adumbrated skyline of concrete boxes and it is referred to in the audio narration, but otherwise, Brasília is the specter haunting the film. The contrast between the distant city and this rural community turns out to be the contrast between two conceptions of utopia—the modernist utopian city designed to overcome social inequity spatially and architecturally and the pastoral utopian ideal of an "Aruanda."

Brasília was constructed with utopian pretensions. The building of Brasília was undertaken in 1957 by the populist president of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek, who campaigned on the promise to transfer Brazil's capital from Rio de Janeiro to the interior of the country. The new capital, Brasília, would integrate the interior of the country into the national economy, providing jobs and infrastructure, and spreading the nation's wealth to long neglected land-locked subsistence economies. It would herald Brazil's emergent identity as a modern nation. Knowing that if the project was not completed before he left office it would not be completed at all, Kubitschek promised the inauguration of the new capital by the close of his administration.

The Brasília project was the quintessential expression of the developmentalist ideology that had been spreading throughout Latin American since the mid-1940s and that had been adopted by Kubitschek. Developmentalism was a liberal ideology, deeply influenced by the 19th century positivism of Comte and Spencer, committed to progress, science, and the notion that society could be reformed through the conscious, rational policies of an activist state.[94] In Latin America, this meant that nations that had long been exploited by the metropolitan centers—to which they provided raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods—thought that they could develop themselves, that they could, through decent state policies, one day match the level of material wealth and technological development of the global north. One commonly implemented strategy to further this end was import-substitution industrialization.[95] Rather than importing manufactured goods and technology from abroad, these countries would invest in national industrialization projects: they would build factories and legally protect nascent national industries; they would implement

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[94] Ramon Grosfoguel, "Developmentalism, Modernity, and Dependency Theory in Latin America," Nepantla: Views from South 1.2 (2000).
[95] Immanuel Wallerstein, "After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?," Social Forces 83.3 (2005).

neomercantilist policies, just as the economic powerhouses of the west had done in the 18th century, as an intermediate step toward the free-trade ideal that was widely shared by the proponents of developmentalism.

Developmentalism had nationalist strains like the one to which Kubitschek ascribed as well as its more leftist strains. [96] The construction of Brasília testifies to the compatibility of these orientations. On the one hand, it was designed by the socialist architect Oscar Niemeyer, a lifelong member of the communist party and a disciple of Le Corbusier, and the left-liberal urban planner Lucio Costa, both of whom imagined it as a modernist utopian city of the future, a city that would ameliorate class division by virtue of its design.[97] On the other hand, it was built by Kubitschek, who cared little for Niemeyer and Costa's vision of social change. Anthropologist James Holston has argued that one key question presented by the construction of Brasília is "how both 'communists and capitalists' can find their views signified by the very same set of symbols," or put another way, "why does modernism in Brazilian architecture signify change toward egalitarianism, collectivism, and socialism for one group, and toward nationalist development for the other?"[98] For Holston the answer lies in the close link between modernism and modernization, which both embrace the aim of innovation and, in the Brazilian context, a break with the colonial past. Moreover, this modernist architectural style required industrial-age building materials; it demanded cars and emphasized speed at a time when Kubitschek's was focusing on developing the automobile industry; and it required a

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[96] For a discussion of the connections between developmentalism and dependency theory, see Grosfoguel, "Developmentalism, Modernity, and Dependency Theory in Latin America." For Grosfoguel, the 'dependency school' shares with developmentalism the commitment to the "modernist idea that progress was possible through a rational organization of society" (361). What distinguishes the *dependentistas* (dependency school) from the other strains of developmentalism including the cepalistas (associated with the Economic Commision for Latin America) and the orthodox Marxists is that the *dependentistas* rejected the strict stagism of both. They believed that development could not be achieved within capitalism because a national bourgeosie that was inevitably coopted by multinational corporations could not carry out the project of national development. Only a socialist state (even within a capitalist world-system) could achieve autonomous national development (361). Implicit in Niemeyer and Costa's vision is a view analogous to the dependency school's in its application of Lenin to architecture. They believed, and this is a point made by Holston, that modernist architecture could by-pass the intermediate steps that had characterized European development, that it could be the cause (rather than the effect) of an enveloping socialist transformation of society (77-82). "The construction of new cities, especially capitals, would stimulate technology, establish networks of communications, integrate vast and backward regions of untapped resources, and organize social relations collectively to maximize the potential benefits of the machine" (Holston 82).

[97] One means of overcoming class division was to be found in the organization of residential space. Most of the population (66%) would live in apartment blocks or *superquadras*. The *superquadras* of all levels of government workers would be practically identical. Costa's design emphasized green and collective space. Each *superquadra* would have its collective facilities like child care, school, recreation, and shops. All *superquadra* residents would have equal access to these facilities and the facilities would promote association across classes and status groups. The abundant green space would provide incentives for outdoor socialization. Four *superquadras* would constitute a neighborhood unit and each neighborhood unit would in turn have an abundance of common facilities (pools, clubs, snack bars, church, cinema, playing fields) to promote neighborhood cohesion and sociability. For an in-depth description of how the plan for the city of Brasília aimed to transform social experience, see James Holston, The Modernist City : An Anthropological Critique of Brasília (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[98] Ibid. 95.

powerful state capable of orchestrating such monumental projects. In other words, the Niemeyer/Costa plan presupposed the very industrialization that developmentalists like Kubitschek were pursuing, and its realization would be the index of those crusaders' success.[99]

By the time Carvalho arrived in Brasília in the late 1960s, the utopian hopes of the city's planners had come to naught. The workers who built the city were largely migrants, many from the northeast. They had come in pursuit of jobs, new opportunities, and the chance to participate in the process of nation building. They lived in poor conditions while the city was being built; they worked without protections; and they had been thwarted by state forces when they tried to organize. When the city was inaugurated, they were excluded from its center, from the very structures they had built. With no place to go, they set up makeshift accommodations in squatter settlements, which only later became legally recognized satellite cities—cities that would become as vicious and deprived as the *favelas* of the coastal metropolises. This was the ultimate paradox of the city of Brasília: its demanding construction brought into being a class of people— impoverished, uneducated, homeless—that its utopian aspirations could not accommodate without abandoning those hopes. In an effort to retain that utopian promise and to defy the reality of the nation, the government had, in the words of Holston, "produced a unique city, but not the one they imagined. Rather, they turned Brasília into an exemplar of social and spatial stratification"; "they created an exaggerated version—almost a caricature—of what they had sought to escape."[100]

> For the planners wanted to make Brasília an exemplar of development by negating the
> conditions of underdevelopment in the city's construction and settlement—not by displacing
> them from coast to the interior, or by transporting them from the big cities to Brasília, or by
> transposing them into another scale. Yet, the very existence of satellite cities, in which
> almost three quarters of the population of the Federal District live, subverts the intention
> profoundly: it reproduces the distinction between privileged center and disprivileged

[99] Ibid. 95-6.
[100] Ibid. 200.

periphery that is one of the most basic features of the rest of urban Brazil, of the underdevelopment Brasília's planners wanted to deny in building their new world.[101]

With the collapse of the utopian pretensions of Brasília's planner and architect came the collapse of the modernist project that the building of Brasília had embodied. Holston has argued that Brasília was a CIAM city; that is, a city built in accordance with the aims of the *Congrés Internationalaux d'Archetecture Moderne* (CIAM), the major international discussion forum for modernist architects and planners from 1928 to the 60s. Moreover, Brasília was designed by the disciples of Le Corbusier, who was the author of CIAM's defining manifesto ("The Athens Charter") and its major figure.[102] Although the Congress managed to unify participants across a broad political spectrum, it did so on the basis of a fundamental consensus on the modernist commitment to radical change and on architecture's capacity to effect such social transformation. Holston explains:

> CIAM modernism links architectural innovation, perceptual change, and social transformation in a utopian mode. Although it considers that innovation develops through a search for architectural forms that 'condense' new types of social experience, it views the relationship between architecture and society as transitive: change the architecture and society will be forced to follow the program of social change that the architecture embodies… As the means to this new society is built form, modernism argues that radical social change can and indeed must occur without social revolution. The utopian sidestep is precisely the challenge and the appeal of the final sentences of Le Corbusier's 1923 manifesto: 'Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided.'[103]

The reality of Brasília undermined the utopianism of CIAM's brand of modernism. The "development inversion"—the idea that development across Brazil would follow from the construction of Brasília—did not pan out.[104] Even Niemeyer eventually conceded the point: "I see now that a social architecture without a

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[101] Ibid. 28.
[102] Ibid. 30-42.
[103] Ibid. 56.
[104] Ibid. 77.

socialist base leads to nothing—that you can't create a class-free oasis in a capitalist society, and that to try ends up being, as Engels said, a paternalistic pose that pretends to be revolutionary."[105]

For any politically engaged modernist artist Niemeyer's words must hit home. His claim implicates all modernists who harbor the conviction that their aesthetic efforts can single-handedly effect political change. Certainly there is something of this conviction in Glauber Rocha and the other Cinema Novo filmmakers. They at least thought that by producing films within an artisanal mode of production they could wrest a realm of freedom from the prison of alienated industrial production.

But the Paraíban school of documentary, of which Carvalho is the most important exemplar, is oddly positioned in relation to Cinema Novo's indisputably modernist project. Carvalho's work is caught between the avant-gardism of the Cinema Novo movement and the poetic realism of Flaherty. Still, the utopianism of his films from *Aruanda* through *Quilombo* is susceptible to critiques like Niemeyer's. After all, they go in search of the utopian kernel within Brazilian reality. Importantly, Carvalho did change course after *Quilombo*. [106] He did not abandon the examination of work, but he did alter his approach. His greatest works of the subsequent years explored Brasilia, its contradictions, and workers' and students' efforts to organize and resist.[107] In other words, Carvalho's major projects take up the development of "a socialist base." *Brasilia Segundo Feldman* (1979) turns to the early years of Brasília's construction and juxtaposes the original footage of an American architect (Eugene Feldman) who visited the city in its final year of construction with the vague story of a massacre of workers. In *Perseghini* (1984), Carvalho investigates the emergence of class-consciousness among Brasilia's construction workers. In the 175-minute two-part film, *Conterrâneos Velhos de Guerra* (1990), Carvalho examines again the lives of the workers who built Brasília: their origins, their efforts to organize, their repression by the state. *Barra 68, sem Perder a Ternura* (2000) focuses on the struggle of students at the

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[105] Niemeyer quoted in Ibid. 93.

[106] The timing here is complicated. While it is true that *Quilombo* was not released until 1975 (after films such as *O Espírito Criador do Povo Brasileiro* [1973], *Itinerário de Niemeyer* [1974] and *Vila Boa de Goyaz* [1974]), it belongs to an earlier period in Carvalho's work. Carvalho first visited Mesquita three years before actually filming *Quilombo*. This would have been 1972. But because he could not get funding for the project initially, production was at a standstill for three years. For an account of the funding difficulties, see Carvalho, Cinema Candango : Matéria De Jornal. Also, although the last film Carvalho made about a rural community, *Mutirão* (1976), touches on the production of carpets, it illustrates a turn toward folklore present in *Quilombo*'s treatment of the "festa do Divino." I would therefore end the cycle of production films (begun with *Aruanda*) with *Quilombo*.

[107] Since 1970, Carvalho made other films not concerned with Brasília including *O Espírito Criador do Povo Brasileiro* (1973), *Vila Boa de Goyaz* (1974), *O Homen de Areia* (1982), *Zum-Zum* (1996), and *O Engenho de Zé Lins* (2000). All of these films concentrate on the work of Brazilian artists, most are bio-pics. Still, these also constitute a significant departure from his production films.

University of Brasília, which culminated in the occupation of the campus by military troops in 1968. How did the failures of Brasília's utopian project affect Carvalho's work?

In *Quilombo*, Carvalho faces the question of utopia squarely one last time before dropping the topic entirely. His works about the northeastern sertão find a utopian element in rural communities. But while *Quilombo* rejects the utopian aspirations of the social architecture of Brasília, it takes no refuge in the community of Mesquita. The utopianism of *Aruanda* is attenuated in *Quilombo*. Mesquita is no utopia of unalienated labor. Surely there are traces of the aesthetic of labor, but the point is made that one cannot create a class-free oasis in a capitalist society. Mesquita is shown to be integrated into a capitalist society in a way Olho D'Agua was not; just as Brasília is not free from the surrounding society, neither is Mesquita. In *Quilombo*, Carvalho has restored a sense of the co-evalness of the quilombo—a space that exists in the same time and place as Brasília. The re-insertion of Mesquita in Brazil's temporal present undermines any argument about the unalienated labor of an isolated, autonomous community.

The threat of urbanization to Mesquita's "way of life" amounts to a loss for its members, but there is no escape. The tide of "development" and modernization is inexorable and wholly destructive. If there was a glimmer of hope for modernization in *Aruanda*, there is none in *Quilombo*. Meanwhile the utopia of labor in *Aruanda* has given way to the realities of land speculation and urbanization in *Quilombo*. The poetry of the production process is soon to be replaced by the prose of political activism. As the story of Mesquita unfolds on screen, the utopian credentials of the quilombo disintegrate. Is this a reflection of a disenchantment with the utopianism of politically ambitious avant-garde aesthetics? Unable to answer the question "who does the "aesthetic of labor" organize and how," Carvalho abandons the aesthetic of labor that he more than anyone elaborated. And with it, he abandons a utopian mode of political filmmaking and exchanges it for an overtly pedagogical one. Carvalho's subsequent films engage political questions directly (e.g. *Conterrâneos Velhos de Guerra*) or provide a kind of cultural education (e.g. *Vila Boa de Goyaz*). He does not abandon his obsession with work or land or nature. After all, he is a consistent, long-suffering socialist—impervious to faddishness. Perhaps this reflects Carvalho's new sense of the proper role of documentary in social transformation and the failures of avant-gardism. At 70 years old, Carvalho describes his career trajectory, and in particular, the

phases of his long-term commitment to the land. He writes, "Later, already having lived through other experiences, we learned that on the land and on her possession depended the survival of those dirty men of clay as well as those clean city folk who exploited their work. From that point on, innocence and poetry were finished."[108]

VII

I began this chapter with a discussion of the contemporary quilombo and its importance to the black movement. I argued that there is nothing natural, nothing inevitable, in the galvanizing role the quilombo has played in the story of black activism. The majority of the chapter was dedicated to remembering the now forgotten filmic use of the quilombo before it became a symbol of the Afro-Brazilian struggle against racism. In *Aruanda* we saw that the utopian aspiration represented by the quilombo had at its core the celebration of unalienated life-activity and not a peculiarly African or Afro-Brazilian culture. This approach to the quilombo has changed significantly in the forty some years following the making of *Aruanda* as the artisanal approach to filmmaking was abandoned and as the structural critique of capitalism was displaced by the ideology of multiculturalism.

Like the black movement, the Cinema Novo movement and the Paraíba school used the quilombo for their own ends. One could argue that these divergent deployments of the quilombo merely reflect the differing ideologies of their employers: the Marxists converted the quilombo into a symbol of the unalienated labor of a future socialist society, while the black movement used it to valorize the egalitarian credentials of a distinctly Afro-Brazilian culture. One might say that the Marxists did what Marxists have always done: buried race in a narrative about class. And the black movement resisted this master narrative, insisting on the racial specificity of the quilombo. Still, there is convergence here as well. After all, the claims of both sides depended on the utopian character of the quilombo. On the one side there is the utopianism of non-exploitative labor practices and on the other side the utopianism of transplanted cultural practices. But this

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[108] Vladimir Carvalho, "Terra--Substantivo Concreto," <u>Vladimir 70: Mostra Retrospectiva Em Homenagem Aos 70 Anos Do Cineasta Vladimir Carvalho</u>, ed. Carmen and Caputo Moretzsohn, Gioconda (Brasília: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2005) 12. (translation mine)

convergence around the theme of utopia should attract our attention. First, because it reflects a peculiar Brazilian commitment to utopian discourses. And second, because it depends on a backwards gaze. As both sides tried to imagine a future radically different from the present, they found inspiration in a vaguely adumbrated past. And in order for this quilombo-past to work for their purposes, the quilombo as such had to be cast as isolated and autonomous—a non-exploitative oasis in the middle of colonial society before the Republic and a class-free oasis in the middle of capitalist society in the 20th century. The quilombo was thereby taken out of place and time; it was denied coevalness and this perhaps enabled it to function as an invented tradition.

4.0   *BUSH MAMA*: A CULTURALIST HEIR OF LATIN AMERICAN THIRD CINEMA

I

One difficult feature of writing about explicitly political films is that they often seem deceptively straightforward. Their didactic messages seem on the surface of the text, available for easy digestion. The referent of the representation—whether history, revolution, injustice, armed struggle—is always a real show-stealer as it distracts from the film's textuality. These films give us a chance to finally talk about the world—the Algerian war of independence, the coup that ousted Allende, the immiseration of the Brazilian backlands--and not its mediations. And perhaps the more committed we are to transforming the world outside representation, the more satisfied we are to grasp coherent messages—to read with the grain, to eschew symptomatic analysis—and declare those messages to the skies. For if we have any hope for media's capacity to affect the world, we must be heartened by didactic messages that reach their targets and transform consciousness, as promised. I think this must be what explains the critical reception of Haile Gerima's 1976 *Bush Mama.*

One could hardly say that this film has been ignored by Film Studies. Most accounts of political cinema in the United States cite it as one of the most important independent films produced in this country. Within scholarship on African-American cinema, *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep* are indisputably the summit of black independent filmmaking, the yardstick by which subsequent films have been judged and found

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politically and aesthetically wanting.[1] While *Bush Mama* has been often mentioned in the critical literature, it

has not been frequently closely analyzed.[2] And yet the film does not say everything about itself; it is not so

straightforward as it seems. Besides offering ample material for the formal analysis of complex sound editing

and narration techniques, *Bush Mama*'s politics are not nearly as coherent as has been presumed. Perhaps this

is unsurprising considering the complexity of the ideological matrix in which the Los Angeles School of Black

Filmmakers were situating themselves—somewhere between Third Cinema, Black Nationalism, the Black

Arts Movement, and the Third World Liberation discourses of Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.[3] While

scholars like Ntongela Masilela have acknowledged that "members of the film movement never subscribed to

a single, hegemonic ideology,"[4] that "a dialectical tension between the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts

Movement and the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party was central to the development of

the members of the group,"[5] little effort has been expended in tracking the expressions of these ideological

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[1] See Mark Reid, <u>Redefining Black Film</u> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 113; Ed Guerrero, <u>Framing Blackness : The African American Image in Film</u>, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," <u>Black American Cinema</u>, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[2] The exceptions are chapters in recent books by Frank Wilderson and Cynthia Young and an older piece by Mike Murashige. See Frank B. Wilderson III, <u>Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms</u> (Duke University Press, forthcoming); Cynthia Ann Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u> (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Mike Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," <u>Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video</u>, ed. Valerie Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

[3] Cynthia Young, following Masilela, an important commentator on the L.A. School, discusses the importance of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Homecoming* to the group's thinking. Young argues that Ngugi offered a corrective to Fanon: "Ngugi manages to break out of Fanon's all or nothing logjam…. Ngugi recognizes the dynamic exchange between indigenous cultural traditions and colonialism without altogether dismissing the import of cultural recovery and excavation" (231). The conflict Young points to owes to Fanon's greater skepticism toward "cultural recovery and excavation," a theme that will be addressed in more detail below. In what follows, I will not be discussing Ngugi's influence on the L.A. School. Not only is his corrective ultimately a minor one, but also I think Young overstates his influence relative to Fanon's. Even Masilela only mentions Ngugi in one sentence (in the midst of a list of other influential texts including *American Hunger* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*): "Also prized was Ngugi wa Thiongo'o's *Homecoming*, which applied African Marxism, particular that of Fanon, to African cultural struggles, and opened new considerations of the revolutionary possibilities of language" (109). See Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u>; Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," <u>Black American Cinema</u>, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[4] Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," 109.

[5] Ibid. The conflict between cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism has been frequently commented on in the literature. One account of the distinction between these two nationalisms has it that "a major defining characteristic of revolutionary nationalism… [is] an open engagement with Marxism (And generally Leninism), particularly with respect to political economy, Leninist notions of imperialism, and often Communist formulations of the "national question" (Smethurst 16). Meanwhile, cultural nationalism, according to Smethurst, is "an insider ideological stance (or grouping of related stances) that casts a specific 'minority' group as a nation with a particular, if often disputed national culture….It also often entails some notion of the development or recovery of a true 'national' culture that is linked to an already existing folk or popular culture" (Smethurst 17). See James Edward Smethurst, <u>The Black Arts Movement : Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s</u>, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). The starkest expression of the conflict between revolutionary and cultural nationalism comes from Huey P. Newton in a 1968 interview: "There are two kinds of nationalism, revolutionary nationalism and reactionary nationalism. Revolutionary nationalism is first dependent upon a people's revolution with the end goal being the people in power. Therefore to be a revolutionary nationalist you would by necessity have to be a socialist. It you are a reactionary nationalist you are not a socialist and your end goal is the oppression of the people. Cultural

conflicts in the films themselves. It bears mention that no commentators on *Bush Mama* have tried to pin down its political allegiances, much less have they remarked on the film's contradictory impulses. The film contains its own puzzles, which, though they remain unassembled, map the terrain of future black political filmmaking.[6]

In this chapter, I hope to accomplish two tasks. The first is to reconstruct the ideological links between Latin American Third Cinema and the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers (also L.A. School). This is necessarily not a project that owes to new historical, biographical, testimonial research that will allow me to say for certain what Burnett (*Killer of Sheep*) learned from Nelson Pereira dos Santos or Haile Gerima from Tómas Gutierrez Alea. Rather, it is a reconstructive effort in the sense that I will take the well-documented fact of influence and try to specify—using the works (both theory and practice) themselves as my sources—the conjunctures and disjunctures between these expressions of political cinema. My intention is not to police the boundaries of the term "Third Cinema," but to add some precision to the oft-repeated, vague assertion that the L.A. School was influenced by Third Cinema. How was it influenced? What was adapted? Rejected? Reworked?

The second task of this chapter is a close reading of *Bush Mama*. Like so many Third Cinema films, *Bush Mama* is a "coming to consciousness" film. That is, it is a film that features a sympathetic character that

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nationalism, or pork chop nationalism, as I sometimes call it, is basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective. It seems to be a reaction instead of responding to political oppression. The cultural nationalists are concerned with returning to the old African culture and thereby regaining their identity and freedom. In other words, they feel that the African culture will automatically bring political freedom. Many times cultural nationalists fall into line as reactionary nationalists. Papa Doc in Haiti is an excellent example of reactionary nationalism. He oppresses the people but he does promote the African culture. He's against anything other than black, which on the surface seems very good, but for him it is only to mislead the people. He merely kicked out the racists and replaced them with himself as the oppressor. Many of the nationalists in this country seem to desire the same ends. The Black Panther Party, which is a revolutionary group of black people, realizes that we have to have an identity. We have to realize our black heritage in order to give us strength to move on and progress. But as far as returning to the old African culture, it's unnecessary and it's not advantageous in many respects. We believe that culture itself will not liberate us. We're going to need some stronger stuff" (Philip Sheldon Foner and Clayborne Carson, eds., The Black Panthers Speak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002). Eddie Glaude has noted that even in this powerful eschewal of cultural nationalism there is an "implicit acknowledgement of the politics of transvaluation" (20) or the politics of revolutionizing the mind along cultural nationalist lines (e.g. "We have to realize our black heritage in order to give us strength to move on and progress.") as means to an end. See Eddie S. Glaude, "Introduction: Black Power Revisited," Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Recent works on the Black Arts Movement and Ron Karenga's US organization have cast doubt on the viability of this dichotomy between revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism, pointing out that the Black Arts Movement and the US organization pursued politics and economic policies simultaneously with cultural ventures. See Scot Brown, Fighting for Us : Maulana Karenga, the Us Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement : Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. For another perspective on the roots of cultural versus revolutionary nationalism, see Michael C. Dawson, Black Visions : The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies (Chicago, Ill. ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[6] There is a case to be made for *Bush Mama*'s direct and indirect links with Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Bamboozled* (2000).

undergoes a dramatic political reeducation through the course of the film. But while the telos of that consciousness-raising has been taken to be unequivocally armed struggle, I will argue in what follows that there is a tension between the film's embrace of revolutionary violence and its cultural nationalism, signaled by the prominence of the main character's hair piece,[7] which functions as a synecdoche for the yoke of Euro-American cultural imposition that must be thrown off. This tension reflects the film's odd positioning between the widely recognized ur-text of the L.A. School, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and the rarely mentioned *Black Skin, White Masks* that haunts the film's puzzles.

As part of my close reading of *Bush Mama*, I will contrast it with the other seminal film of the L.A. School, *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977), as a way of shedding light on the peculiar approach *Bush Mama* takes to consciousness. Consciousness has been a central concern of political filmmaking. The ways in which films handle popular political consciousness—whether they treat it, as *Bush Mama* does, as something that is passed down by wise men; or whether they treat it, as *Killer of Sheep* does, as something already present, incipient, basically shaped by the material conditions of life—is crucial for specifying political programs. It is common in the literature to trace the differences between these two films back to the Marxist revolutionary internationalism of the African (Haile Gerima), and the cultural nationalism of the African-American (Charles Burnett); in other words, to the difference between the Fanon of Third World Liberation and the Amiri

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[7] In what follows, I will subscribe to Jennifer Jordan's understanding of cultural nationalism in "Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry." Jordan identifies two strains within 1960s cultural nationalism: the first, most commonly associated with the phrase, refers to an Africanist (also Pan-African) strain that looks to Africa (or often to an mythical Africa) for cultural inspiration. The second strain gains inspiration from the culture produced by black people in America. For Jordan, both strains share a conservative, preservationist impulse: "This glorification of the cultural attainments of Afro-Americans tends to be a conservative force which grows out of a desire to see the Black man remain a distinct entity in the plastic and antihuman world called America" (31). Larry Neal, one of the architects of the Black Arts Movement, revealing this preservationist impulse, railed against the idea, unavoidable in Fanon, that a revolutionary change in society would usher in new, welcome cultural forms that do not carry within them the baggage of the colonized man. For Neal, without those past cultural forms, the reason for struggle loses it meaning: "A revolution without a culture would destroy the very thing that now unites us, the very things we are trying to save along with our lives. That is the feeling and love-sense of the blues and other forms of Black music [….] John Coltrane's music must unquestioningly be a part of any future revolutionary society" (quoted in Jordan, 31). For Jordan, this backward glance is an essential and controversial feature of cultural nationalism for, she writes, "[T]his desire [to see the Black man remain a distinct entity] means the attempted maintenance of qualities and elements of Black life which are destructive to Black people or, at least, supportive of the system that oppresses them. From the beginning the religion, the music, the dance provided solace for Black people, channeled energy that could have been used in revolt" (31). Other cultural nationalists avoided this critique by turning their backward gaze toward Africa, thus distancing themselves from the stigma of the scorned African American slave. Ron Karenga and Amiri Baraka followed this route. For more on 1960s cultural nationalism, see Jennifer Jordan, "Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry," <u>Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s</u>, ed. Adolph L. Reed (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). For more on the divide within the Black Arts Movement between those (mostly in the Northeast) who defended an autochthonous non-commercial black popular culture based in residual folk practices (a "popular" avant-garde) and those like Haki Madhubuti who embraced an alternative avant-garde black culture, see Smethurst, <u>The Black Arts Movement : Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s</u>.

Baraka of the Black Arts Movement.[8] My reading of *Bush Mama*, by bringing to light the neglected cultural nationalism at the core of the film, will recast the difference in terms of the films' approach to popular consciousness.

Despite their differences, the films share a commitment to the redemption of the black image. And this is a commitment that will ultimately distinguish the L.A. School from its Cuban Third Cinema counterparts and signal its departure from Fanon. Using the paradigmatic film, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, another film singularly concerned with consciousness, I will argue that the L.A. School creatively misappropriated the insights of Cuban Third Cinema, which was not ultimately infected with an archaeological spirit as far as pre-revolutionary culture was concerned. Cuban Cinema's commonly acknowledged turn to history—easily confused with a turn to a native past--had less to do with recuperating a past, native national culture as a fount of self-respect, and more to do with providing a teleological reading of Cuban historical progression that could ground the legitimacy of the Guevarian revolution.

II

The influence of Third Cinema on political filmmaking in the United States was for the most part negligible, except for its impact on a group of black filmmakers working in Los Angeles in the 1970s.[9] The Los Angeles

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[8] In the words of one of its key figures, Larry Neal, the Black Arts Movement "is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (Neal 29). According to Smethurst, both movements shared the common belief that African Americans constitute a separate nation with the right to self-determination. Furthermore, most tendencies within both movements, unlike the Garveyism that inspired them, emphasized the "need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures" (15). While this focus on culture was a feature of the Left, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Harlem Renaissance, Smethurst asserts that "never before…was such artistic activity made an absolute political priority and linked to the equally emphatic drive for the development and exercise of black self-determination within a large black political-cultural movement in the United States (16). The Black Arts Movement was a loose grouping of artists from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s based all across the United States and working in a variety of media, especially poetry. Its most noted activists include, besides Neal, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Haki Madhubuti, Askia Touré, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, A.B. Spellman, James Stewart. See Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement : Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s; Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," The Drama Review 12.4 (1968); David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics," American Literary History 3.1 (1991).

[9] The impact of Third Cinema on Chicano and Asian American filmmakers remains to be examined. Chon Noriega has summarized the history of the Ethno-Communications Program (1969-1973) established at UCLA by film professor Eliseo Taylor that successfully recruited and trained minority filmmakers in the 1970s, the very folks who would go on to found Public Broadcasting Consortia (including Latino Consortium and the National American Telecommunications Association) as well as media arts centers like Visual Communications. These minority students affiliated with the Ethno-Communications program must have also been exposed to Third Cinema theory and practice. Yet, while we do not know much about how and whether Third Cinema influenced their future practice, scholars unanimously mention Third Cinema (especially Cuban and Brazilian) in discussions of the L.A. School. This discrepancy should be further investigated. For an account of minority film training at UCLA in the 1970s, see Chon A. Noriega, Shot in America : Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

School of Black Filmmakers, as the group was subsequently called, looms large in the history of independent black filmmaking in the United States. It was made up primarily of students attending UCLA. Many in the first wave of the movement—which included Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Ben Caldwell, Larry Clark, John Reir, Pamela Jones, Jamaa Fanaka—had not directly entered the Theater Arts Department (the film program), but instead got their start in a new Ethno-communications Program, which had been established in 1969 to diversify filmmaking at UCLA. Only after the efforts of student activists in Media Urban Crisis Committee ("Mother Muccers") did the Theater Arts Department institute an affirmative action policy that would effectively diversify the department by reserving 25% of graduate and undergraduate places for minority students.[10] The second wave of the L.A. School of Black Filmmakers included Billie Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin, Bernard Nichols, Barbara McCullough, Carroll Parott Blue, Zeinabu Irene Davis, Melvonna Ballenger, O. Funmilayo Makarah, Jacqueline Frazier, and Julie Dash.[11] This loose grouping also included non-filmmaker participants like the writer Toni Cade Bambara, the actress Barbara O. Jones, the doctoral students Teshome Gabriel and Ntongela Masilela.[12]

UCLA in the 1970s was a good place for politically-minded filmmakers. Unlike, for example, the USC program, which was also significantly more expensive,[13] the UCLA department was oriented toward individual authorship: although students crewed on one another's films, each student maintained artistic control over his or her own work; the finished films were the property of the students who produced them and thus could be distributed and exhibited by them in any way they saw fit. In addition, UCLA provided a lively intellectual environment that allowed students to engage theoretically with alternatives to Hollywood cinema.[14]

The alternative to Hollywood cinema that they most directly engaged with was the work of Third Cinema filmmakers and theorists, especially those from Latin America. The Los Angeles School of Black

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[10] Ibid.

[11] David E. James, The Most Typical Avant-Garde : History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). See also Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers."

[12] Young, Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left.

[13] This was a crucial factor in Charles Burnett's decision to attend UCLA for graduate school. He was from a working class family in Watts, and he simple could not afford UCS enrollment fees. Director commentary on DVD.

[14] James, The Most Typical Avant-Garde : History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles 327.

Filmmakers was deeply affected by their encounter with films from the Third World. In 1974, Teshome Gabriel, who was at the time a Ph.D. student but who would later be widely credited with introducing Third Cinema theory to Euro-American film scholars with the publication of his 1982 dissertation, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetic of Liberation*,[15] organized a weekly Third World Film Club. Through 1976, the club screened the work of radical filmmakers mostly from Latin American and Africa including Miguel Littín (Chile), Jorge Sanjinés (Bolivia), Solanas and Getino (Argentina), and Ousmane Sembene (Senegal).[16] The Los Angeles School was especially influenced by the classics of Cuban and Brazilian cinema including *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomas Gutierrez Alea, 1968), *Lucía* (Humberto Solás, 1968), *The Last Supper* (Gutierrez Alea, 1976), and the work of Nelson Pereira dos Santos (Brazil) and Glauber Rocha (Brazil), who, invited by Gabriel, visited UCLA in 1978.

The L.A. School's identification with the Third Cinema project was premised on three common interests: a) national culture; b) "imperfect cinema"; and c) an independent mode of film production.

National Culture

In the work of Third Cinema filmmakers, the Los Angeles School saw a rigorous effort to think through the relationship between cinema and national culture.[17] But that this problem (of the relationship between cinema and national culture) seemed relevant to the Los Angeles School reflects the extent to which these filmmakers understood the situation of black people in the United States to be analogous to the situation of the 'natives' of European colonies. In other words, it reflects the degree to which the framework of internal colonialism had become hegemonic in this circle; this framework was an autochthonous contribution, but one that allowed the L.A. School to directly engage with the work of those enmeshed in the decolonization debates.

The theory of internal colonialism was first introduced by Harold Cruse in his 1962 essay "Behind the Black Power Slogan." It was elaborated by Kenneth Clark's 1964 work *Youth in the Ghetto*, and it was

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[15] Teshome Gabriel's importance should not be underestimated. In a recent assessment of Third Cinema, Anthony Guneratne refers to the appearance of Gabriel's book as a "watershed," "the first work in English to undertake a comprehensive exposition of Third Cinema theory in relation to the social and political situations it addressed." See Guneratne and Dissanayake, Rethinking Third Cinema.

[16] Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers."

[17] Ibid.

popularized by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their 1967 book, *Black Power*,[18] but it had something of a pre-history in the Communist Party. In 1928, during the Comintern's Sixth Congress, it was decided that the communists' proper stance toward the "Negro National Question" should be to pursue a two-part strategy. In the South—in the so-called black belt—the Community Party, recognizing black people as an oppressed nation-within-a-nation, would advocate black self-determination. The liberation of the "black-belt" came to be seen as a matter of national liberation, a general principle long-embraced by both Lenin and Stalin. This strategy was known as the "'black belt' thesis." The strategy in the industrial North would be quite different: it would remain roughly the same as it had been pre-1928 with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) continuing to pursue inter-racial alliances and rejecting nationalist and separatist organizing initiatives, which, in practice, included hostile attacks on Marcus Garvey and others. This two-part regional strategy was pursued into the mid-1930s, then quietly abandoned until it was formally disavowed in 1958.[19] The "black-belt" thesis developed by the Comintern in the early 1930s was certainly not the first instance in which African Americans had been seen as a distinct nationality: there was a long history of this in African-American thought. Still, this was the first time that the "African-American nation" had been understood to exist in a colonial relation to the American state. This new colonial analogy, which was resuscitated in the 1960s by Harold Cruse,[20] who had himself spent years in the CPUSA, would have distinct consequences for black nationalist activists and artists in the years to come.

The theory of internal colonialism developed in the 1960s has it that the oppression of minorities in the United States—in particular, African Americans—should be understood on the model of European colonialism. While it is true that in the United States obvious differences apply—there is no geographical

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[18] Bob Blauner, <u>Still the Big News : Racial Oppression in America</u>, Rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

[19] See Dawson, <u>Black Visions : The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies</u>; Stephen Howe, <u>Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes</u> (London: Verso, 1998).

[20] Harold Cruse, who was trained by the Communist Party but had disavowed that affiliation, delivered a paper at the 1962 Socialist Scholars' Conference in which he tried to map a theoretical path that would allow Marxists to support the Black Power movement. He argues counter-intuitively that the Black Power movement is pro-capitalist, "neo-Booker T-ism," and on that basis, not despite it, deserves the support of socialists. For Cruse, Black Power represents the completion of the bourgeois national revolution that began in 1900 and was never completed in the black community. Quoting Lenin and Stalin, Cruse defends the importance of a bourgeois national revolution in underdeveloped places in order to develop the forces of production. He, thus, assumes that the black community is a kind of underdeveloped nation (suffering from too little capitalism), a domestic colony, in need of a bourgeois revolution that will empower black elites who will then undertake the task of developing the community. Harold Cruse, <u>Rebellion or Revolution?</u>, 1st University of Minnesota Press ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

distance between the mother country and the colony; at issue is the domination of the minority by a majority (not the case in most colonies); the land was originally settled by Native Americans, not African Americans, so that the problem is only partially one of the oppression of the original inhabitants. Still, the proponents of the domestic colonialism explanatory framework argue that slavery and European colonialism emerge from the same historical circumstances, that the former funded and made possible the latter. Furthermore, they maintain that European colonialism and the internal colonization of African Americans in the United States share four basic features. First, colonialism and internal colonialism, unlike ethnic immigration, both began with "forced, involuntary entry."[21] Second, colonial domination has intentionally destructive effects on the culture of colonized people. Third, the lives of colonized people are administered by dominant institutions including the police, the school system, the welfare system, etc. Finally, racist ideology tries to justify the differences in power, control, and autonomy between the colonized and the dominant group.[22] The theory of internal colonialism, unlike the "black belt" thesis of a generation earlier, depends for its cogency on the realities of the black urban ghetto, for the black ghetto is a literal figuration of the internal colony, a colony within the "mother country"—a semi-bounded space of powerlessness, permanence, containment, dependence, a space that is economically and politically controlled from the "outside." Indeed, the most seminal films of the L.A. School work with this unit of analysis—the ghetto or slum--which functions in the films very much like its own, separate nation.

The theory of internal colonialism was simultaneously used by Latin American commentators in the 1960s to explain the peculiar realities of recent postcolonial polities in Latin America in which the end of colonialism brings few changes for culturally heterogeneous, non-dominant groups—groups that end up having traded in a foreign exploiter for a native one. The advantage of such an explanatory model for the cases of Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, for example, is that it can bring attention to intra-national fissures that have their basis, not primarily in class relations or regional relations (city versus country), but rather in race/ethnic relations. The concept of internal colonialism can harness the historical experience of

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[21] Blauner, <u>Still the Big News : Racial Oppression in America</u> 66.
[22] Ibid.

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colonialism to the contemporary experience of racism; in effect, it makes visible the inextricable link between these phenomena and their common fount.[23]

The L.A. School's link to Latin American Third Cinema in particular, via the theory of internal colonialism, was not a perfect one. After all, only the work of Jorge Sanjinés is really concerned with the realities of the indigenous internal colony, in other words, the intra-national divisions within the nation-state. For most of the other filmmakers, the fissure that still mattered was the one between the First World and the Third. The national culture being forged in Cuba, in Brazil, in Argentina coincided with the actual territorial boundaries of the nation-state unlike in the case of the black internal colony of the United States. In Latin America, national culture's belated decolonization (over 100 years after independence) owed mostly to the lingering "psychic" reverberations of the colonial enterprise. For the L.A. School, the extent of colonization was ambiguous. While it was certainly the case that these filmmakers were concerned with a black national culture, many were more concerned with the realities of day-to-day semi-colonial structures like schools, welfare, police, city political machines, etc.

Imperfect Cinema

It is widely thought that the L.A. School was especially influenced by the Cuban filmmaker and theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa's 1969 manifesto, "For an Imperfect Cinema."[24] Espinosa's manifesto makes a persuasive arguemnt for the primacy of a "committed cinema," that is, of an explicitly political cinema. But Espinosa makes the case not by adopting a moralistic frame (e.g. filmmakers should use the medium as a propaganda

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[23] Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, "Internal Colonialism and National Development," <u>Studies in Comparative International Development</u> 1.4 (1965). In 1965, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, applied the notion of "internal colonialism," an intra-national phenomenon, to postcolonial polities. In the understanding of internal colonialism that Casanova arrives at, the "structure of social relations based on domination and exploitation" takes place "among culturally heterogeneous, distinct groups" (33). In the Mexican case, internal colonialism would describe the situation of 25% of the Indian population that is exploited by the majority mestizo population. While neither group is foreign, both are in a sense "native," the relationship is colonial to the extent that the "native" category is culturally heterogeneous. Thus, Casanova is careful to distinguish "internal colonialism" from other kinds of stratification based solely in class relations or in regional differences (i.e. town versus country).

[24] See Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u>; Tommy L. Lott, "Aesthetics and Politics in Contemporary Black Film Theory," <u>Film Theory Adn Philosophy</u>, ed. Richard and Murray Smith Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Paula J. Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse," <u>Wide Angle</u> 21.4 (1999).

tool for changing the world) that follows from needs external to the art form.[25] Instead, he orients himself in relation to art, its function and place in society, and its trajectory. Perhaps it is for this reason that he frequently reminds the reader that his intervention is "not merely an ethical matter, but also aesthetic."[26] For Espinosa, the practice of art belongs to everyone; properly understood, it is part of our life activity and he thereby uses folk art as his model for both past and future. That the practice of art in most societies (including Cuba's) is relegated to an elite few, that it is subsumed in the division of labor (i.e. that it is treated as a job just like teaching or garbage collecting) suggests the extent to which society misunderstands its distinctive character. Espinosa aims to show that the commitment to the elite category of the "artist"—in other words, the commitment to a division of labor in which some produce art and others consume it—goes hand in hand with the pursuit "*ad eternum* [of] the 'artistic quality' of the work" as if 'artistic quality' was a legitimate telos for the practice of art in society.[27] By contrast, Espinosa argues that "[t]he new outlook for artistic culture is no longer that everyone must share the taste of a few, but that all can be creators of that culture. Art has always been a universal necessity; what it has not been is an option for all under equal conditions."[28] Thus, Espinosa defends the ultimate aim of the democratization of access to the means of artistic production and of the practice of art in general (which would also require leisure time as well as

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[25] I expend quite a lot of space here on Espinosa's argument because it is often misunderstood. There have been several theoretical and semi-theoretical justifications for a political practice and criticism of art that, unlike Espinosa's, oppose strictly aesthetic and/or formalist criteria. Clyde Taylor, for example, rejects aesthetic criteria altogether, defending a "postesthetics" practice in which "the relation of a sign to the discourses of power and resistance becomes primary" (82). Taylor distinguishes this "postesthetics" orientation from the "ethno-aesthetics" orientation embraced by the Black Arts Movement. "Ethno-aesthetics" aims to supplement western aesthetic criteria with non-western aesthetic criteria (i.e. the Black Aesthetic)—witness the formalist celebration of non-Western practices like "oral narrative, folklore and griotology" (81). Both postesthetics and ethno-aesthetics imply a critique of the injunction: art for art's sake. While Espinosa doubts the universality of Western aesthetic taste as we have come to know it, he does not dispense altogether with a universalist embrace of a singular good and beautiful as do the 'Ethno-aestheticians,' for whom the good and the beautiful is relative. Nor does Espinosa reject the category of aesthetics as Taylor seems to. Rather, Espinosa argues that were the function of art in society properly understood, all would see that the future realization of this proper function (which is not so far from classical aesthetics: the issue is that classical aesthetics treat non-ideal conditions as if they were indeed ideal) demands a political practice of art in the present. From Espinosa's perspective, Taylor's account brings considerations from outside the realm of art—ethical/political/moral considerations—to bear on the question of a political practice of art. Such considerations would have little sway with those committed to aesthetics, meanwhile Espinosa's argument would force the art community to rethink its operative assumptions about the nature and function of art. Perhaps he would prefer to slightly amend the injunction "art for art's sake" to "art for art's sake, for the sake of human flourishing." For the Taylor view, see Clyde Taylor, "We Don't Need Another Hero: Anti-Theses on Aesthetics," Blackframes: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema, ed. Mbye B. Cham (Cambride, MA: MIT Press, 1988); Clyde Taylor, The Mask of Art : Breaking the Aesthetic Contract--Film and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[26] Julio García Espinosa, "Meditation on Imperfect Cinema...Fifteen Years Later," New Latin American Cinema, Vol. One: Theory , Practices and Transcontinental Articulations, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) 84.

[27] Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," New Latin American Cinema, Vol. One: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) 76.

[28] Ibid.

access). In this struggle to abolish the category of the elite "artist," Espinosa advocates a "partisan," "committed," "imperfect" art practice whose purpose would be to help bring the actual practice of art in society in line with the proper function of art of in society, which is uncommitted, free, open, and resolutely heterogeneous and individual.

The "imperfect cinema" is not an end in itself; properly understood, it works towards it own dissolution. "Today art must assimilate its quota of work [i.e. committed activity] so that work can assimilate its quota of art."[29] While Espinosa's essay is often reduced to an argument for the legitimacy, celebration, valorization of a cinema of low production values,—in fact, underdeveloped means of production, grainy images, black and white film stock, etc. are not ends in themselves either.[30] The use of primitive equipment and technique is desirable only to the extent that it allows more people access to the means of film production; it lowers the bar for participation.[31] But access alone is not the objective, at least not before the full democratization of art. And in order for us to understand this point (i.e. the significance of democratizing the practice of art), we need a different understanding of art's function in society. If the telos of artistic production is the pursuit of transcendent "artistic quality" or "the beautiful," Espinosa's prescription will make no sense to us: surely democratization alone does not bring "artistic quality." But if we grant his reorientation of the question of the function of art in society, then we can begin to elaborate a different set of

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[29] Ibid. 79.

[30] It would be interesting to compare Espinosa's essay to Glauber Rocha's "An Esthetic of Hunger," which also defends low production values but for different reasons. The essays have often been treated as distinct national expressions of the same sentiment. I actually do not think this is true.

[31] In 1985, Espinosa published "Meditations on Imperfect Cinema…Fifteen Years Later." In this essay he acknowledges that the argument of the 1969 essay had been frequently misconstrued. Many people thought that he was advocating the making of bad films. In his corrective, though, Espinosa does not exactly clear things up. This second attempt is rife with ambiguity as Espinosa concedes that he intentionally left the issue of bad filmmaking open and that he was a bit defensive because of the sense of impotence among Cuban filmmakers lacking in technical and other resources. The real puzzle of this second account comes when Espinosa says that the basis of the question of bad filmmaking was the following dilemma: "either you tried to make an artistic cinema, estranged from a public which had the potential for substantially changing reality, and these films would then be sent to the cinémathèques and become part of an anthology of great films; or you made films which posed, let's say, the denunciation of a reality disguised by aesthetics, and which finally spoke to our exposed innards" (83). Surely while "For an Imperfect Cinema" rhetorically supports the second path, the reception of Cuban cinema abroad suggests that it actually fits comfortably into the category of "artistic cinema." Where does this reality leave Espinosa? Defending "bad filmmaking" which is "important from a cultural point of view" but practicing internationally recognized "good filmmaking"? This paradox should be further explored particularly because the explicit occasion for the writing of "For an Imperfect Cinema" was concern over the attention Latin American cinema was garnering in Europe and the temptation that this attention represented—namely, the temptation to transform Cuban cinema into a cinema of quality, a "perfect" cinema. The internal critique of filmmaking in Cuba present in the first essay is lost in the second where the struggle against "artistic cinema" appears to have been won. But it could not have looked that way in 1985 given the canonization of the works of Espinosa himself, Tomás Gutierrez Alea, and Humberto Solás. See Espinosa, "Meditation on Imperfect Cinema...Fifteen Years Later."

criteria for judging and evaluating art, criteria that will not preclude work lacking high production values. And the criteria for evaluating this "imperfect cinema"—this cinema of the pre-democratized present—are political criteria. Espinosa writes, "Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in predetermined taste, and much less in "good taste." It is not quality which it seeks in an artist's work. The only thing it is interested in is how an artist responds to the following question: What are you doing in order to overcome the barrier of the 'cultured' elite audience which up to now has conditioned the form of your work?"[32]

Independent Filmmaking

The L.A. School of Black filmmakers were putting into practice Espinosa's prescriptions. On the one hand, they were living examples of the democratization of access to the means of film production and their films, like their Cuban and Brazilian counterparts, reflected the relative poverty of their resources. For their minimal student fees, they had access to filmmaking equipment and to the advice of teachers and peers. Film school was so conducive to independent filmmaking that Charles Burnett famously did not want to graduate.[33] On the other hand, in the eyes of U.S. scholars of black cinema, their distance from industrial Hollywood cinema would earn them the label of "independent black filmmakers." This descriptor was certainly not one adapted from the Latin American context, where there was not a viable industrial cinema on the Hollywood model and where the films from Brazil and Cuba that were being so avidly consumed by the UCLA set were for the most part funded by state institutions. All the films produced by Cuba's state-funded *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) since 1960 have been, in some counter intuitive sense, as far as most people are concerned, independent Cuban films—that is, independent from Hollywood.

In the U.S. context though, this "independent" label, especially when it came to black film, brought with it a set of unacknowledged commitments. Those involved in debates about independent black filmmaking—what is it, who makes it, what is it committed to—all can agree on at least one thing: that the L.A. School of Black filmmakers is the quintessence of independent black filmmaking in the United States.

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[32] Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema."
[33] DVD commentary.

But they disagree on a lot more. Some scholars like Mark Reid who strictly defines independence in relation to sources of funding exclude Oscar Micheaux and Melvin Van Peebles from the category because these filmmakers received some studio funding. But still for Reid the distinction between independent and studio production is not merely a factual distinction. Studio affiliation casts a cloud over a film's aesthetics and politics such that any studio involvement for Reid automatically implies minstrel representation.[34] If Reid argues to exclude films and filmmakers from the vaunted "independent" category but makes no explicit claims about the politics of the independents, Ed Guerrero assimilates the fact of independent financing, or in his locution "guerilla cinema financing," to certain political commitments so that the category of independent becomes coterminous with politically liberatory film.[35] Manthia Diawara, also concerned with delineating the category of independent, includes studio-supported Blaxploitation films like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Ganja and Hess* (1973) because they are aesthetically and politically radical—radical in "their formal positioning of Black characters and Black cultures at the center of the screen, creating a sense of defamiliarization of the classical film language."[36] What do we learn from this disagreement? My point is merely that the "independent" label cannot seem to shake the expectation that films fitting under its rubric bear counter-hegemonic politics (as well as aesthetics). At issue in this expectation is the lingering question of the relation between a mode of film production and the text it produces—also an important theme in Third Cinema polemics, though secondary for the simple reason that there was no real local industrial competition.

Some have argued that the confusion over the politically pregnant label "independent" in contemporary black film scholarship betrays another problematic trend in the critics' approach to black film. In a provocative essay, scholar Tommy L. Lott traces a pervasive practice of contemporary black film criticism—namely, "evaluating a black film's aesthetic achievement primarily by reference to its political ideology"—back to the commitments of the L.A. School, which in turn had been adapted, or at least, deeply influenced to his mind by Espinosa's manifesto.[37] These L.A. School commitments entailed new criteria of

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[34] See Lott, "Aesthetics and Politics in Contemporary Black Film Theory," 284-5.
[35] Ibid. 286.
[36] Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," 10.
[37] Lott, "Aesthetics and Politics in Contemporary Black Film Theory," 282.

judgment that neither fetishized technical achievement nor that bracketed politics. Disapproving of politicized criticism practice, Lott defends a more pluralist, eclectic approach to black film criticism, one that does not "internalize" or "functionalize" the new poetics of Third Cinema: "Different films display strengths and weaknesses with regard to their political orientation, aesthetic orientation, or their reception by a black audience. Hence, there is no single fixed criteria that can be generally used to appraise black films. Audience reception is a strength of mainstream black films and political and aesthetic orientation are strengths of Third Cinema, but in either case both political and aesthetic criteria come into play."[38] Lott would sever evaluation from politics and politics from mode of filmic production. That the three were sutured together is what concerns us here, for Lott is perhaps right that the presumption of the entire spectrum of black film criticism is that black film should do something more, something other than industrial cinema—that it had a part to play in black liberation. The suppressed premise that Lott exposes and tries to challenge has it that black film should be political and that it is right and good that it should be judged by that yardstick.[39]

But if Lott's analysis of the black film scholarship scene is right, there remains a question about what sort of political commitments count as liberatory. It turns out that there is substantial ambiguity on this question, which may perhaps explain the schizophrenic assessments of the work of the most significant black filmmaker of the contemporary moment, Spike Lee. While the work of the L.A. School seems to constitute a sort of widely agreed upon standard, even the work nestled within this category is itself politically

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[38] Ibid. 283.
[39] This 1997 view represents a reversal of Lott's earlier position expressed in a 1991 article, "A No-Theory Theory of Black Cinema," which was first published in *African American Review*. Oddly enough, it is this earlier essay that has been frequently reprinted in collections about African American cinema and culture, including Lott's own 1999 text, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation*. Perhaps the explanation for this odd publication detail can be traced to the fact that the earlier view is more palatable as it shares the same suppressed premises as the going scholarship. In the earlier essay Lott grapples with the category of "black cinema." He argues that the designation should be defined—like Third Cinema—not by reference to the racial/ethnic identity of filmmakers, but by reference to politics: "As a primarily oppositional practice engaged in resistance and affirmation, black cinema need not be presently defined apart from its political function" (93). Furthermore, Lott writes, "I want to advance a theory of black cinema that is in keeping with those filmmaking practices that aim to foster social change, rather than participate in a process of formulating a definition of black cinema that allows certain films to be canonized on aesthetic grounds so as to occupy a place in the history of cinema. The theory we need now is a political theory of black cinema that incorporates a plurality of aesthetic values that are consistent with the fate and destiny of black people as a group engaged in a protracted struggle for social equality" (93). While in this earlier essay Lott subordinates aesthetic values to liberatory politics, in the later essay, referenced above, Lott hopes to free black film aesthetics from ideological considerations. While in the earlier essay he holds up Third Cinema as a model for black filmmaking to emulate, in the latter essay he accuses Third Cinema evaluation criteria of prescriptively reducing film criticism to "moral judgment." Lott's language here suggests that he targets the merging of the political and the moral realm in a practice of film criticism that sifts good versus bad texts according to their politically progressive versus politically reactionary ideological commitments. See Tommy L. Lott, "The No-Theory Theory of Black Cinema," Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video, ed. Valerie Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

heterogeneous. Still, it seems worth acknowledging that the one baseline, commonly held commitment of black film scholars is a commitment to a politics of the black image. It is perhaps for this reason that so many engagements with black cinema begin—as Manthia Diawara's frequently anthologized essay, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," does—with a discussion of *Birth of a Nation*,[40] the exemplar case of the denigrated black image in American film. Scholar Mark Reid reveals his political concerns when he writes, "[T]he critics and historians must analyze the independent film in terms of the filmmaker's efforts to create films that explore serious social issues and present balanced images of black women, men, and the African-American community."[41] Ed Guerrero, in his embrace of the black independents of the 70s, credits the movement with the ultimate achievement: laying "a clear political, philosophical, and aesthetic foundation for an ongoing cinematic practice that challenges Hollywood's hegemony over the black image."[42] Reid, Guerrero, and others are unmistakably indebted to image analysis, that is, to the constant tallying of positive versus negative images that is a feature of this analytic approach. The ubiquity of image analysis in the analysis of minority cinemas should not be underestimated. Michele Wallace has observed that "Mainstream culture habitually assumes that the first job of Afro-American mass culture…should be to 'uplift the race', or to salvage the denigrated image of blacks in the white American imagination."[43]

This has been no less the case with the films produced by the L.A. School. Even one of its most famous exemplars, *Bush Mama*, subscribes, in more and less obvious ways, to a politics of the black image. But, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter, this preoccupation with the denigrated image that needed to be salvaged, avenged, was not, in general, the priority of Third Cinema film politics. This tension around the status of the stereotype and its relevance to a political film practice is central to thinking about the relation between Third Cinema and the L.A. School.

Now we turn directly to the film, *Bush Mama*.

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[40] Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism."
[41] Reid, Redefining Black Film 135.
[42] Guerrero, Framing Blackness : The African American Image in Film 137.
[43] Michele Wallace, Invisibility Blues : From Pop to Theory, The Haymarket Series (London: Verso, 1990) 1. For a thoroughgoing critique of this approach, see also Shohat and Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism : Multiculturalism and the Media.

III

Dorothy (Barbara O. Jones) is the jobless mother of one adolescent daughter, Luann (Susan Williams). Her husband, it is suggested, was killed in Vietnam. Her new partner, T.C. (Johnny Weathers), who is also a veteran, cannot find work. The family survives on the meager check Dorothy receives from welfare. The family's objective circumstances change when T.C. is detained by the police on the morning of his new job, falsely accused of a crime he could not have committed. Shortly afterwards, Dorothy learns that she is pregnant and must decide whether to have the abortion that her social worker insists on. While the plot covers a span of a few weeks in Dorothy's life between T.C.'s incarceration and her decision not to abort the fetus, most of the film's screen time is taken up with inner images—memories, daydreams, projections—that interlace, without regard to chronology, events from the previous few months with scenes from daily life replayed hours, perhaps days, later in Dorothy's mind's eye. The film's narration is restricted, focalized entirely through Dorothy. And although the camera treats the images in her head objectively—there are few instances of visual perceptual subjectivity (though many of aural perceptual subjectivity)—most of the sequences are disordered visual and aural memory-fragments. The viewer has privileged access to Dorothy's consciousness, but importantly, we only have access to what she has—reliably, it is suggested—absorbed from the world, and not to her efforts to order that data, at least not until the very end of the film when she narrates a letter to T.C. outlining all that she has learned.

Gerima's allegorical style gives us iconic, extreme close up shots of Dorothy's head and face as she pensively stares out from the barred windows of her apartment. The visual metaphor suggests, at once, Dorothy's imprisonment by so-called free society and the constriction of her consciousness, which at this point in the film, has not made sense of the contradictory ideas knocking about, each with its identifiable source. Dorothy is a cipher. When we first encounter her she is like a blank slate—walking home from the welfare office in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles overwhelmed by the chaos of the city's streets with its traffic, its advertisements, its density, overwhelmed by the memory of a police shooting outside the welfare office, by the welfare bureaucrat's condescension, by the endless forms and surveys, and by the creeping recollection of the pedantic injunctions of friends, strangers, bureaucrats, her lover, etc. In this period of

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external and material stress—her sweetheart in prison, her purse snatched by a child, her pregnancy, her ongoing unemployment—Dorothy experiences anew the heterogeneity of voices of the community.

There is T.C. who, having become radicalized in prison, writes Dorothy letters, which she imagines him reciting from his cell: "People who love money are vicious animals… A people whose main principle is money by any means necessary is dangerous…The fact that we are subjected to slavery in all its many faces is a direct result of money lovers, usually Europeans, though now you find non-whites imitating love money pioneers." T.C.'s letters suggest his adoption of Black Panther Party politics.[44] There is Angi (Renna Kraft), Luann's teenage tutor, who is being groomed as a local activist and embraces an internationalist Third Worldist position committed to historical analogy and modern world-system analysis: "Today, I teach you history [….] Us black folks are found all over the world. And there are many people angry at them white folks for what they did. But I bet if all us mad folks unite like the Indians, Chicanos, the blacks, the Asians we shape up them white folks and they have to act differently. But you know, the brother at the demonstration said it was a long process, a long process…" There is Molly (Cora Lee Day), Dorothy's close friend who drinks too much. Upon seeing the poster of an Angolan national liberation fighter with a gun in one hand and baby on her hip hanging in Dorothy's apartment (a "decoration" brought by Angi), Molly bursts out laughing: "Girl, what is that? I ain't never seen nothing so funny in all my life. That nappy headed baby and the broad with the gun. Don't tell me them niggers is going crazy over there in Africa." There is the raving man Dorothy encounters at the bus stop, the self-described "prince of Dahomey" (Bob Ogburn Jr.): "Just the other day, I had thrown for me a dinner party, right here in niggertown, one of them finest restaurants in niggertown. They served me prince food [….] They had a liqueur from the red sea for me to wash down my prince food… You don't believe I'm a prince. Here, look into my eyes. You'll see the stars of Dahomey."

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[44] One perhaps anomalous shot has T.C. presumably lying on his prison cot reading Langston Hughes' 1963 book of short stories, *Something in Common.* This may seem like odd reading material considering the consistent character of T.C.'s rhetoric. But I do not think the function of this short shot is to link Harlem Renaissance literature with anti-capitalist political rhetoric. The shot is crosscut with a scene of Dorothy, on her bed (like T.C.), contemplating a political poster of an Angolan guerrilla fighting for national liberation carrying a child in one arm and a gun in the other. The editing goes back and forth between Dorothy and T.C., slipping in a clear shot of the title of T.C.'s book. Is it Dorothy and the Angolan freedom fighter that have "something in common"? Is it T.C. and Dorothy that have "something in common"? Is it Black Arts and Black Power that have "something in common"? I am inclined to think that the book title operates more as a kind of subliminal textual message than as a symbolic one; the point is not the content of Hughes' book but just its title. The short story for which the book is named is about two Americans—one black man from the north, one white man from the south—who meet in a bar in Hong Kong. They have a fight about race and soon get thrown out of the bar by a British guy. Their nationalism (what they have in common) kicks in and they reenter the bar to teach the Brit a lesson.

There is the radio program peddling mind-over-matter self-help antidotes: "You always become whatever you're fascinated with and here again is the law of mind. If you're fascinated with poverty, you'll become poor…." There is the black social worker (Bettie J. Wilson) that visits Dorothy's apartment, condescendingly chastising her for having an empty liquor bottle in the living room and threatening to discontinue her state support if Dorothy refuses to go through with an abortion. Finally, there is Simmi (Simmi Ella Nelson), the owner of the local bar/restaurant, whose analysis is the most cohesive and resonant. Simmi's lecture to her son, who is wearing a fez and African dress, is suggestive of Maulana Karenga's Kawaida philosophy and its seven principles of blackness (Nguzo Saba): unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (Ujima), purpose (Nia), Kiimba (creativity), faith (Imani).[45] Simmi insists on the four requisite achievements in order to effect change in the community: togetherness (by which she seems to mean black unity and not the nonwhite unity that Angi advocates), bodies (she advises Dorothy not to abort her fetus because of the demographic challenges of minority groups), calculation (i.e. a plan) to which she opposes the promiscuous violence of individual actions ("You know I could get me a gun and go out there and on top of one of them hills in Hollywood and rip me off some of them white freaks… [But] that's not good enough. That's not what we want."), and lastly, historical knowledge ("You know, the thing that really, really makes me sad is we don't have enough awareness about our past folks… And we need to know these things.").

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[45] In 1965, in the wake of the Malcolm X's assassination and the Watts rebellion, Karenga founded the cultural nationalist US organization headquartered in Los Angeles. Although the organization probably never exceeded five or six hundred members, its influence on black activism in the Black Power era was significant. Karenga's organization developed a semi-religious (though anti-Christian) philosophy based on a creation story that incorporates elements of African religions, in particular Zulu theology, that turns to Kiswaihili (widely spoken language in Africa) as a semi-official language, that incorporates African rituals. Within the black nationalist community, the strife between cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism took on concrete form in the actual conflicts between the US organization and the Black Panther Party. Between 1968 and 1970 these entities vied for "dominance in the public sphere—from community meetings and street corners to college campuses" (Brown 88). The conflict culminated in the deaths of two Panthers—Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and John Huggins—at the hands of US members after a contentious argument during a student meeting about the directorship of a new Black Studies program at UCLA turned violent. US's influence declined in the early 1970s as a result of the conflict with the Panthers, State repression, internal strife, and Karenga's conviction and incarceration for assault and false imprisonment of two female US members in 1971. Karenga was released from prison in 1975, at which time he re-entered nationalist politics with "an updated Kawaida theory, void of its quasi-religious emphasis and redefined as a secularized ideology of social change based on pan-African, nationalist, and socialist thought" (Brown 129). For a sympathetic history of the US organization, see Brown, Fighting for Us : Maulana Karenga, the Us Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism.

IV

While recent scholars agree that political violence is indeed at the heart of *Bush Mama*, they largely disagree about its role in the film.[46] Much of the disagreement centers around *Bush Mama*'s relation to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*—the L.A. School's commonly noted inspiration. The disagreement largely turns on two questions: first, the extent to which the film's analogy between the colonial subject and the black internal colonial subject—in other words, between the national liberation struggles against colonial powers and African American armed revolt against the American state—is a valid one. If the analogy is not apt, then *Bush Mama*'s account of violence cannot fit comfortably within the Fanonian framework that gives it some of its theoretical authority and legitimacy. Second, there is a question about whether the film understands its own contemporary moment as one that precedes the onset of anti-colonial violence, or, as itself a period of struggle. Fanon makes a distinction between these two moments in order to emphasize the rupture of anti-colonial struggle—the way in which participation in the struggle transforms consciousness and lays the foundation for *new* politics and culture.

In her recent book, *Soul Power*, Cynthia Young has tried to problematize the Fanonian reading of the two seminal L.A. School films, *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep*, by suggesting that rather than illustrating a Fanonian insight about revolutionary violence in the U.S. context, they address a lacuna in Fanon. Young argues that if Fanon imagines that the revolutionary subject is formed in the *midst* of anti-colonial struggle, he fails to fully account for the *advent* of the struggle for decolonization. Young asks, "What precipitates that Hegelian act of violence, the decisive struggle between slave and master, that will produce the historical struggle?"[47] Fanon, Young suggests, vaguely turns to the "revolutionary intellectual" who forges links with mass organizations and who plays a critical role in the advent of struggle. But the problem persists: How are we to understand the emergence of the revolutionary intellectual? What produces his consciousness? Young argues that this is the aporia in Fanon that the seminal films of the L.A. Rebellion, *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep*, address: namely, they try to account for "…how that formation [revolutionary intellectual class] might

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[46] See Wilderson III, <u>Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms</u>; Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u>.

[47] Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u> 228.

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help mobilize themselves and the masses in the period that might be termed pre-revolutionary."[48] Perhaps we should first say that Young overstates both the intellectual's role in Fanon's analysis (which is less top down than suggested here) and his role in Gerima and Burnett's films. For if we could comfortably say that these films are about consciousness, the subjects of consciousness—Dorothy, a welfare mother (in *Bush Mama*), and Stan, a slaughterhouse worker (in *Killer of Sheep*)—are surely neither the "revolutionary intellectuals" Fanon describes nor even the organic intellectuals that Young imagines them to be; they represent the mass subject that must be mobilized. Still, Young has put her finger on a real difficulty in Fanon: the revolutionary subject in Fanon—that is, the subject formed in the *process* of struggle—is necessarily temporally displaced and ontologically distinct from the subject that *first* enters into struggle, that "precipitates that Hegelian act of violence." The consciousness of the first subject cannot be the same as the consciousness of the second, and yet without this (imperfect? mixed?) consciousness of the first, the decolonization effort could not have gotten under way. *Bush Mama*, thus, may be said to give an account of that "pre-revolutionary" mass subject arriving at a mixed consciousness that corresponds to the immediate pre-history of struggle.[49]

In *Bush Mama*, culture will play a role just as it does in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Yet, as we will see, its role is ambiguous as is the film's deployment of Fanon. The relation between revolutionary violence and national culture is taken up by Fanon, but Fanon's sometimes obscure statements contribute to the difficulty of specifying *Bush Mama*'s relation to Fanon. If Fanon was adamant that national culture does not, in any real sense, pre-exist decolonization struggle, he was less so about rejecting the positive role for culture in the "pre-revolutionary" period. On the one hand, past national culture, after a few centuries of exploitation, had become a "a set of automatic habits, some traditions of dress, and few broken-down institutions."[50] All this belongs to colonized man. Meanwhile, decolonization struggle "does not give back to the national culture its former value and shape; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form or the content of the people's culture."[51] For

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[48] Ibid. 229.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Frantz Fanon, <u>The Wretched of the Earth</u> (New York,: Grove Press, 1965) 238.
[51] Ibid. 246.

Fanon, while perhaps a historical necessity, the turn to a past national culture is ultimately a blind alley: it can neither take the place of struggle (for "you do not show the proof of your nation from its culture" rather "you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation")[52] nor is it the dynamic, elastic, living culture that will proceed decolonization. On the other hand, Fanon does not entirely dismiss past national culture, granting a kind of affective importance: "The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native."[53] What sort of change? One important for *entry* into struggle? We encounter a lacuna in Fanon: what is the possible instrumental role for the turn to past national culture? Could it serve as a means to the end of national liberation? While Fanon is largely silent on this question, this question is central in *Bush Mama.*

Moreover, the L.A. School demonstrates a distinct interest in culture that ultimately departs from Fanon's more skeptical treatment. For if the L.A. School was focused on consciousness in the "pre-revolutionary" period, its consciousness-raising tool of choice has seemed to many commentators to be "pre-revolutionary" national culture. But, Young asks "If one takes this [Fanonian] reading seriously, then how might we understand the UCLA filmmakers' project of cultural excavation, their use of music, dance, and spiritual traditions to anchor a black oppositional identity?"[54] This archaeological impulse is apparent in important L.A. Rebellion films like Larry Clark's *Passing Through* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of Dust*, which turn to jazz music and Gullah culture, respectively. Even Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* relies heavily on an African American musical tradition and on African American folklore. While paradigmatic of the school, in some ways, *Bush Mama* is actually anomalous in this regard: it is the L.A. School film least involved in the work of cultural excavation and thereby seemingly most allied with Fanon. And yet, as I will try to show, the ambiguity surrounding Dorothy's adoption of plaits at the end of the film indicates a certain tension in the film between cultural excavation and revolutionary violence à la Fanon.

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[52] Ibid. 223.
[53] Ibid. 210.
[54] Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u> 230.

At the end of *Bush Mama*, Dorothy dictates a letter to T.C. The final five minutes of the film leading up to this letter constitute a formal break with what has come before. I dwell on these final moments of *Bush Mama* because in this last sequence and the letter-reciting epilogue that follows, the film reveals its ambiguities and contradictions. A pregnant Dorothy is being forced to sign a statement confessing to the killing of a police officer (Chris Clay) who she caught raping her daughter. Her refusal results in a severe beating. She is filmed in a prison cell, writhing in pain as she miscarries. This scene is intercut with the temporally prior sequence in which Luann is first questioned on the street by a police officer as she waits for Dorothy to return from her first day at a new job; then led by the officer into her apartment and handcuffed to Dorothy's bed; then raped by the officer; then discovered by her mother, who kills the officer with her umbrella. Each moment in this high contrast sequence is crosscut with Dorothy miscarrying in her prison cell. This is the first sequence of the film whose perspective is ambiguous. It cannot be Dorothy's memory because she could not have been present to witness the events. It seems unlikely that the scene is a phantasm that Dorothy conjures up as she writhes in pain on the cell floor for the scenes are too information-packed and unequivocal (though it is true that the audio track of Luann screaming "mama" as she is being raped echoes softly over the images of Dorothy in the cell).

This sequence appears to be the film's first objective flashback. And it makes sense that it would be cast as not springing from Dorothy's imagination, for the film has a stake in establishing beyond a doubt the truth of this account. The audio track loops the alternating voice of the social worker from earlier asking in a condescending tone "Do you understand?" and the voice of another bureaucrat "Do you agree?" in what feel like boomeranging questions addressed as much to the audience as the authorities. This audio loop is combined with the reading of an "official report" that accuses Dorothy of having pulled down the officer's pants to simulate rape. But the objectivity of the entire flashback beginning with Luann talking to the officer and ending with Dorothy walking in on the rape—which is filmed as a long shot with all three actors consistently in the frame (it has no point of view shots)—suggests that the sequence is not focalized through Dorothy, that it is wholly reliable and objective, a true account of the events leading up to the killing. Let

there be no mistake, the film suggests, this is not a he said, she said impasse; rather, it is the conflict between the state's lies and the film's truth (made possible by filmic realism). One imagines that this carefully-made distinction—in some sense out of character for a film interested in perception—owes to the squeamishness of spectators who care about police officer's guilt, spectators for whom Dorothy's act is admissible only as direct revenge, vigilante justice, imposed on the actual perpetrator and not on a homologous surrogate.

Film scholar Frank Wilderson argues that to include the rape—much less to narratively establish its actuality—betrays an incongruity between *Bush Mama*'s formal features and its script that is indicative of a political failing: "Even in Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama,* one gets the sense that whereas Burnett's cinematography and Gerima's editing and acoustic innovation acknowledge the gratuitousness of violence that structures the chaos of Black life…, the screenplay, on the other hand, insists on contingent and commonsense notions of police brutality and therefore is only willing or able to identify policing in the spectacle of police violence (e.g., Luann being raped) and not in the everyday banality of ordinary White existence."[55] And later,

> In other words, the script *needs* the "event" of police brutality as a justification for Black on White violence. Whereas the cinematic form is content with a structural and ontological argument for Black on White violence (for instance, the repetition of the stabs and the camera's fascination with that repetition), the narrative can only meet the form halfway. The script requires the moral and juridical persuasion of the "event" of police brutality… The script thus responds to and imagines White on Black violence as though such violence was individuated and contingent; as though it had everything to do with the police in Compton, and nothing to do with White women burning bras in Harvard Square; and as though it were not structural and gratuitous.[56]

In other words, for Wilderson, the film casts Dorothy's act too much in the mold of revenge, reciprocity—and not in the Fanonian vein of revolutionary violence that does not require an "event" for its ignition.

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[55] Wilderson III, <u>Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms</u> 178.
[56] Ibid. 182.

The "cinematic form" of the particular scene (Dorothy killing the officer) that Wilderson cites—by its very symmetry to the rape sequence before it, by its repetition of the stabbing—implies reciprocity. This scene bears closer examination as it raises a number of questions about *Bush Mama's* treatment of political violence. There is an important shift within this scene that is marked by a dissolve. When Dorothy walks in on the rape, she is wearing her wig. She lunges toward the officer and descends on him with her umbrella. He is positioned between Dorothy and Luann, his body extended horizontally across the bed, in almost the same the position he trapped Luann, who he handcuffed to the end of the bed. After the dissolve, Dorothy is wearing braids; the officer is positioned vertically with his head at the head of the bed; Dorothy is straddled over him, repeatedly jabbing him with the end of her umbrella; a poster produced by the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) featuring the image of a female Angolan national liberation fighter with a rifle in one arm and a child in the other hangs on the wall over the bed frame.[57]

There are a few things to notice about this scene. First, the repositioning of the officer's body, the repeated thrusts of the umbrella, and Dorothy's concomitant grunts, suggest that they are engaged in sex, or perhaps more accurately, that Dorothy is raping the officer. Dorothy does not merely kill the officer; she reciprocates his violence. Frank Wilderson has noted that the formal symmetry between the officer's rape and Dorothy's rape:

> There is a correspondence between the intimacy of the policeman's violence and the intimacy of Dorothy's murder of him [.…] Dorothy does not blow the officer away with multiple rounds of an automatic weapon, but crawls on top of him—as he had been on top of her daughter—and stabs him to death with the blunt point of her umbrella. As he has exhausted, relieved, and renewed himself sexually at the expense of her daughter, she now exhausts, relieves, and renewed herself through the repeated thrust of her umbrella. To paraphrase Fanon, the violence cleanses her.[58]

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[57] *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) was formed in 1956 as a Marxist party. It began efforts to fight the Portuguese colonial government in 1961 and fought until Angolan independence was won in 1975.
[58] Wilderson III, Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms 159.

Furthermore, the cleansing has taken place below the MPLA poster, as if blessed by it, in much the way the crucifix above the conjugal bed blesses the procreative act. Second, what are we to make of Dorothy's braids? We know from the previous shot, the objective flashback, that when Dorothy discovered Luann being raped she was wearing the wig. The shot that follows the dissolve cannot be part of the objective flashback; it represents the film's symbolic rendition of Dorothy's act. In the order of events, Dorothy kills the police officer and then dispenses with her wig that has come to signify Euro-American cultural imposition (figure 19). This action will take on primary importance in Dorothy's final voice-over. But in the post-dissolve, symbolic account, the order is reversed: she has already dispensed with the wig when she kills the officer.

Figure 19. Dorothy (Barabara O. Jones) killing the police officer (Chris Clay). *Bush Mama* (1976). She wears a wig as she rushes toward the officer, but she wears braids as she kills him (beneath the MPLA poster).

At the core of the film is a question about what constitutes the revolutionary act: the killing of the police officer or the removal of the wig. After Dorothy kills the police officer, she then rearranges Luann's dress, stands up from the bed, out of breath, to address the camera directly. The letter Dorothy dictates at this point refers to events that occur after the rape—her beating by the police, her miscarriage—but the actual dictation of the letter occurs in the same space and time as the killing of the police officer. Surely the letter could have been dictated from the prison cell or the final events of the film could have been presented linearly rather than as objective flashbacks. But by this sleight, the film can conjoin the moment of

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consciousness, of agency, the film's denouement, with the act of enunciation that is implied by Dorothy's letter. Moreover, although the letter that Dorothy narrates does not mention the killing of the police officer, the act—because it occurs in the same space—hovers over the film's epilogue, raising a question about what sort of consciousness, agency, Dorothy has achieved by her violent redress, and furthermore whether this act was the telos of her evolving consciousness. For, how can we escape the echo of Simmi's prior disavowal of individual, random acts of violence: "You know I could get me a gun and go out there on the top of one them hills in Hollywood and rip me off some of them white freaks…Would that do any good? That's not big enough. That's not good enough. That's not what we want… We want a big hunk of Uncle Sam's pie." Is Dorothy's act "big enough"? Its privileged status in the film's ending would suggest the opposite: that the act is indeed "big enough" and by itself constitutes a breakthrough for Dorothy's consciousness. But the film's final moments in which Dorothy dictates a letter summarizing the changes in her consciousness complicates this reading.

Before freezing on Dorothy's face for the declamation of her letter to T.C., the image rack focuses back and forth between a poster of an Angolan freedom fighter—a young woman in braids holding a child in one arm and a gun in the other—and a tight close-up of Dorothy's face, directly addressed to the camera, her lips still, her hair in braids, the catch light of her eyes obscured by the shadows the braids cast (figure 21). The visual analogy seems unmistakable: the Angolan militant of the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) fights the colonial imposition of Portugal, one of the last colonial powers to be officially dislodged from Africa, while her North American counterpart takes up the struggle against internal colonialism. This analogy was also suggested in an earlier sequence in which extreme close-ups of Dorothy's eyes are intercut with extreme close-ups of the eyes of the MPLA woman in the poster (figure 20).[59] In that sequence, the suggestion was that Dorothy *identified* with the woman—they were literally making eye contact and the framing of the shots reinforces this reading. The identification imagined was one-sided (coming from Dorothy) and ultimately subjective; she saw "something in common."

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[59] One interesting feature of this earlier sequence is that the close-ups on the poster seem to reveal a streaming tear in the MPLA fighter's eye. I doubt this was in the original poster, and I cannot say I have a hypothesis about what it might mean in this context. It adds sentiment in a film that, for the most part, eschews melodramatic displays.

Figure 20. Dorothy and the MPLA fighter make eye contact. *Bush Mama* **(1976)**

Figure 21. The last shot of *Bush Mama* (1976)

The last shot of the film (and its last frame), because it has both women facing the same direction (rather than each other)—both directly addressing the camera—suggests that the analogy between them is objective, posited by film, and undeniable. What remains to be established—an open question—is whether we, the audience, will make eye contact, whether we will return the gaze, whether we will (subjectively) identify with them.

The ending's voice-over is less straightforward; it is rife with puzzling, contradictory injunctions. These contradictions challenge the obviousness of the visual analogy described above. In the final voice-over, after reporting the recent events—her miscarriage induced by a severe police beating—Dorothy summarizes what she's learned over the course of the film, namely that she is not to blame for her precarious situation, her poverty and powerlessness; that her "problem" is the place she was born into, "a place with laws that protect the people that got money"; and that things need to change. But the change that Dorothy subsequently elaborates is not rebellion, what she did when she killed the policeman who was raping her daughter, or guerilla warfare, what the MPLA fighter in the poster behind her represents, or even political organizing, exactly. Instead, she embraces a preliminary step, a turning inward: "I have to get to know myself. To read and to study. We all have to, so we can change it, so we can know how to talk to each other." But what is it to get to know oneself? What is it that must be read and studied? And who is the relevant "we"? We should read the injunction "to get to know myself" as a collective one in which "myself" stands in for "my people" and in which "I" stands in for "we" and in which "we" implies the black internal colony. While her letter suggests the need for consciousness-raising, it also suggests that the consciousness that needs to be raised is a historical consciousness—a consciousness of "our" past—just as "knowing myself" entails "knowing where I came from." We change things by knowing ourselves first, not by participating in armed struggle.

If Dorothy's first recommendation concerns the content of consciousness-raising, the second strategic recommendation of the letter concerns the form of consciousness-raising: "Talking to each other is not easy. I know you in jail T.C. and angry, but most of the time I don't understand your letters. Talk to me easy T.C. cause I want to understand. It's not easy to win over people like me. There's a lot of people like me

and we have many things to fight for just to live. But the idea is win over more of our people. Talk the same talk but easy T.C." This bit of the letter raises several problems. First, among the film's competing political discourses, it seems to privilege T.C.'s. But there is reason to believe that up until this point T.C. has not embodied the film's politics. The letter suggests that Dorothy's consciousness has been most directly affected by T.C.'s letters, full of nuggets of wisdom that have been transmitted from on high. Mike Murashige, in the most detailed examination of *Bush Mama* to date, argues that T.C.'s preachy letters have a decreasing effect on Dorothy—which Gerima indicates by his choice of camera angles--as they move from speaking *to* her to speaking *at* her. Murashige claims that the film suggests that T.C.'s discourse—though perhaps "true"— "cannot adequately speak of or to Dorothy's [distinctly female] experiences or, by itself, provide sufficient tools for resistance."[60] On the contrary, for Murashige, no single discourse can adequately address Dorothy's situation; it is the accretion of the multiple narratives that the film itself showcases that can make sense of her experience. After all, the film has carefully detailed the evolution of Dorothy's consciousness, which has been variously affected by the drudgery of her daily life as well as her encounters with individuals and institutions—the social worker, the welfare office, the police, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) "therapy" sessions,[61] her friend Molly, her daughter's tutor Angie, and especially Simmi. If *Bush Mama* has systematically avoided legitimating certain discourses over others (T.C.'s over Simmi's or Angie's), how are we to understand Dorothy's privileging of T.C.'s talk at the end of the film? Is this a sign of Dorothy's ongoing false consciousness? Or is it meant to single out T.C.'s discourse for masculinist bias and/or gendered tone deafness? If this is the case, to cast the complaint about T.C.'s talk as a matter of too much difficulty seems overly deferential and risks casting Dorothy as not up to the task—as deficient rather than different.

Another related problem suggested by Dorothy's letter has direct bearing on film as a medium of consciousness-raising: Dorothy raises a question about the film's own form. For, *Bush Mama* is itself no easy film. Certainly her complaint about the difficultly of T.C.'s letters apply to the film itself; the film stubbornly

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[60] Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," 196.
[61] In a footnote, Murashige suggests that an early sequence in *Bush Mama* in which Dorothy participates in some kind of meeting and various participants accuse her of drinking in secret is an AFDC gathering. See Ibid. 202.

does not "talk easy." The complex layering of sound and image, the non-linear narrative, the expressive editing betray *Bush Mama*'s high modernist aesthetics. If Dorothy's plea is addressed to the black nationalist intelligentsia, we cannot avoid the sense that it is addressed to Gerima himself in a kind of reflexive self-reproach.

It may be worth questioning at this point whether Dorothy is indeed a reliable narrator, whether in fact her final voice-over reflects not the achievement of self-consciousness, but her ongoing "false consciousness." Such a reading has been implicitly suggested by Cynthia Young, who writes, "Gerima's *Bush Mama*, however, holds out the hope that Dorothy and T.C. represent the beginning of an emergent social order that can be of eventual political use…Gerima's use of surrealism and straight narrative, though, does present a ruptured style, one that may in fact undercut Dorothy's seamless trajectory toward liberation. Is her letter at the end just another hallucination?"[62] But I wonder whether it is less the film's non-linear style (and I do not think the surrealism label apt) that suggests this reading of the ending than the puzzling content of the letter. Reading Dorothy's letter as hallucination or false consciousness would constitute a reading against the grain. Furthermore, it would destabilize the consensus that understands Gerima and the L.A. School to be activist political filmmakers using cinema as a tool for community consciousness-raising.[63]

The last bit of Dorothy's letter takes another, perhaps surprising, turn as it transitions from the importance of popular audience reception (i.e. talk easy so I can understand) to the meager pay-off of effective message transmission: Dorothy's removal of her wig. "You remember you used to ask why I always wear a wig. All day and all night, when I eat, when I sleep. T.C., the wig is off my head; the wig is off my head. I never saw what was under it. I just saw on top—the glitter, the wig. The wig is off my head T.C." This final bit of voice-over inflects the earlier prescription—"I have to get to know myself. To read and to study"—with a new sense of embodiment, a literalness: my body, my self. While the rack focus between Dorothy and the MPLA fighter at first suggested a structural analogy between Dorothy and the MPLA

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[62] See Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u> 244.
[63] Gerima affirms his activist orientation when he writes, "While Hollywood produces by and large escapist spectacle, commercial and emotionally exploitative cinema, independent cinema, hopefully, produces a rational, pedagogical alternative that seeks to meet the particular needs of the community" (quoted in James, 328). See James, <u>The Most Typical Avant-Garde : History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles</u>; Haile Gerima, "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinknesh Vs Lucy," <u>Questions of Third Cinema</u>, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willeman (London: BFI Publishing, 1989).

figure—both occupy comparable positions within their respective societies and both recognize the need to take up arms against the colonial power, by the end of her voice-over the visual analogy appears more equivocal. The parallel was initially established, on the one hand, by both figures' direct address to the camera and, on the other hand, by their braids.[64] The later voice-over suggests, however, that the object of Dorothy's imitation is not the gun but the braids, that the end of her newly achieved consciousness is a "natural" hairstyle. But does hair figure at all for the MPLA fighter in the poster? If the gun signifies her physical struggle and if the child in her arms signifies the historic nature of her struggle, do her braids signify at all? Or are they just as accidental to her (and the propagandist) as her blouse? Dorothy has, in a sense, read the poster against its grain, transforming the braids into the most potent signifier of all. This raises the question of whether Gerima is substituting braids (a signifier of cultural nationalism) for the gun (a signifier of revolutionary nationalism) or whether, more charitably, he glosses over what he grasps as a two-step process in which donning braids is a prerequisite for everything/anything else. What seems indisputable is that for the MPLA fighter and the propagandist who created the poster, the braids constitute neither a preliminary step toward armed struggle nor a replacement for it—the prominence of hair is a purely U.S. addition. For *Bush Mama*, it turns out that the Third World Liberation comparison is only so useful. In this ambiguous ending, we encounter the fight between revolutionary black nationalism and cultural nationalism, a debate that had raged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But by placing hair (in a sense) at the center of *Bush Mama*, Gerima

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[64] Frank Wilderson has also argued, for different reasons, that the Dorothy and the woman in the MPLA poster are not really analogous figures. His argument hinges on a rejection of the internal colonialism framework, though for none of the standard reasons discussed in the previous chapter. For Wilderson, the postcolonial's violence is ultimately aimed at the restoration of land; it is about, in Fanon's parlance, putting the settler "out of the picture." Meanwhile, the black diasporic descendent of slaves—a figure that Wilderson designates by the term "Slave"—suffers an absolute "psychic vulnerability," one that "cartographic restoration" (i.e. the restoration of land) cannot mitigate. The Slave's "guarantee of restoration [is] predicated on her/his need to put the Human out of the picture" (155)—that is, to end the world as we know it. Thus, for Wilderson the widespread application of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* to *Bush Mama* (and other films featuring comparable narratives defending revolutionary violence in internal colonial contexts) is a convenient failure of reading. Fanonian readings—by assimilating the case of the "postcolonial" to the exceptional case of the "Slave"—provided a useful alibi: "the slave might project his/her violent desire, cinematically, in a manner that could be understood and perhaps appreciated by spectators who were not Slaves" (153). What remains unclear in Wilderson's analysis is how *Bush Mama* signals the ontological distinction that Wilderson maintains between the Slave (Dorothy) and the postcolonial (the figure in the MPLA poster), and furthermore, how it establishes the exceptionalism of the Slave's violence. While Wilderson acknowledges that the Fanonian analogy is the one embraced consciously by Gerima and thus has no use for the language of intention, his methodology still seems to require some form of textual evidence. Otherwise, the argument would be one in which violence in films by "Slave filmmakers"—by virtue of the identity of their authors alone—necessarily confirm the exceptionalism of the violence of "an object who possesses no contemporaries" (i.e. the "Slave"), "an epistemological violence unaccompanied by the psychic grounding wires of postcolonial restoration, fantasies anchored by cartography" (155). See Wilderson III, Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms.

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muddies the sides in this quarrel. Dorothy's letter's final lines unmistakably complete the film's circle, connecting its ending to its opening and putting hair at the core of its politics.

VI

Bush Mama begins by introducing, one by one, several distinct sound elements in a cacophonous, tension-laden, aural palimpsest: the sound of helicopters overhead that both foreshadow T.C.'s Vietnam war nightmares and that evoke the Watt's rebellion of 1965 that converted an American urban center into the frontlines of an intra-national war; the taut sounds of cars duking it out in a traffic jam; the grating, looping script of a welfare bureaucrat's questionnaire, "Do you and your spouse reside together? Is all or a portion of your spouse's income deposited in a joint checking account, a joint savings accounts, your spouse's separate savings account, turned over for use in your family expenses? Have you ever received non-cash gifts in the form of free rent, free housing, free food, free room and board, free utilities or other household expenses,…?"; a police radio reporting the apprehension of a suspect; another male interviewer rehearsing the same welfare questionnaire, "Do you and your spouse reside together?…." These distinct sound elements are layered over each other, in orchestral fashion, building toward an orgasmic crescendo that gives way to a single musical refrain which coincides with the introduction of the main character, Dorothy, walking down a busy Watts street toward a welfare office. The images that have accompanied the frenzied layering of sound are black and white documentary images of what is perhaps a single, representative street in the Watts ghetto. The shots are unsteady and restless, unmistakably betraying their handheld genesis. The sixteen shots that accompany the delirious sound track focus on a few city blocks, capturing it variously from across the street in long shot pans and in medium handheld tracking shots that mimic the perception of someone walking down the sidewalk taking in its bustle of people and advertisements. Six of those sixteen shots feature storefronts that sell wigs or signage on marquees and sidewalk placards advertising wigs ("wear and wash") and other beauty supplies (figure 22).

Figure 22. Wig Signage. *Bush Mama* **(1976)**

The overwhelming character of the openings' sound track mirrors the chaos of the visual montage with its short shots, its shaky camera, and its meandering gaze. Both sound and image evoke perceptual overload. That the shots of the sidewalk suggest the perspective of someone walking down it looking in at the window displays further suggests the analogy between the camera's gaze and Dorothy's gaze as she too absorbs, visually and aurally, a multiplicity of signs and inputs. Indeed, *Bush Mama*'s opening sequence conjures phenomenologically the polyphony of the "voices" in Dorothy's head. The film that follows turns out to be the story of how Dorothy comes to make sense of those discordant messages and to choose sides, so to say. It is significant that the most frequent visual "message" Dorothy receives advertises wigs. The wig, by the end of the film, will come to signify, almost like a synecdoche, the "voices" that Dorothy will disclaim. The inward turn that Dorothy embraces in the film's final voice over ("I have to get to know myself") begins with the removal of her wig.

The symbolic importance of hair in diasporic black communities should not be underestimated. Commenting on the presence in black neighborhoods of so many barbershops and beauty salons, on the abundance of hair-care products, on the explosion of advertising dedicated to their sale, on the "skill and sheer fastidiousness that goes into the styles you can see on the street,"[65] Kobena Mercer asks "Why so much time, money, energy and worry spent shaping our hair?"[66] Mercer suggests that the answer is to be found in the peculiar importance of hair in the classification schemes of eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientific

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[65] Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 2000) 112.
[66] Ibid.

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racism: "[W]ithin racism's bipolar codification of human worth, black people's hair has been historically *devalued* as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin."[67] Struggles over black hair have largely been concerned with valorizing what had been previously devalued. But valorizing the "key ethnic signifier" is not such a straightforward enterprise according to Mercer, precisely because hair—unlike skin pigmentation or facial features or body types—can be changed, styled, worked-up by the labor of human hands. Hair is a cultural raw material, a site for creative expression, and as such any work done on it, which is mostly the case in all human societies, is an index of our human capacity to make worlds.

If the discourses of scientific racism associated non-white peoples with nature rather than culture, the mere recognition that hair, that most seemingly biological of traits, is an important site of cultural production goes some way toward exposing the absurdity of those discourses. But it also suggests how puzzling it is that avengers of black hair in the Black Power era embraced the natural (e.g. the Afro, dreadlocks) and jettisoned the artificial (e.g. straightening). This embrace of the natural evidenced by the valorization of the Afro and Dreadlocks—two hairstyles that owe their forms to the materiality of black hair—was accompanied by an implied link to Africa. The Afro referenced Africa in its very name and Dreadlocks through the Rastafarian recentering of Ethiopia as the "promised land." This implied link between the natural and Africa thus unwittingly accedes to the nature/culture dichotomy central to European ethnocentric thought that associated Africa with Nature and barbarism and Europe with Culture and civilization.[68] For Mercer, of course neither the Afro nor dreadlocks are natural or African—both depend on the work of human hands and even on special tools to achieve their effects and both hairstyles were recognized as distinctly diasporic in Africa. Still, Mercer recognizes that the Afro and Dreadlocks operated as a kind of "tactical inversion," that, while maneuvering within the terms established by Eurocentric thought, sought to claim for "Nature"—and thus for blackness (via the Africa link)—goodness, beauty, and freedom.[69] Mercer laments that "The counter-hegemonic tactic of inversion appropriated a particularly romanticist version of nature as a means of empowering the black subject; but by remaining within a dualistic logic of oppositionality (to Europe and

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[67] Ibid. 113.
[68] Ibid. 115-17.
[69] Ibid. 118.

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artifice) the moment of rupture was delimited by the fact that it was only ever an imaginary Africa that was put into play."[70] There is a suggestion here that because the Africa invoked by these hairstyles was an imaginary one rather than an historical Africa, the force of the tactic was contained. Mercer suggests that had the preferred hairstyles linked up with something real, an actually existing Africa, an "African approach to the aesthetic" could have provided a real alternative to the "separation of the aesthetic sphere in post-Kantian European thought."[71] Plaits, in their resemblance to other kinds of African craft forms (e.g. ceramics, architecture, embroidery) would have been a better option, one that reflects a distinctly "African approach to the aesthetic" by incorporating "practices of beautification in everyday life" and by embracing artifice as the "mark of both invention and tradition."[72] Mercer does not so much reject the turn to Africa as the source of a counter-hegemonic tactic (for he thinks that African aesthetic forms could indeed provide symbolic resistance), rather, he rejects the turn to a mythological Africa, the same mythological space of nature that Eurocentric thought constructed for its own plundering ends.

If *Bush Mama* centers on the symbolic meanings of hair, it is significant that the opposition is established between the wig that Dorothy wears throughout the film and the plaits that she adopts, in imitation of the MPLA fighter, at the film's end. While the dichotomy between the artificial ("[t]he wig is off my head. I never saw what was under it. I just saw on top—the *glitter*, the wig") and the 'natural' ("I never saw what was *under it*") is operative in *Bush Mama*, Gerima has avoided some of the pitfalls suggested by Mercer's analysis. The wig, unlike straightened hair, is not straightforwardly the unalienated work of human hands—a a form of popular art, creative expression. The wig was likely mass-produced in a factory. The plaits that Dorothy adopts forge a link with a real Africa and not a mythological one. Still, if for Mercer plaits signify, not the realm of nature, but a collective creative artistic *practice*, for Gerima the plaits signify a 'natural' hairstyle opposed to the glitter (is there anything more artificial?) of the wig whose surface hides what is beneath and essential.

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid. 120.
[72] Ibid.

What does it mean for the film to put hair at the core of its politics? What failure of consciousness does the wig signify? I would argue that by putting hair at the center of the film, Gerima has in effect complicated the spectatorial relation to the violent act. On the one hand Dorothy's act of violence, in terms of the story order, appears to occur prior to the ultimate the act of consciousness—Dorothy's removal of her wig—the ultimate sign of a revalorization of blackness. On the other hand, in the film's symbolic rendering of Dorothy's act, which replays the initial stabbing of the officer with the umbrella (and is marked by a dissolve), Dorothy is represented as already being wig-free, which would suggest that the revalorization of blackness signified by the adoption of braids comes prior, and is necessary, to the revolutionary act of violence. But in either reading, the film has affirmed the relevance of the embrace of blackness whether as a means to an "end"—where the "end" is revolutionary violence—or as itself the "end" of revolutionary violence. These are quite different strategic approaches to the liberation of the internal colony. And neither is particularly Fanonian; for as I have tried to show above, Fanon was deeply skeptical about the role of cultural affirmation in the fight against physical colonialism but also in the fight against mental colonialism and internalized racism.

Furthermore, that it is braids that come to stand-in for the avowal of blackness rather than Africa more explicitly or African American music or plastic arts is suggestive. Could we really say that the embrace of braids indicates a cultural nationalist strain in *Bush Mama*? If we grant Kobena's analysis above, we must contend with the exceptional character of hair as a racial signifier. Like skin color, hair, in scientific racist discourse, has functioned as an important signifier of blackness, a "key ethnic signifier." But unlike skin color, hair—because it can be worked up by human hands—is a site for cultural expression. That Gerima chooses braids implies an allegiance to African cultural expression rather than to distinctly diasporic hairstyles. Even so, the drama of hair in *Bush Mama* aims to redeem negative images of blackness and thereby fits comfortably with discourses of black nationalism, which have, according to Mercer, "always acknowledged that racism works by encouraging the devaluation of blackness by black subjects themselves, and that a recentering sense

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of pride is therefore a prerequisite for a politics of resistance and reconstruction."[73] Despite the prominence of (seemingly) Fanonian revolutionary violence in the film's narrative, *Bush Mama* subscribes to a politics of transvaluation, which, according to Eddie Glaude, Jr., sought not only to challenge the state but also "maintained that a fundamental psychological and cultural conversion from their [African American] socialization as a subordinate people to a self-determining nation needed to take place."[74] Whether the telos of this "revolution of the mind"—or cultural nationalism by another name—is revolutionary struggle, or rather, a sense of pride (e.g. the defeat of internalized racism) remains an open question in *Bush Mama*. To the extent that a politics of transvaluation is very much at issue in *Bush Mama*, we should be tempted to see the actual relevance of *Black Skin, White Masks* over *The Wretched of the Earth*, which has typically been treated as the reference point for this film.

Black Skin, White Masks is one of the most poignant texts exploring the dynamics of internalized racism, the psychological impact of systematic oppression and centuries of cultural imposition. But Fanon expressly rejects the pursuit of pride and self-esteem as a solution to the alienation of the racialized. He writes, "As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad—since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short, I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal."[75] Along corollary lines, Fanon will disavow racialized history, what Dorothy in *Bush Mama* embraced when she said "I have to get to know myself. To read and to study." Racialized history, Fanon seems to say, is not a means to an end, a prerequisite for revolt, rather, it is a blind alley. "Those negroes and white men will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed about in the materialized Tower of the

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[73] Ibid. 114.
[74] Glaude, "Introduction: Black Power Revisited."
[75] Frantz Fanon, <u>Black Skin, White Masks</u> (New York,: Grove Press, 1967) 197.

Past. For many other Negroes, in other ways, disalienation will come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive. I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo. Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act. In no way should I derive my basic purpose from the past of the peoples of color. In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future. It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that his is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe."[76]

If *Bush Mama* undeniably takes up the problematic of internal colonialism adumbrated in *Black Skin, White Masks*, its proposed solution to Dorothy's alienation turns out ultimately to depart from Fanon's Universalism in its loose mixing of cultural and revolutionary nationalism.

VII

Bush Mama stands in sharp contrast to the other seminal film of the L.A. Rebellion, *Killer of Sheep*. *Killer of Sheep* bears mention because its contrast with *Bush Mama* will help further specify the latter's peculiar political commitments. The differences between these two films have less to do with the often noted more Marxist revolutionary orientation of Gerima and the more culturalist orientation of Burnett. After all, both films display variants of cultural nationalist politics. Rather, in what follows I would like to focus on how the filmmakers handle popular consciousness in the pre-revolutionary moment. I contend that because of Burnett's more populist attitude toward the average person he could not make a coming to consciousness film like Gerima's *Bush Mama*, which depends on an elitist conception of a popular consciousness that needs shepherding from above.

The characters in *Killer of Sheep*—Stan, the slaughterhouse worker, and his wife—are not ciphers like Dorothy, nor do they arrive at what we might call "consciousness" by the end of the film. Burnett's

[76] Ibid. 226.

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distanced, objective style renders characters that have inner lives, ideas in their heads, but our access to their interiority is blocked. The characters are inarticulate, in some ways like Dorothy, and it is often the soundtrack that mediates for them. But while Gerima tries to suggest something of the heterogeneity of the "foreign" voices in an average black welfare mother's head—in other words, of the content of her false consciousness—, Burnett refuses the knowability of his characters' minds and thereby refuses the framework of false consciousness altogether. Burnett insists on his characters' interiority as a fact, but does not attempt to expose its contours.

To say that *Killer of Sheep* is not a film about the ideas in people's heads is perhaps not quite right either. After all, the conceit of the film depends on an impossible dilemma between thought and action. Stan is a workingman—all day he works in a slaughterhouse herding, bleeding, dismembering sheep. But what happens to the killer of sheep when he suddenly cannot fall asleep, when he suffers from insomnia? Stan's friend jokingly advises him to count sheep. Should he imagine in his mind's eye an idyllic pastoral scene— green meadows, blue sky, a herd of sheep--in which he, the herder, count the obedient sheep as they hop over a fence?[77]

But how can the killer of sheep by day count sheep by night? Counting sheep and killing sheep correspond to two different, temporally distinct animal production regimes: the former to family farming and artisanal slaughtering, the latter to commercial farming and industrial slaughter.[78] Although Stan has a sense of the anachronism of an expression ("counting sheep") that has outlasted its intelligibility, it is suggested that for him it is not entirely of another world and time. After all, Stan retains a biographical and affective link to the pastoral scene of the insomniac's fantasy. He has migrated from the rural South, bringing with him to Watts a distinctly countrified sensibility. He has a robust sense of metaphor and poetry, perhaps even

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[77] The OED traces the association of "counting sheep" with getting to sleep only as far back as 1854, when Seba Smith, an American humorist based in Maine, used the idea in *Way down east; or portraitures of Yankee life*. See "Sheep, N," The Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2nd 1989 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vol.

[78] The regime of commercial farming and industrial slaughter superceded the regime of family farming and artisanal slaughter in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century (around the same time as the expression made its way into the literary archive) with the advent of urban industrialization and the rise of the city (even though stockyards and abattoirs operated on its margins). Counting sheep has been a part of the shepherds work for centuries. In medieval Britain farmers were given access to common grazing land, but in order to avoid overgrazing shepherds were required to maintain careful count of their herds, which they did by employing a particularly monotonous Celtic-derived numbering system, Yan Yan Tethera. See Karen Gee, Sheep's Miscellany (London: Murdoch Books, 2006) 120.

folklore—the steam from the tea cup reminds Stan of "when you're making love, how a woman's forehead gets sometimes"; when his daughter asks what makes the rain, Stan replies "Why it's the devil beating his wife." Stan grasps, as no one else around him does, the truth of his alienation, an alienation that can be no better rendered than in the incongruous scenes of grazing and dismembered sheep. The one is an image of an idyllic, pre-industrial past, the other of a Taylorized, murderous modernity. Stan must adapt himself to the industrial regime of his modern present, but cannot manage to exorcise the memory (or is it the myth?) of the pre-modern past.[79] It is the consciousness of the contradiction between the two regimes and of his own alienation within a ravishing modernity that produces his paralysis. Stan's crisis is an existential one imposed by a system whose dynamics are perhaps racialized (i.e. the necessity of migration to the north; the neglect of the urban areas) but whose fundamental contradictions are not racial.

Killer of Sheep has often been compared with Italian Neorealism for its episodic structure, long takes, non-professional actors, objective camera.[80] And while *Killer of Sheep* certainly shares these characteristics with Italian Neorealism, a crucial difference is the importance of word play and the self-consciousness of Burnett's characters. Burnett has said that he had not seen Italian neorealist films before making *Killer*. Perhaps, but surely he had seen *Vidas Secas* (1963), the neorealist-inspired film by Brazilian Nelson Pereira dos Santos (who visited UCLA), which was likely shown in the Film Club and was reportedly a favorite of the L.A. School.[81] *Vidas Secas* is a sensitive portrait of the misery of life in the arid northeastern backlands of Brazil. It follows

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[79] This is a reading that goes with the grain of the film. If we adopt a vantage point outside the text, we may be struck by the film's efforts to summon imaginatively (not visually) the ghost of an authentic black culture, rooted in southern, rural life—the fount of truth, goodness, disalienation, etc. and the foil for Stan's life in the ravaged, post-industrial, dystopian Watts. Adolph Reed has argued that Black Power's faith in a repository of authentic black culture was "naïve both in that it was not sufficiently self-conscious and in that it mistook artifacts and idiosyncrasies of culture for its totality and froze them into an ahistorical theory of authenticity" (52). Militant black nationalism, according to Reed, "envisioned an obsolete model of black life. This yearning was hypostatized to the level of a 'black culture'—a romantic retrieval of a vanishing black particularity. The vision of a black culture, of course, was grounded in residual features of black rural life prior to the migration to the North. They were primarily cultural patterns that had once been enmeshed in a lifeworld knitted together by kinship, voluntary association, and production within a historical context of rural racial domination. As that lifeworld disintegrated before urbanization and mass culture, black nationalism sought to reconstitute it" (52). It may make sense to see Charles Burnett's film within this problematic elaborated by Reed—a film that in its way nostalgically mourns this passing black lifeworld and tries to reclaim (the positivity of) its scraps for Stan's life and consciousness. This reading suggests that the film makes a strong argument for the salutary effects of cultural preservation for political consciousness: Stan's folkloric sensibility would thus explain his extraordinary self-consciousness. See Adolph L. Reed, "Black Particularity Reconsidered," Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[80] For a comparison to Italian Neorealism (*Bicycle Thieves*, in particular), see Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse." Masilela also compares *Killer of Sheep* to Italian Neorealism. See Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers."
[81] Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers."

the lives of a family of four (and a dog) that wanders the backlands in search of a vacant plot of land to cultivate and work cow herding. The film's realist style emphasizes the dryness of the land, the poverty of the people, the material and emotional crudity of the family. The film depends for its critique of conditions in the northeast of Brazil on the iconicity, the verisimilitude, of camerawork that manages to convey the desolation of the land with its dusty, cracked ground; of the shacks with their leaky roofs and disintegrating walls; and of characters with their sunken cheeks and vacant stares. The dialogue is sparse and the monosyllabic. The characters are not merely inarticulate—they don't say much—, it is suggested that they don't think much either as the family's existence has been reduced to that of brutes. While much of *Killer of Sheep*'s power may be traced back to the stationary camera's documentation of the desolation of Watts cityscapes—vacant lots strewn with industrial detritus unfit for children's play—the critique of this poverty is clinched by musical counterpoint. For example, when Paul Robeson's rendition of "The House that I Live In"—whose lyrics are "What is America to me?...The children in the playground/ The faces that I see/ All races and religions/ That's America to me"—is laid over shots of children playing in a dangerous, empty lot as if in a playground, the irony is unmistakable. Similarly, while *Killer*'s characters do not generally articulate their thoughts, when they speak, word play becomes an index of an interiority to which we cannot have direct access. This contrasts with *Vidas Secas* where stunted speech is further evidence of the absence of inner life. And *Killer of Sheep* contrasts with *Bush Mama*, whose protagonist is a cipher.

If Gerima's Dorothy is a character with no thoughts of her own, no inner life, the victim of the world's bad ideas, awaiting edification by the community's high priests, Burnett's Stan is a model of working class self-consciousness.[82] While some scholars, perceiving perhaps the comparative elitism of Gerima's discourse, have tried to argue that Dorothy is an allegorical character,[83] others manifest their anxiety by

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[82] One may want to disagree with this point and cite the scene in which Stan refuses to be considered poor (after all, Stan objects, he gives to the salvation army) as an instance of false consciousness. While this scene may signal an imperfect self-consciousness, a mixed consciousness, it cannot single-handedly undermine our sense that Stan grasps a contradiction in his work life that prevents him from going along as usual. This surely signals his self-consciousness.

[83] See Young, <u>Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left</u>; Paula J. Massood, <u>Black City Cinema : African American Urban Experiences in Film</u>, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). Young writes, "… a 'realistic' representation of Dorothy is not necessarily his [Gerima's] primary concern; instead, Gerima makes *Bush Mama* into a contradictory canvas for both hope and despair" (234). Massood writes, "[…] while Dorothy is ostensibly the 'lead' of the film, we are denied exclusive identification with her point of view. In fact, Dorothy is more a symbolic representation of black inner-city

arguing for the film's substratal populism. Cynthia Young has tried both tacts. She has claimed that "*Bush Mama* ultimately tells a double narrative about Dorothy's development and the artist-intellectual's humility in the face of working-class common sense."[84] Her evidence comes from Dorothy's letter. Because the letter signals Dorothy's incipient "critique of intellectuals" ("talk easy"), it thereby also suggests that "Black consciousness and empowerment will not be a matter of simple transmission from the vanguard to the masses; rather, it will take open collaboration, a willingness of intellectuals to be schooled by the working class as much as the reverse."[85] But in fact, Dorothy's injunction to "talk easy," "her critique of intellectuals," does not cast the exchange as dialogic at all; it merely calls for greater monologic perspicuity.

My emphasis here is on the very different account of the state of black consciousness generated in the two films. While *Killer* suggests that Stan derives his inner sustenance, his clarity, his self-consciousness from a past rich in an unalienated intercourse with nature and in exposure to an authentic African-American folklore,[86] Gerima has little use for diasporic cultural practices in *Bush Mama* and shows little faith in *lumpen* consciousness absent instruction. Perhaps the difference in perspective owes to the difference between the working class subject of *Killer of Sheep* and the *lumpen* proletariat subject of *Bush Mama*. Perhaps it owes to the salutary effect of Stan's rural roots. Either way, we can see that the two films inflect the question of coming to consciousness entirely differently. In *Killer*, it is not Stan who must come to consciousness; it is the spectator that must catch up to Stan, that must grasp anew the contradictions of the society, though perhaps not revolutionary violence as its resolution. It is actually Burnett's film, and not Gerima's, that calls for "artist-intellectual's humility in the face of working-class common sense."

Despite the different approaches to consciousness that have been underplayed in the scholarly literature, *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep*, the seminal films of the L.A. School, are ultimately similar in their efforts to redeem the black image in film. Paula Massood is thus quite right when she writes, "Unlike many

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humanity than an individual. Her problems are community problems; her needs and desire are those shared by the community" (112-3).

[84] Young, Soul Power : Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left 239.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Massood echoes this view when she writes, "In using folk references in one of the rare scenes of connection among family members, Burnett suggests that the welfare of Stan, of his family, and of the community as a whole, is dependent upon the maintenance of an historical perspective that acknowledges a southern, or rural, past" (39). See Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse."

African American filmmakers working within the mainstream, members of the L.A. School expressed an explicitly political agenda that extended beyond profit-making and the superficial interrogation of representation; instead they were concerned with what they saw as the internal colonization of African Americans and film's role in the construction of subjectivity and self-respect" (23). But neither Burnett nor Gerima pursue a flatfooted version of the positive images approach whereby an archive of negative images are countered by the depiction of "good" black role models. If Burnett contributes to this project by granting his characters a thoughtful interiority they are denied in most mainstream representations, Gerima contributes a sense of the heterogeneity of the black community as each of the voices circulating in Dorothy's head represent a different negotiation of societal conditions.[87] Murashige has remarked on this feature in *Bush Mama*: "In presenting multiple narratives [T.C.'s, Angi's, Simmi's, etc.], insufficient in themselves yet powerful when assembled into an entire picture of resistance, Gerima resists the idea of a master narrative of opposition and liberation. Part of the community's strength lies in its ability to generate multiple narratives which all, in some particularity, address the crisis and provide the space, small as it may be, for critique and resistance to dominant narratives."[88] This heterogeneity implicitly challenges the thrust of stereotypic representation: namely the implicit view that stereotyped groups are monolithic and immutable. The claim for diversity within the group is a strike at the essentialism of racist discourses.

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[87] It may be worth noting that this strategy—of juxtaposing several competing voices—is one that is frequently used by Spike Lee. Critics like bell hooks have complained about this strategy, accusing Lee of using "many stereotypical and archetypal figures (the 'wino,' the wise 'matriarchal' black woman, the 'hound dog' who is obsessed with sexuality)"(176) in *Do the Right Thing*, figures that lack all complexity. See Bell Hooks, Yearning : Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (London: Turnaround, 1991). But I think hooks misunderstands. While it is true that Lee's characters often lack complexity, this tact serves his films. Each character provides an argument in what turns out to be a larger debate about what ails the community. The characters—Mookie ("I gots to get paid"), Jade ("I'm down for something positive in the community"), Da Mayor ("Always do the right thing"), mother sister, the Korean grocers ("I Black…You…Me same"), Buggin Out ("Who told you to buy a brownstone, on my block, in my neighborhood, on my side of the street?... Motherfuck gentrification"), Celtics fan ("As I understand it, this is a free country. A man can live wherever he wants"), Radio Raheem, Pino, Vito, Coconut Sid, Sweet Dick Willie, ML ("Look at those Korean motherfuckers across the street. I bet they haven't been off the boat a year before they open up their own place…Either them Korean motherfuckers are geniuses or you black asses are just pain dumb"), etc...—act almost like voice boxes, each for a discrete argumentative line. In this way, the film orchestrates a debate in which the spectator is invited to choose among heterogeneous views. Lee employs a similar strategy in *Bamboozled* with different characters taking conflicting positions on minstrelsy.

[88] Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," 198.

VIII

If it was Fanon that seemed to lend to the Los Angeles School "a sense of political and intellectual legitimacy and guidance in its quest for a particular form of 'Third Worldism,'"[89] it was Cuban revolutionary cinema that provided an emulable model in the realm of filmmaking, according Ntongela Masilela, the most cited commentator on the L.A. School. It was Cuban revolutionary cinema more than perhaps any other Third Cinema practice that inspired the L.A. School. But the problematic faced by Cuban pioneers such as Tómas Gutierrez Alea, Humberto Solás, Julio Garcia Espinosa was quite distinct from that of the other practitioners of Third Cinema. Whereas the cinema of elsewhere often pursued the theme of armed struggle (e.g. *La hora de los hornos*), the Cubans were singularly focused on the vicissitudes of consciousness: how to put cinema to work toward the formation of a new socialist man. Cuban cinema from the first was not interested in provoking revolution, but in playing a role in forging a new Cuban cultural identity. This orientation toward consciousness may be seen in a film like *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), in which the "underdevelopment" of the title refers not to Paul Baran's economic category, but rather, to a species of psychosocial inferiority complex that accompanies the (neo)colonial condition so poignantly elaborated in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. It is worth emphasizing that the Cuban cultural strategy pursued the socialist project at the level of consciousness *concurrently* with a program at the level of politics and resource redistribution. The divestment from the old forms of bourgeois thought were conceived as the *necessary correlate* to transformation at the level of politics and economy, though certainly not sufficient in itself. If the later New Latin American Cinema outside of Cuba was inspired by the Cuban example—if Cuban revolutionary cinema's concerns were generalized across the region—, it importantly must have imagined that a cinema of consciousness could function similarly in radically different political contexts, it must not have grasped that the task of political cinema in the post-revolution context is objectively different from its task in the pre-revolution context.

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[89] Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School," IJELE: Art EJournal of the African World Issue 5 (2002).

The influence of Cuban Cinema was "profound, immediate, undeniable" claims Masilela;[90] just note the similarities between Humberto Solás' *Lucía* (1968) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), between Tomás Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* and Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years* and *Sankofa*.[91] This assertion is odd (even symptomatic), in no obvious sense born out by even the most cursory examination of the films named. Perhaps the parallel between Alea and Gerima is not entirely off, but I would argue that it actually applies only in the case of *Bush Mama* and its link to *Memories of Underdevelopment*. Both are films about coming to consciousness, the former invites the viewer's identification with a character (Dorothy) who arrives at consciousness by the end of the film and the latter with a character's (Sergio) mixed, contradictory consciousness in order that the spectator can recognize the remnants of bourgeois consciousness in himself.

Alea's lifetime preoccupation with consciousness, manifest in his oeuvre, makes him an especially important figure for Third Cinema—the cinematic practice devoted to its awakening. But even so, Alea was working on a peculiarly Cuban consciousness problem: the imperfect synergy between the taking of state power and the transformation of the ideas in people's heads. In other words, he was addressing the realization that a socialist revolution does not transform minds overnight; if the Revolution was going to carry out its policies and regenerate itself from day to day and from generation to generation, it needed to construct a new subject, a new man—differently oriented to the social world, exorcized of bourgeois ideology.

Masilela has claimed that "The Cuban cinema imparted to the Los Angeles School a particular perspective and understanding of the relationship between revolution and art in revolutionary times"[92] and that, "As with Cuba, the importance of the Latin American Cinema for members of the Los Angeles film school resided in its uncompromising examination of the relationship between film and national culture."[93] But it bears mentioning that the L.A. School was not operating in revolutionary times, but in pre-revolutionary times. And Cuban cinema's understanding of art in post-revolutionary times is consistent with

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," 110.

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Fanon's analysis of national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth*: the revolution was the keystone that made the building of a national culture possible, but the culture under construction, with the help of *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC), signaled a break with what had come before; there was no trace of the archaeological instinct as far as culture was concerned. The turn to history so evident in the work of Humberto Sólas or Sergio Giral (another L.A. School favorite) should not be confused with the archaeological spirit that animates Masilela's film comparisons above. Rather, the turn to history could be explained by the effort on the part of the Cubans, in historical materialist fashion, to recast the past as a dialectic, a series of episodes in the history of Cuban class conflict that would eventually lead to the Revolution; it turned the Revolution into the natural, inevitable culmination of Cuban history.

When Masilela approvingly notes that the opening of *Daughters of the Dust* with its "African polyrhythms" bears the influence of the pre-credit sequence of *Memories of Underdevelopment*, he reveals the vacuity of his comparison. For, while it is true that *Memories of Underdevelopment* opens with a scene of an outdoor popular, community dance—which Julianne Burton describes as "dancing couples—detached, absorbed—gyrating to the insistent beat of Afro-Cuban drums"[94]—, the music and the dancing do not signify the national culture that the film embraces. And the "African polyrhythms" detectable in the song that plays, "Donde esta Teresa?" by Pello el Afrokán, are not quite the point even if the Afro-Cuban woman (not a character in the film) on whom the camera freeze frames before cutting to the narrative is the point (figure 23). Julianne Burton has argued that but for the atypical, cinema verité approach to the shooting, this "stereotypical vision of Cuban life" would have been "virtually *de rigeur* in films made in Cuba throughout the country's ignominious pre-revolutionary cinema history."[95] The archetypal vision is ultimately disrupted by a shooting in the midst of the revelers (who ignore it and keep dancing) and the viewer is thus jolted out of his passive contemplation of what Burton calls the "illusion of exoticism" but what Masilela would perhaps call "African polyrhythms."

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[94] Julianne Burton, "*Memories of Underdevelopment* in the Land of Overdevelopment," <u>Memories of Underdevelopment</u> (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 236.
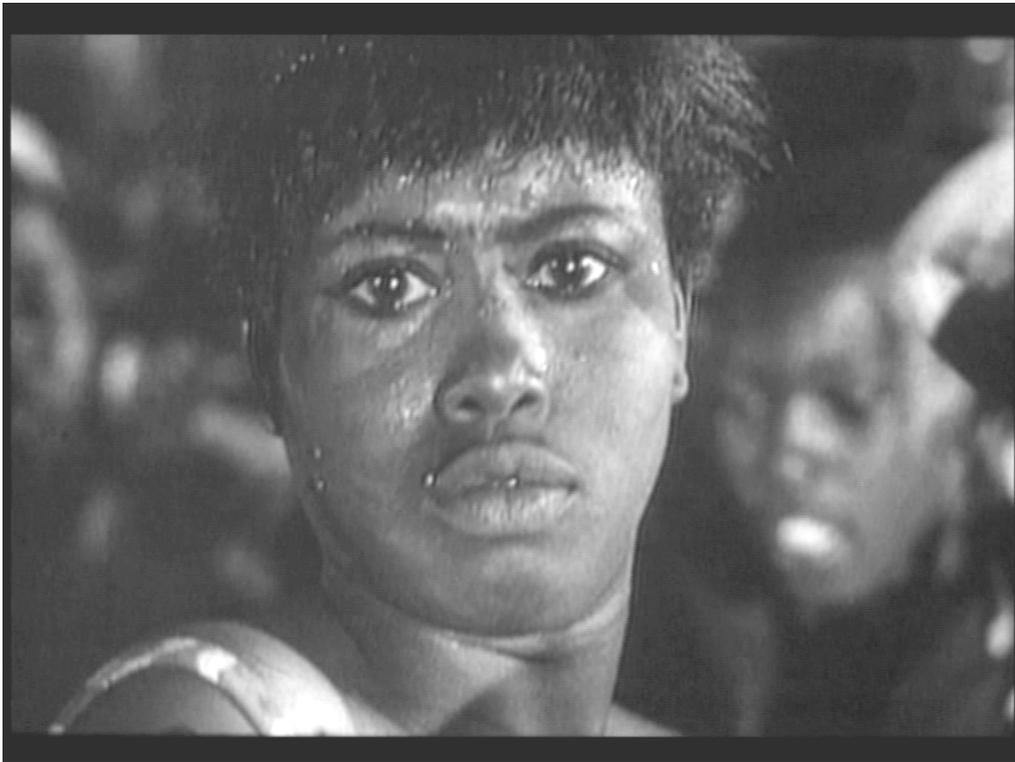[95] Ibid.

Figure 23. Freeze framed image ends the credit sequence of *Memorias* (1968)
Memorias del subdesarrollo [*Memories of Underdevelopment*] **(New Yorker Films, 1968)**

There is no question that Sergio (Sergio Corrieri), the protagonist of *Memories of Underdevelopment*, suffers from cultural colonialism: he has always tried to "live like a European," he tells his proletarian girlfriend, Elena, as they make their way through an exhibit of abstract art at the Belles Artes Museum. This admission is perhaps the most striking feature of the destructive legacy of (neo)colonialism and the psychology of underdevelopment. Alea, in an article written for the film's tenth anniversary, writes of Sergio's condition: "His contrariness and the source of his dissension lie in knowing himself to be alienated by cultural patterns foreign to his own environment, and nevertheless unable to struggle to assert himself. He is already a defeated man who reveals the cultural colonization that has victimized us throughout our history, the consequence of which, within the revolution, is located in a general sense of underdevelopment." Echoing this theme, one of the film's posters features the two ancient Greek columns in what looks like the process of restoration. Still, the film does *not* contrast Sergio's apartment full of contemporary European art or his mania

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for tracing the outlines of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* with a positive conception of the "authentic" Cuban national alternative—typified by the pre-credit sequence with its "African polyrhythms"—that he rejects. The film itself stands in for the alternative; it is itself national culture and mixes, indiscriminately, cinematic styles associated with other national cinemas and figures including Godard, Italian Neorealism, Eisenstein, Vertov.

Figure 24. *Memorias* (1968) Film Poster

As for the freeze frame on a close-up of an Afro-Cuban woman, sweat droplets covering her face, who is she? The face of the new nation or of the old, underdeveloped one?[96] Does it establish Cuba as a symbolically black nation? Perhaps. The film, from this opening sequence, invites a Fanonian reading. Its subject is cultural colonization and what text elaborates this condition more compellingly than *Black Skin, White Masks*? The dilemma articulated by the film takes up where Fanon leaves off. Once the revolution takes place, what then of cultural colonialism's lingering legacy? What is the remedy to its depredations? Tómas Gutierrez Alea offers no blueprints.

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[96] For example, Fernando Perez, a Cuban film critic, commenting on the film's opening sequence describes the last freeze frame like this: "In the end, it [camera] fixes itself in front of the startled face of a young black woman, sweating, panting,…underdeveloped?" (228). See Fernando Pérez, "A Dialectical and Partisan Film," Ibid.

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IX

In this chapter, I have tried to provide a general context for seeing the L.A. School's links to two sources of influence: Third Cinema and the work of Frantz Fanon. There is no question that L.A. School films bear the imprint of these influences, yet I have emphasized differences over similarities in order to counter the available scholarship that has failed to take seriously enough the relevant political distinctions. The failures of current scholarship manifest in a dearth of close readings of even the most seminal films of the L.A. School. I have tried to address this failure.

5.0 THE PRICE OF HEAVEN: REMAKING POLITICS IN *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS*, *ALI: FEAR EATS THE SOUL*, AND *FAR FROM HEAVEN*

I

Commentators on Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven (2002)* have often pointed out that it is a remake of Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows*, a 1955 family melodrama about a bourgeois widow who begins an affair with her young gardener only to be ostracized by her high-society peers. Like Sirk's original, Haynes's remake is set in a suburban hamlet in the northeast circa 1957. Unlike the original, Haynes's film dispenses with the class and generational conflicts of *All that Heaven Allows*, replacing these with conflicts over interracial love and sexual orientation.

But Haynes's film is not the first reworking of *All that Heaven Allows.* Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 film, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, also revises Sirk's original. Fassbinder's version depicts the troubled affair of an elderly German cleaning woman and a significantly younger, black Moroccan "guest worker" who has come to Munich as part of Germany's post-war labor recruitment program.

Many writers have observed that Haynes's film stands in a complicated relation both to the two earlier texts, and to the contemporary moment. Some have argued that this is an "historical" film, bent on exposing the less than pristine realities secreted away behind the smooth patina of Eisenhower's America, and obscured by representations of the time (like Sirk's) that were constrained by convention and the Production Code.[1] Others have said that *Far from Heaven* arrogantly condescends to the past, overconfident that there has been significant social progress in the intervening years.[2]

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[1] See, for instance, Sharon Willis, "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk," <u>Camera Obsura 54</u> 18.4 (2003). Robert Sklar, "*Far from Heaven* Review," <u>Cineaste</u> 28.2 (2003); Amy Taubin, "In Every Dream House," <u>Film Comment</u> 38.5 (2002).
[2] See James Harvey, "Made in Heaven," <u>Film Comment</u> 39.2 (2003).

I will argue, conversely, that *Far from Heaven* eludes many of the categories that would allow us to make sense of either its relation to Sirk and Fassbinder, or its relation to the contemporary moment. By setting its narrative in the same time and place as the original, rather than updating them, *Far from Heaven* fails to do what most remakes do. Nor does *Far from Heaven* quite fit Fredric Jameson's category of the "nostalgia film"—a film that evokes a past by imitating the stylistic tropes of that historical moment's representations of itself, but that is neither properly historical nor contemporary. Haynes's film is too self-reflexive to fit this description.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to making sense of *Far from Heaven*'s relation to the present is its seemingly banal treatment of race and sexual orientation. The displays of racism and homophobia and the surface-level injunction to tolerance and color blindness seem, from a contemporary vantage point, hopelessly outdated. If we insist on such a flatfooted reading, we are forced to conclude that *Far from Heaven* is indeed an "historical film" bent on highlighting our social progress, the difference between then and now, past and present; and we are left feeling an uneasy sort of relief that at least times change.

Ultimately, I will argue for a reading of all three films that casts *Far from Heaven* as a film responding to the problematic of coalition politics set up in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, which in turn recasts *All that Heaven Allows* as a film about identity and class politics. In doing so, I will propose an alternative reading of *Far from Heaven*'s seemingly straightforward, and ultimately banal, critique of the racism and homophobia of fifties society. I will argue that what is being represented is not so much the twin ills of a bygone era, but the contemporary crisis over who, properly, constitutes the subject of historical agency. The film deconstructs the promise of identity politics and the coalitions forged on their basis. And as it disavows identity politics at the level of the narrative, the film distances itself from the melodramatic mode at the level of generic mode. The interest of Haynes's film lies in the way it questions the ability of the moralizing mode of melodrama to address the social issues of the contemporary historical moment.

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According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is the cultural correlate of a third stage of capitalism, what he calls "late" or "multinational" capitalism. Postmodernism is characterized by, among other things, the erosion of historicity—that is, the loss of "the perception of the present as history."[3] Genuine historicity would entail a representation that achieves a defamiliarization of the present, one that "allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective."[4] The nostalgia mode in film is just one more symptom of the postmodern erosion of historicity.

For Jameson, the nostalgia film may be understood narrowly or broadly.[5] Narrowly conceived, it includes films set in the past and "about specific generational moments of that past";[6] *American Graffiti* (George Lucas), a 1973 film about the 1950s, or *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski), a 1974 film about the 1930s, would fit this description, as would any "historical film." Yet, for Jameson, this approach to the past is inevitably pervaded by pastiche, defined as the "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style … without parody's ulterior motive."[7] These films about the past are "never really a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approach[ed] the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion."[8]

In Jameson's broader conception, a nostalgia film is any film—set in the past or in the present—that makes use of pastiche. And inasmuch as they typically make use of pastiche, remakes are paradigmatic examples of nostalgia films.[9] Jameson uses *Body Heat*—the 1981 remake of *Double Indemnity*—as an example. Set in a contemporary (1981) Florida context, the film makes use of pastiche in its choice of Art Deco credits and in the virtual absence of the objects of late capitalism.[10]

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[3] Fredric Jameson, <u>Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism</u>, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 284.
[4] Ibid.
[5] See for a critique of Jameson's taxonomy, see Anne Friedberg, "Les Flaneurs Du Mal(L): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition," <u>PMLA</u> 106.3.
[6] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," <u>The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture</u>, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1998) 133.
[7] Ibid. 131.
[8] Jameson, <u>Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism</u> 19.
[9] Ibid. 134.
[10] Ibid.

What the nostalgia film does, on either conception, is turn the viewer's present moment into an eternal past that is beyond real historical time and thus closed off to the intervention of human agency. The resulting representation is neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the present, both of which necessarily elude us in this new historical situation.[11] For Jameson, it is not the case that genuine historicity would allow a representation of the "real past" (i.e., something other than a simulacrum of the past), but rather that historicity "can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history."[12]

Far from Heaven appears to be a nostalgia film on both the broad and the narrow conceptions, and therefore doubly nostalgic: it is set in the past (1957), and it is a remake of Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* that indulges in pastiche. But I will argue that *Far From Heaven* does not do what nostalgia films do—it does not efface the present.[13]

The first thing to notice is that *Far from Heaven* is not a typical remake.[14] In his discussion of the remake, Thomas Leitch identifies four kinds of remake, each characterized by a different stance toward the original: the "readaptation," the "update," the "homage," and the "true remake."[15] The first two are not relevant to this discussion, as they primarily engage the filmic remake's relation to a classic literary text. The third taxonomic category sketched by Leitch is the "homage," which has been mainly a European trend. The homage treats its cinematic precursor as a classic "in danger of being ignored or forgotten."[16] The homage defines the relation between two cinematic texts—it valorizes the earlier one without trying to replace it. It is a film that has no life outside of its intertextual relation to the original; it succumbs entirely to

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[11] Ibid. 21.
[12] Ibid. 284.
[13] Pam Cook, in *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, considers *Far from Heaven* to be a "nostalgic memory film" which is defined by the way it "reconstructs an idealized past as a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning"(4). But for Cook, unlike for Jameson, nostalgia, understood as a yearning for that which is lost forever, is not inherently reactionary: "it can be perceived as a way of coming to terms with the past, as enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on" (4). See Pam Cook, Screening the Past : Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005).
[14] Some commentators argue that *Far from Heaven* is not a remake at all. See Ibid; Laura Mulvey, "Review," Sight and Sound 13.3.
[15] Thomas Leitch, "Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake," Dead Ringers: The Remake in Theory and Practice, eds. Jennifer Forrest and Leonard Koos (Albany: SUNY, 2002). For competing taxonomies, see also Michael B. Druxman, Make It Again, Sam : A Survey of Movie Remakes (South Brunswick [N.J.]: A. S. Barnes, 1975); Harvey Roy Greenberg, "Raiders of the Lost Text: Remaking as Contested Homage in *Always*," Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes, eds. Andrew Horton and Stuart McDougal (Berkeley: University of California, 1991). I discuss only Leitch because his taxonomy is most attuned to the temporal dimension (i.e., to the significance of updating or not), which I think is key to making sense of these films. For an assessment of these approaches and the taxonomic enterprise in general, see Constantine Verevis, Film Remakes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
[16] Thomas Leitch, "Twice-Told Tales: The Rhetoric of the Remake," Film and Literature Quarterly 18.3: 144.

the authority of the original. The homage manages the "enabling paradox" of the remake—that it is like the original, only better—by opting out, by relinquishing any assertion of superiority.[17] *Far from Heaven* should not be considered an homage because it is not primarily allusive: while it clearly hopes to refocus attention on a forgotten master, it also provokes a broader examination of the representational strategies of that master. *Far from Heaven* retains an autonomy and ambition of its own, which is not characteristic of the homage.[18]

The fourth species of remake, the "true remake," is, for Leitch, the paradigmatic form of the remake. The true remake relies most visibly on a triangular relationship between three texts: an original (usually a literary text), which it tries to usurp; a second remake, which it borrows from but disavows; and itself. Using *Body Heat* as an example, Leitch argues that the elements of pastiche, the evocations of the 1940s, function to call attention to *Double Indemnity* in order to disavow its own discursive markers; then it "liberates values that were present in the story [James Cain's novel] all along but were obscured by the circumstances of its earlier incarnation [*Double Indemnity*],"[19] namely unseen sexual content. The true remake claims the story and concomitant prestige of the original and updates that story, then it borrows the discourse of its cinematic precursor while disavowing its story. The effect is that, "[t]he [true] remake … takes what is presented as a classic, timeless story and updates it—partly by the paradoxical attempt to remove all markers of any historical period whatever."[20] This is accomplished by a systematic effacement of signs of the remake's period through the mining of a past discursive incarnation (the second version). "The true remake is pretending, in effect, that it has no discourse of its own to become outdated";[21] it presents itself as a work outside of time.

Far from Heaven may be said to be involved in this kind of triangular relationship, situating itself *vis á vis* both Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* and Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, to which it does not make explicit reference. But while Leitch's true remake is engaged in disavowing both its intertextuality and its own textuality in a struggle against time, *Far from Heaven* disavows neither, citing a source—Douglas Sirk—for

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[17] Ibid.: 145.
[18] In *Film Remakes*, Constantine Verevis categorizes both *Far from Heaven* and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* as homages. It seems quite clear that *Ali* does not imagine itself to be a secondary text at all, but one that attempts to apply certain of Sirk's insights to Fassbinder's own, more radical project. It is more plausible to claim that *Far from Heaven* is an homage; but, as I hope to demonstrate, Haynes's film is less recuperative and historical and more generative and contemporary. See Verevis, <u>Film Remakes</u>.
[19] Ibid. 53.
[20] Ibid. 52.
[21] Ibid. 53.

both. The film copies Sirk's discourse more closely than his story. *Far From Heaven* copies scenes and sequences from Sirk almost verbatim (including the credits), while making major adjustments to Sirk's story. Because it explicitly locates itself in the past—the fifties—it cannot be said to be pretending it is contemporary either. It is peculiar in that it does not update the original as *Body Heat* updates its original, *Double Indemnity*, simultaneously employing simulacra of the forties while eschewing the explicit reference. Rather, *Far From Heaven* produces the original as the original: the diegetic time of the original and its copy are the same (though produced close to fifty years apart, both are set in 1950s New England), and Sirk's aesthetics have been closely reproduced.[22]

The obvious question is: Why present a remake as an original—why "re-do" a film? One answer is that the project of the film is, as Sharon Willis puts it, "archeological":[23] it aims to excavate the social reality of fifties desire, a reality that could not have been presented in the original.[24] Following this reading, *Far from Heaven* is a backward-looking historical film that aims to represent the "real past" and fails—as nostalgia films inevitably do. But this reading cannot account for the imitation of Sirkian aesthetics and the observance of certain production codes of the time (e.g., the prohibition against interracial sex on screen), and it turns *Far from Heaven* into just another example of postmodern artistic production à la Jameson.

I would argue, however, that *Far From Heaven* "re-does" *All that Heaven Allows* not in order to expose the dirty laundry of the past, but rather in order to say something about the present. *Far From Heaven* is a very special kind of remake. If most remakes update the time and/or place of the original, but keep the narrative roughly the same, *Far from Heaven* imitates the discourse and preserves the historical setting of the original, but modifies the story in significant ways. By presenting the same story in a different historical setting, most remakes emphasize the timelessness of the story. By presenting a different story in the same historical setting

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[22] Even Verevis, who is skeptical about "purely textual descriptions of the remake, particularly those which seek to ground the category in a rigid distinction between an original story and its new discursive incarnation" (28), thinks that the repetition of narrative units in the remake "most often … relate to the content … rather than to the form … of the film" (21). He mentions *Far from Heaven* as a rare example of the way such talk (of story and discourse) can be "frustrated by those remakes which repeat not only the narrative invention of an original property but seek…to recreate the expressive design of an earlier film" (28). I would only add that the uncommonness of this kind of repetition requires special attention. See Ibid.

[23] Willis, "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk," 135.

[24] Pam Cook has expressed a similar view. Cook writes: "*Far from Heaven* digs beneath the surface to uncover the fractures in the 1950s vision of the happy heterosexual couple and the white middle-class family that formed the basis of the burgeoning consumer economy" (13); "Todd Haynes' probing beneath the surfaces of Sirk's melodramas reveals a hidden American history" (15). See Cook, Screening the Past : Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema.

with roughly the same aesthetics, *Far from Heaven* emphasizes the adjustments it has made to the narrative; herein lies its contemporaneity. The contemporary content of *Far from Heaven* is, as it were, the arithmetic difference between its narrative and that of the original. This difference is what needs to be explained.

Far from Heaven may be a species of remake, but it is not a nostalgia film, at least not in spirit. For it does no stage the past as present, and thus timeless. Nor does it stage the past as true history, the way an historical film does. Rather, it casts the present as past history, forcing us to register our historical situatedness. In Jameson's terms, it may be considered an attempt to recuperate historicity and fashion an "aesthetic representation of our own current experience."[25] For it manages to put the past (represented by a discourse that self-consciously presents itself as discourse and not as reality) and the present (represented by new story content) together in the same frame. *Far from Heaven* forces one to ask: "What has changed since then?"

Far from Heaven receives a measure of its timeliness from the adjustments it makes, at the level of narrative, to *All that Heaven Allows*. These adjustments involve the expansion of identity positions, from class and gender in *All that Heaven Allows* to race, gender, and sexuality in *Far from Heaven*. But the adjustments owe much to Fassbinder's own reworking of Sirk's film in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. Haynes's impulse is not toward a timeless depiction, but the reverse. Time, history, and the nature of change are the subject of the film, which is why this particular kind of remake is fitting.

III

All that Heaven Allows is the story of a middle-aged bourgeois widow, Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), her affair with a younger gardener, Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), and the community that shuns her because of the relationship. The nature of Cary's transgression is ambiguous. Does the disapproval of the community and her children owe more to Ron's age, or his class? Is the object of their ridicule the inappropriateness of female desire or that of cross-class fraternizing? From the outside, it looks as though only desire could explain their relationship. What else could Cary want with a "gardener" but sex ("a good looking set of muscles," as

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[25] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 135.

her son puts it)? And what else could Ron want with Cary but her money? The age conflict refers us back to the class conflict; the two are inextricably linked, but the film obscures the nature of the latter.[26]

Cary's Stoningham community misrecognizes the union between Cary and Ron as one that transgresses class barriers as well as breaching decorum.[27] Ron may be working as a gardener, but he is not a wage laborer; he is not selling his labor-power for an hourly fee: he is a member of the bourgeoisie. Perhaps this is why Cary constantly reassures her children and friends that "if they knew him, they would like him." They would like him if only they knew what she knows—namely, that he is not only a gardener, but also a successful small businessman.

Early in the film, when Ron first introduces himself to Cary, he establishes the basis of the distinction. He tells Cary that: 1) he is old Kirby's son, inheritor of the business, and not a hired worker; 2) he has studied agriculture in school (i.e., he is in some sense a professional); and 3) yard work is not essential to his livelihood—he has better things in store, namely, his nursery business (so he probably will not be coming back next autumn). The relationship is consolidated only after Ron is tied to the American philosophical legacy of Henry David Thoreau. With this philosophical foundation, Ron's status as "just" a gardener is fully disavowed, and romance becomes possible.

In her essay "Melodrama Revisited," Linda Williams posits that the primary ideological function of the melodramatic film text is to deliver moral legibility, or the assignation of guilt and innocence in a post-sacred world in which the surface of reality is deceptive, masking the hidden source of all value and meaning. The melodramatic text delivers this moral legibility by focusing on victim-heroes and the "the recognition of

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[26] For more on the relation between the age and class conflict in the film, see Chuck Kleinhans, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism," Film Reader 3 (1978). For an assessment of the relation between the conflicts of social class and "sex class" in Sirk films, see Michael Selig, "Contradiction and Reading: Social Class in *Imitation of Life*," Wide Angle 10.4. For a historical review of the auteurist orientation of Sirk criticism and for a critical assessment of scholarly close reading as a Film Studies methodology, see Barbara Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning : History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[27] The misrecognition of the community is most obviously manifested in the language that is used to discuss Ron's vocation: He is repeatedly referred to as a "gardener." When Sara, Cary's best friend, learns of the affair, she asks incredulously: "You can't be serious. Your gardener?" The high-society cocktail party-goers similarly inquire, "A gardener?" to which another replies, "Why doesn't he find himself a better money-making vocation?" Even Cary's son, Ned, before he meets Ron, is disturbed by his mother's impending marriage to "old Kirby, the gardener['s]" son, to which Cary replies, "You don't know him." Ned answers, "We know the *type*."

a hidden or misunderstood virtue."[28] In *All that Heaven Allows*, Ron is the character of unrecognized virtue: it is his virtue that Cary and the viewer come to see, and that the Stoningham elite does not.[29] But in what does Ron's virtue consist? He is virtuous inasmuch as he has rejected the consumerism of the country club set. Let us be clear: he rejects this consumerism *on principle*. Virtue is shown here by freely chosen actions.[30] And Ron *can* be virtuous in this way precisely because he is not really the wage laborer that he appears to be. The wage laborer is not a wage laborer by choice: he cannot quit civilization, retreating to his inherited plot of land in the country to grow green beans in solitude. Ron appears in the film—wielding Thoreau, a good chunk of land, and a beloved nursery project—as if to say, "I am not like a regular gardener: somewhat disempowered, with few choices, forced to tend to your trees now so that my children won't have to. I have an education. I have land. I have trees. I have choices. And I *choose* freely an alternative lifestyle because yours is corrupt." Had Ron been cast as a "real" wage laborer, his censure of Cary's world would have looked comparatively weaker: a worker's declaration of moral contempt for such a world would seem like *ressentiment* and not the action of a free and noble individual. The sign of Ron's virtue is simultaneously the sign of his class position *and* the basis of Cary's admiration and of the community's misunderstanding.

There can be little doubt that *All that Heaven Allows* contains a critique of consumer society. But the critique is moralistic and not political in that it targets wayward individuals, not dysfunctional systems. Cary's people are craven: if pressed, they would recognize the superiority of Ron's principles to theirs, but still they could not live by them. Ron's alternative idyllic natural world is cast as a non-exploitative, simple commodity-producing utopia peopled with charming petit bourgeois artisans wringing their means of life

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[28] Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," <u>Refiguring American Film Genres</u>, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 8. Williams adapts Peter Brooks's treatment of the melodramatic mode in literature to film. See Peter Brooks, <u>The Melodramatic Imagination : Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess</u>, Columbia University Press Morningside ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[29] Perhaps it could be argued that Cary is also a victim-hero. After all, like Ron, her self-sacrifice goes unrecognized by her children and results indirectly in her headache symptoms. But I would add that to the degree that she comes to share Ron's ethical principles, so too does her virtue multiply in our eyes. If her love object were a scoundrel, would the breakup seem like such a self-sacrificing act? In other words, our perception of her victimization depends on our reading of Ron.

[30] It is often the case in melodrama that virtue is usually shown by suffering. In *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, Linda Williams has persuasively argued that in melodrama, victimization and suffering count as proof of virtue "for if virtue is not obvious, suffering … is" (29). My point is only that Ron is an exception to this rule. His virtue is demonstrated not so much by suffering (although he is shown to suffer at the hands of the Stoningham elite) as by deeds, freely chosen actions, which could only have been undertaken by a man in Ron's position. See Linda Williams, <u>Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson</u> (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

from land, sea, and air. Ron and his friends value nature, authenticity, craftsmanship, and, ultimately, unalienated manual labor. They struggle—sufficiently free from material need—to realize their principles in practice. This is a conflict of values, and not a class conflict: it is a quibble internal to the bourgeoisie.

Jon Halliday has remarked that Sirk built into this film "*the history of the concealed disintegration of the society.*"[31] He set the film in New England, "the place where contemporary America started, and started to go wrong."[32] In Halliday's view, "Hudson and his trees are both America's past and America's ideals. They are ideals which are unattainable—and, when they actually offer themselves in concrete form, are swiftly rejected by Wyman and her bourgeois friends on her behalf."[33] But, in fact, it is not the ideals that are rejected. Cary's friends know nothing of Ron's ideals: they assume that Ron is what he appears to be, namely a wage laborer. Cary is not unlike her friends: she just knows *more* about Ron. She admires him precisely *for* his ideals, as they probably would also. Neither Cary nor her friends have a competing worldview or set of principles with which to challenge Ron's; their actions and reactions are cynical, marked by an unthinking pragmatism, devoid of utopian aspirations. If Cary rejects Ron (temporarily), it is for practical reasons, out of convenience, and *with* the knowledge that in another sort of world, she, too, could live by such principles (figure 25). The ideals themselves are not contested in the film.[34]

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[31] Jon Halliday and Laura Mulvey, eds., <u>Douglas Sirk</u> (Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972) 61. (emphasis original).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] It must be admitted that if Cary and Ron share the same ideals, they probably have a different assessment of how to behave in light of the gulf between "real life" and the ideal. For Ron, the ethical point of view dictates that one should act *as if* the "real world" were the ideal world; for Cary, to do so is hopelessly utopian. The conflict is not over *what* the "good" values are, but the conditions of possibility for the pursuit of those values.

**Figure 25. Cary (Jane Wyman) reads from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*
in Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (Universal, 1955)**

But if the film is sympathetic to Ron's Thoreauvian ideals, why does the natural world, the synecdoche of these ideals, appear so contrived?[35] A good example of this contrivance is the appearance of a deer in the picture window at the film's end, as Cary cares for Ron after his fall from the side of the mountain.[36] Film scholars have said that the stylized representation of natural spaces serves an ironic purpose: to delegitimize the Thoreauvian ideal. But another reading is possible. The use of techniques of

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[35] Much of the critical literature around Sirk has focused on style, particularly his use of an "ironic mise-en-scène." It is worth noting that while scholars agree on the *fact* of stylization in the mise-en-scène, there is some disagreement on its effect and implications. Paul Willemen, for example, has said of Sirk's work that "It is extremely difficult to make any clear cut and precise distinction between stylization and parody" (28). See Paul Willeman, "Distantiation and Douglas Sirk," Douglas Sirk, eds. Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday (Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972). Elsewhere, Willemen has lamented the sophisticated viewer that misreads Sirk's films by "turning it into camp" (133), a danger connected with an overinvestment in parodic readings of stylization. See Paul Willeman, "Toward and Analysis of the Sirkian System," Screen 13.4 (1972/3). For a critical assessment of the use of stylization in the funeral scene featuring Mahalia Jackson in *Imitation of Life*, see Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/ Natinal Bodies: *Imitation of Life*," The Phantom Public Sphere, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1993).

[36] For this view, see John Mercer and Martin Shingler, Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004); Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres : Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). Mercer and Shingler grant that "From the opening scene of the film Ron is symbolically linked to a typically clichéd notion of nature" but agree with Schatz that the clichéd representation functions to highlight the way in which Ron's "alternative lifestyle" is not much better than the one Cary has fled. After all, "Ron … seemingly free thinking, still adopts a paternalistic attitude toward Cary, forcing her to choose between the life and security that she has known or his 'new' way of living" (67). Thus, by the film's end, the pathos of the false happy ending owes to the continuation (in a new guise) of Cary's oppression by patriarchy.

Brechtian defamiliarization to depict Ron's world (so often commented on in the Sirk literature) situate the ideal in a mythic historical past, a time before modernity.[37] In other words, the contrived natural spaces may be seen as functioning nostalgically, rather than ironically. [38]

Tracing the etymology of "nostalgia," Linda Hutcheon has noted its shift from being a seventeenth-century medical term designating severe, but curable, homesickness to a term designating an incurable psychic condition by the eighteenth-century.

> What made that transition possible was a shift in site from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home … [Sufferers] in fact, did not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. And nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact.[39]

I want to suggest that *All that Heaven Allows* is nostalgic in both these senses of the word. The film presents two different time periods contiguously: there is, on the one hand, the present of its production—the 1950s—represented by Cary's world; and on the other hand, a mythic pastoral American past the film wishes to use as the basis for its critique of the present,[40] represented by Ron's utopian world. Ron's world represents a space of innocence. One central feature of the melodramatic mode, according to Williams, is that it begins and wants to end in such a space.[41]

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[37] One could object that the mise-en-scène of Cary's world is similarly artificial. The difference is that in the case of her world, the style is consistent with the narrative: Cary's people are as inauthentic and contrived as the representation of the spaces they inhabit.

[38] Linda Hutcheon—trying to understand why postmodern artifacts can be simultaneously deemed, by different critics, as both ironic and nostalgic—argues that nostalgia and irony have gone hand in hand for a long time. Her point is that both irony and nostalgia (contrary to the Jamesonian view that casts nostalgia, but not irony, as always an obstacle to "genuine politics") are "transideological," that is, they "can be made to 'happen' by (and to) anyone of any political persuasion": nostalgia was a feature of fascism *and* negritude. (One could object that negritude too was ideologically doomed.) In Hutcheon's view, this is the case because "to call something ironic or nostalgic is, in fact, less a *description* of the ENTITY ITSELF than an *attribution* of a quality of RESPONSE" ("Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern"). Based on the same textual evidence—the contrived representation of nature—I think one could derive both readings proposed above. See Linda Hutcheon, Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern, 1998, Available: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.htm.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Following Bahktin, Hutcheon writes, "Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present--which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational." See Ibid.

[41] Williams, Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson 28.

According to Hutcheon, the pathos of nostalgic representation "depends precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past."[42] If the film's happy ending seems somehow hollow—when Cary and Ron are reunited, a deer pauses at the window—it is because Ron's world does not exist within the same temporal frame as Cary's. Situating the ideal in an irrecoverable past is the source of the film's pathos; even a nominally reunited couple cannot affect the sense that, in Linda Williams's terms, it is too late, that the real object of loss in this melodramatic text is time, a time when the ideal (always desirable) was also attainable.[43] What would the story of the disintegrating consumer society look like if there were no yardstick, no ideal, by which to measure the society's self-betrayal? The Thoreauvian point of view represents the ideal—"the good." And *All that Heaven Allows* tries to make that moral good legible, if irrecoverably remote.

That the critique of the decadent present is made under the banner of Thoreauvian transcendentalism, also notoriously nostalgic, is fitting. Sirk himself lamented that this aspect of the film had been so neglected in the film's reception.[44] Thoreau was writing in the period between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, when New England was undergoing a major "ecosocial transformation."[45] The agricultural and mercantile order of the colonial period was being replaced by the first stage of modern capitalism. The result was a starkly divided class society with new levels of immiseration, exploitation, and technological innovation.[46] Amidst these developments in the 1830s were worker's strikes, growing unrest, and the prospect of violent class warfare.[47] Faced with an organized working class and economic crisis, Thoreau's model for social change posits the priority of self-transformation.[48] Leo Marx has argued in *The*

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[42] Hutcheon, <u>Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern</u>.

[43] According to Williams, "A melodrama does not have to contain multiple scenes of pathetic death to function melodramatically. What counts is the feeling of loss suffused throughout the form. Audiences may weep or not weep, but the sense of a loss that implicates readers or audiences is central. And with this feeling of 'too late,' which Peter Brooks has explained as the longing for a fullness of being of an earlier, still-sacred universe, time and timing become all important" (18). See Williams, "Melodrama Revisited."

[44] In interviews with Jon Halliday in *Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday*, Sirk has admitted that although he did not remember much about *All that Heaven Allows,* "I do recall the following influences on me … One of the first of all American literary impacts on my thinking, when I was thirteen or fourteen, was a book my father gave me: *Walden* by Thoreau. This is ultimately what the film was about—but no one recognized it, except the head of the studio, Mr. Muhl … The picture is about the antithesis of Thoreau's qualified Rousseauism and established American society" (113-4). SeeDouglas Sirk and Jon Halliday, <u>Sirk on Sirk; Interviews with Jon Halliday</u> (New York,: Viking Press, 1972).

[45] Lance Newman, "Thoreau's National Community and Utopian Socialism," <u>American Literature</u> 75.3 (2003): 3.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.: 17. Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* has emphasized the importance of craft and art to this transformation. He has read the emphasis on self-transformation not so much as an intermediate step in the

Machine in the Garden that Thoreau's criticism of New England society is moralistic, and not political.[49]

Echoing this view, Lance Newman has said that,"Thoreau … focused, again, on the importance of ethical regeneration, of programs for the moral reform of a backslidden elite …The object of concern here is not the working class but the potentially salvageable bourgeois slave-driver of himself, who single-mindedly pursues material wealth."[50]

It is worth noting that while *All that Heaven Allows* strategically "disappears" the urban space, the white working class, and the African-American—figures whose reproach of consumer society cannot be contained by a merely ethical critique of the spiritual poverty of the elite—the hope for this society, which, as Jon Halliday said, "ha[d] lost touch with its ideals" was embodied in the figure of the diasporic immigrant. Perhaps this is not surprising, considering that Sirk himself was an émigré from Germany.

At a certain point in the film, a procession of happy, ostensibly petit bourgeois subjects parade in to party with Ron and Cary at Ron's friends' rural cottage. Each partygoer is introduced to Cary with a reference to his or her vocation: we have the beekeeper who moonlights as an "artist"; we have the bird-watcher and Audubon society volunteer; we have the plump, stubbly Mexican fisherman[51] and his Spanish-speaking wife and daughter.[52] The residents of Ron's idyllic pre-modern utopia are self-employed, and have an unalienated relationship to their own labor as well as to nature (figure 26).

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transformation of society as it is itself compensatory. See Leo Marx, <u>The Machine in the Garden : Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[49] According to Leo Marx: "It is not the material or social conditions of life, it is not capitalism, that in his [Thoreau's] view accounts for the quiet desperation felt by the mass of men: it is their own spiritual inertia" (quoted in Newman 17). See Newman, "Thoreau's National Community and Utopian Socialism."

[50] Ibid.: 10.

[51] The fisherman's accent in English sounds more like that of a native speaker of Italian than of Spanish, but his wife unmistakably speaks a few words in Spanish: "*Que bonita* [of Cary]. *Tanto gusto. Mi hija, Margarita.*" Some scholars, such as Judith Mayne, have thought them to be Italian. See Judith Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," <u>New German Critique</u> 12 (1977): 69.

[52] It is worth noting that there was a sharp rise in Latino immigration, particularly Mexican immigration, to the United States during the 1950s as a result of the new demand for immigrant labor following World War II. Bracero programs, in effect from 1942 to 1947 and from 1951 to 1964, brought Mexican laborers to do seasonal agricultural work in the United States.

Figure 26. Cary (Jane Wyman) is introduced to Ron's (Rock Hudson) friends in Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (Universal, 1955): they include an immigrant lobsterman (Nestor Paiva) and his family (Rosa Turich and Gia Scala).

But what could the immigrant have to do with Ron and his Thoreauvian ideals? The presence of immigrants that share the Thoreauvian worldview at the Anderson party might seem somewhat anomalous. Thoreau and the transcendentalists were notoriously unenthusiastic about the influx of Irish immigrants to New England in their day: they were certainly not addressing their injunctions to these newly integrated members of the working class.

On the other hand, one might think that the figure of the immigrant, unlike the native wageworker and the victims of internal colonialism (the Native American and the African American), has a certain structural affinity with Ron's position. First, like Ron, the immigrant in some sense has agency; after all he *chooses* to emigrate. Second, as a consequence of uneven and combined development—especially relevant in the case of the immigrant from the so-called Third World—the immigrant often leaves behind an agrarian,

semi-feudal way of life where he had an unalienated relationship to his labor and experienced a sense of genuine community association.[53] He has not been formed *within* industrial society (though he is perhaps inadvertently its victim) and knows nothing (yet) of the stultifying rhythms of alienated labor on the factory circuit or of the anomie of modern urban life. So *it might seem* that the immigrant has bypassed the socialization of his American contemporaries and carries within himself a consciousness corresponding to an agrarian past that is the source of all that is good and virtuous. Best of all, he brings those "old-fashioned values" into the American present, into the future maybe, with his geographic migration. He is the only one that can be said naturally and directly to bear the past's glorious imprint in the space of the American present. And he is ubiquitous—a figure whose presence has been constitutive of the nation since the beginning. It might seem that the immigrant is in fact the perfect audience for Ron's lessons; just as it might seem that the native wage laborer is a hopeless case—one without the requisite agency (the choices) necessary for such demonstrations of virtue (as Ron's), and missing a countervailing tradition, history, experience with which to contest the spiritually-backward American elite. Here we have a kind of romantic anti-capitalist rendition of the American dream.[54]

IV

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul,[55] in presenting a cross-ethnic worker solidarity, ultimately inverts *All that Heaven Allows*, which it reads as depicting not a cross-class solidarity, but rather the alliance of petit bourgeoisie and haut bourgeoisie sanctioned by an ideology of individualism. Fassbinder's film recuperates the absences of the Sirk text: the urban space, the working class, and the racial minority. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* copies neither the

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[53] According to the law of uneven development, neocolonialism impoverishes and distorts the culture and development of the colonies. The law of combined development accounts for the internal underdevelopment that accompanies these neocolonial relations. This is a situation in which "advanced" techniques and relations of production make their way into the neocolonies and exist side-by-side with (semi)feudalistic techniques and relations of production.

[54] This was the term Lukács used to refer to a pervasive late 17th century European trend that both registered the desolation of capitalism while looking back to a precapitalist time for cultural values worth rescuing. See Löwy, "Naphta or Settembrini? Lukacs and Romantic Anticapitalism."

[55] The German title is *Angst essen Seele auf*, which means, roughly, "fear eats the soul." In German, this line is ungrammatical, presumably trying to mimic the speech of a nonnative speaker of German. The U.S. title is "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul." This may reflect the working title of the film, which was "*Alle Türken heißen Ali*" ("All Turks are Named Ali"). Most scholars writing in English refer to the film as "Fear Eats the Soul," which has the disadvantage of not reflecting the grammatical error. I will refer to it here by the U.S. title, which is not a perfect solution either, but has the advantage of suggesting the way the name and character of "Ali" function allegorically in the film.

discourse nor quite the story of *All that Heaven Allows*. In some sense, it updates the Sirk film, setting the action in another place (Munich) and in a time (contemporaneous with its making; 1970s). The relationship between a much older, widowed cleaning woman and a younger man is central, though their age difference is more stark, and a racial element is added: Ali (El Hedi ben Salem) is a "guest worker," Moroccan and black; he is referred to both as "auslander [foreigner]" and "schwarz [black man]."[56] As in the earlier Sirk film, the woman, Emmi (Brigitte Mira), is ostracized by her family and community.

The mechanism of the remake is central to the internal structure of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The film is divided into two parts: the first part is a disavowal of *All that Heaven Allows*; the second part is a remake of the first. The two parts are separated in the story by a "vacation" that is not represented in the plot; they are separated on-screen by an enigmatic scene in an outdoor café.

The three-minute scene opens and closes with an extreme long shot of Ali and Emmi sitting across from each other at a yellow table; they are surrounded by dozens of similar tables and chairs, all of them empty (figure 27). Apparently they are the only patrons and entirely alone except for a small crowd of café staff staring at the couple from a nearby doorway. The dialogue closely follows the dialogue in *All that Heaven Allows* between Cary and her daughter, Kay, as Kay confesses that she cares what others think of her despite her own better judgment. Kay's disclosure deeply impacts her mother, who decides she cannot marry Ron because the marriage will adversely affect those around her. Emmi, for her part, wet from the rain and weeping, lays her head on the table and tells Ali that she cannot tolerate being rejected by the community: "I am so happy yet I can hardly stand it, the way people hate us … If only you and I were alone in the world." This last line encapsulates the theme of the first part of the film: the fallacy of a love that is "alone in the world." In the face of their troubles, Emmi proposes that they take a vacation, and go "somewhere where no one will stare at us." "When we get back," she says, "it will all be different. Everyone will be nice to us." Her prophecy is fulfilled in the second part of the film. When the couple returns from vacation, there is a marked

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[56] I recognize that "guest worker" (*gastarbeiter* in German) is a contested term used to refer to the hundreds of thousands of foreign workers recruited by the Federal Republic of Germany during the so-called economic miracle following World War II. The obvious irony of this misnomer is that guests, by definition, do not work for their hosts. Rita C. K. Chin, "Imagining a German Multiculturalism: Aras Oren and the Contested Meanings of the 'Guest Worker,' 1955-1980," <u>Radical History Review</u> 83.Spring (2002). Hereafter, I will be using this term without quotations, though in some sense I mean them.

change in people's attitude. People are, literally, *nice* to them: Ali goes from being a pariah to being sought after and admired.

Figure 27. The scene that separates the two parts of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974): Emmi (Brigitte Mira) and Ali (El Hedi ben Salem) decide to go on vacation.

The problematic of the first part of *Ali*—coming to terms with a love that is *not* alone in the world—reaches its culmination in the enigmatic café scene, but it first emerges in a conversation between Emmi and her coworkers. They are discussing the situation of a German woman who married a Turkish guest worker. The coworkers are disparaging the woman and rationalizing her subsequent alienation from the community. Responding to her coworkers, Emmi says of the married German woman, "Maybe she needs no one else, if he [her Turkish husband] speaks to her." To which her coworker replies, "No one can live without others.

No one, Emmi." The question of the autonomy of romantic love is raised here and will echo throughout the first part of *Ali*. Emmi suffers the same fate as the German woman under discussion.

The plot of the first part of the film depicts Ali and Emmi's first meeting and their subsequent social rejection. Emmi becomes more and more isolated from the social alliances of her former life: first, her neighbors find the building suddenly dirty since Ali has moved in; then her coworker refuses to shake Ali's hand or even to recognize Emmi's presence during lunch hour; then, her son kicks in her television and disowns her; then the neighborhood's petit bourgeois grocer refuses to serve Ali until he "learns" German. At the end of this first part of *Ali,* Emmi is broken, confessing that her coworker was right—the autonomy of romantic love is illusory; no one can live without others. The second part of the film then explains the nature of this dependence. While the film opens with Emmi suspended in space and time, unattached, alone in a zone of depoliticized individuality, it ends by situating her in a class context.

When Emmi and Ali return from their vacation, the scenarios of the first part of the film replay but with a difference. This difference is best exemplified by the scene that immediately follows the conversation between Ali and Emmi in the café. The petit bourgeois shopkeeper, in an exchange with his wife, reverses his position toward Emmi and Ali under the pressures of the growing dominance of the supermarket in German society.

> Wife: Anton, don't forget she was a good customer …Just walk out and say hello and everything will be fine … She'll shop here again.

> Anton: I suppose I'd better, now most of them shop at the supermarket … You're right: one can't be too particular in business.

His insight—that he'd better be nice to them—follows from the requirements of his shop: discrimination is bad in business. The petit bourgeois shopkeeper is being edged out by the undiscriminating vehicles of mass consumption such as the supermarket. In the face of such pressures, the shopkeeper recognizes Emmi and Ali as the consumers that they are and that the supermarket understands them to be. The reference to the supermarket marks the transition to a late stage of capitalism (i.e. multinational capitalism), as did the arrival of the television and Ned's new job at a multinational corporation in *All that Heaven Allows.*

The shopkeeper's logic unfolds throughout the second part of the film, in which the relations between Emmi and her neighbors, family, and coworkers confirm this market logic. Her relationships with others are shown to be determined, in the last analysis, not by predilection, or taste, or a distorted sense of decency and morality, but by need. The shopkeeper needs Emmi's business; her son Bruno (Peter Gauhe) needs her to babysit his daughter while his wife works; her neighbor needs her storage space; her coworkers need her cooperation in order to effectively petition their employer for a raise. And at Ali's place of employment, when Emmi is ridiculed by his workmates ("Is this your grandmother from Morocco?"), she confesses not that she loves Ali, but that she needs him ("I need you … I need you so much")—the old washerwoman needs the guest worker, just as the guest worker needs the washerwoman.

The coincident change of attitude in the community as a whole toward Emmi and Ali that marks the second part of the film is not explained within the diegesis. The structural repetition in the plot seems incomprehensible at the level of the story: how can it be that over the period of a "vacation," the community's attitude changes so dramatically and simultaneously? Such changes in attitude would seem to require decades, perhaps centuries. In the U.S., for example, it took decades to transition from a society characterized by segregation, discrimination, and under-representation to one that projects an image of multiracial bliss in the realm of representation while still suffering from stark racial inequality. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* begins by modeling the first kind of society (Ali is mistreated and reviled by various segments of the society) and ends by modeling the second (Ali becomes attractive, sought after, commodified). But this stark change cannot be explained temporally within the narrative; after all, the couple was only away for a short period, a worker's vacation. Yet, this is what the use of the formal strategy of the internal remake accomplishes: it condenses time. In *Ali*, the unrepresented "vacation" achieves this condensation.

This narrative break constituted by the phantom vacation of fifty years cannot withstand the plausibility requirements of realism, just as in *All that Heaven Allows* Ron's fall functions as a *deus ex machina*. In both cases, these narrative breaks should be read metaphorically; they signal temporal breaks. In *All that Heaven Allows,* the fall further confirms that Ron's ideal world belongs to a mythic pastoral past before modernity: Cary's time and Ron's may be contiguous in spatial terms, but they do not share the same

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temporal frame. Similarly, in *Ali*, the time before the vacation and after seems to correspond to two distinct historical moments. The two films are distinguished by their differing judgments about that historical past. In *All that Heaven Allows*, we said the judgment was nostalgic: the corrupt present is compared unfavorably to the glorious past. In *Ali*, the discrimination of the pre-vacation past does not appear worse than the fetishization of the post-vacation present: neither past nor present escape negative judgment.

The remake mechanism at work within the film is what allows us to see this: the second part of *Ali* remakes the first part (in precisely the way *Far from Heaven* remakes *All that Heaven Allows*), setting it in the same time and place, but adjusting its story content. The adjustment to the story turns out to be the contemporary face of racism. Because in *Ali*, the passage of time (a mere worker's vacation) cannot justify the change in attitude (i.e., the realization that discriminatory practices do not pay), the film suggests that the new attitude does not represent an advance or progress or moral epiphany, but rather, a new incarnation of the original offense. The racism Ali suffers in the first part of the film is hardly worse than the racism of the second part. Sure, "everyone is nice," but it becomes clear the problem was never a matter of "niceness" versus "meanness," but of something more fundamental. The internal remake is a useful formal strategy for undermining the commonly held view that it is "progress" or "evolution" or "moral awakening" that accounts for the changes in the treatment of minorities; the mechanism governing change is shown to be the adjustments capitalism makes necessary. The mode of production is the culprit, while the treatment of the guest worker is a superstructural reverberation. Ali's actual situation is little changed from the beginning of the film to the end. Whether he is rejected or fetishized, his circumstance is little improved; he is exploited and oppressed all the same. And this reality of exploitation Ali shares with Emmi.

In offering an economic explanation of the situation of the guest worker in Germany, *Ali* links the struggle of the black guest worker to that of the white charwoman; they are presented as aligned subjects of historical agency (figure 28).[57] The film may therefore be read as a look at the challenges of uniting a proletariat fractured by race, culture, and the unexorcised fascism of the German working class. The starkly

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[57] Another example of this emphasis on the economic may be seen in the drama of the new Yugoslav worker at Emmi's job. Emmi's coworkers exclude this new worker from their wage negotiations because they worry she will jeopardize their chances at a raise.

visible age difference between Brigitte Mira (Emmi) and El Hedi Ben Salem (Ali)—significantly exaggerated from Sirk's Wyman and Hudson—underscores the nature of their attraction. Faced with the postmenopausal Mira's age-worn visage, it is infeasible to understand the Emmi-Ali union in terms of traditional romance and individual love-object predilections. This couple cannot withstand a reading that casts their relationship as one founded on "love at first sight," as the diegesis seems to suggest. This cliché depends on the view that desire is autonomous, spontaneous, and not itself socially produced. But *Ali* suggests that even the couple's "love" is socially determined, and inexplicable without reference to their structurally analogous social positions in the society.

Figure 28. **Repetition with a difference.** *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* **(1974)**
In the second part of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* **(New Yorker, 1974),**
Yolanda (Helga Ballhaus), a Yugoslav guest worker who earns less than her German
coworkers, is framed sitting along on the stairs, much as Emmi is earlier in the film.

Thus, the dialogue between Emmi and Ali on the dance floor in the penultimate sequence of the film must be read allegorically. Ali and Emmi are dancing at the Asphalt Pub to the same music they danced to upon first meeting.

> A: Me sleep with other women.

> E: That doesn't matter, Ali. Not at all.

> A: I no want, but all the time nervous.

E: You're your own master; you can do what you like. I know how old I am; I see myself in

the mirror. I can't tell you what not to do … but when we're together we must be nice to

each other. Otherwise life isn't worth living.

A: I want no other woman, only love you.

E: I love you too. Together we're strong …

The conflict between ethnic guest worker and German proletariat is what is being dramatized in the relationship between Ali and Emmi. Another clue to this allegorical reading is Ali's own name, which is, of course, not "Ali" but "El Hedi Ben Salem." The use of "Ali" suggests that this character is a kind of ethnic guestworker everyman.[58]

More support for an allegorical reading involves Barbara (Barbara Valentin), the blond proprietor of the Asphalt Pub. At one point, Emmi has ordered a cola, and the blond delivers the cola, adding nonchalantly but *a propos* of nothing, "By the way, I'm the owner." The admission is puzzling because it is narratively unmotivated. Why is this detail here? The relationship that Ali begins with Barbara serves as a foil to his relationship with Emmi. The pub owner is young, blond, and clearly designated a petit bourgeois. She is happy to serve guest workers in her pub, offers a postmodern array of Arab and "German" music on the pub's jukebox, and is eager to make couscous for Ali whenever he comes to visit her. Emmi, by contrast, is an older worker and a former member of the Nazi party. Thoroughly depoliticized, she is excited to celebrate her wedding dinner at an Italian "Osteria" that, she proudly reports, Hitler frequented between 1929 and 1933; and she refuses to make couscous, reproving Ali, "In Germany people don't eat couscous." Ali turns to the pub owner each time Emmi erupts; the first time on the question of couscous, and the second time when Emmi and her workmates admire his physique in the third person as if he were being priced on an auction block—"what soft skin he has," they say as they circle him, fingering his muscles. When Ali becomes

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[58] In light of this, it is interesting that *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul's* working title was "*Alle Türken heißen Ali*" ("All Turks are Named Ali"), suggesting that 1) Ali's experience is generalizable; and 2) Turks are in effect both "auslander" (foreigners) and "schwarz" (black). Relevant as well is the fact that Ali is North African and not Turkish, while in 1973, the top three guest-worker nationalities, in order, were Turkish, Italian, and Yugoslav. If one of the film's objectives is to generalize Ali's experience, why not make Ali typical rather than exceptional? Why invite the confusion of race with nationality? This complexity is precisely what is on display when the characters interchange "foreigner" and "black" in their discourse.

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disturbed by the scene, Emmi, by way of explanation, tells her friends, again in third person, "He has his moods; that's his foreign mentality."

Each of these episodes is followed by an encounter with Barbara, the blond couscous-peddling bar owner. The encounters are explicitly staged as exchanges: the offer of couscous ("I'll put the pan on" the blond says eagerly to Ali) precedes a sexual tableaux depicting the pub owner as she comes to collect her fee. But the pub owner's willingness to exchange couscous for sex suggests the film's understanding of the role of culture in worker solidarity. As Ali turns from Emmi's unexorcized fascism, he encounters in the pub owner a relationship characterized by sheer commodity exchange: couscous (with all its symbolic cultural content) for sex. What appears, on the face of it, to be her cultural tolerance (and Ali seems drawn into this view initially) is explicitly cast by the film's structure, its use of juxtaposition, as exploitation. Like the petit bourgeois grocer, the pub owner is concerned with her bottom line. Culture is not sacred here; it, too, can be co-opted, repackaged, and sold. If it takes couscous, give him couscous. Ali flees from Emmi's latent fascism, only to face a more sophisticated predator. But in the pub owner's hands, couscous is evacuated of the affective content Ali associates with it—North African identity, history, tradition, and culture; couscous becomes merely a unit of exchange. It is the pub owner's disclosure of her class status that aligns her with the grocery owner. It also explains Ali's eventual repudiation of Barbara, when he tells Emmi as they dance "I want no other woman, only love you." To which Emmi replies, "Together we are strong …" suggesting the necessity of an interethnic alliance against capitalist exploitation and its superstructural reverberation, racism.

It is true, of course, that as soon as Emmi says, "Together we are strong," Ali collapses on the dance floor and must be hospitalized for a stomach ulcer. His collapse and hospitalization act as a qualifier that acknowledges the specificity of racial oppression without undermining the necessity of an interethnic proletariat alliance. To the degree that Emmi's subjectivity is socially determined, so is Ali affected by the social context. The impact of the outside on Ali is registered by his hospitalization from an ulcer. The barrier to cross-ethnic worker solidarity is twofold: the non-ethnic German worker must exorcise fascistic habits of thought to become politicized and the guest worker must maintain health. That the guest worker experience

of racism in Germany penetrates to the literal core of his being—his stomach—suggests the urgency of the situation.[59]

The final hospital scene in *Ali* articulates a relation between race and class in which racism is cast as a threat to the organism, to life itself. In some sense, racism emerges as primary, trumping everything else: without life (and a compromised digestion jeopardizes the most basic requirement for life), there is no chance for worker alliance. This is the predicament, clearly recapitulated at the end of the film: racism endangers the very cross-ethnic solidarity that will spell racism's demise.

For Thomas Elsaesser, Fassbinder takes a distinctly anti-identity-politics stance:

> What makes the depiction of oppressors and oppressed in his films ultimately so difficult for some audiences is that Fassbinder refuses to assume that there has to be a natural solidarity between victims. Instead, one finds an almost Buñuelian vision of the right of outcasts and underdogs to be as mean, inhuman and evil as anyone else. His portrayal of the victims of society shows what has made them who they are, giving rise to a picture of cruelty among the underclass which reflects but cannot explain the cruelty of the dominant class. The decision of not judging his characters from an external vantage point thus obliges him not to be partisan toward marginal groups solely on the basis of being marginal.[60]

What Elsaesser describes is a cinema in which victims *both* suffer *and* do not behave virtuously. In Fassbinder, suffering by itself is not enough to establish virtue. If the melodramatic mode's use of suffering as proof of virtue is assimilable to precisely "partisan[ship] toward marginal groups solely on the basis of being marginal (i.e. victimized)," then it is this equivalence between suffering and virtue that Fassbinder refuses by interjecting the counterweight of the victim's own cruelty. To put it in Linda Williams's terms, this is

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[59] The ulcer, and even the doctor's prognosis, come straight out of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. In the chapter on "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," Fanon understands the prevalence of the stomach ulcer in Algerian men in similarly social terms, as a psychosomatic disorder broadly caused by the "pathology of atmosphere" that accompanied the Algerian war. On the question of treatment, Fanon prescribes, "As a general rule, we never advise surgical intervention. A gastrectomy was performed on two occasions, and in these two same cases a second intervention was necessary in the same year as the first" (291). See Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth.

[60] Thomas Elsaesser, Fassbinder's Germany : History, Identity, Subject, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) 30.

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melodrama without victim-heroes: suffering does not establish moral virtue and moral virtue, and moral virtue is never misrecognized because it is beside the point.

Thomas Elsaesser calls this a "non-judgmental relation to destructive or evil characters"[61]; Fassbinder has called it "indulgence [toward characters] to the point of irresponsibility."[62] This nonjudgmental stance is what makes *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*'s critique of the social world political and not moralistic, like that of *All that Heaven Allows.* The point is not that Fassbinder's characters are unvirtuous, rotten, contradictory, misguided, and that if they could only be made aware, they would change and would begin to make the right life choices. Rather, we have here a situation in which the dominant ideology is internalized and lived out daily by everyone, in one way or another. The utopian moment in Fassbinder does not rest with the virtuous individual activist who imagines himself impervious to ideology, who imagines that he can change the world by his acts of individual resistance and by his choice to live his own life (like Ron) *as though* conditions were ideal. Nor is the utopian moment to be found in the depiction of a mythic past as in *All that Heaven Allows.* The utopian dimension for Fassbinder is, as Elsaesser has pointed out, embodied by the characters that, though admittedly not virtuous, take "the 'system' literally, which is to say, by believing in equality, love, generosity, trust."[63]

In *Ali*, the dance scene is simultaneously a moment of victim solidarity and the embodiment of the film's utopian drive. That this victims' solidarity collapses by the film's end makes the impulse toward solidarity no less desirable or ideal. The point is that solidarity in not "natural"; it is something to be sought, but something that does not depend on the virtuousness of its seekers. The film shows the necessity of class-consciousness, even if it presents, without illusions, the obstacles to its realization.[64]

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[61] Ibid. 29.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid. 40.
[64] In "Reading Fassbinder's Sexual Politics," Richard Dyer has argued that several of Fassbinder's films (including *Ali*) exemplify a problematic political perspective, what Walter Benjamin called "left-wing melancholy." This term refers to a quietist leftist stance characterized by both a recognition of the desolation of capitalism and a refusal of the real world possibilities of collectivity, political mobilization, and social transformation. For Dyer, left-wing melancholy "does not see the working class as the agent of historical change—instead it stresses the working class as the victim of capitalist society and/or as hopelessly complicit in its own oppression" (177). Surely the working class can be a victim of capitalist society, complicit in its own oppression, *and also* the agent of historical change. What is certainly the case in Fassbinder is that successful political action is not depicted. But in *Ali,* there is a clearly marked class solidarity that is decidedly not a politics of identity. See Richard Dyer, The Culture of Queers (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).

Far from Heaven is set in 1957, at the time of the Little Rock desegregation struggle, in an insular New Haven, Connecticut, suburb. Cathy (Julianne Moore) and Frank Whitaker (Dennis Quaid) are the unhappily married couple featured in advertisements for Frank's television company, Magnatech. Their marriage unravels as Frank has affairs with men and Cathy begins a "friendship" with Raymond Deagen (Dennis Haysbert), her African American gardener.

In "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk," Sharon Willis finds that "it is the moments of referential 'breakthrough,' those instances where the film incorporates contemporary social issues of race and sexuality, that remain problematic and that trouble—or disappoint—the film's logic."[65] The logic to which Willis here refers, and which she claims is "disappoint[ed]," consists primarily of the structural analogy between racism and homophobia, established by the film's visual organization.[66] The idea is that there is a "symmetry within its [the film's] architecture between racial and sexual oppression, bringing together the violent repressions of both racial mobility and sexual choice."[67] Willis duly observes the stark differences in the representation of Raymond and Frank's positions. Raymond is hypervisible, surveilled continuously by the white community, while Frank remains invisible, until he enters a gay zone. Raymond is deprived of a point of view and never depicted without Cathy, while Frank is granted a point of view in scenes that do not include Cathy. Raymond is featured in an interracial relationship devoid of erotics, while Frank is featured in the only sexually charged scene in the film—between him and a young man on vacation with his family. Raymond suffers the worst fate of the film when he must sell his business and leave town, while Frank can keep his corporate job and his new relationship. Willis concludes from this that "Race … is *dis*placed into the interracial bond and *re*placed by the white-black couple. Thus, the film's 'racial angle' fades into a white perspective of fascination with the ongoing mystery of a black world elsewhere."[68] In other

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[65] Willis, "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk," 162.
[66] Ibid.: 168.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.: 158.

words, the film, by refusing Raymond black subjectivity—"a black world elsewhere"—turns race into a floating signifier that eventually attaches itself to the interracial bond, leaving the question of black identity unanswered.

Willis presupposes that the structural symmetry clearly established between racism and homophobia in *Far from Heaven* is an instance of analogy rather than of disanalogy.[69] She takes for granted that the objects of racism and homophobia—the black man and the gay man—are analogous subjects in an alliance against heteronormative, mainstream American society: this is her starting point. So when these figures are represented in such starkly different terms, the only possible conclusion is that the film disappoints its own logic. But perhaps the film never accepted the logic that Willis ascribes to it. Willis's text overlooks the possibility that *Far from Heaven* might be interested in the difference between racial and sexual identity, rather than their similarity. In fact, *Far from Heaven* is questioning the coalition of "others." Rather than disappoint its own efforts at liberal multiculturalism, it is pointing to the political impotence of identity politics—in which political activity is organized around the interests of particular groups that are united on the basis of a shared social identity such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, rather than around policy issues or class. And thus, it refuses the consolation of a political alliance of oppressed, politicized identities joined by a "chain of equivalences."

In one scene that closely follows *All that Heaven Allows,* Cathy and Raymond are talking outside of her house. Raymond tells Cathy three important things about himself that unsettle her expectations: 1) he is a responsible father raising a daughter alone ("Well I guess between Pa's business, my shop, and looking after my little girl, there's not much time for reflecting"); 2) he owns a plant shop in town ("It's just a little place, down on Hawthorne. Started out as a service for gardeners, ordering plants and fertilizer. Till I opened the store. 'Bout six years ago. The only thing that business degree's been good for yet"); and 3) he has a business degree. This information is close to what Ron Kirby established in his first meeting with Cary, and amounts

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[69] For a similar stance, see James Morrison, "Introduction," <u>The Cinema of Todd Haynes : All That Heaven Allows</u>, ed. James Morrison (London ; New York: Wallflower, 2007). By contrast, Laura Mulvey, takes the view that the film is pointing to a disanalogy: "At first *Far from Heaven* might seem to suggest that these two social oppressions [racism and homophobia] are equal and parallel in intensity, but as the plot unfolds social anxiety at homosexuality is shown to be infinitely less deep rooted than the hysteria caused by intimacy across the racial divide" (41). See Mulvey, "Review."

to a corrective (as it did in Sirk's film)—namely, "I am not what I seem." In Ron Kirby's case, the coded message is that Kirby is not really a wage-laboring gardener, but a petit bourgeois businessman; in Raymond Deagan's case, the message is that race and class are extricable terms, that the only thing that separates Cathy from him is skin color. In their exchange, race becomes literally just a matter of skin color, divorced from any indicators of economic oppression or cultural content. And it is only when Cathy understands Raymond's difference to be quite literally "the color of his skin" that the "friendship" can commence, just as in *All That Heaven Allows* the barrier to Ron and Cary's relationship is overcome when Cary learns the "truth" about Ron's class status (i.e., that he is not a wage worker). In the remake, racial difference is reduced to its "essential" truth—it depends, in the last analysis, on "skin color," not on culture or class. Hence this scene reproduces the cliché of colorblindness that is undermined throughout the film.[70]

The cliché of colorblindness is primarily undermined in the scene in which Cathy breaks off her relationship with Raymond.

> Cathy: It just isn't plausible, Raymond, for me to be friends with you. You've been so very kind. To me. And I've been perfectly reckless and foolish in return …thinking—
>
> Raymond: *What*? That one person could reach out to another? Take an interest in another? And that maybe, for one fleeting instance, could manage to see beyond the surface—beyond the color of things?
>
> Cathy: Do you think we ever really do? See beyond those things? The surface of things?
>
> Raymond: "Just beyond that fall of grace/Behold that shining place." Yes, I do. I don't really have a choice.
>
> Cathy: I wish I could … You're so beautiful.

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[70] The cliché is reinforced by the casting of Dennis Haysbert as Raymond. Haysbert played Clay Arlington in the 1993 black-and-white thriller-allegory of American race relations, *Suture* (Siegel and McGhee). In the film's diegesis, Haysbert is the identical half-brother of white actor Michael Harris. Within the film's diegesis, the two are supposed to look identical. Of course, from the spectator's perspective, they could not look more different: the one is black, tall, and strong, the other is white and scrawny. For a thorough treatment of the use of cliché in Haynes's oeuvre, see Marcia Landy, "Storytellling and Information in Todd Haynes' Films," The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows, ed. James Morrison (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

Raymond advances the cliché of colorblindness (managing "to see beyond the surface") that has determined Cathy's actions until now, only to have Cathy, in good postmodern fashion, suddenly refuse this opposition of depth and surface, essence and appearance, declaring, instead, the reign of appearance.[71] This disavowal of depth mirrors the film's own disavowal of what some have argued is the film's "archeological" project of recuperating the actual fifties buried beneath the glossy images of its own representations. The scene discussed above would suggest the film's acknowledgement of the impossibility of such a project—in other words, the impossibility of archeology, of getting at the "actual" fifties, of recuperating the past itself.[72]

The difficulties of representing the historical past have much in common with the difficulties of representing difference. What does Raymond imagine that Cathy would see beyond the surface of things? An individuated self? Shared humanity? "[A] black world elsewhere"? In that all of these would constitute a "depth" beyond the surface of things, the view that this "black world elsewhere" is what remains a mystery in the film just reconfirms *Far from Heaven's* postmodern refusal of the concept of essence. In refusing colorblindness as a solution to the problem of racism, *Far from Heaven* refuses two things: 1) black subjectivity based in culture and history, and 2) the superficiality of appearance or surface; instead embracing a black subjectivity shaped exclusively by the experience of discrimination.

Black culture, tradition, history are entirely missing from *Far from Heaven*; "blackness" has no positive content, it is purely negative, demarcated by racism. "[A] black world elsewhere" is indeed absent. There are allusions to such a world: for example, when Cathy reenters the house after first meeting Raymond, Sybil, Cathy's African American maid, casts Raymond a meaningful look, clearly flagged as such by the film's discourse. But the film gives us no sense of the content of Sybil's look; it functions as an empty signifier.[73] The result is that black subjectivity based on a shared culture, a concept that relies on an essentialist notion of

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[71] Fredric Jameson considers this new depthlessness a symptom of postmodernism. See Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.

[72] In "The Filmmaker's Experience: Question and Answer with Todd Haynes and Julianne Moore" (included in the DVD supplemental materials), Haynes says that many people have asked directly if the "message" of his movie is summed up by Raymond's line about getting beneath the surface of things, to which he has replied, "It's the contrary. Everything in this film is on the surface."

[73] An analog to this in *All that Heaven Allows* is the moment when Cary becomes paranoid about the whisper and subsequent laugh exchanged by Ron and Mick in Cary's presence. But while in *All that Heaven Allows*, we learn the content of the exchange—it turns out that Ron had just commented to Mick about Cary's legs—in *Far from Heaven* we do not. There is a secret that Raymond and Sybil share by virtue of being black. Sharon Willis has commented on this. See Willis, "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk."

depth, is called into question. Whereas in *Ali*, culture and tradition—couscous and Arabic music—are shown, and shown to be easily co-opted, in *Far from Heaven*, they are simply ignored.

While *Far from Heaven* may have little use for a specific black consciousness, it does have a political understanding of race. In the scene discussed above, in which Cathy tells Raymond on a public street that there is no seeing beyond the surface of things, a white man from across the street interrupts, "You! Boy! Hands off!" The seriousness of the surface of things is thus underlined. And it is the surface of things that will ultimately determine Raymond's fate. To say that there is nothing "beyond" the surface of things is not to retreat to superficiality.[74]

This moment of interpellation—"You! Boy! Hands off!"—is an illustration of what Frantz Fanon calls the "fact of blackness."[75] Fanon rejects a conception of black subjectivity in which it is either a mere means to class consciousness (as one finds in Sartre) or an expression of a shared history or culture (as one finds in negritude). Instead, Fanon posits a black consciousness based in experience. The "fact of blackness" is a moment of interpellation—a child saying to his mother: "Look, a Negro!" Fanon complains: "Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently than the white man."[76] And so, in Fanon, "the regime of the look" is installed at the heart of the race problematic:

> All the same, the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is. One hopes, one waits. His actions, his behavior are the final determinant. He is a white man, and, apart from some very debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed. He belongs to the race of those who since the beginning of time have never known cannibalism. What an idea, to eat one's father! Granted, the Jews are harassed—what am I thinking of? They are hunted down, exterminated, cremated. But these are little family quarrels. The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a new

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[74] For an alternative account of "surface" in the film, see Celeste-Marie Bernier, "'Beyond the Surface of Things': Race, Representation and the Fina Arts in *Far from Heaven*," <u>The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows</u>, ed. James Morrison (London: Wallflower, 2007).

[75] Fanon, <u>Black Skin, White Masks</u>.

[76] Ibid. 138.

guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance.[77]

Far from Heaven draws a similar distinction in its representation of the hypervisibility of Raymond (a racialized subject) and the relative invisibility of Frank (figure 29). The idea of being a slave of one's own appearance is present in the film's view that surface—appearance, the visible—is indispensable for any account of racism. To be discriminated against on the basis of appearance is not an incidental feature of racism; it is the heart of the matter.

**Figure 29."Overdetermination from without." *Far from Heaven* (Focus Features, 2002).
An empty pool evacuated after a black child has touched the water.**

According to Fanon, "overdetermination from without" is a worse condition than any other. *Far from Heaven* echoes this judgment. In its juxtaposition of racism and homosexuality, *Far from Heaven* shows how much Raymond's hypervisibility impacts his prospects for economic mobility and love. Willis observes:

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[77] Ibid. 115.

"While Frank is expelled from his family and from heteronormativity, and Cathy is expelled from suburban wifely normalcy, neither ends up as bereft as Raymond. He is literally pushed off the film's map, and off his own map as well, since, by his account, he has never even been to Baltimore,"[78] Raymond's status as a petit bourgeois business owner is untenable. The difference that defines him—hypervisibility—fares worse in the world than the invisibility of the closet.[79] Frank, at least, can maintain his executive job with the television corporation. It may be true that Frank is exiled—airbrushed from the image of domestic normativity peddled by Magnatech—yet still, his livelihood is not jeopardized by his identity as Raymond's is. With these differing fates, the absent term, "class," makes its appearance: while Frank continues to be identified with the corporate giant Magnatech, it is suggested that Raymond, expelled from the petit bourgeois class, must begin to sell his labor power for wages in Baltimore. The oppression that Raymond is shown to suffer is, in the film's last analysis, economic.

In *Far from Heaven* the three identity categories—race, gender, sexuality—so clearly designated by the film's structure, ultimately fail to come together in a "rainbow coalition" (figure 30).[80] By film's end, the characters representing these categories, which today are the politicized identities of identity politics, each go their separate ways and suffer different fates alone. Although only Raymond emerges as wholly innocent and virtuous, they are all presented as victims. I have been arguing that by calling attention to the differences in the fates of these characters, the film undermines the view that beneath it all there is a common interest among these identities, that there is a "chain of equivalences" that could form the basis of an alliance.[81]

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[78] Willis, "Politics of Disappointment," p. 168.

[79] The film also suggests the life possibilities of gay characters that are out-of-the-closet. An example of this would be the inclusion of Mona Lauder's uncle, Morris Farnsworth, "the hotshot art dealer from New York," who snickers, with the socialites, at Cathy and Raymond in the art gallery scene. He is explicitly designated a gay character. Farnsworth is out of the closet, embraced by the group, and sees no common cause with Raymond.

[80] And perhaps to this failed coalition we can add the figure of the Latino immigrant. There is an anomalous moment at the end of the film that depicts a new gardener at work in Cathy's yard. For a few frames, we can see that this gardener is neither black nor white; he has a long ponytail of straight, black hair and could be Latino, evoking ongoing "conflicts" between immigrants (mainly from Latin America) and African Americans around employment displacement and competition for low-wage jobs—yet another reminder of a highly fractured "rainbow coalition."

[81] I use this phase in the way that Slavoj Zizek does in his convincing critique of multiculturalism and the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*) in "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." Connecting identity politics with coalition politics, Zizek writes, "And is not a homologous utopia at work in the notion of a 'rainbow coalition': in the idea that, at some utopian future moment, all 'progressive' struggles –for gay and lesbian rights, for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, the ecological struggle, the feminist struggle, and so on—will be united in a 'chain of equivalences'? Again, this necessity of failure is structural: the point is not simply that, because of the empirical complexity of the situation, all particular 'progressive'

Moreover, the film's account of the failure of such an alliance is not to be explained away by the diegetic time of the film: identity politics was not around in 1957. The disappointment of the alliance applies to political life in the contemporary moment. For Haynes is interested in how racial identity and sexual identity strain the social order in fundamentally different ways. At most, in positioning the characters in a hierarchy of material well being by the film's end, Haynes's film suggests that certain forms of oppression—racism, for example—are social ills that require, in Nancy Fraser's language, redistribution as well as recognition, while others like homophobia require only demands for recognition.[82]

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fights will never be united, that 'wrong' chains of equivalences will always occur—say, the enchainment of the fight for African-American ethnic identity with patriarchal and homophobic ideology—but rather the emergencies of 'wrong' enchainments are grounded in the very structuring principle of today's 'progressive' politics of establishing 'chains of equivalences': the very domain of the multitude of particular struggles with their continuously shifting displacements and condensations is sustained by the 'repression' of the key role of economic struggle—the leftist politics of the 'chains of equivalences' among the plurality of struggles is strictly correlative to the silent abandonment of the analysis of capitalism as a global economic system and to the acceptance of capitalist economic relations as the unquestionable framework" (47). See Zizek, "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." For other critiques of identity politics, see also Reed, Stirrings in the Jug : Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era; Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism; E. San Juan, Racism and Cultural Studies : Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Brown, States of Injury : Power and Freedom in Late Modernity; Michaels, The Trouble with Diversity : How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality.

[82] Nancy Fraser actually argues that "justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition" and that "the task is to devise a 'bivalent' conception of justice that can accommodate both defensible claims for social equality and defensible claims for recognition of difference" (5). She designates certain collectivities—such as race and gender--as "bivalent collectivities" that "suffer both socioeconomic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition" (15) and others—like sexuality—as collectivities whose suffering is ultimately caused by "the status order, not the economic structure of capitalist society" (21). Still, heterosexist injustice does result in some economic harm, thus redistributive justice is demanded in that case as well, according to Fraser. See Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," The Tanner Lectures in Human Values (Stanford University: 1996), vol.

Figure 30. Neither black nor white. *Far from Heaven* **(Focus Features, 2002).**
Cathy's new, ethnically ambiguous gardener.

Like Fassbinder, Haynes takes an anti-identity politics stance, but unlike Fassbinder, he does not posit the ultimate desirability of an alliance based on a shared class interest. In contrast to *Ali* and *All that Heaven Allows, Far from Heaven* refuses to name capitalism in its indictment. *Far from Heaven's* characters suffer oppression at the hands of social conventions that belong to a certain period in American history; they are not shown to be linked to the economic organization of society. While the film suggests some of the affective dimensions of oppression, it fails to diagnose its sources; and it declines to envision the contours of a utopian future.

VI

This chapter began from the need to understand *Far From Heaven*'s relation to its filmic predecessors and its representation of social injustice. I have already discussed the ways in which the film and its predecessors engage with identity politics. This final section discusses how *Far from Heaven's* banal depiction of social

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exclusion and intolerance, and especially racism, reflects a critical engagement with melodrama. In particular, I will argue that just as the film disavows identity politics, it also disavows the melodramatic mode. In doing so, *Far From Heaven* raises the question whether the melodramatic mode is capable of representing the social injustices of today.

Having considered identity politics in melodrama, we should also consider the melodrama of identity politics.[83] In *States of Injury: Freedom*, Wendy Brown analyzes the structure of desire of the politicized identities of identity politics in terms of Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*—"the moralizing revenge of the powerless."[84] For politicized identities, the suffering that is the cause of *ressentiment* depends upon the exclusion from liberalism's universal ideal subject—white, masculine, and middle-class. Politicized identities gauge their social injury by this ideal's rights and privileges (e.g., educational and career opportunities, protection from hate crimes, the possibility of upward mobility in return for "hard work").[85] So while politicized identities present themselves as self-affirming, in fact, they depend for their existence as identities on the very ideal (bourgeois, white, male) whose universality they must deny, but end up reinscribing. Like Nietzsche's vengeful slave, politicized identity deals not in political action, but in a "moralizing politics." Satisfied with its moral superiority, politicized identity is committed to nothing but its own powerlessness. [86] This is shown by the fact that identity politics fights its battles for the limited goals of legal rights and social acceptance.[87] According to Brown,

> When social "hurt" is conveyed to the law for resolution, political ground is ceded to moral and juridical ground. Social injury… becomes that which is "unacceptable" and "individually culpable" rather than that which symptomatizes deep political distress in a culture; injury is thereby rendered intentional and individual, politics is reduced to

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83 See also Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Publics," Cultural Studies and Political Theory, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
84 Brown, States of Injury : Power and Freedom in Late Modernity 68.
85 Ibid. 59.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. 60.

punishment, and justice is equated with such punishment on the one hand and with

protection by the courts on the other.[88]

In Brown's view, the juridical focus of identity politics precludes a fundamental attack on capitalism, the structure that is ultimately responsible for social injury.

Linda Williams has suggested that the melodramatic mode is the formal complement of identity politics. [89]Like identity politics, the melodramatic mode speaks in the moralizing language of social injury, individual blame, and exclusion; it demands rights and recognition from the state and its citizenry. In melodrama, as in identity politics, virtue is equated with suffering; and victims, because they are victims, occupy the moral high ground.[90] Moreover, the melodramatic mode and identity politics are both are predictable by-products of liberalism.

It is no surprise, then, that *Far From Heaven* should distance itself from the melodramatic mode as much as it does from identity politics. Most critics have taken for granted that *Far From Heaven* is unproblematically a melodrama, citing the emotion it reliably engenders in its viewers.[91] But we must think carefully about the film's relation to the melodramatic mode. Christine Gledhill has emphasized that in order for the melodramatic mode to deliver moral legibility in a post-sacred world, it also "must conform to realism's ever shifting criteria of relevance and credibility, for it has power only on the premises of a recognizable, socially constructed world."[92] "As the terms of this world shift so must the recognition of its changing audiences be continually resolicited."[93]

Melodrama draws on realism in two ways. First, melodrama employs the filmic conventions that at a given historical moment look like realism. For example, Williams points to D.W. Griffith's frequently

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[88] Ibid. 27.
[89] Williams, Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson 24,43.
[90] For this account of melodrama, see Ibid; Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination : Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess; Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," Reinventing Film Studies, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000).
[91] See, for example, Richard Dyer, Pastiche (New York: Routledge, 2006); Taubin, "In Every Dream House."; Richard Falcon, "Magnificent Obsession," Sight and Sound 13.3.
[92] Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," Home Is Where the Heart Is : Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Pub., 1987) 37.
[93] Ibid.

discussed storm sequence in *Way Down East*, which was filmed outdoors on a real river in a real blizzard, as one that, by incorporating a realistic background achieved heightened melodramatic effects in its time.[94] As the filmic conventions of realism change over time, melodrama must draw on these modernizing trends in order to continue to deliver moral legibility.

The second way that melodrama draws on realism is by adjusting to the shifting signs of what Gledhill prefers to call "cultural verisimilitude" or, roughly, contemporary public opinion on cultural and social issues, the reigning consensus on "reality."[95] Using the example of Victorian melodrama, Gledhill argues that "[A]s the socio-political formations and psychic identities of class and gender—on which Victorian melodrama depended—break free from the ideologies and representations that sustained them, the codes of verisimilitude are challenged. With successive working-class, feminist, and civil rights movements, a reflexive self-consciousness invades an increasingly media-mediated culture: struggles to redefine cultural verisimilitude under the banner of realism follow." [96] In order to maintain this cultural verisimilitude in the face of an audiences' changing experience of its situation, melodrama must adapt itself to the new consensus. It must present a constellation of moral dilemmas that the audience accepts as relevant to its own situation. So understood, melodrama is a peculiarly contemporary form, not because its narratives are always set in the present (they often are not), but because of "the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up,"[97] and because of the currency of the filmic conventions it employs. It is therefore little wonder that it has been the preferred mode in which American culture has addressed the social problems of everyday life.

If we take seriously the account of melodrama put forward by Williams and Gledhill, we are forced to conclude that *Far from Heaven* is not straight-forwardly a melodrama: it does not deliver moral legibility

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[94] Williams, <u>Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson</u> 37.
[95] Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre,"   236. "Cultural verisimilitude" was coined by Todorov and applied to film by Steve Neale. For Neale, "verisimilitude" should not be used as a synonym for "realism" or "authenticity" as he accuses Gledhill of doing because according to Todorov, "the verisimilar is not a relation between discourse and its referent (the relation to truth), but between discourse and what readers believe is true" (118-119). See Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," <u>Screen</u> 31.1 (1990); Tzvetan Todorov, <u>The Poetics of Prose</u> (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).
[96] Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre,"   236.
[97] Williams, <u>Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson</u> 18.

precisely because it does not draw on realism in the ways discussed above.[98] First, it does not update its use of filmic conventions: even acting styles and scripts mimic the conventions of the past. More importantly, it lacks culturally verisimilitude.   In its treatment of social issues—segregation, the taboo on interracial relationships, the isolation of the stay-at-home-mother, a medical establishment that treats homosexuality as a disease—it fails to be timely. This is not merely because the film is set in the past and its discourse has been scrupulously designed to imitate 1950's styles of filmmaking. Certainly there is a long tradition of historical melodramas that provide timely moral lessons. Rather, *Far from Heaven's* untimeliness owes to the fact that its moral lessons—its clichéd brand of antiracism, it injunctions to tolerance and inclusion of "others"—belong to the past as well.[99] That was a time when the United States was, in the words of George Fredrickson, an "overtly racist regime,"[100] when the battles for rights and recognition from the state was a live one, when discrimination by individuals looked like both cause and effect of social inequality and injustice, when legal segregation was the paradigmatic form of intolerance. The public consensus on these issues has undeniably shifted, although we may still feel dissatisfied with the current state of things.

Today, after rapid industrialization and urbanization, after the American Civil Right Movement, after the Women's Movement, and the Gay Liberation Movement, it is undeniable that the character and forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia have changed. And the public consensus on these social maladies has changed as well. For instance, the racism of today cannot be neatly summed up by the paradigm of state-

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[98] James Morrison in "Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice" considers the film a "postmodern melodrama." Recognizing the paradox of such a designation, Morrison nonetheless argues that Haynes's films are melodramas to the extent that they take very seriously their character's emotions. See James Morrison, "Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice," The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows, ed. James Morrison (London: Wallflower, 2007).

[99] What I am calling the film's untimeliness, others prefer to read as the film's pervasive self-consciously camp sensibility. For this reading, see Morrison, "Introduction." Citing the camp appropriations of Sirk films, Barbara Klinger has noted that the mass camp sensibility "thrives … on outdatedness" and melodrama, because it depends for its effects so much on the contemporary social context and filmic conventions, is particularly apt to seem outdated as the social landscape changes, and thus, readily available for camp appropriation. See Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning : History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk. One could perhaps argue that the film itself inscribes a camp mode of reception common to contemporary viewers encounters with classic Hollywood melodramas. Rejecting the notion of an incongruence between timeliness and campiness, some commentators have tried to emphasize both the film's campiness and its "timely" treatment of social issues. James Morrison writes, "In its purest form, camp is the retrograde aesthetic style of a self-consciously closeted gay sensibility, and Haynes adopts it wholeheartedly to suggest that the destiny of the closet is by no means a thing of the past" (3). By contrast, Klinger and Susan Sontag treatments of camp suggest the close relation between camp and moral irrelevance. See Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New York,: Dell, 1966).

[100] In *Racism: A Short History,* George Fredrickson considers the ideal type of the "overtly racist regime" to have been exemplified by the American South at the height of Jim Crow, in South Africa during apartheid, and in Nazi Germany. See Fredrickson, Racism : A Short History.

sanctioned discrimination of yesterday. Nevertheless, we know racial inequality exists; we only have to refer to any index of non-white well-being—from wealth to education to health to rates of incarceration—to confirm a gnawing sense that all is not well in American democracy. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has argued that the 1950's marked a crucial break between the Jim Crow period of race relations and the post-civil rights era of the new racism.[101] While the Jim Crow era was characterized by overt racism and a strongly held and voiced belief in minority intellectual and moral inferiority, the new racism of today—buttressed by the ideology of color blindness, which eschews the explicit mention of race, believing that "racialized patterns of social inequality that do persist are outcomes of individual and/or group-level cultural deficiency"[102]—is "subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial";[103] it is a "racism without racists."[104] The sort of exclusion depicted in *Far from Heaven* is not of this variety.

So it is bewildering when production designer Mark Friedberg says in *Anatomy of Scene*, a Sundance Channel production that is included in *Far from Heaven's* DVD supplementary materials: "Even though this seems like such a dated way of telling stories, many of the social issues that it addresses are still with us, very strongly so."[105] In fact, the social issues treated in the film are not with us. When commentators defend the contemporaneity of the moral of lessons of the film (against those who have argued that the film is a "corpse"),[106] we have to wonder what it is that is affecting them so.

One thing is clear: it is not what affected Fassbinder when he famously wrote about the scene in *Imitation of Life* when Sarah Jane begs her mother, Annie—who has followed her daughter across the country trying to reconcile her to her race—to leave her alone, to just allow her pass for white: "The cruelty [of the scene] is that we can understand them both, both are right and no one will be able to help them. Unless we

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[101] Bonilla-Silva, <u>White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era</u>. The phrase "the new racism" has been used by other writers, including Martin Barker, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall, to mean something similar but more specific: namely, "culturalism" or "a way of thinking about difference that reifies and essentializes culture rather than genetic endowment, or in other words make culture do the work of race" (141). SeeFredrickson, <u>Racism : A Short History</u>.

[102] Tyrone Forman, "Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities," <u>The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity</u>, eds. Maria Krysan and Amanda Lewis (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2001) 45.

[103] Bonilla-Silva, <u>Racism without Racists : Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States</u> 3.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Echoing this sentiment, Pam Cook has written, "*Far from Heaven's* retrospective look at the 1950's imagines a scenario in which the lives of its characters could have been different, and it is all the more poignant in light of the knowledge that while some things may have changed, many remain the same" (15). SeeCook, <u>Screening the Past : Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema</u>.

[106] Stuart Klawans, "Heaven Can Wait," <u>The Nation</u> 275.18 (2002).

change the world. At this point, all of us in the cinema wept because changing the world is so difficult."[107]

What is striking in his account is the way in which he reaches outside the text of the film. The pathos produced by *Imitation of Life* owes in his account to the recognition of the gap between the way things are and the way they should be, not only in the diegetic world of the film, but in the world outside the representation, in the world he was inhabiting (or at least, in his perception of that world). In other words, the effect was achieved by some correspondence between the world represented in the film and the world outside its frame. Williams concurs, putting it this way: "[M]elodrama is structured upon a 'dual recognition' of how things are and how they should be,"[108] of the gap between desire and reality. Tears are produced when this conflict gets resolved, when desire is finally disappointed.[109] Williams herself reaches outside the text as she reminds us of melodrama's dependence on cultural verisimilitude for its effects. In order to provide moral legibility in a morally ambiguous world, melodrama must at least *seem* timely. The situation we are faced with in *Far from Heaven* is not like the one Fassbinder described in *Imitation of Life*: the social ills of *Far from Heaven*'s diegetic world and their attendant moral lessons (e.g., tolerance and color-blindness) have been assimilated—the audience inhabits the changed world and so what engenders emotion cannot possibly be the realization that "changing the world is so difficult."[110]

If, as I have suggested, the source of affect in *Far from Heaven* cannot be attributed to melodrama, then how do we account for it? Attempting to reconcile pastiche and emotion, Richard Dyer's meditations on the source of the film's affect are revealing:

> Some of the intensity of the emotional response to the film feels like a longing for there to be such films and a gratitude for having given us one now in which some of the elements we may stumble over in them (because of changing attitudes and tastes) have been dealt with, but then, just because of the differences, an intensification of regret that such films are not

[107] Douglas Sirk and Lucy Fischer, <u>Imitation of Life</u>, Rutgers Films in Print ; V. 16 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
[108] Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," 41.
[109] Williams, <u>Playing the Race Card : Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson</u> 20.
[110] Haynes uses this Fassbinder quote in the director's commentary that accompanies *Far from Heaven* over the penultimate scene as Raymond's train leaves the station. But oddly, the sentiment does not apply well here.

made. What happens in the film is sad but we may also be sad for there not being films that

do sadness like this anymore.[111]

And what is it about this way of "doing sadness" that is so compelling? What is it about such films?

We may begin to address these questions by noting the strange social predicament in which we find ourselves: we know that inequality exists—that the dilemma of race, for example, continues in the American present—while grasping the inadequacy of representing its contemporary forms in the way it has been represented in the past (i.e., melodramatically). The strangeness of this predicament has led some critics to read the film as condescending to the shameful past and basking in the present's moral superiority.[112] Such a reading registers the untimeliness of the social issues presented in the film, but attributes that untimeliness to a presentist arrogance, thus unwittingly assuming the progressive unfolding of history.[113] Instead, I am suggesting that the combination of the untimely representation of the moralistic dimensions of bias, on the one hand, and the inarticulate sense that all is not well in the present, on the other hand, points to the difficulty of understanding and representing contemporary forms of social injustice, and particularly racism. In that case, perhaps the source of *Far from Heaven*'s affect is nostalgia—not nostalgia for the 1950s *per se* or for, as Dyer would have it, the films of that period, but rather, for the moral clarity of a time when unpleasant social realities seemed visible, on the surface of things, and in clear violation of the explicit ideals of American democracy. It is nostalgia for the moral righteousness of the fight for civil and political rights that characterized the era of widespread, socially sanctioned exclusion. In effect, it is nostalgia for the melodramatic approach to social injustice.

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[111] Dyer, Pastiche 178. For a discussion of the uncynical combination of pathos and intellectualism, affect and analysis in Haynes's oeuvre, see Mary Ann Doane, "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes," Todd Haynes: A Magificent Obsession, ed. Amelie Hastie (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[112] James Harvey writes in *Film Comment*, "But it's the movie's condescension toward the past—unintended but unmistakable—that's most troublesome … And in spite of a general level of intelligence and restraint, it goes on feeling that way—an enlightened movie about unenlightened people living in a ludicrous time … If we (or our predecessors) were so dumb then, should we be feeling so good about today—watching this movie?" (55). See Harvey, "Made in Heaven."

[113] Pam Cook has argued that, in fact, *Far from Heaven* is questioning "linear progression, and the way we think of social progress and history" (16). See Cook, Screening the Past : Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema. And certainly Todd Haynes takes himself to be rejecting progressivist models of history: "When most people see films set in the '50s today … there's an immediate sense of superiority. It's all about the myth that as time moves on, we become more progressive…So the '50s become a sort of earmark of oppressive politics and climate, which is flattering to us as we look back" (quoted in O'Brien 1). See Geoffrey O'Brien, "Past Perfect--Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven*-Interview," Art Forum November 2002 (2002).

Far from Heaven thus forces us to confront the question of whether the melodramatic mode is able to represent the social ills of the present historical conjuncture—ills to which, in the language of Wendy Brown, a "moral and juridical" framework seems increasingly inadequate. Is, for instance, the racial melodrama still capable of delivering moral legibility, when legal segregation has been outlawed, and when explicit social exclusion is universally deemed unacceptable? How does one represent racism melodramatically when racism has shed its melodramatic skin? In other words, I am suggesting that *Far from Heaven* is a film that points to a very political problem that concerns Jameson—namely, fashioning representations of the present.

VII

We are now in a position to take the full measure of *Far from Heaven's* contemporaneity. On the one hand, by setting the narrative in the same time and place as Sirk's original, and by copying its aesthetics, *Far from Heaven* calls attention to the adjustments it makes to the narrative of *All that Heaven Allows*. The contemporary content of *Far From Heaven* is expressed in the asymmetry of the lives of Frank and Raymond—an asymmetry that invites a consideration of the political possibilities of identity politics. It is the film's structural approach, its juxtaposition of the characters' lives, that engenders a perhaps politically incorrect comparison of their suffering. On the other hand, if we consider the characters situations, not in relation to each other, but in relation to the community's censure, we are struck by the film's dated and moralistic representation of social exclusion. *Far from Heaven*'s approach to prejudice both registers what is satisfying in the moral clarity of melodramatic representations of injustice, and it suggests the need for a new mode of representation, one that is better suited to contemporary forms of oppression.

The latter interest in changing forms of social injustice was prefigured in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The form of social injustice depicted in the first part of *Ali* is explicitly exclusionary, like that of *All that Heaven Allows* and *Far from Heaven*. But in the second part of *Ali*, where the first part is remade, racism transforms into an opportunistic appropriation of the "other." Fassbinder identifies the source and unity of these changing forms: it is capitalist society. For its part, *Far from Heaven* recognizes that the social ills of society take on distinct forms at different historical moments, but declines to characterize the peculiar forms of the

present. Nor does it give an account of what, at bottom, ails its suffering characters. *Far from Heaven* thus

seems to be a film without hope. In *Ali: Fear East the Soul*, hope depends on the recognition of the shared

interests of workers of different races and ethnicities. In *All that Heaven Allows*, hope resides in the pastoral

vision of a simple commodity-producing society. But *Far from Heaven* is mired in the nowhere place of "left

melancholy"—nostalgic for the galvanizing moral outrage of an activist past, but unable to mount a political

strategy for the present, not even in the realm of imagination.[114]

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[114] See Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," <u>Boundary 2</u> 26.3 (1999). For a critique of Fassbinder's succumbing to left melancholy, see "Reading Fassbinder's Sexual Politics" in Dyer, <u>The Culture of Queers</u>.

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