills Nino, Old Man shouts, "Idolater, your soul is required in hell!" (01:34:47 minutes). Nino falls from the balcony to the ground below, reinforcing the conceptualisation of his fate with "hell."

In addition to the repeated "idolater," is the phrase, "Am I my brother's keeper?" taken from the bible (Genesis 4:9 KJV). The principle biblical excerpt featured in the narrative, it is also the mantra used by the Cash Money Brothers (CMB) gang that Nino heads.[77] Often referring to each other as "brother" and displaying a matching affection, the two leaders of the CMB gang presumably used this phrase in reference to themselves, thereby making them "Cain and Abel," which, narratively-speaking, foretells their doomed brotherhood. True to this expectation, Nino kills Gee Money, pronouncing him ". . . Cain, my brother's keeper" (01:23:05 minutes). A multi-layered reference in the context of this film with consequently infinite interpretations, it can be briefly surmised as the film's signal to accountability and guilt in individual and collective actions. For example, Scotty makes Pookie (Chris Rock) representative of all drug users who contribute to the destruction of the community by using and robbing its inhabitants of their possessions and the value of the environment in which they live.

> SCOTTY. . . . you owe a lot of people man. You owe me, you owe yourself, you owe the whole community man . . . You owe Pook'. (00:47:44 to 00:48:17 minutes)

From government level, to the drug lords, to the pushers and the users, *New Jack City* presents the audience with what it identifies as the principle actors in the drug economy, leaving discussion or conclusions about who or what is ultimately responsible for its ubiquity, to each. In the main however, it is implied that responsibility should rest on the individual, as especially articulated by the old man's statement, "you shall reap what you

[76] "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galations 6:7 KJV).
[77] See *New Jack City* 00:34:50 minutes for the scene of a New Year's party where its use is abundantly demonstrated.

sow." Thus, a consistent theme in the film, beginning with Nino's reasoning for the choices he has had to make in order to achieve his ambitions of wealth and upward mobility, is "accountability." For while the role of government in the creation of these desperate conditions cannot be disputed, the effects of Nino's activities are also liable for the maintenance or acceleration of the conditions of "hopelessness" and destitution in his community.

The film was released in 1991, the height of the hood film phenomena which developed out of a period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, which "marked the burgeoning of an African American presence throughout the media" (Fabre and O'Meally 178). This was notably because of the proliferation of rap music and hip-hop as a commercially successful vehicle of expression for issues stemming from ghetto life experiences, and the visual accompaniment of this in the form of hood films. The success of hood films and the interest of the American public in African American urban lives were both a consequence of and contributor to the hip-hop culture movement that had been sweeping across the country from the early 1980s. During the decade when *New Jack City* was showing at theatres across North America, hip-hop was, as Murray Forman writes, "saturating the media spaces of the mainstream press and, of greater consequence, television, gaining unprecedented attention throughout North America" (214).

As has been articulated in chapter two, the term "hip-hop" comprises the youth culture affiliated with the ghetto and the social circumstances, activities and conditions associated with living in one (including the consequences and expectations of gang life). The rap music form, its artists (rappers and DJs) and their appearance (attire) and performance of ghetto narratives, are hip-hop's most prominent articulations. Consequently, at the time of the film's release, hip-hop and rap artists were the ambassadors of African American inner-city biographies and served as legitimate examples of those who had "survived the streets" and, without losing sight of this, found success. As Forman notes, "[a]s the ghetto was being articulated as the privileged site of authentic black experience, rap was gradually imbued with a similar character, as the authentic sound track to contemporary black youth experience . . . " (Forman 2002: 112). Being from "the streets" was thus an important signifier of the value of the ghetto story being told. The opening line of the film bears testimony to this: "You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge" (00:00:13 minutes). As intimated by this line, hood films thus popularised the streetwise African American image.[78]

[78] See Murray Forman's discussion on the significance of "the street" in rap music and hip-hop (Forman 2002: 83-84, 112).

Hood films are usually characterised by a young black male protagonist whose immediate environment, of which he is an inescapable part, is hostile to him. As Forman phrases in his discussion on the communion between rap and hood film, "[a] core element of both rap lyrics and contemporary black cinematic narratives is the conflation of youth and danger with life in the 'hood" (Forman 2002: 266). He is usually born and raised in a self-contained, inner-city setting, decaying due to neglect, and marked by drugs and related crimes, as well as poverty and unemployment. The protagonist also often expresses a desire to escape the constraints of this environment, although they do not or cannot leave. In keeping with this characteristic feature of a hood film, Nino Brown expresses to the court and to the audience, his childhood desire to escape the 'hood and the life he was born into:

> NINO BROWN. . . . I was forced into this way of life . . . See I didn't have the chances that you have, Miss Hawkins. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, miss Hawkins. (01:32:00 minutes)

The film, by way of the introductory montages of run-down buildings and scenes of abject poverty in Harlem, New York, transports the imagery of a ghetto and thus sets the bleak, diegetic tone of the narrative.

As a consequence of the cross-marketing strategy that was characteristic of the two articulations of hip-hop culture, the accompanying soundtrack of a hood film is often largely comprised of best-selling rappers or hip-hop artists, who may also be part of the film's cast. For in hip-hop, as Massood writes when discussing hood films, "[m]ost important of all . . . was the assertion of the MC as a celebrity and community griot" (2003: 124). Including rap artists either in the soundtrack or in the film therefore gave its ghetto-centric narrative legitimacy. This can be noted at the start of the film when, accompanying sweeping aerial shot of New York, the rapper Queen Latifah's words are heard: "Yo this is Queen Latifah, bringing a song about a place you might live. In case you don't know, it's called New Jack City. . ." (00:00:17 to 00:00:34 minutes). Significantly then, notwithstanding the vocalised presence of Queen Latifah, the inclusion of a contemporary rap star (Ice-T) in one of the leading roles as well as a soundtrack made up of popular rap icons substantiates this assertion. For in *New Jack City*, not only was Ice-T the hero and a leading character, the film featured his track, "New Jack Hustler" from the album, *O.G. Original Gangster*. The film thereby " . . . reaffirmed the strong commercial potential of marketing gangster movies with

'hood orientation and hip-hop inflected sound tracks to eager audiences" (Forman 2002: 258).

Accordingly, there is a strong presence of hip-hop culture in *New Jack City*, as expressed via the soundtrack and diegetic music, the performers, the dancing, the fashions and even in the featuring of basketball, a principle signifier of this (relatively more easily accessible and) popular urban-based recreation. Thus, coupled with a hip-hop soundtrack, which spoke of the streets, as presented by chart-topping rap artists who allegedly represented the streets, this film becomes the embodiment of this wave of filmmaking. Furthermore, with a soundtrack as well received as the film, *New Jack City* demonstrates the necessary "relationship of cross-pollination and mutual invigoration" of rap and hood films (Forman 2002: 265).

Though *New Jack City* does not follow to the T, the narrative plot and character conventions easily identifiable in other hood films, the ghetto setting and the subliminal transportation of the idea of the inescapability of the ghetto life is very present. Secondly, as an enemy to the people of his community (or as Old Man phrases it, "his people"), Nino becomes an asset to the alleged government machinations which were crafted to subjugate African Americans. As such, Nino's endeavours to achieve his capitalist desires work against black consciousness politics which seek African American collective uplift because he literally kills his own people. Consequently, in addition to the afore-mentioned message of the film, *New Jack City* expresses its views on accountability, and, from this vantage point, insists on African American cohesion grounded in higher ideals, namely social betterment not just for one, but for all its constituents.

As with the blaxploitation era, the hood film phenomenon was short-lived (from the beginning of the 1990s to the mid-1990s) and filmmakers that made such films often moved away from this genre in later works.

3.3.1 *Higher Learning*

Released in early 1995, *Higher Learning* was written, directed and co-produced by John Singleton and marked his third major feature following *Boyz n the Hood* and *Poetic Justice* (1993). Reluctant to repeat the settings and plot of the hugely successful *Boyz n the*

Hood, which had become the prototype of the hood film genre,[79] yet still eager to depict the effects of racist structures of power on African American lives, Singleton sought to portray alternative African American experiences with the object of forwarding his black consciousness agenda. In an interview with Roger Ebert for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Singleton stated:

> [after] the success of *Boyz n the Hood*, everybody was trying to make another *Boyz*. . . . I wanted to do all of Los Angeles – to do L.A. the same way Woody Allen has New York or Spike Lee has Brooklyn . . . After all the other movies came out, I said I'm going to have to change all the way up. I'm going to have to do something different (Ebert 1995).

Furthermore, in another interview by Aldore Collier for Ebony magazine's April 1995 issue, Singleton is quoted stating that "Traditionally, Black men in the movies were always emasculated. They took their manhood away. Hollywood didn't want to see strong Black men" (Collier 122, 124). The outcome of this creative conundrum was thus *Higher Learning*, which tracks the experiences of three freshman students around whom the narrative is built.

> PROFESSOR PHIPPS. One's primary purpose at university level should be to learn how to think. (01:01:20 minutes)

The diegesis of the film takes place on the campus of Columbus University, which, as signified by the full frame of the US American flag in the first scene, is arguably to be viewed as a microcosm of the United States. Congruently, the film's overarching theme is focused on African American survival and struggles for individual and collective betterment within such a context. Oscillating between a Black Power rhetoric which insists on physical responses to racist confrontations which are seen to be part of the mechanisms that continue to oppress African Americans, and a conservative Afrocentrist approach which insists on personal agency as a means of transcending subject statuses, the film's primary concern is turning the audience's attention to the pervasiveness of "white power," which is constantly depicted and literally vocalised in several parts of the narrative. This is particularly noticeable in a scene which takes place late in the film, when the neo-Nazi gang have re-grouped at their leader Scott Moss's (Cole Hauser) home after the campus shooting scenes. They chant,

[79] Hollywood favoured supporting stories like these as evidenced by the emergence and proliferation of hood films. Massood writes that 1991 was a year "in which more than nineteen films directed by African American directors were released," a phenomena that previously characterised the blaxploitation era of filmmaking (2003: 146).

"white power!" in an effort to revive their spirits after one of them dies (01:56:37 to 01:56:58 minutes).

Concurrently, and making full use of the university analogy, Singleton encourages the audience to formulate their own opinions on black empowerment based on the scenarios he sets up. Accordingly, it is suggested that the manner in which these opinions are formulated and expressed should follow the structural expectations of an academic essay. Fulfilling his function in the continuation of this conceptual tool, Professor Phipps, the "Politics 101" lecturer, directs the task for the students (and the audience):

> PROFESSOR PHIPPS. Your assignment for the semester is as follows: To formulate your own political ideology. (00:45:50 minutes)

As such, and in keeping with expected associations of a university setting, Singleton impresses upon the viewer that akin to writing an essay or engaging in a debate or discussion, differing opinions or views on how individuals express their political leanings within this context are encouraged, as is detectable in the way he chooses to develop some of his characters. His characters, like his audience are thus compelled to "learn . . . to think" about their identities and its relation to their specific socio-political influence and agency. However, though this may have been Singleton's intention, the strength of his personal opinion, which is informed especially from the perspective of African American masculinities as is alluded to in both the cited interviews, still overwhelms the presented scenarios, meaning that the plot is chiefly fixated on the nature of "the game" and the intensity of the odds in it for African American men.

In choosing "Columbus" as the name of the university and including shots in the opening sequences which focus on his statue on campus, Singleton reminds the viewer that this university setting (i.e., the United States with inherently racist institutions that actively maintain a white hegemonic state and its systems of power) is a representation of the world created by white men. This world, he states repeatedly through the film, constitutes a game which is rigged in favour of white US Americans. Singleton finds several ways to restate this point, employing the responses of Campus Security as his most unambiguous examples.[80] At

[80] See (1) the party break-up scene from 00:13:05 to 00:13:47 minutes, (2) a scene featuring Campus Security being called by the fraternity house boys 00:37:17 to 00:38:10 minutes, (3) a scene in which Security are responding to reports of a gun threat 01:26:00 to 01:27:00 minutes, and (4) in a final scene involving the film's anti-hero, Remy 01:51:00 to 01:53:00 minutes.

each incident that Campus Security has been called to attend to, which also always pits white against African American students, Security sides with the white students, finding cause to mock, bully or beat the African American students.

Stark polarisations and simplified causalities for character attitudes, preferences, actions and opinions are a constant feature in *Higher Learning*, which effectively amplifies the didactic tone of its narrative. Furthermore, though much could also be said about the basic character stereotypes and their predictability as constructed in the film, it could be argued that again, this makes the narrative more receptive to the ideas that this film is seeking to transport.[81]

The lead character, Malik Williams (Omar Epps) is enrolled at Columbus on an athletics scholarship; Singleton hereby referencing an obvious stereotype of many African Americans who are only able to attend higher education because of their sporting talents. Through this facet of Malik's character construction, the plot highlights that though he is confident about his athletic talents and assumes that it is an innate quality in him that requires little nurturing in the form of training, he is mistaken in believing that he controls the rights to his skills in running. For the purposes of elucidating this assertion in the film's narrative, Coach Davis (John Walton Smith Jr) promptly checks Malik's apparently misguided illusions and simultaneously highlights the concomitant relationship between these and the conditions of his university enrolment, by changing the terms of his scholarship from "full" to "partial," thereby preventing Malik from attending classes at the institution until the rest of the fees are paid up. He has been bought by the university because of his physical attributes and while he is there, must behave according to their stipulated conditions.

What the film almost immediately asserts then is that the potential of Malik's physical capacities have, like a slave's, been "sold" to the university in the form of the scholarship, and unless he performs in the way the university expects him to, permission for him to be at Columbus will be revoked. Malik himself draws correlations between his scholarship and the conditions of it with being a slave. For instance, in a scene where he is venting his frustrations at his girlfriend, Deja (Tyra Banks), he exclaims, "I'm tired of running and studying. It's too hard to do both. I feel like a slave" (01:09:48 minutes).

In addition, Malik is told by his coach that, contrary to his own beliefs, he is not the fastest runner, which is exemplified by the fact that he is chosen to run as second in his relay team, a position traditionally not left to the fastest member. Impressing on this point, though

[81] As Keith Gilyard writes of *Higher Learning*, "nothing is subtle in this collage of racialized metaphors and ironies" (44).

Malik's relay team are in the lead at the start of their race at an athletics meet, his performance ultimately costs them the win.

It is thus made apparent that athletics cannot remain a reliable source of Malik's progression in the world. He comes to the realisation that running can only serve as a temporary means to an end and that he must therefore find other routes for self-improvement, which the narrative suggests begins through education. Singleton is subsequently echoing aspects of Afrocentrist and Black Power thought which make the contention that the US comprises institutions that are deeply and actively engaged in maintaining historically unchanged power structures that work for the interests of preserving a white hegemony, and that acknowledging this claim and using such knowledge to one's advantage without losing one's sense of Self, will eventually lead to a true emancipation. As such, the film illustrates that Malik's education is ultimately about grasping how the world (which is referred to as "the system," and "the real word") in which they live works.

References to "the system" are made throughout the film, though only later in the story is it vocally pronounced. Malik, in a conversation with Professor Phipps and Fudge, expresses his irritation at the futility of any actions taken to counter the racist confrontations he has experienced: " . . . the more you learn about this system the more upset you get" (01:30:20 minutes).

Hinting at the power and pervasiveness of "the system," Singleton enlists his paragons of Black Power and conservatist politics, Fudge and Professor Phipps to expound on its extent. Fudge, in a scene following a fight involving his group of friends and the neo-Nazi's, tempers the energised gathering by angrily stating, "They still won! Look around you man, they own this shit" (01:39:00 minutes).

In another example, after dismissing the students who have not paid their tuition fees from his class and making a double reference to both the reasons for this happening and to the subject of his class, "Politics 101," Professor Phipps says, "Welcome to the real world," alluding to the existence of a world with rules and conditions which the young students may not be aware of, but which has a direct and profound impact their lives (00:17:29 minutes).

Parallel to the above-cited messages, there is added emphasis on ideas of citizenship and belonging articulated through the use of flags and the repeated requests of Campus Security, the foot soldiers that maintain "the system," for the African American male students to produce their identification documents (IDs). Not only is the US flag representative of the interests of the white hegemonic "system" that the African American characters are fighting against in this film, it is also the flag under which the audience is first introduced to the neo-

Nazi men. Though they also use flags branded with swastikas, it is suggested via their positioning under the US flag, that it too represents their political interests. Moreover, in a method characteristic of the film's doubly-articulated message delivery style, Scott Moss voices the symbolism of the scene by saying, "I mean we're white, we're in America, what more do you need, right?" (00:43:00 minutes).

Considering all these afore-mentioned factors, it follows that the African American characters cannot therefore be shown to stand under the flag which acts as a symbol of their experienced oppression. Consequently, they unite under the Black Power flag, with its raised black fist, superimposed on a map of Africa and its red, black and green colours, which hangs on the living room wall of Fudge's flat.

Fashioned by the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities league (UNIA), the Pan-African flag, from which the Black Power one is inspired, was allegedly conceived as a means of uniting black people in an effort to counter contemporary racist propaganda (Peddie 121). Fittingly, the first time the audience sees the flag in its entirety is when Monet (Regina King) seeks Fudge's support after being subjected to Billy's (Jay R. Ferguson) racial slurs, following his rape of her roommate, Kristen Connor (Kristy Swanson). Though his flat is a common meeting place for the African American students on campus who make use of his books, computer and printer, this scene marks the first moment that Fudge and his compatriots come together as a unified group in defence of one member of their collective.[82] Fudge is sitting authoritatively at the centre of a semi-circle of men who are flanked around him. The flag looms large behind him. At his command, the group stands up with dramatic purpose, and are shown entering with an air of defiant determination, the fraternity house where Billy is lying sullen and broody on the couch.

Singleton also makes a fleeting reference in *Higher Learning* to arguments about whether or not African American males or females experience the same degree of racism, which developed tangentially from arguments about the misogyny and sexism, amongst other deficiencies, in black nationalist rhetoric. By way of Malik's egoistical ownership of African American suffering as expressed in a discussion he has with Deja, and without a constructive resolution, Singleton raises and then just as quickly drops the contention that African American males suffer more in this regard. He thus constructs but then fails to capitalise on the opportunity to directly address the misconception. For as Angela Davis finds it necessary

[82] The conception of the African American students as a "collective" and separate from other groupings in the university is established at the start of the film when Fudge explains to the freshman the social divisions crudely developed and maintained out of perceived ethnic and/or skin colour differences (00:16:48 to 00:17:00 minutes).

to write, albeit in the context of slavery, ". . . Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered (23)," a point which it seems Singleton is unwilling to accept:

> If Blacks were exposed to the richness of their heritage, Black-on-Black crime would probably be a lot lower and, above all, their battered self-esteem would be much higher. (Collier 128).

As is subsequently expressed through *Higher Learning*, the only incident where one black man physically threatens another is depicted in a silhouetted frame in a scene following Malik's lost race at the athletics meet. The track anchor (i.e., the athlete who runs the final leg of a relay) is frustrated and is voicing his anger toward Malik.

> TRACK ANCHOR. You the only weak link on this team bra! You listening to me man?
> MALIK. Fool all you is, all you're ever gon' be is a runner . . . You're just a slave too ignorant to know it. (00:54:19 to 00:54:34 minutes)

A third athlete steps in to break up the ensuing threat of a fight: "We gotta stick together black men," which brings this scene to its close. In the following sequences, the track anchor is leaning on his sports car, kissing a blonde-haired, white woman, which Malik comments on in a conversation with Deja. What is implied by depicting the track anchor in this way, is that he is not a man aware of the "richness of [his] heritage." In other words, it is thus suggested that if he were, it would be unlikely that he would chose to be with a white woman, and most importantly, would not have found cause to square up to Malik, and vice-versa.

What Singleton therefore reiterates by way of this scene and in the above-referenced interview statement, is that it is important and necessary to embrace an Africa-centric cultural identity, as displayed through Fudge's character. He asserts that African Americans show an active interest in an Africa-centric history and of the black consciousness philosophies and movements that lead to the educational and employment opportunities made possible through them, which the contemporary African American society depicted in the film enjoy. As a contrasting example to the track anchor, Fudge is clearly aware of the "richness" of his African American heritage, as Singleton has termed it. For in considering the methods that Singleton consistently employs as a means of introducing the identities and qualities of his

characters, namely, via their choice of music, decorative posters, photographs or stickers, Fudge's African-inspired art, his Marcus Garvey sticker, his musical choices (Al Green, Nina Simone, Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin and others), or collection of books (which includes the biography of Fredrick Douglass) serve as evidence of his political consciousness. Moreover, it is demonstrated that it is this knowledge that has given Fudge the confidence to be as indomitable as he is and to stand up to the racist-motivated challenges he is faced with.

Synchronously, it is also posited that it is necessary to pursue any educational opportunities diligently and with excellence in order to not just continue to compete and therefore participate in the contemporary "system," but to do so to one's advantage or, as Singleton puts it: "Black people really need to hear about using their minds. We need to make sure kids know it's cool to achieve" (Collier 128).

Professor Phipps represents conservative elements of black consciousness philosophies in the film. Visually, he is the classic stereotype of a professor or well-read, scholarly enthusiast. Smoking a pipe, wearing a bow tie and a beard, Professor Phipps becomes an inadvertent second mentor to Malik. Fudge acts as the other mentor. This association is confirmed when, for example, at different points of Malik's character development, both present him with a hypothetical story as a lesson in response to his confessed confusion or frustration about how to handle his latest racist-motivated experience. After they have narrated it, they ask him what he would do.[83]

As part of Singleton's conservatively-rooted principles and mirroring his own thoughts on the matter of self-empowerment, as discernible in his interview for Ebony magazine, Professor Phipps is seemingly only interested in the academic merit of his students, alluding to the fact that hard work is rewarded with good grades, and by default, leads to a better choice of opportunities for the future. This is further emphasised in the conversation had between Professor Phipps, Malik and Fudge about information and the possession of it.

> PROFESSOR PHIPPS. Oh my dear Mr Williams, information is power. If you don't have the information, one cannot seize power. You need to think about becoming mentally competitive. Being black does not free you from being a responsible individual.

[83] For Malik's conversation with Professor Phipps, *see Higher Learning* 01:02:00 to 01:04:00 minutes. For the conversation he has with Fudge, see *Higher Learning* 00:26:00 to 00:27:00 minutes.

> MALIK. Yeah, but being a responsible individual don't free you from being a black now do it?
> PROFESSOR PHIPPS. Poor, misguided soul. You have to learn the rules of this game.
> FUDGE: He will.
> MALIK: I don't want to. See, I'm smart enough to know it's not my game to play. I'm just a pawn like everybody else.
> PROFESSOR PHIPPS. Used intelligently, a pawn can create a checkmate Mr Williams. Or become a very powerful player himself. Don't you understand? This is all a game . . . You play it and you play it to win because in the real world, no one wants to hear excuses or empty rhetoric [pointing at Fudge with his pipe before returning his attention to Malik]. (01:30:20 to 01:31:40 minutes)

The messages in the film correlate with the aspiration Singleton cumulatively articulated in the interviews he gave. These are to portray positive examples of African Americans on screen, (such as Phipps and Fudge), to prove how knowledge (of African American heritage and the fact of "the system") can elevate and empower, and that the lived experiences of African Americans (though more acutely felt by males) can be challenged by this (re)education.

Professor Phipps, through which Singleton's Black power preferences seep through, is the example of a middle-class African American "integrationist" that Hamilton and Ture cite in their chapter in *Black Power and Student Rebellion: Conflict on the American Campus*. I quote this piece at length because Singleton's construction of Professor Phipps is the visual composition of what Hamilton and Ture voice their opinions against in their chapter. Moreover, it references the "colour-blind racism" that Hill Collins discusses in her work, *From Black Power to Hip Hop*.

> White people must be made to understand that they must stop messing with black people, or the black *will* fight back! . . . Next, we must deal with the term "integration." According to its advocates, social justice will be accomplished by "integrating the Negro into the mainstream institutions of the society from which he has been traditionally excluded." . . . The goals of integrationists are middle-class goals, articulated primarily by a small group of Negroes with middle-class aspirations or status. . . . Such people will state that they would prefer to be treated "only as individuals, not as Negroes"; that they "are not and should not be preoccupied with race." This is a totally unrealistic position . . . helping *individual* black people to solve their problems on an *individual* basis does little to alleviate

> the mass of black people. Secondly, while color blindness *may* be a sound goal ultimately, we must realize that race is an overwhelming fact of life . . . There is no black man in this country who can live "simply as a man." His blackness is an ever-present fact of this racist society, whether he recognizes it or not (Hamilton and Ture 53).

With the benefit of hindsight though, and with the experience of the "new racism" that Hill Collins describes, it is not as straightforward to deal with oppressive mechanisms. This could arguably be Singleton's reasons for "leaving it up to us."

He insists that the audience decide independently about which expression of black consciousness presented in the film best suits their unique circumstances and requirements. For in the final frame of the film Singleton again displays a shot of the US flag. On this occasion however, the word "unlearn" is typed onto the image in the foregrounded depth-of-field. Using the courier font (which is standard script format requirement) suggests in an overtly extra-diegetic sense, that the writer is addressing the audience directly.

3.4 Contextualisation and Understanding Spectator Expectations

As is discernible in each of the films discussed, there exists a necessary relationship of cross-pollination between contemporary black consciousness politics, narrative and character constructions, and the messages embedded within them. Working parallel to these attributes is the representation of Africa and Africans.

Reading the employment of African elements in the films involves more than just contextualisation, however. It insists on an understanding of cinema's basic operating mechanisms and codes. This includes being familiar with standard filmic conventions, which include how cinema can manipulate space (i.e., by lighting, camera angles and framing, settings, depth of field, focus – the technical, literal aspects) and time (i.e., the abstract aspects as elucidated in the plot/script). It also includes other salient mechanisms, like understanding that the audience may be privy to information that the characters are not, by way of slates, soliloquies or other types of revelations. Depending on how well this is executed, a film can lock the audience in their diegesis, where they can then engage them with the messages, lessons and sensations they wish to inspire. Watching a film is thus a multifaceted, communicative gazing and refracting from both sides of the screen.

What I have chosen to articulate briefly here are only a few factors a viewer is expected to be cognisant of while watching a film, and I do so in order to illustrate how context and the extra-diegetic societal conventions that inform the reading or meaning-

making processes of any film, affects the spectator's understanding (and appreciation) of it. In the proceeding chapter, I will concentrate on assessing potential associations of the spectator to what is presented on the screen, and the correlation of this with the constitutive identity-making processes inherently involved in watching a film.

4. A Reading of the African Elements

Having established a contextual framework with which to read the African elements in the selected films by analysing the permutations of black consciousness movements in US America, and the socio-political conditions that necessitated them, as well as by assessing the messages in the narratives and their objectives, what remains is an examination of the African elements themselves and thus, a rendering of how they can be seen as an extension and reflection of the afore-mentioned contexts.

In various scholarly texts, film has been characterised as a system of signs with relations to the subject/object (or "the signified"), mediated by cinematic (e.g., scene composition, framing or editing) and non-cinematic codes (e.g., dialogue and costuming), thus implying a need for them to be translated, without which their raison d'être is made redundant.[84] Born out of semiotics, the theories used to explicate how film produces meaning converge on the understanding that at its core, the signs must go through a transformative process from which the content in these systems of signs and coding are released. In order to do so, the film must have a spectator. In short, meaning is made possible by spectator interaction.

From this conceptual perspective, the presented African elements operate as signs which function alongside several other codes to construct and produce meaning in the selected films. As they are conceived of in this thesis, for the varied purposes of their plots, the discussed films need to transmit settings (i.e., diegetic environments) and/or characterisations (i.e., of people and spirituality) that are inferred and are to be immediately read as Africa and African (in actuality or in the implied form via décor, clothing, art, hair, language or sonically) to, primarily, US Americans, from which African Americans are the target audience. For in constructing implicit subject matter by selecting signs for specific functions based on decisions for what to emphasise in the story, the films principle producers do so with the added cognisance of what they must assume their primary audience would understand from their production. This speaks to the assertion in chapter one, that because these films are either by African Americans, are black-cast, and addresses African American socio-political experiences, it therefore follows that the target audience is African American.

More than just decoding the presented signs, the spectator must also understand the context, for without contextualisation, there is an implicit limit to the production of meaning.

[84] See Wollen, Silverman, Miller and Stam, Lapsley and Westlake.

Signifying elements in cultural industries like film rely on a contextualisation rooted in dominant societal practice. As a result, as both a constitutive and constituted form of expression, these signs thus have the potential to produce many interpretations with infinite repercussions, as they are dependent on individual readings of them.

At the same time however, social convention (by virtue of its ordering mechanisms) influences the multiplicit potential of their readings and thus can also reduce the scope of a signs interpretation by an individual, and hence its meaning. So though they may read as being representationally true and thus ingenuous, filmic signs inevitably impose a highly selective political, social or spiritual outlook on the viewer. For, the reasons for choices of shots, music, props, etc., are not simply due to the fact that the filmmakers want to simply say *something*, they also want the audience to understand that *something*, and at the same time be able to contextualise or relate to it. What is meant by "relating to it," includes the occasions of a negative-relation, namely, that the viewer consociates to the divergent or opposite of what is presented. Thus, as an alternate result of the same constitutive elements that elicited positive associations, a film and its signs can also be an exclusionary medium of expression which thereby serves as a demonstration of power by the privileging of one perspective over another.

For example, the presence of women's "asses" in *Barbershop* may resonate differently when viewed by an individual who does not comply with the scopophilic expectation tacitly implied by the totality of the use of women in the film. Because the close-up, slow-motion framing of these buttocks does not serve a practical function in the unfolding of the plot, they present as a kind of narrative drifting which ultimately acts as a projection of the heteronormative, male-dominant parlance of the film, and which is in turn tied to the construction in it of a masculine ideal. Presence of female identities in *Barbershop* therefore interrupt this stress in its plot, and so are promptly employed in a way that enhances it at the expense of a more fully developed female characterisation, as per the demands of the patriarchal framework of the film's narrative. Compelling the viewer to recognise and participate by way of a negative-relation process, births, as Manthia Diawara formulates a "resistant spectator" (1993: 219). The reading of these particular frames are intended to provoke a response which I argue the viewer is consciously aware of, given the repeated, displayed diegetic reactions to women's buttocks. I therefore borrow the phrase and by it, the adjective, "resistant," because cognisant of this, any viewer who does not share the diegetic and, thus, inferred response to these frames as per the generally-assumed societal convention of expressed heterosexuality, is then "resistant," as the word implies an active, conscious

disassociation.

Thereupon, as part of the spectrum of "resisting spectatorship," I emphasise the conscious spectator who becomes impassive in their "active criticism," which allows the occasion for that critique to potentially transform similar renderings in future (Diawara 1993: 219). Thus, in addition to Diawara's formulation, I stress that such a viewing experience can also simultaneously transform the position of the spectator to one which is empowered. In such instances, film, as a cultural medium for individual and collective identity construction, which simultaneously either reflects and maintains, or refracts expressions of these, can then function as a persuasive, galvanising tool. Moreover, I apply this position to any scene, in any film that inspires such a response from a spectator.

What the former discussion also reveals, is that, crucially, the processes of reading a film encourages observations through either paradigmatic or syntagmatic inference from the viewer. Consequently, the spectator goes through the imperative procedure of "relating" to what is being shown, because through this form of interpretation, they inject "themselves" into the task, therewith recognising aspects of their own identities in what they see represented in the film. Lastly, depending on what they identify with (or not with) from the scenes and/or plot, the spectator's readings are then usually either confirmed or denied in other, and often, increasingly obvious ways.[85]

Given that the afore-mentioned "reading-interpreting-reacting" spectator processes necessarily induces differing viewing experiences derived from the same, presented material, this chapter will thus engage a cognitive or psychoanalytical approach to the reading of the African elements in the films. For while watching, the spectator is continually developing an architecture for understanding the diegesis based on what is deemed to be the intended message behind the film's cinematic codes. As the plot evolves and more information is given to the spectator, so too does their contextual framework of understanding. In addition, as suggested earlier, this also necessarily includes the viewer's own identity and its relation to what is shown. Further, this approach will best explicate how, if reading their signifying qualities from the position as a "conscious" spectator, making meaning from the African elements may generate the requisite conscientising premised in chapter one.[86]

[85] For examples, see the analysis of John Singleton's *Higher Learning* in chapter three.

[86] As can be read in Stephen Prince's contribution in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, it could be argued that analysing viewing experiences of films in connection with (what is essentially assumed) detected narrative messages would be enriched by an empirical contribution. I will, however, forego such an addition to my analyses in this regard, because the scope of this thesis is not concerned with, for example, the viewing behaviours of the spectators. My interest is with the overall resonances of the messages in relation to the African elements.

4.1 An Outline

Diverging from the conceptual framework used up to this point in the chapter, the African elements will be divided and grouped into corresponding areas of resemblance in application and utilisation, in order to better elucidate their functions in the films. This subsection will thus constitute a stepping-stone to the more in-depth analyses which follows. As has been previously explicated, they derive meaning from interpretive processes which implicate the spectator and the producers of the film. The makers of the film provide the signs (which transport their messages, which in turn are reflective of contemporaneous contexts) that guide the spectator's readings according to the contexts alluded to. Explanations of their employment will also overlap.

Summarised into two broad renderings, the African elements in some of the films can be seen to draw on both contemporary and historical facts pertaining to Africa and African American heritage for the purposes of demonstrating that such an engagement contributes to strengthened and empowered African American identities. In others, they fulfil the ignoble functions of contributing to the comedy of the narratives, and, by way of their overlap into references of supposed sexual natures of Africans, an even more controversial narrative duty.

To refresh, the African elements and their employment are expressed in six basic categorisations. With the purpose of accentuating their representations, I will first map them strictly by the forms they take. I then address them within the divisions that draw out their meanings, namely, in the contextualisations evinced in chapters two and three, as these are the sites in which they transcend their statuses as mere "signs." The first of the six conceptual categories is noted in regard to the settings.

While it serves as the location from which John Shaft's mission begins, parts of the narrative in *Shaft in Africa* are set in Ethiopia. A second use of diegetic locations filmed in contemporary African countries can be distinguished by the inclusion of Elmina, the fort in Cape Coast, Ghana, where Mona in *Sankofa* experiences her spiritual retrospection. The third representative mise-en-scène in this category is shown in *Coming to America* in the portrayal of the "African" kingdom of Zamunda.

The next category refers to the attire or costuming of characters, including hairstyle choices. As such, the concoction of diegetic African visualisation in *Coming to America* extends to the costuming of its African characters, which showcases the film's incorporation of various examples of real and imagined African fashions as worn by all members of the Zamundan kingdom. In *Barbershop*, Dinka is always seen wearing his signature Nigerian *fila*

hat in combination with a leather necklace of the map of Africa, with a cowry shell at its centre. He also wears a beaded band around his wrist. He is clothed in these items again in the sequel, which was released two years later.

In order for John Shaft to pass as an Ethiopian in *Shaft in Africa*, as the other men in the rural setting, he is shown wearing white short breeches and a shirt, with a thin blanket thrown around his shoulders. He accessorises this outfit with a "fighting stick." Osiat (Frank McRae) who is part of the Ethiopian delegation that hires Shaft, is also dressed in an all-white outfit, though with the distinction of a sarong, a Nehru-style jacket, completed with a necklace of large beads, a *kufi* cap and his "fighting stick."

As featured in *Sankofa*, as with *New Jack City* and as such, keeping up with the Afrocentric fashions of the time, Mona is shown wearing outfits with the popular inclusion of kente-cloth print on her *kufi* cap, caftan and wrapper draped over her shoulders, as well as a yellow-coloured zebra-print bathing suit in the modelling scenes. Sankofa is in a white cloth which is wrapped around his body, and displays white-painted feet and ankles. He also holds a staff with a sculpture of the Sankofa spirit bird and wears a *kufi* cap. Mona's hair is cropped and therefore "natural" while Shola's is in cornrowed plaits. Similar in aesthetic intentions to the characters in *Sankofa*, the characters in *Daughters of the Dust* wear their hair in its natural state: Nana Peazant keeps her hair in dreadlocks, Eula's is in twists and the others have simply let their hair grow out, tying it up in plaits or knots.

In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, Dan Freeman and some of the Cobras dress in African-print *dashikis*, while the Dahomey Queen (Paula Kelly) sports a short afro (which is sometimes tied in a head-wrap), in combination with flowing African-print caftans. *New Jack City's*, Nino Brown has a leather pendent of the African continent, as does Scotty. Furthermore, when Scotty is off-duty, he too wears a leather pendent, but adds to it a *dashiki* and/or *tam* hats (in order to accommodate his dreadlocked hair) adorned with kente-cloth print. The familiar use of kente-cloth print is also featured in *Higher Learning*, as seen worn by the black student in the lab where Remy reveals his emerging neo-Nazi leanings.

With regards to the third category, namely, that of décor and props, as is seen in *Higher Learning*, Deja and Malik choose to wear African masks for Halloween which conversely marks their (and the film's) hybrid Black Power and Afrocentric politics. The flag with a map of Africa in Fudge's living room, as well as the carved book divider, Ankh, masks and posters thus constitute the film's decorative African elements. For *The Spook*, the masks and sculptures as well as their framing in the opening credits fulfil the film's contribution to this category.

Carrying over into that of representations of African-based spiritualities, *Daughters of the Dust* presents a first example via the adorned river sculpture and diegetically-referred "bottle" tree. These are featured alongside verbal references to the ancestors in the depiction of the Gullah Islanders' African-based spirituality and religious practices. Another example is observable in *Sankofa's* focus on the repeated images of the Sankofa spirit bird initiated and guided by the griot.

The performance and presentation of an "African," or "Africans," is employed extensively in *Coming to America*, given the setting and narrative outline and thus comprises the fifth category. Dinka in *Barbershop*, John Shaft and the Ethiopian delegation in *Shaft in Africa* (with the exception of the Mr Amafi's side-kick, Wassa), and Bilal in *Daughters of the Dust* also signify "Africans" in their respective films. From *Sankofa*, I also include Nunu and Sankofa, for though the actors are African themselves, their ascribed roles insist on a performance which signifies to the audience, the mystical African typecast.

Finally, in terms of auditory signifiers which are synonymous with Africa, films like *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sankofa* abound with hand and percussive drumming, accompanying ululations, grioting, a-capella chorusing, or chanting throughout. This is further extended to the use of Twi, a Ghanaian language of the Akan linguistic group, in *Sankofa*. Hand-drumming accents the fight scenes *in Shaft in Africa*, *Higher Learning* and *New Jack City*. Added to these is the reliance on names to transport the idea of Africans or Africanness.

Coming to America also incorporates percussive aural signatures, occasionally accented by horns and trumpets to mark the presence of the king and queen. Dinka's humming in *Barbershop*, is similar in rhythm and melody to the *Mbube* soundtrack heard in the opening sequences of *Coming to America*.

The onomatopoeically "African" or Muslim names (with African American pronunciations) in all the films also serve the function of producing an African aesthetic.[87]

As has been previously explicated, the cited African elements derive meaning from interpretive processes which implicate the spectator and the producers of the film. The makers of the film provide the signs that will guide the spectator to reading them based on the alluded contexts, which are usually contemporaneous or if historical, generally well-known.

On the matter of hair, as Grada Kilomba notes in Plantation Memories, " . . . during the enslavement period . . . hair . . . became a symbol of 'primitivity,' disorder, inferiority and

[87] "Dinka" are a linguistically Nilotic people who make up the majority ethnicity of Southern Sudan.

un-civilisation" (75). Ownership of black hair in its natural state is thus not only a resistant stance against Eurocentric valuations of beauty and civility, it is an acknowledgement and a pride in that acknowledgement of the black body. It follows then that in narratives of African American empowerment, keeping ones hair in its natural state are an integral part of that defiance.

4.2 Drawing on Historical Facts

Manifesting in correlation to the spirituality depicted in *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sankofa*, the African elements featured in these films ultimately connect the represented African American characters to an African-based historiography by way of their spiritual engagements. In so doing, they reinforce the idea that a more strengthened African American identity begins with learning about, acknowledging and incorporating an Africa-centric cultural base into the fabric of one's lived experiences. Consequently, such an individual will be better prepared to confront the many social and political obstacles faced by African American body politic.

4.2.1 *Daughters of the Dust*

From the beginning, the African elements employed in *Daughters of the Dust* (*Daughters*) form an integral and important part of the viewer's impression. For example, throughout, with varying degrees of intensity, the accompanying soundtrack is comprised of Africa-centric hand-drums and percussive instruments, as well as vocals with ululation and rhythmic choral singing. This has the effect of setting in the minds of the audience, the necessary resonances of the African-based, spiritual content in the plot. It is important for the viewer to be conditioned in this manner so that they can be receptive to the non-linear, metaphysical message the film carries.

> For the soundtrack of Daughters of the Dust, John assembled an impressive collection of musicians and styles to evoke the film's magic and mystery . . . We wanted to depict various religions . . . through musical expression (Dash in Martin, ed. 1995: 386).

The impact of these aural cues on the spectator correlate with the intention Dash had in including them in her film.

Besides the direct references in the various dialogues to Africa, Dash includes short frames or scenes of actions or activities that are instantly identifiable as African, such as one from the introductory sequences in which two women are shown pounding in the way it is done in many West African countries. For example, making *Fufu* (a Ghanaian staple) in this way usually requires two people to rhythmically pound a mix of boiled cassava and plantain in turn. There are several other food products or popular dishes which are prepared in such a fashion, like *gari* or *egusi*, which makes this method of food preparation a common sight across West Africa. Thus, from the outset, the film pronounces its Africa-centric tone by way of the rhythmic undulations of hand-beaten drums and accompanying percussion, and with sequences that correlate with its echoes of African cultural practices.

What has been visually presented to the viewer so far, are the film's factual pieces of information in the form of production credits (i.e., names of the crew and cast), and Dash's interpretations of enduring Africa-centric cultures in contemporary African American lives.[88] Consequently, when in the frame which announces the diegesis, a slate with an historical account of the Gullah Islands is presented, the audience must make the syntagmatically-informed assumption that what is written, is, like the preceding sequences, also factually-based, and therefore truth. Julie Dash affirms this contention in her text, indicating the source from which this filmic information was derived:

> The sea islands of the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia became the main drop-off point for Africans brought to North America as slaves in the days of the translatlantic slave trade. It became the Ellis Island for the Africans, the processing center for the forced immigration of millions. It also became the region with the strongest retention of African culture, although even to this day the influences of African culture are visible everywhere in America (1995: 380).

When the makers of a film wish to communicate what they perceive to be necessary contextual information that they need the audience to be aware of when watching, the slate of information can be an invaluable visual. It produces a context for understanding the diegesis of a film, and is employed so that relevant up-coming scenes or dialogue objectives are not lost on the audience. Given its frequent use, filmmakers are arguably confident that the spectators will interpret the objectives behind this stylistic choice correctly, namely, in this case, that the plot is based on "truth," which is important for a better reception of the narrative. In *Daughters*, the slate text communicates that the people living on the Gullah Islands "created and maintained a distinct, imaginative and original African American

[88] See Dash's contribution in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 1995.

culture," because the African descendants living there had been "isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia" (00:01:36 minutes). The characters living on the island therefore have an indisputable, direct connection to Africa. The slate text further informs the audience that "Gullah communities recalled, remembered and recollected much of what their ancestors brought with them from Africa . . . " (*Daughters* 02:04 minutes).

The isolation of these Sea Islands is very relevant to the narrative in that it asserts an authenticity to it. In other words, because the community had remained relatively untouched by the outside world from the moment it was formed (i.e., when slave ships brought the African people to the islands), Dash demonstrates that the Africanist cultural practices and the collective memory of the Islanders shared by the chain of storytellers, and shown in the film, have been preserved. Thus, a few minutes in, Julie Dash's film has set a precedent for the audience of how to read this story. The soundtrack informs the viewer that what is about to be watched is Africa-centric, while the slate maintains that the story's setting is grounded in factual information about aspects of African American cultural origins. Additionally, it sets in the mind of the viewer a pre-emptive assumption that the represented African-based spiritual practices in the film are authentic, given the timelessness of the Islanders' way of life.

As the plot develops, Dash depicts glimpses of life on these islands including in them, sequences which illustrate how the Islanders "recalled and remembered" not just their ancestors whom they connect with Africa and the Ibo of Nigeria specifically, but also via their records of births and deaths. This is portrayed through the use of artefacts like the lock of Nana Peazant's African mother's hair, which she carries along with other objects in a tin, and via the bottle tree which acts as a kind of ossuary for members of their community who have passed on. Their religious practices and rituals as shown by way of Bilal's, Eli's, Eula's and Nana's ritualised spiritual observations are other ways in which the objective of recalling and remembering is expressed.

Nana's tin box is the portable, tangible signifier of the afore-mentioned narrative objectives, as she has it with her throughout the film. When some of the women on the beach are making fun of Nana Peazant's tin box, Viola reprimands them saying that what Nana's carries in the box are "just scraps of memories;" that there is nothing "wrong or harmful" in it. Her dismissal of the value Nana puts on the box and its contents is further illustrated by what she says after: She advises that Nana put her life in the hands of the Lord.

> VIOLA PEAZANT. She's old and she's frightened. What does Nana know about the world outside? Nothin'! Nana was never educated. All she knows are simple things. Things people told her long time ago. (00:55:01 minutes)

Here, the film thereby highlights another classic dichotomy, namely the credibility of African American cultural history, as passed on through stories or folk customs, versus that of western or white American education. Succinctly, Nana's "ignorance" versus Viola's "enlightenment."

The audience, however, knows that Nana's belief system has credence because they are privy to the narration of the Unborn Child (who is a spirit and who was called by Nana through prayer) and can see her. Dash, by including these factors, thus ensures that the audience are rather in the position to see the misguidedness of Viola's point of view, and subsequently judge her on her "ignorance." Viola and Haagar are, in this moment in the story, the bastions of relinquishing all the rituals and belief system that the community has followed up to now, with Nana Peazant as its guardian.

As this particular conversation develops, Haagar states, "I'm an educated person and I'm tired of these old stories – watching her make those root potions and how she washes with her clothes on just like those soft-water folks used to do. My children aint gon' be like those old Africans fresh off the boat. My God, I still remember" (00:56:16 minutes). Fulfilling the double function of being subject to the inferred extra-diegetic reproach, through Haagar's statement, the film once again reinforces the notion of the preserved state of the Islands' African-based cultures.

In a film whose narrative takes pains in establishing the preserved authenticity of the African-based practices, the character of Bilal is a paragon of this. To reiterate the assertion, as a result of his enquiries about the ways of the Islanders, Daddy Mack suggests that Mr Snead speak to Bilal: "If you wan' know about dem Africa people, you need to talk to Bilal" (00:48:38 minutes). Bilal Muhammad came on the last slave ship as a young boy and is referred to as a "salt-water negra" and a "heathen" who prays to the sun and moon by some of the Islanders.

As has already been explained in chapter three, Bilal is a practicing Muslim, born in Africa and brought to the islands as a boy. The intercutting edits of his and Nana's prayer scenes during sunrise or sunset connect with Haagar's verbal framing of Islam as a religion in

which one prays to "the sun and moon." Saliently, the effect of this visual and verbal concomitance insists that his direct connection with Africa and therefore both his and Nana's religious observations, can be viewed as representative of antiquated belief systems, associated with a closer, more integral relationship to the earth. Further, they act as an oblique reference to the film's apparent contention that their beliefs are also older than the former slave-owner's, Eurocentric (as opposed to Ethiopian) Christianity, and subsequently a spiritual practice of their choosing.

Rather than being deterred by the comments the Islanders make about Bilal, Mr Snead appears more eager to seek out and talk to him, displaying a comparable hunger for knowledge to what Dash described in her chapter in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*. Mr Snead who, like the audience of this film comes from outside the community and certainly outside of the time period it reflects, knows little or nothing of the ways and stories of these islands. Everything he gleans of the islands is directly connected to what he sees and hears. Moreover, while he learns, he simultaneously documents the community and their historic crossing to the mainland with his camera.

Speaking to his captive audience on the boat as they near Ibo Landing, Mr Snead is explaining the mechanics of the kaleidoscope that Yellow Mary is looking through.

> MR. SNEAD. *Kalos*, "beautiful." *Eidos*, "form." *Skopeîn*, "to view."
> (00:08:50 minutes)

He does not have an attentive audience while talking about the mechanics of his kaleidoscope; Viola is lost in thought, looking off over the water, while Yellow Mary and Trula, with their heads turned to face each other, are amusing themselves with the kaleidoscope, as indicated by their laughter. However, as he is the feature of these particular scenes in that his speech and explanation is foregrounded, he has an audience by way of the extra-diegetic spectator(s). He begins his explanation of the origins of its name and how it operates, though seems to miss the joy or emotional pleasure that can be derived from the object itself, as Yellow Mary and Trula are showing, because he does not respond to their laughter or inattention. He keeps up with his explaining, indifferent to his absent diegetic audience. The scientific breakdown of the kaleidoscope's function emphasise his emotional disconnect from the power it has with regard to human emotion. His anaesthetised approach to the lens undergoes a change however, as towards the close of the film, before taking a final, group picture of the community, he exclaims emotionally, "Look! Look up and

remember Ibo Landing!" (01:27:06 minutes). This is perhaps the point at which Mr. Snead may have embraced the ways of the island and found solace in it. At the same time, this phrase could be read as a direction from Dash herself for the audience to "remember," an evident, strong subtext in the film's narrative.

The seemingly cursory (though arguably intense) focus on the camera also alludes to its potential storytelling qualities. For in its intra-diegetic capacity, it documents with the inferred intention of later telling the story of the community's migration. Extra-diegetically, it serves the function of telling the story of slavery and migration to yet broader audiences.

The theme of storytelling as a means of preservation is also taken up literally through the characters of the male elder, Nana Peazant and Eula, who educate the viewer on the importance of remembering, as well as the tools that were used by the Islanders to maintain these recollections.

The male elder gives an account of the history of how they came to be on those islands. After opening with "We're here today . . . to honour the old souls," he speaks of how history and memory were kept by the enslaved people.[89] He tells the group that their history began with: " . . . those first captured Africans . . . And Nana, she carried them with her through generations of Peazants. And we must carry them with us wherever we go" (01:13:27 to 01:14:00 minutes).

Nana's contribution follows as she recalls the slave days. She narrates that because the slave-owners only kept records of those who died, it fell upon the enslaved people to chronicle births, marriages and deaths. After her explications of why this was necessary, she concludes by reiterating the necessity of such an accounting, which she likens to the roles of African griots. The scene is brought to a close with her stating, "Those 18th century Africans, the watch us, they keep us – they ancestors" (01:13:05 minutes). They therefore demonstrate by their recounting, the power and necessity of storytelling in living memory, thereby drawing in the part of the film itself in this undertaking, as another means of disseminating these histories.

Dash brings into the spectrum of storytelling, the matter of mythologised histories by way of the version of the community's recollection of the last Ibo enslaved people brought to the Sea Islands. Eula speaks of how "the minute those Ibo was brought ashore, they just stop and take a look 'round. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. And they seen things that day that you and I don't have the power for see" (01:15:20 minutes). She tells of

[89] See *Daughters*, 01:11:20 to 01:12:05 minutes.

how they saw the future, "Even seen you and me." (While she narrates, Eli emerges from behind her and wades into the water towards the sinking water shrine). According to Eula, when they had all seen, they turned – "all of them, and walked back in the water. Every last man, woman and child." She continues, relating how they walked, with their chains, on water as if it were "solid ground," and when they reached the ship, walked passed it " . . . cuz they was going home" (01:17:30 minutes).[90]

The effect of 132ythologizing historical events is that the factual details of what transpired are subsumed by the overall reason for why it has been altered in this way in the first place, which in this instance, is to highlight the defiance of the enslaved people. The reference by way of this story to their valour is an example of and for empowered black identities. She says with a smile which one reads as pride " . . . chain didn't stop those Ibo none" (01:17:03 minutes). Moreover, the fact that Eli walks on water towards the sinking sculpture, directly connects him with the story and thus his indomitable Ibo ancestors (01:16:53 minutes). As inferred by this accounting of events, their fortitude was so admirable that the governing laws of physics colluded on their behalf, allowing them to walk to freedom by walking on water. They are also thereby freed from a history of storytelling which sees them bound and enslaved. Their literal and figurative freedom as notable in this mythologised version of events thus has an empowering effect on the community.

Bilal, in a conversation with Mr Snead later on in the film, disclaims this myth. He tells him of how he came on the ship called "The Wanderer" with the Ibo. "Some say the Ibo fly back home to Africa. Some say [. . .] they walk on top de water [. . .] When they down in the water, they aint never come [come] back. Aint nobody can walk on water" (01:30:02 minutes). So although he doesn't completely disregard the story, he does however make the distinction that instead of walking home on water, the likely explanation is that they may have committed mass suicide, going "home" to the join the ancestors in death.

As has been explained, Eula's end to the block of recollection Dash has provided, is a mythologised version of the Gullah Island history, which is legitimated in a way by the depiction of Eli reproducing the miracle. However, as if Dash was demonstrating the difference between truth and fiction, she employs Bilal to verbally disprove this in his conversation with Mr Snead. This leaves the element of truth in, namely, that the Ibo were brought to the Islands as enslaved people and committed mass suicide, hence the island's name.

[90] See *Daughters* 01:14:35 to 01:17:40 minutes for the whole scene.

4.2.2 *Sankofa*

In discussing *Sankofa* and *Daughters* and pointing out further aesthetic and narrative overlaps, Sandra M. Grayson in her book, *Symbolizing the Past*, notes that

> [t]hese narratives are positioned as always already tied to beliefs about and roles of women in traditional West African societies. As extensions of the oral tradition, the texts indicate the relevance of the past to the present and the future (83).

Similar in its employment of strong female characters to transport the idea of resilience in connection with an African spirituality, *Sankofa*, through its main character, Mona, introduces its resistant matriarch in Nunu. Nunu, played by a Ghanaian actress, is the person on the plantation who, as Shola states is, close to her "African past" and is buttressed by this communion. Demonstrating the significance of storytelling as a commemorative tool, in one scene for example, a woman is recounting to a group of eager listeners an incident involving Nunu. According to the story, and with the use of an introductory narration from Shola, Nunu caused the demise of an overseer. Shola, on her way back to the house at the plantation, pulls back some sugarcane to reveal a group of enslaved people eating and listening to a report by another. During parts of this retelling Gerima provides frames of a reposed Nunu before cutting back to the ebullient narrator. According to the story, while Nunu was "mumbling and chanting" along with others who were mysteriously incorporated into the act, the white overseer with his eyes "rolling back in his head," died a convulsive, supernaturally-induced death, which the lady attributes to Nunu's power and which is "where [their] people come from" (*Sankofa* 00:20:05 to 00:22:40 minutes). Thus, Nunu connects the enslaved people to a potent, spiritual past, which helps them defeat an enemy in their present.

Intercut into this sequence are Shola's flashbacks to her rape at the hands of the slave-owner. Visibly upset, she holds her hand over her mouth, suppressing her emotions so as not to be detected by the group she is eavesdropping on beyond the sugarcane. When the story of Nunu's alchemy is complete, Shola in a voiceover, expresses her desire to enlist Nunu's spiritual power to kill her rapist. As has been explained in chapter three, Nunu does eventually help her achieve this, in that her death inspires in Shola the strength to fight back and kill him, which consequently releases her from her slave life by way of death and entry into the spirit world. Thus, through Nunu, she is truly set free from the shackles of slavery and all its attendant horrors.

In another scene which displays Nunu's confidence and power, a pregnant woman, Kuta (Alditz McKenzie), has been lynched. Kuta may die taking the life of the baby she is carrying with her. Nunu implores the spirits to help. "Warriors, saviours of nations, one of us is suffering . . . Warriors stand firmly behind me . . . " She takes the woman down, off the contraption despite the several guns trained on her by both black and white overseers who appear to be unable to stop this process. The other enslaved people encircle her and the recently deceased pregnant woman, their cane knifes held high and braced for defence. Nunu delivers the baby, protected still by those encircling her. "Oh almighty spirit, I thank you . . . " She holds up him up. "You delivered this child safely unto me. I name him Kwame, the witness" (*Sankofa* 00:33:31 to 00:34:30 minutes). As Sankofa does at the start of the film, Nunu speaks in Twi. In effect then, all the spiritual scenes in the film are mediated in Twi, which contributes to the sense of authenticity of Nunu's African spirituality in the viewer's mind.

Intertwined with storytelling from the "home country" (as referred to by Shola), gatherings with Nunu are also linked to whisperings of a planned revolt or an escape to freedom. In a narrative double-articulation, Haile Gerima thus demonstrates how enslaved people communicated with each other and how news was carried from plantation to plantation, making revolts possible and co-ordinated. He captures this in the non-verbal signals, such as nods and eye contact and secret meetings at night, under the cover of trees and bushes a little way away from the plantation sites. Resonating with many historical accounts of slave rebellions, in *Sankofa*, the revolt on the Lafayette plantation is suppressed and some of the enslaved people caught are sold away, while others are made an example of and are hung and left for the vultures.

This unromanticised end to the revolt (i.e., that it fails and is followed by yet more atrocity) references the innumerable, unsuccessful slave rebellions dotted throughout the timeline of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, thus adding to the body of non-fictional truths established by the film. In addition to this is the use of Twi, which is an existing language from a region on an important coastline in the Atlantic slave history. Further, the journey Gerima takes the viewer on begins not just at a principle slave port shown in both its current and former states (i.e., as a tourist site and as a slave site), but is initiated by a sage (i.e., Sankofa) named after a contemporarily-acknowledged Adinkra symbol whose meaning correlates with its use in the film. Thus, inarguably correct in these associations, for the viewer, more so than in *Daughters*, the Africa referred to in the narrative in these various ways is real and present. In short, the African cultural references here are not imaginary.

With the dialogue Nunu is scripted, the sum of all the reactions and responses to her by the other characters, the audience can only infer that she is the physical embodiment of defiance and the source of her strength is her active African spiritualism.

As part of the film's representations of West African spiritualism, Grayson attributes the use of birds in a metaphysical capacity to their conceptions in Ifa systems of belief. Explaining the history, influence and concepts of reincarnation in Ifa belief systems, Grayson suggests that from these, the transformative spiritual qualities inscribed within some of its tenets are the aspects that *Sankofa* concentrates on by way of its bird imagery (Grayson 9-12). Intercuts between the observing vulture (a bird which feeds off dead flesh), Sankofa and the close-up shots of a Sankofa spirit bird sculpture, work together in precipitating Mona's spiritual journey. The vulture symbolises the corporeality of the millions of dead African and African American enslaved people, while the Sankofa spirit bird symbolises their enduring spiritual presence.

As a method of giving a trajectory of how far Mona's journey has gone, the film begins with her fashion photoshoot in Elmina, Ghana, featuring aesthetics (in the form of kente-cloth print) that originate there. Exemplary of contemporary trends, these scenes comment on the increasingly vacuous use of Africa-centric fashions, whose emergence had formerly reflected a pride in the African heritage of African Americans. The commercialisation of Africa-centric clothing is articulated through this shoot by way of Mona's initial inability to see the significance of where she has been sent to model and the connection her clothes have to the location. In an allegorical sense, Mona in these opening scenes can be seen as representative of the trendy African Americans who may not necessarily have known (or wanted to know) anything about, or be associated with Africa itself. Mona literally verbalises this when she exclaims that she is not African. Gerima's commentary here is thus about the depoliticisation of these fashions, as well as the lost meanings of kente symbolism.

Mona thus travels from a point of ignorance, in terms of awareness of her heritage and of the black consciousness politics that inspired the designs she models, to full consciousness where she sits reflectively in the presence of ancestors.

The theme of recalling is present in every aspect of the film, most notably in its opening sequences. The intercutting frames of West-African print designs, the spirit bird symbolism, combined with auditory cues of the *kpanlogo* drums that the griot plays (a drum that can be heard over long distances), calls out to the film's potential audiences, beseeching them to remember. Having been taken with Mona on this retrospective experience, if not just

temporarily through watching the film, the audience, like her, has thereby been re-conscientised.

4.2.3 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*

The framing of two wooden sculptures with a hand-drummed, percussive soundtrack underscores the African cultural, historical and contemporary references that influence the motivations of characters like Dan Freeman, and scenes where African American empowerment is asserted. The slate accompanying the percussive track and image of the sculptures, informs the audience of the fact that this is a "Bokari" production. The aggregation of the onomatopoeic pronunciation of this title, the exhibited sculptures and the extra-diegetic music, reveal the film's African-inspired expression of the Black Power which informs its narrative developments. In an affirmation of this premise, the percussive aural cue is introduced for a second time when Freeman unambiguously marks the moment the film becomes openly expressive of its Black Power politics for the first time, by his rhetorical question and statement, "You really wanna mess with whitey? I can show you how. I can show you how" (00:35:46 minutes). This pronouncement follows a brief display of Freeman's fighting skills through which he finally wins the attention of the Cobras. Consequently, he can thus begin the process of training and re-education.

This music continues over scenes of him teaching the Cobras judo, how to make bombs – everything he has gleaned from his training in the CIA, which the audience was presented with through the film's establishing scenes. As such, any doubts about Freeman's militarism or that he might be an "Uncle Tom" are laid to rest. He has infiltrated the CIA and is now exhibiting the execution of the ultimate guerrilla tactic – using what was available and accessible to him in order to build his weapon against white US America. He has learnt how the law works, how to assemble a bomb, and how to shoot. Most importantly, he has received this education from the top US spy agency at the time, with its state-of-the-art methods, equipment and psychological tactics.

In a pedagogical manner, the film, through Freeman's lessons to the group, informs the audience on the ways in which an African American revolt against white America would succeed. In one such example, Algeria, Kenya, Korea and Vietnam are used as models of successful guerrilla warfare tactics when Pretty Willie (likening the bomb-making exercise that Freeman is giving to a high school chemistry class), expresses his doubts about what they are doing there (in this instance making bombs using locally and easily obtainable

products).

Furthermore, the association of Africa with the film's brand of black nationalism is reiterated in a conversation he has with Dahomey Queen in their first encounter. He tells her that she reminds him of a queen from Dahomey, which he saw in a book and which he says was a great nation in Africa. She seems unimpressed with the African reference, which he obviously means as a compliment because he later says, "you'd look good like that" when suggesting she wears her hair natural like the said queen. Before the scene ends, however, the audience knows that she is starting to accept and appreciate the compliment because she asks, "You really got a picture in a book of a queen that look like me?" (00:13:41 to 00:15:44 minutes). What is revealed through this conversation is that Dan Freeman not only possesses the characteristics of a top spy, he also endorses a Black Power politics that is accented by Pan-African, cultural black nationalist philosophies. This is demonstrated by his awareness of and interest in African American connections with Africa and its diaspora beyond the example of freedom and the methods with which to achieve this that decolonisation has set. From when she is next featured to her final scene, Dahomey Queen is represented either sporting a short afro, an African-print caftan, a head-wrap and beaded jewellery, in combination with each other or separately on different occasions. In this way the viewer is literally shown that Freeman's words had made an impression on her.

In another example which reveals his Pan-Africanist/Black Power outlook, Freeman suggests a West Indian restaurant when he and his girlfriend, Joy (Janet League), are discussing potential places to dine. He thereby displays his desire to support black-owned businesses and organisations, which as previously posited connect with the asserted cultural black nationalist agenda.[91] Furthermore, Dan Freeman is discreet about his real political leanings and is so good at masking them even the CIA are unable to detect his true political agenda. For example, according to one of the agents, in terms of security (i.e., the chances of him being their much-feared "black nationalist agitator"), he "checks out" because he is found to be "a-political" (00:20:20 minutes). Thus, the viewer eventually comes to know that in addition to his displayed qualities (via either verbal or visual depictions in the film), Freeman is aware and informed about African contemporary and historical references, which the CIA is unaware of, and is supportive of black enterprise.

The African American association with the conditions of being a colonised nation are again affirmed when in the scenes which mark the rebellion, Freeman and his team hijack a

[91] See *The Spook* 00:19:57 minutes.

local radio station where he ends his broadcast by announcing "the beginning of our war of liberation" (01:19:13 minutes). The message underscoring this war is ". . . whitey go home. We don't want you in our neighbourhood either. We will control our nation" (00:20:08 minutes). In keeping with the conceptualisation of African Americans being a nation within a nation (i.e., a "colonised people"), Pretty Willie is assigned the role of "minister of information" when Freeman lets him know that the group needs a "propagandist." It is fitting that Freeman chooses him because besides the revelation that he often writes and publishes black empowerment texts, he is always wearing West-African print *dashikis* and beads, with a hat in the Black Power colours. In other words, he is already visually propagating black nationalist philosophies by choosing to wear such fashions. His home also reflects a cultural black nationalist disposition. There is a Black Power flag hanging on his wall, some African masks and an ashtray sporting the Black Power colours. There are pictures of black faces around too. His living space and body therefore epitomise his new role, namely, being a visual embodiment of what it means to be "conscious," and as articulated by the contemporary James Brown, to be "black and proud."

In the final scenes, it is made apparent that Freeman's cover has been blown and his former university mate-turned-police officer, Dawson (J. A. Preston) lies in wait for him at his apartment. After a verbal confrontation, they fight and Dawson is killed. Freeman does not emerge unscathed however, and it becomes clear a short while later that he has sustained a gunshot wound. When the rest of the Cobras come to help him remove Dawson's body, Freeman has put on an African print *dashiki* whose colours and design disguise the blood from his wound, which the others do not seem to have noticed. As this is the last outfit we see him in and also the first time he wears Africa-centric attire, it seems the film is for a final time boldly stating its brand of black nationalism, symbolising too the potentially inevitable convergence of shed blood and sacrifice with these politics. Moreover, by way of asserting this and reasoning away the scene's ultimate display of "black-on-black" violence which has resulted in death, the film simultaneously articulates the degree of Freeman's militancy and dedication to the cause of African American liberation. For he declares that, "Anybody that gets between us and freedom has got to go – now that's anybody. Now remember, don't quit. Until you either win or you die" (01:39:32 mins).

As he starts to succumb to his bullet injury, in the extra-diegetic audio, the audience hears reports of how there are eight more uprisings across North American cities. "The president has declared a state of national emergency," it announces (01:41:21 minutes). After this, the focus is now a close-up of Freeman holding his drink, looking pensively out of the

window. He lifts his glass in a toast to what one assumes is the city outside, but when the shot changes to show his point of view, the audience is instead shown the two carvings featured in the opening frame of the film on his coffee table. Chicago is in the background and the credits roll.

It is not clear whether or not he dies, but his toast has a sense of finality and judging by his expression, he seemed to be in pain. Although he may die from the injury, Greenlee has made sure that his audience knows that the "revolution" could continue for much longer since the fighting units all over the country have been trained to replace leadership in order to sustain the fight, and to use guerrilla warfare tactics.

Dan Freeman (a man whose surname is by no coincidence one which was commonly used by manumitted enslaved people) and his form of resistance is a powerful, armed African American response to the "colonising" institutions of white US America. The presence of African elements to these ends makes it a useful contributor to the quality of this variety of black empowerment.

4.2.4 *Shaft in Africa*

Making references to contemporary Africa by way of featuring Ethiopia and Ethiopian actors and actresses in the film, *Shaft in Africa* presents another function of African elements, namely, one which contributes to the diegetic authenticity of the film. That being said however, the construction of the leading African characters discloses the moment such attention to authenticity becomes compromised. For the performers chosen to play the roles of Africans in the film are either US American or British.

Frank McRae, who plays Osiat, is an African American actor playing an African. Cy Grant, who plays Emir Ramila is of British extraction, as is Marne Maitland, who plays the part of Colonel Gonder, and Thomas Baptiste who plays Kopo, Shafts bodyguard in Ethiopia. Vonetta McGee, an African American, plays Aleme. In order for these black actors to successfully impersonate black people culturally different from their own origins, the filmmakers have chosen to lay emphasis on creating the Otherness of the black people they are intended to impersonate, through elements like accent, mannerisms and clothes.

For example, at the start of the film, the audience is introduced to the first of the Africans that the car attendant reports to John Shaft when he arrives at his office. Following this brief dialogue, Shaft calls the lift, but before entering, takes in the large man occupying it. Although he is a little surprised or intimidated (because he hesitates) he resumes his

nonchalant, confident physicality and joins him in the lift. While he is "taking the man in," the audience is too and by way of a syntagmatic reading of what the man signifies, the viewer must conclude, as Shaft does, that this one of the Africans the car attendant spoke of.[92] The construction of this impression is executed by the fact that Osiat is wearing an all-white outfit with a Nehru-style jacket, a *kufi* hat, large yellow beads and is carrying a stick. When he speaks a short while later, his accent, stilted cadence and corresponding formality in language and mannerism seal this association. Thus, in defining the characteristics of being African in the way that the film does through the character of Osiat for example, *Shaft in Africa* introduces into its representational processes the concept of performing "African."

John Shaft will later employ the same methods of passing as African (though the audience is made overtly aware of this). On the flight to Addis Ababa, via Paris, Shaft is already in character and the success at his passing is affirmed by the man sat next to him by way of their brief exchange. The man tries to strike up a conversation and when Shaft responds in Manta,[93] the man declares, "Oh you don't speak English. You must be African!" (00:27:19 minutes). In addition, the film sets up further occasions in which Shaft passes as African to Africans. For example, when on a bus in Ethiopia, the woman who is sat next to him reiterates this premise by speaking to him in Manta, which is based on the fact that she must see him as Ethiopian, like her. He responds in turn and the conversation continues without her suspicions being raised (00:36:50 minutes). He passes with apparent success as his being foreign is not detected by the locals on the bus and in the villages he comes upon, due to his is attire, to how he holds his fighting stick, and by virtue of his proficiency in the language.

As such, though similar in execution, Shaft is playing a role, while, for example, Osiat is meant to be understood as African by both the audience and within the film's diegesis, thereby highlighting the stock characterisation of these performances. For these actors (the use of the term also includes Vonetta McGee), performing "African" in this film thus necessitates a reliance on clothing, accent and a degree of formality in social interactions, in order to create this distinction. The latter is especially observable in the interactions between Shaft and the Emir, the Colonel and to some degree, Aleme.

As posited in chapter three, in addition to the above-mentioned engagement of African elements in *Shaft in Africa*, in this film they also serve the purpose of acknowledging

[92] A little later on, the audience is informed that this is Osiat, the Emir's security guard, which he describes as his "strong right arm" (00:15:48 minutes).
[93] The audience is compelled to assume as much, since it has been inferred that he cannot begin his mission without learning it to a passable degree. See 00:22:55 minutes.

the contemporary African American popular culture rhetoric as espoused in Black Power politics, which referenced the power and prestige of ancient African kingdoms. In this regard, Aleme's version of the Manta people's history that she shares with Shaft reflects the idealised variant of African history which focuses on the glory of the ancient kingdoms, and which would have been taught in the independent black schools established by Black Power groups, like Maulana Karenga's Organization Us. However, unlike in the era which reinvigorated this discourse (i.e., the period when Du Bois's "Star of Ethiopia" was touring the United States), when *Shaft in Africa* was produced, it was possible to actually go to Ethiopia, whence this idealised image is thus confronted.

Shot in part in Ethiopia and featuring Ethiopian actors and extras (namely, Debebe Eshetu and Zenebch Tadesse), *Shaft in Africa* gives a literal, visual impression of the term "Ethiopia," because it situates the diegesis in an existing location. From what is portrayed, Ethiopia is evidently not a wealthy country in the sense that the Ethiopianism narratives had cultivated. This is exemplified by the ironic fact that the men who are eventually subjected to this modern-day slave trade are poor and need desperately to find work, clamouring over and fighting each other to be recruited by the slave traders.

Moreover, the popular African American perception of Islam as an authentically black religion, as is notable through characters like Kunta Kinte of *Roots*, or Bilal in *Sankofa* who were depicted as practicing Muslims, is apparent here too because the Ethiopian people Shaft has encountered, who have been educated to a high level and who have power and wealth, are represented by the Emir and his entourage. "Emir" is a title given to a man of high office in a Muslim monarchy, which when the film was made, Ethiopia was not. In Ethiopia the largest population that practices Islam are the Oromos, and although Haile Selassie, the ruler at the time, was partly of Oromo heritage, he was not Muslim (Mekonnen 274-75). Ethiopia is defined in part by its Christianity and by the fact that the oldest practiced form of the religion is from that region. Whether or not this indicates a projection of contemporary African American popular culture politics which sought to identify and promote Islam as the religion for black people, is up for debate. The matter is raised here however, because it signifies another example of an unreconciled version of the Ethiopia constructed in the film versus contemporary Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, as a consequence of the narrative being filmed in part in Ethiopia, Shaft, like the contemporary audience, must negotiate concepts of Ethiopia with the current Ethiopia. The film approaches this confrontation in the following ways:

Shortly after his assenting comment regarding her noble Ethiopian heritage, Aleme tells Shaft she will go through an initiation which will involve her getting a "clitoridectomy." Following his positive response with a stunted dialogue about Female Genital Mutilation therefore sets up the first contradictory encounter of this romanticised history. According to Aleme, for her people, sex is performed not for pleasure but for procreative purposes.[94] Shaft pauses his actions and seems momentarily astonished before recovering and making a characteristic joke. Here then, the process of demystification begins because it hints at a non-progressive country and people who, besides inferring a nonchalant participation in a harsh brand of extraneous brutality, do not associate sex with pleasure as was very current at the time, given that North America was experiencing the reverberations of the Sexual Revolution.[95] Although Shaft does not disparage it, he indicates that he thinks what she described is a bizarre practice, though typical to his character, mostly because it takes the pleasure away from having sex: "How in the hell you gon' know what you missing unless you give it a little wear and tear before they take it away?" (00:24:50 minutes). His concern then, is not about the morality of the practice, it seems. Rather, he convinces her that she should enjoy having a clitoris before it is disposed of.

The second confrontation of the concept and contemporary Ethiopia comes a little later in the film when Shaft has finally been embedded into the country and is passing as an African. The Africa that he (and the audience) is exposed to, transports a primal version with shots of a landscape with wide, open spaces, where combative men are never seen without their fighting sticks, and where women scream with excitement at the prospect of keeping sexual company with men who have just come into their town.[96]

During these sequences, Shaft and his bodyguard, Kopo, pass through a village where they meet with a village elder who makes an ominous prediction: "When the sun stands two more times above our heads two men will die" (00:49:30 minutes). This is an antiquated way of saying that "in two days, two men will die." The notion alone of an elder speaking an omen about a pre-destined future, adds a folkloric undercurrent to Shaft's Ethiopian experience. The sense, ultimately, is that he has gone back in time to a place where such occurrences are the norm and indeed where a slave trade still exists. In these ways, the film's narrative is again directing attention to the differences between African Americans and Africans and maintaining that distance. Its manner of reconciling historical, popular African

[94] See *Shaft in Africa* 00:24:00 to 00:24:50 minutes.
[95] See Kelly 2012.
[96] See *Shaft in Africa* 00:47:30 to 01:04:25 minutes and 01:08:00 minutes for the scenes of the women.

American perceptions of the country, with what is applicable to its contemporary state is haphazard at best.

In spite of the weightiness of the narrative subtext, *Shaft in Africa* as a blaxploitation film spoke to the predominantly young, urban demographic that patronised the cinemas (as other films in this genre did) in other ways (Massood 2003: 82). One of the signifying elements of such films was that the principal male characters were not only tough and street-smart, but were alluring to women. As such, the female characters in the film are all, without exception, aggressively oversexed, and as epitomised by the character of Jazar (Neda Aneric), oversexed to the point of absurdity.

Further, when she is introduced to the viewer, it is announced that Aleme is to teach Shaft the Manta language and brief him on their "tribal ways." Consequently, he would then be able to pass as African, which would lead to the eventual success of the mission (00:22:00 minutes). The sultry, extra-diegetic auditory cue in the scene indicates that the moment they meet, there is an instant attraction, with Shaft standing and taking a long look at her, maintaining an approving, desirous half-smile.[97] So, though Aleme's historical reference to Ethiopia's past greatness is the singular part in the totality of female dialogues which does not allude to, and is not inspired by sexual motivations, the rest of her contribution in the film is. Because of her role as the Manta cultural educator, she is therefore also connected to sex, as the conversation is set up as a consequence of a "cultural" discussion which references clitoridectomies.

As expected, Aleme fully succumbs to his sexual prowess (even risking dodging her bodyguard, Osiat,[98] to meet him on his journey in Ethiopia), and further, as a consequence of Shaft's sexual performance, decides against going through with her scheduled clitoridectomy.[99] He therefore saves her from a lifetime of suggested misery brought on by unpleasurable sexual intercourse, which appears to be an important factor in this film's female characterisation.

Without digressing too much by presenting the varied ways in which the sexual availability of the women is expressed, the inventory of African encounters in the film thus also includes Shafts sexual experiences of African women, including the prostitute at the brothel, whom he meets in a town in Ethiopia where the slave recruits have been deposited. On this occasion, while singing, the prostitute undresses for him, revealing her breasts, which

[97] See *Shaft in Africa* 00:22:20 to 00:22:42 minutes.
[98] According to Aleme, he is celebrating the birth of his sixth child, which allows her to escape undetected. Though a fleeting comment, it serves as testament to the stereotype of the unfettered fecundity of African men.
[99] See *Shaft in Africa* 00:45:48 to 00:46:15 minutes.

prompts his retort, “No wonder they call Africa the mother country” (00:09:58 minutes). Though this is a way in which Shaft doubly-articulates his humour and his sexuality, the out-of-context use of this contemporarily politicised phrase implies that he is either conceiving of his Ethiopian experience in such terms, or is re-affirming his muted politics or unwillingness to engage in the contemporary black consciousness ardour.

The sexual use of the African women’s bodies also extends to the men, though only in a brief excurses, which is really for the benefit of expounding on the degree of Jazar’s carnality. Jazar and Mr Amafi pass a troop of men working by the roadside when she asks that the car be slowed down in order for her to take in the scene of black men labouring and sweating. She is visibly aroused by this, as indicated by her suddenly heavy, slowed breathing, by her licking her lips, loosening her jacket and rubbing her body (01:04:38 to 01:04:58 minutes).

Sex and the women presented are both the relievers of tensions brought on by the challenges faced by the leading men in the story (Shaft and Mr. Amafi), and are intended by the writers, it would seem, to serve as distractions or light interludes for the men (and the viewers too) from the real drama at hand. Both are interchangeable elements of the narrative in this regard, and both are as bluntly dismissed as they are introduced.

4.3 Sexualising African Bodies: *Coming to America*

Homologous to its brand of sexism and faithful to the bent of Eddie Murphy’s humour, the representation of African women as sexual objects whose primary function is to serve men in *Coming to America* is established from the outset of the film, as the audience is presented with a bevy of women who are employed to give Prince Akeem his morning bath and throw petals at his feet. It is always insinuated that, for example, even though it is part of the protocol to bathe him, the unquestioning, mechanical manner in which they do this implies that they would be willing to provide any other service if he so wished. Their scantily clad bodies indicate that this service could very well include sexual favours too. This contention is confirmed a short while later in the film when King Jaffe Joffer (James Earl Jones), Akeem’s father, suggests that sex is always available in the kingdom, not least in the form of the bathers with whom he has apparently had trysts. This advice comes in an attempt to address what the king believes is Akeem’s angst about marriage, and, as per conventional

expectation, having to consequently remain monogamous.[100] The African women presented in Zamunda, with the exception of Queen Aoleon (Madge Sinclair), are like robots, programmed to please men, as epitomised by Akeem's betrothed, Imani Izzi (Vanessa Bell Calloway).

As it is Akeem's 21st birthday, the viewer is informed by way of a conversation between the prince and his parents that this is the day he will meet his future wife – a woman who has been trained from birth to attend to his needs in such a capacity. Consequently, a short while later, the audience is presented with a rendering of a ceremony which is meant to introduce Akeem to Imani. From within a big hall in the palace, brimming with what one assumes are members of the royal court and their entourages, Colonel Izzi (Calvin Lockhart), the father of Akeem's betrothed, announces her imminent entrance. The court does not wait too long in anticipation because a few moments after that, a troop of dancers with an accompaniment of hand-drumming, ululations and shrieks, dressed in bejewelled or beaded underwear and elaborate, feathered headgear, styled in the manner of Brazilian carnival dancers, rush into the centre of the hall.[101] At the climax of this scene Imani emerges from within the suddenly stilled dancers.

When the dancing comes to its dramatic end, as if mirroring a potential extra-diegetic audience response, the court gasps in approval when Imani is revealed. Everyone seems pleased with what they see except the prince. Breaking another taboo (which one must assume is happening, judging by the horrified, hushed whispering and looks), he takes her into another room hoping that they would "get to know each other" (17:30 minutes). At the end of this conversation, she is seen hopping out of the room on one leg barking, because Akeem, in his frustration, has commanded her to do so. This scene highlights her submissiveness and in her, the absolute absence of personhood. The issues in such a characterisation are further compounded in light of the subject of arranged marriage, which, as an extension of the African female archetype presented in *Coming to America*, is herewith brought to the audience's attention.

As presented in the previous chapter, the plot of the film is developed out of Akeem's unhappiness at the prospect of marrying a woman he has not yet met. In a break with protocol, sitting by his parents at their end of the table at breakfast, he laments about not being allowed to do anything for himself, and is especially troubled by the fact that this also includes his not having a hand in choosing his wife. His parents, using their own marriage as

[100] See *Coming to America* 00:20:20 minutes.
[101] A discussion of these and the other African elements in this scene will be presented shortly.

an example of successful betrothals, try to convince him that his fears are unnecessary. What is not addressed however is the fact that the "robotic" quality of Imani's personality also calls into question her consent to this marriage and all its attendant requirements (i.e., sex and potentially, children). The moral question behind this arrangement would therefore be: Without consent, how can any marriage be called "a marriage"? The filmmakers have thus ensured that any audience member who may have been ambivalent about the idea of arranged marriages cannot now with any integrity say that this arrangement would be suitable or fair for both parties. Still, in accordance to the comedic function of the plot, Imani's degradation at the hands of Akeem (directly) and of the kingdom and its practices (indirectly) is also to facilitate the comedy of the scene. The transported idea thus being that "her submissiveness, like the social conventions of Zamunda are so extreme, it is laughable."

Disheartened by his encounter with Imani, Akeem is taken outside by the king to work out a solution to what his father perceives is anxiety stemming from the prospect of monogamous sex. The king suggests he "sow [his] royal oats," believing that what would alleviate this anxiety would be that Akeem have as many sexual relations with whomever he likes before he settles down in matrimony (00:21:25 minutes). It is ultimately decided and confirmed that Akeem will travel to Queens in New York where, undisclosed to his father, he will seek and find a more suitable wife.

> PRINCE AKEEM. I want a woman who will arouse my intellect as well as my loins.
> SEMMI. Where will you find such a woman?
> PRINCE AKEEM. In America! (00:21:39 minutes)

This brief dialogue confirms the role women have played in Prince Akeem's life so far. What it also elucidates is the opinion that finding a woman with the added value of being able to think is not possible in Africa.[102] It is precisely this suggested nescience that leads Prince Akeem to look for his future bride in Queens, New York.

Furthermore, the "man-to-man" conversations between Akeem, his father and his friend and aide, Semmi are a part of the film's constitutive devices (besides its portrayal of women in general), employed to establish the patriarchal heteronormativity in the narrative of its diegesis.

[102] This corresponds with the ideal wife described by Eddie Murphy in his stand-up routine, *Raw* (1987), in which he affirms this inference of African women and the availability of their bodies and labour, which, as exemplified in the above dialogue between Prince Akeem and his aide, is invariably linked to their benighted natures.

The very submissive, attractive women who seem to abound in the kingdom do not exist in the United States presented in *Coming to America*.[103] The contrast between the film's constructed "types of women" available in the US (i.e., opinionated and corrupted) and the vacuous Africans, is explicitly demonstrated in a scene in which Akeem and Semmi are shown interviewing a variety of women of hackneyed characterisation in a club (00:34:23 to 00:36:43 minutes).

Also included in this interview scene is a transsexual woman who is obtusely (and obviously) played by Arsenio Hall (i.e., recognisably, Semmi), and who, in combination with her scripted line, is presented for the humour implied in the delivery of her actions and speech. She especially does not fit the pre-determined "future wife" model, thereby reifying the entrenched heteronormative turn in the narrative, again constructed through a process of presenting and humiliating deviants or unfavourable examples of such a space.

The viewer (and Akeem) is thus presented with an onslaught of ridiculous, laughable women who do not fit the "wife material" construct as already prefigured by the prince, and who ultimately add to the misanthropic flavour of the film's chauvinist leanings.[104] As if applying for a job, these women are introduced in an interview format, reinforcing further (at the risk of belabouring the point), the subject role female characters play in the film and the dominance of the male characters in the narrative patriarchy.

The interview process inherently encourages a judgmental approach to the individual concerned due to the fact that the expected outcome is either the approval or rejection of the person being interviewed. The subject positioning of the women in the frame so that the viewer is almost looking at them directly, as per from the point-of-view of the men, and the fact that there are no scenes before or after they appear which show how they came to be sat there, denies them a background or a place from which the audience can relate to, or be able to take a sympathetic view of them. Consequently, the audience is placed in a position of complicity in Akeem and Semmi's (and the film's) transparent critiques of the women. What is instead offered to the viewer is a quick successions of unsuitable wifely candidates for Akeem, who, as was the case in Zamunda, are extreme in their characterisation and thus can again only be primarily perceived in a comical capacity. Furthermore, the men are never shown verbally communicating back. They do so by means of their facial expressions, which

[103] This allusion to what the film perceives as the objectionable qualities of African American women, had already been raised in Eddie Murphy's stand-up routine, *Raw*, where he rails against such women and constructs their antithesis in his description of African women.

[104] The viewer knows what Prince Akeem is looking for in a wife because he is shown explicating this in a few examples at the start of the film (i.e. the conversation he has with Imani, with his father and with Semmi).

indicate their shock or horror, and which establishes and corroborates an implied audience response. Ultimately, the audience relates to what the men experience because the scene has been set up to produce this effect. As such, the viewer is once again implicated in the exploitation of female characters for laughs, which *Coming to America* persistently effectuates.

Lisa McDowell meets the required standards set up throughout the film's narrative of a woman who befits the role of "Akeem's wife." In the first place, her intelligence is demonstrated by the fact that she does the books for her father's restaurant. In addition to this necessary quality, she is charitable, as displayed by her church activities, and is independent and strong-willed, as is exemplified by her rejection of Darryl Jenks. Significantly, and as a final positive character attribute, it is made clear that she falls in love with Akeem for his personal qualities and not his princely pedigree. In a conversation they have Lisa indicates, by way of her compliments, that free from the influence of knowing his royal background, she is taken by Akeem's manner and temperament, thereby falling for him and thus his character. These feelings convince her to agree to the courtship that the audience subsequently witnesses, and their eventual marriage.

Thus, in effect, Akeem has verbally defined his desired woman to the viewer via his statement to Semmi, and she is correspondingly constructed again by the filmmakers through the character of Lisa. The audience is thereby made a part of this process when laughing off or dismissing the women in the bar, as well as Imani and all the other submissive and available African women presented in the film.

Preserving the fairy tale narrative construct that insists that the female interest is dependent on the male lead for acknowledgement, love, protection, or for rescuing, the film culminates in his saving her from her previous existence, by way of their marriage and thus, as stated in chapter three, ensuring their "happily ever after" future in Zamunda. Accordingly, though Lisa challenges him she must eventually succumb to his charms.[105] She therefore becomes subject to his power and although she may have been feisty and rebellious,[106] which is part of what has attracted her to him (i.e., a shared rebelliousness, as notable in the fact that both are against "forced marriages"), she submits to his "world." Though she hesitates about continuing their young relationship after finding out that he is a prince, couched in the

[105] Akeem's position as the prince, affords him the privilege of enjoying a life of leisure and having his pick of the kingdom's beautiful women, who can be present or absent at his behest. Lisa presents a challenge for him in that he literally had to work to get her – a foreign concept to him – and was forced to chase her in an attempt to win back her affections.
[106] As portrayed by her rejection of Darryl, and later Akeem – both by dating him; a man she ironically believed to be beneath her social status, and by briefly breaking up with him when she finds she has been misled.

intimation of true love, she accepts this happenstance in her life and marries him, indicating in their final conversation that she may just enjoy the pomp and opulence his world promises.

Cleo McDowell (John Amos) is thrilled with the discovery of Akeem's royal position and attendant wealth, and contrary to his original feelings on the matter, is then subsequently eager to ensure that his daughter's and Akeem's relationship endures. As advised by the barber in the beginning of his experiences in New York, Akeem has thus won the good graces of Lisa's father (first, after he defeats the armed robber and now with the revelation of his vast wealth), and so by the barber's logic, should "get in good" with an American girl, which is affirmed by their marriage (00:51:35 minutes). Thus, in the US, notwithstanding the fact that they follow the bidding of the male characters around them, the female characters are imbued with an agency almost entirely absent in the world of the Zamundan women, with the exception of the queen who has a small degree of freedom to express her thoughts.

4.4 Contributing to the Comedy: *Coming to America* and *Barbershop*

By way of its overlap into references to the generation of humour at the expense of perceived African characters and cultural practices in *Coming to America*, I return to the start of the film, where the diegesis of Zamunda is produced, and the comedic tone of the film is set.

The soft, rhythmic, a-cappella harmonies of Ladysmith Black Mambazo's "'Wimoweh" (or *Mbube* as the track is formally known) serve as an accompaniment to the opening sequence of *Coming to America*, which introduce the African kingdom of Zamunda. Mirroring this tender choral soundtrack, the audience is gently transported into visuals of Zamunda's lush, jungle valley, enveloped by snow-capped mountains. Just to the right of the frame, a white palace surrounded by palm trees comes into view. The opulent structure is the royal residence and the seat of Zamundan power. As the shot continues to descend towards the palace, there is a trumpeting of elephants, which in all likelihood is coming from the troop the viewer sees in the foreground of the shot. This "Africa," like the sensory effect of the combination of the gentle, rhythmic music and sweeping camera movement, is a tranquil place of unimaginable wealth, where humans peacefully coexist with the nature around them.

This introductory imagery seems like a bizarre and implausible combination of elements: Elephants, snow-capped mountains, jungle and palm trees, a palace with domes and towers with an eastern aesthetic make it a setting that fails to meet anything anyone has seen or exists. For, in effect, the viewers have been swept into a magical setting, which, with

its rich, fantastical landscape, promises adventure. These sequences thus become a visual articulation of the start of a fairy tale romance: "Once upon a time, in a far off kingdom..."

In addition to its thematic connection to the romantically-centred fairy tale genre, *Coming to America* in this regard also functions as a comedy. As Andrew Horton notes in his introduction in *Comedy/cinema/theory*, " . . . comedies are interlocking sequences of jokes and gags that place narrative in the foreground, in which case the comedy leans in varying degrees toward some dimension of the noncomic (realism, romance, fantasy) . . . " (Horton 7). For the purposes of fulfilling a comedic style which plays on the latent eccentric edge in the grandeur of royalty, the film employs a bombastic humour, which inherently allows for "beyond real" explorations. The dual and important consequence of this is that the viewer will know that the representational quality of the scenes and characters are not to be unquestioningly taken as "truth." At the same time however, the narrative incorporates, for example, the idea of African princes, and kings and queens, which do exist on the African continent, and which can therefore be said to be representationally true. What is more, just as it is true that jungles, elephants, giraffes and Zebras are animals found in Africa, the issue of arranged marriages raised in the plot is a prevalent cultural practice in many of its countries. Non-fictional elements like these are thus injected into the sequences which contextualise the humour in the scenes so that the laughs are given the depth required to keep the audience engaged throughout.

In addition to these, other non-fictional features of the film can be noted in the costumes worn by the African characters. For example, King Jaffe Joffer is dressed like a combination of various African dictators, complete with flywhisk and, as seen when he arrives in Queens, with a lion stole draped over his shoulders. At the time the film was produced (1987/88), images and reports of powerful African men could be seen on contemporary broadcast news mediums because the leadership of many of them was being more openly questioned both locally and internationally. Central to the discredit of these leaders were accompanying literary or visual imagery of their lavish lifestyles, which served as evidence of the exploitation of national resources and the embezzlement they were allegedly committing.[107] Their choice of dress and the pomp that surrounded many of their public appearances can be seen reflected in the costumes of the royal characters and the scenes set in Zamunda.

The men in the royal court are seen wearing tuxedos and suits, sometimes with a sash,

[107] See, for example, articles like this from New York Times by James Brooke on Mobutu Sese Seko, *Mobutu's Village Basks in his Glory*, published on September 29, 1988.

(which also mirrors the style shown by the formal dress of European royal families)[108] finished with a Nigerian-styled *fila* hat, or a variant of those worn by African dictators in their varied public presentations, particularly like that worn by Mobutu Sese Seko. The women in the royal court wear bright, voluminous dresses of West African print and prodigious head-wraps in a style which mirrors the way these are worn by Yoruba women in Nigeria (i.e., the *gele*). The guards wear a uniform which looks like those of British colonial soldiers, while the small orchestra that wakes the prince are wearing Nigerian-style (Yoruba) *bubas* and, again, *fila* hats. The three flower women are very minimally clad in West African print cloth and head-wraps. The bathers wear beads in the styling of the popularly conceived ancient Egyptian aesthetic, which are arranged around their necks and shoulders as well as on their heads.

The way in which people in Zamunda are dressed seems to therefore be a mash-up of various African historical and cultural references, with obvious European imperialist influences. Thus, although as a comedy the film plays on the extreme or bizarre, it ties these attributes to existing images and practices. The fact that these costumes are modelled on African dictators like Mobutu and on colonial army attire, is another problematic area in the film's African representational quality because it undermines the magnitude or seriousness of what these elements mean in African history and experiences.

Maintaining the film's play on mixing what could be read as fiction versus fantasy, the prince and his aide Semmi assume the role, as Akeem words it, of "ordinary African students." As there are and have been African students travelling to the US to obtain their degrees, this is a fact that resonates as "truth" both diegetically and extra-diegetically. When they arrive in Queens, Semmi and Akeem find some accommodation in a seedy establishment because, in keeping with their new identities as humble students, Akeem feels they should live in less affluent lodgings than they are accustomed to. When it is indicated to their future landlord that they have the money to pay the rent, he responds by saying, "Obviously you gentlemen came in on another boat," as a comparison to the African Americans from around the area who apparently do not have money (00:28:15 minutes). This reference, arguably to the slave ships that the African Americans in the neighbourhood are descended from, therefore adds to the list another "truth" that cannot be disputed.

As has been explicated in chapter three, there are also a series of intra-diegetic statements in the film that present the dichotomy of fictive and non-fictive, which places the

[108] Prince Akeem's first outfit is a polo uniform, which although is worn by anyone who plays polo, is also, for example, as captured in numerous photos, famously worn by the princes of the British royal family.

viewer in the position of being able to see misinformed stereotypes of Africans in use, whilst at the same time generating some of its own. Consequently, in these circumstances, the producers consciously or subconsciously invert the aspect of the films' reading which would have compelled most African viewers (or a person knowledgeable about Africa), to dismiss the authenticity of the Africa represented by Zamunda, and co-opts those for whom Africa remains an unexplored region, in the formation of a unified voice which would likely take exception to the intra-diegetic fictions or "untruths" that have informed the landlord's and Darryl's comments about Africans and flies and primitiveness, respectively. This is especially noteworthy given the fact that their comments are said at the expense of the character whom, as a consequence of the plot development, the audience has been groomed to identify with from the start. Ultimately then, any audience watching this film would be in mutual agreement, albeit from potentially differing vantage points, that Cleo, the landlord or Darryl's intra-diegetic stereotyping is not only rooted in misinformation, but can also be read as potentially offensive to Akeem and Semmi in their misguidedness. The reciprocal effect of such remarks thus also contributes to the devaluation of the respective US American characters and, by default, to the simultaneous elevation of Akeem's and Semmi's, with whom the spectator has come to sympathise.

This subversive act in the plot of *Coming to America* (i.e., exhibiting the ignorance of the three African Americans in this way) is, however, only temporary. For just as subtly, the deconstructive perspective pivots back towards the position the filmmakers took at the start of the film's plot with regard to clichéd impressions of Africa (i.e., one that projects the extra-diegetic view commonly taken of the continent and its people), as detectable in Lisa's question to Akeem: "Does everyone in Africa talk like you?" (01:16:16 minutes). As the audience has been presented with Prince Akeem's background, the extra-diegetic answer would be "yes." Further, to confirm the viewer's internal answer to her question, Akeem appears worried, hoping she is not put off by this apparently ingrained and therefore undisguisable feature.

In this situation, Lisa is referencing his eloquence and use of a varied vocabulary. Dinka in *Barbershop*, and the Emir and his retinue in *Shaft in Africa*, are correlating examples of such renderings taken from the films discussed in this thesis, though there are several others with similar depictions in contemporary films and television series.

The film later re-emphasises this element of Akeem's characterisation in the robbery scene, where Hold-up Man is confounded by his diction and can only finally respond with "what?" to Akeem's request that he " . . . refrain from using any further obscenities . . . "

(01:01:47 minutes). To cite an earlier example, in his first conversation with the landlord, Akeem states that both he and Semmi "seek meagre accommodations" which has a similar effect on the African American character, who responds with, "'xcuse me?" (00:28:09 minutes). The cumulative effect of scenes in which all the Zamundans use sophisticated language or vocabulary, constructs an impression in the viewer that theirs is a manner of speech that typifies an African.[109] Furthermore, as Akeem has been shown to speak in this way in Zamunda and privately with Semmi, the audience can therefore also confirm that this is indeed his manner of speech, and by default, "how Africans speak." The allusion to the diegetic truth in her question is unambiguously cemented again when she queries, "I bet where you're from women throw themselves at your feet . . . you have an inner glow like you're above anything petty. It's almost regal" (01:13:45 minutes).

In terms of the characterisation of Africans in *Coming to America*, formal and well-enunciated language when speaking are thus the audiences auditory cues, which, as exemplified in some of the films discussed here, are popular and synonymous with depictions of Africans by African American, Black British or Caribbean actors. Speech cadence, accent and tone forms part of the distinctions these actors adopt in order to separate their own identities from the Africans they are portraying. Correspondingly, all the Zamundan characters from the king to the bathers, display highly formal mannerisms, interactions, syntax and vocabulary when communicating with each other, and faithfully observe constricting traditions (at least, in opposition to the presented North American ones).

Finally, as stated above, an important element to the successful execution of this difference-making, is that other characters within the film remark on these features, as Lisa and the others have done. Thus, in addition to the social and cultural distinguishing done in the form of the statements Darryl, Cleo or the landlord make, the fact that Akeem and Semmi are never mistaken for anything other than "African" by the African American characters in the film, is maintained by the way in which they interact. For example, when the barber refers to Akeem as "Kunta Kinte," amongst the other previously presented instances.

Using names like "Akeem," "Jaffe Joffer," "Semmi," "Oha" and "Imani" for the featured Africans, contribute further to the methods with which the film establishes the Africanness of the characters. While names like "Akeem" and "Imani" are variants of the popularly used Muslim names, "Hakim" or "Iman," names like "Oha" or "Jaffe Joffer,"

[109] I use the term "African" here and not "Zamundan" because Zamunda is arguably representative of Africa as a whole in this diegesis. Moreover, because other African American characterisations of Africans (e.g., Dinka's) employ the same representational tools when it comes to "African speech."

without the necessity of delving into a mostly hypothetically-informed exploration of their possible origins, are phonetically associated with ideas of "African-sounding" words, (like the phrasal lyric "wimboweh").

Fixing the spectator in the position that they are constantly being furnished with scenes or scenarios where they are actively or passively defining what Africa is and is not, what Africans are and are not as *Coming to America* does, compels the audience to relate, primarily, to the version being represented in the film. The setback of this is that unfortunately, as a consequence, the diegetic Africa makes use of questionable representations which the viewer is likely to accept as true, given that the focus is not on the authenticity in the construction of Africa via Zamunda, but on Akeem, with whom the audience has come to relate. In other words, the reproduction of Africa and Africans forms a backdrop to the foregrounded story of Akeem and his fairytale quest of "finding true love."

Conversely however, knowing that it is a comedy and thus understanding the implications of the genre, frames the way in which the spectator deduces what is seen or shown, which means necessarily accommodating the expectation that what is watched may, after all, not be representationally "true." For, in this case, the African cultural practices and lifestyle that the viewer is presented with are so excessive and therefore impossible for the average cinema-goer to be able to relate to, that the single unifying reading of these scenes for the audience is through the humour implied within them.

In trying to portray a positive African idyll in the form of Zamunda, the film irresponsibly appropriates thorny features of African history through the use of their costumes, as well as pre-colonial and colonial impressions of a jungly Africa in which humans and safari animals coexist in close and peaceful proximity.

4.4.1 *Barbershop*

Notwithstanding the shared feature that *Coming to America* and *Barbershop* engage in similar methods of African character constructions, both films are both heavily centred on African American homosocial fraternity, within which there is a requisite contextualising of women in terms of sexual objectification and a corresponding production of masculine and feminine ideals. In addition to these two narrative stresses, in the wrestle for recognition within the hegemonic masculine environment that *Barbershop* constructs, Dinka, the diegetic African, emerges as a marginal masculinity who is actively controlled by the African American characters, and who, if not constantly being told how to do things, is only ever seen

reacting to what the other characters do *to* him. The film employs several devices by which to effectuate this premise, and central to these methods is the way in which the other characters show what little regard they have of him and his voice.

A cheery Dinka walks jauntily into the narrative humming a tune similar in its rhythm and sound to "Wimoweh" and before long is caught up in a discussion in the shop upon entering, which ultimately marks him as the cultural Other. When he comes into the shop, a customer teases him about his weight. As articulated in chapter one, this distancing between him and the other black male identities in the *Barbershop* and concurrent humiliation, is always for the benefit of their pleasure and for the narrative purposes of film whose object, as a comedy, is to construct the humour in it. In consequence, the conversation, which was precipitated by a negative comment on his weight, simultaneously distances him from the represented African Americans, and inaugurates the diminished value of his masculinity in the hierarchy of hegemonic male identities in the barbershop. Accordingly, Dinka endures a series of discomfiting scenes in which his contribution to the world of the barbershop always seems to land outside the invisible boundaries that encompass that space.

One such example can be noted in the scene of the conversation Calvin and his wife Jennifer (Jazsmin Lewis) are having on the matter of Lester Wallace's borrowed money. While they are arguing about the fate of the barbershop, Dinka, with his ear pressed to the door, is eavesdropping on behalf of the rest of the shop. The audience is privy to what is being discussed when Dinka is asked about what he hears. Thus, when he responds with, "[something] about a monkey coming back but his arse has too much pressure," the intended humour of his feedback is obvious, not least because of the baffled expressions of the others and the audience's knowledge of the actual conversation (00:39:04 minutes). The others in the shop are frustrated because although Dinka has apparently not managed to detect that what he thinks he hears may be wrong, they are able to distinguish that what is reported back is implausible and cannot be what is being discussed. Consequently, Ricky joins him at the door, signifying the loss of faith in Dinka as a reliable source. Rather than confessing as Ricky does a short while later (i.e., "Still couldn't hear nothin'"), Dinka has repeated what he believes he hears, making the idiocy in his characterisation more palpable (00:40:30 minutes).

The abasing narrative mechanisms, however, are most clearly exhibited by way of his relationship and interactions with Terri, his love-interest. When Dinka first appears, he is in a buoyant mood, carrying roses for her. Having recently discovered her boyfriend's infidelity, Terri, by contrast, storms into the barbershop where she promptly notices that her juice has

been tampered with. In her compounded anger, she picks up the roses and chooses to throw them onto the barbershop floor, where Dinka, whose job it is to clean the floors and dust, has to clear them up.

Much later in the film Terri apologises to him for destroying the flowers he gave her and thanks him for the accompanying card. Surprised that she is even addressing him directly and with a sympathetic, attentive air, and followed by a sequence of frames which indicate Ricky's further coaching, Dinka works up the courage to ask her out on a date. Unfortunately though, Dinka's romantic advances are interrupted by Kevin (Lahmard J. Tate), who walks in to try and win Terri back. He physically occupies the space between the two and in a short time, has directed his attentions to Dinka, hammering him with a barrage of racist insults.

> KEVIN. Yo, supersize me Mandela, you wanna get up off my neck?
> TERRI. Kevin . . ."
> KEVIN. Wait, hold on a second baby. (To Dinka:) What, you don't understand English? (Starts making clicking noises at him).
> TERRI. Stop.
> KEVIN. Be gone Mandingo . . .
> TERRI "Kevin – "
> KEVIN. . . . I'm talking to my lady. (To no one in particular:) "Can you believe Shaka Zulu?" (1:05:09 to 01:05:28 minutes)

In response, and faithful to the film's diminutive masculine construction of his character, Dinka walks away, dejected and with his head slightly bowed.

Because Kevin's infidelity is positioned against Dinka's earnest and more sincere love interest in Terri, the audience (and the other characters in the shop) would in all probability side with Dinka in any confrontation between the two. So, when he is repeatedly insulted by Kevin in the monologue cited above, though none come to his defence, the solemn expressions and silence of the men in the shop indicate their support. When it looks like Kevin is about to physically attack Terri, Dinka, following Ricky's advice earlier about defending a woman's honour under such circumstances steps between them and punches Kevin. A fight ensues, which the others, though first allowing Dinka to get in another punch, eventually try to break up.

During this fight one of the men shouts, "That's some safari punch!" and "Boma ye," a reference to the famous fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in the *Rumble*

in the Jungle event that took place in Kinshasa in 1974. As such, the film is still connecting random African references to Dinka through its script, albeit this time in his support and not with the intention of insulting him, as Kevin has done. By again distinguishing his actions with the "safari punch" and "boma ye" retorts, the film effectively diffuses the universality of Dinka's anger and the reasons for the fight because these comments once again make him a point of humour (1:04:13 minutes).

The processes involved with deriding and laughing at Dinka at the cost of his esteem, constitutes a kind of comedic bullying which makes him (along with the two slapstick thieves) the butt of a series of jokes that empower the African American characters, and simultaneously alienate him, including viewers who watch this scene and identify as African, and/or another who identifies with his character traits.

Dinka, with his happy-go-lucky, innocent characterisation is thus depicted as marginal and Other in the barbershop through several devices because of his African identity. This is detectable in the type of language he uses, his ascribed manner and the derision that both incites, in Terri's very public and harsh rejection of him, in the tasks he is seen doing in the shop, in his isolation as signified by the uncharacteristic silence that follows the insults directed at him by Kevin, in his involvement in the violence which none of the others are ever shown participating in, in their respective character developments, and finally in his failure at winning the romantic attentions of his love interest. Thus, in addition to his menial role in the evolution of the plot and in the shop, the employment of Dinka for these comic purposes exposes a level of coarseness in the humour employed in *Barbershop*, because in an apparent contradiction of the maturity that the film tries to animate through its construction of the ideal man, the laughter it generates demeans by making fun of things that are innate characteristics in him, that he can neither change nor intends to be funny.

4.5 Symbolism: Black Consciousness Political References in *Higher Learning* and *New Jack City*

Similar to the objectives in their utilisation as illustrated in especially *Sankofa*, *The Spook* and *Daughters*, the African elements in *Higher Learning* and *New Jack City* and their connected utilisation with Black Power politics, depict the assertion that a cultural black nationalist-based knowledge of African American heritage will contribute to durable African American identities.

As indexes of a black nationalist state of mind which speak to this contention, Fudge's flat décor explains the source of his apparent political conviction. As he is sure of who he is, he is always ready to fight to keep his place, which he is shown doing on many occasions throughout the film. He is emboldened by the consequences of his cultural black nationalist education. Fudge, like Scotty in *New Jack City*, is thus a character who displays his black consciousness politics in the clothes he chooses to wear (including his hairstyle), and in the way that he adorns his home.

Scotty Appleton in *New Jack City*, is also driven by black nationalist passions which are affiliated very strongly with the interest he noticeably has in the improvement of his neighbourhood, which he does not want to see degrading further. As the hero (though Old Man may also be seen in this capacity), he is the medium through which the narrative employs its African elements. In all the scenes in which he is not undercover, Scotty is seen dressed in all-black outfits, with some, on occasion, displaying the distinctive, orange kente-cloth print. With these outfits, he also wears a pendant with a map of Africa in the Black Power colours. The combination of these features in his fashion choice amounts to the hallmarks of the Blank Panther uniform (i.e., generally, all-black outfits and a representation of the Black Power colours and/or panther somewhere on them). In addition to these, Scotty also has dreadlocks, thereby showing his preference for expressively "natural" hairstyles. Though he may or may not be a member of the Black Panthers, the militancy of his black consciousness is thus implied, and is consequently expressed through his attitude towards and approach to those who are depicted in the narrative as destroying the African American community he is a part of.

Nino Brown (who throughout the film is wearing heavy gold chains) is pointedly shown wearing a leather pendant similar to that of Scotty's in the scene in which he is arrested, which incenses Scotty, prompting the rhetorical question he eventually raises.[110] The one Nino wears however, does not have the Black Power colours but is still indexical of a black consciousness which would consequently presuppose an active interest in the betterment of his community though, ironically he is doing the opposite, as Old Man and Scotty articulate.

Higher Learning's homage to blaxploitation films and popular black consciousness rhetoric of the 1970s begins with its opening credits and choice of opening music, with its noticeable funk accents. The funk guitar twang is present throughout the film, used at points

[110] As referenced in chapters one and three, see *New Jack City* 01:28:29 minutes.

of elucidation for the characters. John Singleton is arguably enlisting these codes in order to signal his departure from that point in African American cultural and political history, which is especially demonstrated in the Black Power sensibility of the film.

It exhibits its affinities to a militaristic Black Power, which is a significant part of the promoted black cultural nationalist agenda coursing through it, via Malik and Fudge. As such, the narrative therefore asserts the premise that fortitude is derived from an African American re-education encouraged in Black Power and Afrocentrist discourses as exemplified by the scripting of Fudge. The boldly displayed Black Power colours on the flag in his home, the afro he wears, his taste in music, and the sense that is transmitted by way of his candid interactions that reveal his combative and self-assured spirit, are thereby attributed to his pro-African American erudition. Additionally, in the moment in the film when Malik is centering in on his black consciousness voice and thus the expression of his self-empowerment, he wears a Black Panther T-shirt which triggers a reaction from Remy, the neo-Nazi freshman, which ultimately results in a violent, physical exchange. He is thus literally compelled to fight for his power as a black person against the film's crude personification of white power. Though Malik, Fudge and their group win this physical fight, the question that Singleton poses to the audience by the untethered close to the film is whether or not Malik will win against the figurative representation of white power in the form of the "game" or "system" that is US America.

Malik's character development necessarily involves a progression of "unlearning" and edification from a black consciousness perspective. The point which marks the moment of his realisation of this for the viewer, is notable at the Halloween party when both he and Deja wear African masks. Fudge's friend, Dreads (Busta Rhymes) says in response to seeing them "Warrior representation yes" and thus vocalises for the viewer the politicised nature of this choice of costuming (01:06:12 minutes). In correlation with other moments, the audience is presented with cumulative scenes which shows Malik's increasing awareness of the pervasiveness of the frameworks of oppression that steer him towards a more militaristic black consciousness stance (signified by his wearing of a Black Panther shirt and by the fight he takes part in). Simultaneously, the more he learns, the more he seems to be directed away from the conservative position of Professor Phipps.

Thus, articulated in these ways, these films include African elements as signifiers of a matured consciousness by the African Americans who are associated with them, and the implication of them in the self-empowerment of those characters.

Another twin device in the films is the choice of a rhythmic, hand-drummed track in

the extra-diegetic sound accompanying the fight scenes between Scotty and Nino in *New Jack City*, and in the one between the neo-Nazis and Fudge's group in *Higher Learning*. Used to indicate the climax of the confrontation of the Black Power politics and opposing politics or ethics in both, the tracks suggest a buttressing of spirit necessary for them to win their fights by referencing in this way the enduring, and to use Dreads' word, inner "warriors."

5. Conclusions

An important part of defining African identities in these films is in its affirmation by other characters in the diegesis through actions, and/or statements, which also include those which are meant to demean, and those which are meant respectfully. "You must be African!" is thus stated figuratively or literally on such occasions. Consent to either the negative or positive outcome of these affirmations is also produced in the spectator, who by virtue of the filmic codes, is in a constant and fluctuating relational state with one or more of characters or settings. When they are not concerned with constructing an African person, the films incorporate allusions to the continent for the purposes of articulating or outlining a particular black nationalist cause or as an exotic mise-en-scène. In the former, the African elements shape definitions of African American political empowerment, inducing the statement, "you must be African American," in a black cultural nationalist sense. In other words, within this context, the African American character would be identifying themselves in this way as a sign of their political rejection of Eurocentric frames of reference. In the latter, the concern is in presenting an alternate Other and is thus usually diametrically opposite to the contrasted US setting.

As the title infers, the challenge of this thesis has been to assess the construction of Africa and Africans in the films discussed. Subsequently, in the assessments presented throughout, it has been shown that whether or not these engagements are positive in their intention, in each of these circumstances, neither African element resonates with a suitable contemporary representation, which makes resisting and/or conscious spectators from within the films broad viewership. The conscious viewer is thus compelled to unpack selective or exploitative approaches to the African continent and people, whilst simultaneously identifying with and supporting the self-determination of the African American characters and storyline as per the dictates of the spectator/film relationship. The unsustainable dynamics of connecting and distancing that results, has created tensions within relations between Africans and African Americans, which is supported by the empirical experiences referenced by, for example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

5.1 Conscious/Cursory Approaches

The comprehensive presentation here of black nationalist activity in US America, considered the promises and pitfalls of the black consciousness movements and

contextualised them with the films' messages. An added depth to the readings of the signs was thus incorporated as the metanarratives of the films were more fully exposed.

Additionally, the filmmakers' practical requirements of fulfilling the commercial objectives of their films, influence which signs are chosen, their aesthetic positioning and apportioned weight in the task of anchoring the plot. This directly impacts what the spectator is presented with. Noticeably, the films which comprise the independent film category focus on an ethos of a cultural black nationalism that empowers by constructing stories from a position of defiance and pride, while those which are focused on less defined forms of collective resistance, are Hollywood-backed.

There is a correlation between contemporary socio-political contexts, and why and for what purpose an African element was selected and utilised in each film. These factors also have an impact on the attention paid to the depth of that representation, which would answer questions about what each symbolised, or how they enriched the character they were associated with, or the narrative as a whole. For example, in *The Spook*, the African elements affirm the authenticity or strength of the articulated Black Power message. How Dan Freeman engages with the elements, says more about him and the value he places in his politics than about the continent they refer to.

In *New jack City* and *Higher Learning* the links are tertiary, having been sourced from the black cultural nationalisms of Black Power, the Civil Rights Movement, and as a result of Afrocentrist practices, like the initiation ceremonies which insist on African names and dress. Though this may be so, the references in both these films announced a militant political position, which, like *The Spook*, revealed the quality of the black nationalisms espoused by the lead characters. *Higher Learning*, however, occupies a more ambiguous position with regard to expressions of black consciousness, as Singleton's omnipresent pedagogical methods ironically obstruct his intentions of creating an objective space in which the spectator can view what is presented from a critical position, and decide what suits their political leanings. His hints at a conservatist, male-oriented black consciousness is the most prevalent of a few key limitations.

Exposing the incompatibility of the macho representation of black consciousness displayed in the above films, *Daughters* and *Sankofa* are female-focused narratives whose engagement with African elements and their expressed black cultural nationalisms is therefore noticeably different. Heavily spiritual with an emphasis on drawing strength from places of pain, the African elements are tied to self-determinist, empowering objectives, which subsequently incorporate them in a mythic or allegorical sense.

All of the above-mentioned films strongly propose that in accepting and taking pride in an African American identity which acknowledges a connection with an African past and/or incorporates an African syncretism into daily experiences, will grow resilient or, at the very least, will be able to resist the systematic attempt at erasing that past.

African elements in *Shaft in Africa*, *Coming to America* and *Barbershop* take on less solemnly-presented forms, as their representations are either loose and cursory, or are engaged to fulfill comedic roles and/or to contribute to the amusement of the potential audience or characters by way of sexual objectification. Their utilisation in *Shaft in Africa* suggests that the film, unable to ignore the Black Power ethos of the early 1970s, thus draws from easily-recognisable sections of contemporary black consciousness rhetoric (i.e., great African kingdoms) and Eurocentric, African presentations (i.e., in the depictions of the Ethiopian people and villages).

The careless incorporation of negative African historical references as illustrated in *Coming to America's* use of colonial costumes and allusions to African dictators betray a complete separation from the conscientious approaches evident in films like *Daughters* or *Sankofa*.

Finally, although the latest of the films discussed, *Barbershop's* rendering of Dinka is astonishingly unprogressive. The film makes full use of popularly-denounced archetypal impressions of Africans, which are disturbingly similar in execution to historically racist, white US American portrayals of African Americans.

5.2 Broad Receptions

Notwithstanding their entertainment values, these films and their African representations should be paid closer and more critical attention because in an age where they are more readily and easily accessible, the inadequate imagery of Africa and Africans shape problematic perceptions in the minds of an even wider public.

Excepting the independent ones, namely, *Daughters*, *Sankofa* and *The Spook*, all the other films have distribution deals with commercial giants of the industry, such as Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Warner Brothers, Paramount Pictures, United International Pictures and Columbia Pictures, which ensured their global reach. Today, in addition to those distribution networks, there are new avenues for accessing these films, with sites like Netflix internationally, or Kinox, or Maxdome in Germany. As such, the films continue to reach growing audiences who may not care to be critical of their complicity in reifying stock

characterisation or demeaning representations. For example, on various online sources (e.g., Vibe, Billboard, BuzzFeed, E!-Online) it was reported that in 2014, the musical icon, Alicia Keys, celebrated her husband's birthday by throwing him a "Coming to America-themed" party. In it, the highlight was a reproduction of the scene in which Imani is introduced and revealed to Prince Akeem. With a readership of millions, the imagery of *Coming to America* was once again projected to a new generation of people who may not have known of the film. Judging by the responses and comments to this party by Keys' fans and general readership, most are unaware of the problematic African references, and repost, re-blog or retweet the visuals, thereby cementing the flawed representations.

Furthermore, Eddie Murphy films are re-run regularly and continue to enjoy prime-time film spots on a vast amount of television channels all over the world. Like Keys' party, the repetition of their messages about Africa and Africans are uncritically reproduced and commented on by most of the television viewers. In one such example, the famous performer, Azealia Banks, known for her impassioned and often intelligently-infused confrontation with another successful performer, confessed on 16 December 2014 to over half a million followers on twitter: "I wish i (sic) had an African Accent (sic) and a huge house with giraffes and gazelles and roosters . . . " (Banks 2014). Though the source of this imagery is not made explicit, it resonates with the imagery of Africa transported through *Coming to America*.

Though much has been made in this chapter about the films' resonances in the changing media sphere, they do comprise the dominant arena of global visual exchange and thus have a profound effect on the constructions of identity. If similar representations of African Americans in the historic filmic record were rightly pronounced as unacceptable, the blinkered suppositions about Africa and Africans are equally so. Closer attention should be paid to constructions of any identity, as its inherently abstract and elusive components will always avoid a true definition. Thus, failing such a grasping, it is hoped that whatever filmic representation is at least fair.

Videography

Coming to America. Dir. John Landis. Perf. Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall and James Earl Jones. Paramount Pictures and Eddie Murphy Productions, 1988.

Barbershop. Dir. Tim Story. Perf. Ice Cube, Cedric the Entertainer and Eve. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, State Street Pictures and Cube Vision, 2002.

Beverly Hills Cop. Dir. Martin Brest. Perf. Eddie Murphy, Judge Reinhold, John Ashton. Paramount Pictures, Eddie Murphy Productions and Don Simpson/ Jerry Bruckheimer Films, 1984.

Boyz N the Hood. Dir. John Singleton. Perf. Cuba Gooding Jr., Laurence Fishburne, Hudhai Al-Amir. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1991.

Daughters of the Dust. Dir. Julie Dash. Perf. Cora Lee Day, Alva Rogers and Barbara-O. American Playhouse, Geechee Girls and WMG Film, 1991.

District 9. Dir. Neill Blomkamp. Perf. Sharito Copley, David James, Jason Cope. TriStar Pictures, Block/Hansen, WingNut Films 2009.

Friday. Dir. F. Gary Gray. Perf. Ice Cube, Chris Tucker, Nia Long. New Line Cinema and Priority Films (I), 1995.

Higher Learning. Dir. John Singleton. Perf. Omar Epps, Kristy Swanson and Michael Rapaport. Columbia Pictures Corporation and New Deal Productions. 1995.

Jungle Fever. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Wesley Snipes, Annabella Sciorra, Spike Lee. Universal Pictures, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 1991.

Living Single. Creator Yvette Lee Bowser. Perf. Queen Latifah, Kim Coles, Erika Alexander. Sister Lee Productions, Warner Bros. Television, 1993-1998.

Malcolm X. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Delroy Lindo. Largo International N.V., JVC Entertainment Networks, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1992.

New Jack City. Dir. Mario Van Peebles. Perf. Wesley Snipes, Ice-T and Allen Payne. Warner Bros., The Jackson/ McHenry Company and Jacmac Films, 1991.

Raw. Dir. Robert Townsend. Eddie Murphy, Tatyana Ali, Birdie Allen. Eddie Murphy Productions, Paramount Pictures, 1987.

Roots. By Alex Haley. Adapt. William Blinn, M. Charles Cohen, Alex Haley, Ernest Kinoy, James Lee. Perf. LeVar Burton, Robert Reed, John Amos. 8 episodes. David L. Wolver Productions, Warner Bros. Television, 1977.

Precious. Dir. Lee Daniels. Perf. Gabourey Sidibe, Mo'Nique, Paula Patton. Lionsgate, Lee Daniels Entertainment, Smokewood Entertainment Group, 2009.

Sankofa. Dir. Haile Gerima. Perf. Kofi Ghanaba, Oyafunmike Ogunlano and Alexandra Duah. Channel Four Films, Diproci, Ghana National Commission on Culture, Myoheduh Films, Negod-Gwad Productions, Norddeutscher Rundfunk and Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 1993.

Shaft in Africa. Dir. John Guillermin. Perf. Richard Roundtree, Frank Finlay and Vonetta McGee. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures and Shaft Productions, Inc., 1973.

The Best Man. Dir. Malcom D. Lee. Perf. Taye Diggs, Nia Long, Morris Chestnut. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1999.

The Spook Who Sat by the Door. Dir. Ivan Dixon. Perf. Lawrence Cook, Janet League and Paula Kelly. Bokari, 1973.

Trading Places. Dir. John Landis. Perf. Eddie Murphy, Dan Ackroyd, Ralph Bellamy. Cinema Group Ventures and Paramount Pictures, 1983.

Waiting to Exhale. Dir. Forest Whitaker. Perf. Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine. Twentieth Century Fox, 1995.

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