

## THE LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

by

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The historical achievements of the Los Angeles School were like no other intellectual and cultural movement in the history of African American culture in the twentieth-century, even though there are unique parallels with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The first observation to make is that the first major African American cultural movement of the past century, the Harlem Renaissance, was centrally concerned with literary matters, whereas the last movement within the logic of modernity at the end of the century, the Los Angeles School, was wholly engaged with film matters. On immediate connection between the Harlem Renaissance and the Los Angeles School is that one of the members of the film constellation made a film adapted from a novel written by a member of the literary pleiad: Charles Burnett's *The Wedding* (1998) based on the work of Dorothy West of the same name. Earlier Haile Gerima had made the documentary film *After Winter: Sterling Brown* (1985), a tribute to a major poet who could be viewed as also a member of the Harlem Renaissance, depending on how one demarcates the historical parameters of this cultural movement. Such a discourse between the two movements located at the opposite poles of the century expressing themselves in different artistic forms of representation had not occurred before.

There is another affiliation between the two cultural movements in the sense of continuity, emerging at exactly the same moment as the African American women writers movement (Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker and others), two decades before the close of the twentieth-century, the Los Angeles School (Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Haile Gerima, Teshome Gabriel and others) was part of what Henry Louis Gates has characterized as the 'Second Renaissance'. That there are strong parallels between the African American women writers' movement and the Los Angeles School is perhaps best exemplified by Julie Dash's short film *Diary of an African Nun* (1977), based on a short story by Alice Walker. In her recent film *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002) Julie Dash has widened further the discursive connections of the Los Angeles School by extending them to the Civil Rights Movement, a historic eventuation that Manning Marable has designated as the 'Second Reconstruction'. Given these expansive identifications of the Los Angeles School with the central strands of African American cultural and political experience in the twentieth-century, it may not be far-fetched to postulate it as perhaps the terminus point of African American cultural modernity.

While the national profile of the Los Angeles School within the genealogical structure of African American culture has become more evident in the last decade

or so, its emplacement within the historical development of modern black culture in Los Angeles has not been so easily apparent. Perhaps the reason for the absence of this recognition is that the cultural history of Los Angeles in the twentieth-century has not been totally factored into the history of African American cultural forms. In anticipation of such a future undertaking and understanding, the definition of the historical project of the Los Angeles School is in order.

Fundamentally the Los Angeles School has engaged itself with the modernistic sensibilities that were critical in the making and formation of African Americans in the recently past century. The tracing and analysis of the nature of these sensibilities is initiated from the slavery era to the present. Two films of the Los Angeles School have concerned themselves with beginnings, ruptures and continuities of the historical consciousness that informed the making of these sensibilities at the moment of enslavement: Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) and Charles Burnett's *Nightjohn* (1996). *Sankofa* postulates that the complexly intertwined ideologies of Pan-Africanism and African American nationalism forged the political forms of the new sensibilities of modernity that emerged between the Middle Passage period and the New Negro era. *Nightjohn*, argues that the social forms of the new sensibilities of modernity were made at that time period by pedagogical instruments of education and ethics. Both films meditate on the historical imagination of African Americans in modernity. Also both films, perhaps much more with *Sankofa* than with *Nightjohn*, are an engagement with the fundamental theme informing W. E. B. Du Bois's classic text **The Souls of Black Folk** (1903): the historical theme of double consciousness. Each film interrogates the spiritual and political forces that shaped the historical imagination of African Americans: the dialectic between Africanness and Americanness, and the dialectic between blackness and whiteness. The thoroughness of this interrogation infused both films with their own peculiar and particular modernistic sensibilities.

But it is Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) that is much more radical than the other two aforementioned films in its quest to understand the historical imagination of African Americans. The triangular nature of this radicalness will be examined elsewhere. For the immediate purposes of this Introduction various reasons for the distinctiveness of *Daughters of the Dust* can be set forth. While *Sankofa* and *Nightjohn* are about the historical moments of the Middle Passage and Slavery, *Daughters of the Dust* is about the moment of New Negro Movement, the period that arguably constructed the intellectual instruments and the epistemic forms of the African American historical imagination. Consequently, *Daughters of the Dust* may be said to be about the interior forms of this historical imagination, whereas the other two films are about its contours or its outside structure. *Daughters of the Dust* argues that the differentiation between temporal and spatial zones, and especially the contradiction between modernity and tradition, have had

an indelible effect on the nature of the historical imagination of African Americans. Being about historical journeys and spiritual journeys, the film is invariably engaged with the ruptures, continuities, and discontinuities of political choices, historical retrievals and cultural formations. Perhaps even more innovatively, the film is about the multivocality of the female historical consciousness in modernity.

The effect of spatial and temporal spheres on the African American historical imagination is formulated in an original way in Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* (1990). In preoccupying itself with the theme of the historical consequences of migration, it goes beyond the historical period of New Negro modernity which is fascinatingly represented in *Daughters of the Dust*. This extraordinary theme of migration in artistic representation was first formulated in a seminal way by the painter Jacob Lawrence. In appropriating it, Charles Burnett constructs a remarkable historical vision. Julie Dash represents this critical theme of African American history in a different poetic form. Whereas in *Daughters of the Dust* the historical divide between modernity and tradition is articulated in a formal sense, in *To Sleep With Anger* this formal structure is laden with historical content. *To Sleep With Anger* shows that the consequence of migration, a very positive and progressive eventuation, has been the irresolvable contradiction between the Old History of the South and the New History of the North. With this radical postulation, the film indicates that one of the central themes of the Los Angeles School is the situational historical context of the African American family in modernity. Charles Burnett's own particular theme is the examination of the disintegrative forces that challenge the African American family in modernity. This theme was announced in Charles Burnett's first feature film *Killer of Sheep* (1977). Although there is a historical continuity between *Daughters of the Dust* and *To Sleep With Anger* concerning the nature of African American modernity, there is a difference in the stylistics of representation which reflects the different inspiration each film has had: while the former film seems to have been inspired by the collage style of Romare Bearden, the latter film found inspiration in the urban Delta blues of Muddy Waters. Besides painting, *Daughters of the Dust* makes deep references to modern African American dance culture, in that the representation of African American modern womanhood in the film was influenced by the notion of African American modern womanhood so profoundly realized in Alvin Ailey's modern choreographic works *Revelations* (1960) and *Cry* (1971). In many ways, *Daughters of the Dust* could be seen as a slow motion rendition of *Revelations*: in both generic forms black women imprint their subjectivity on the objective narrative structure of American history. In parenthesis, one could add that Julie Dash's affinity for African American modern dance culture is expressed more directly in *Praise House* (1990), which was made in collaboration with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, choreographer and artistic director of the Urban Bush Women dance troupe.

To Sleep With Anger and Daughters of the Dust are similar to each other in articulating the spiritual credo of the Los Angeles School, yet different from each other in central ways because each reflects a particular strand of the complex mosaic of African American culture. While To Sleep With Anger is resolutely historical in articulating the fundamental coordinate of African American modernity, the irreconcilability of the Old History of the South and New History of the North, it argues that it is in the spiritual realm and perhaps even in mythology that the effect of this contradiction can be resolved. Nearly fifteen years earlier in Killer of Sheep Charles Burnett had sought an explanation for this contradiction in the intersection of class and race. In postulating the idea that the attainment of justice by the African American working class can only be effected by challenging racial and class oppression, Killer of Sheep was in unison with two other films of that particular historical moment of the Los Angeles School: Haile Gerima's Bush Mama (1976) and Billy Woodberry's Bless Their Little Hearts (1984). Killer of Sheep, Bless Their Little Hearts and Bush Mama formed a trinity of sorts in the history of the Los Angeles School in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as much as Sankofa, To Sleep With Anger and Daughters of the Dust did likewise in the early 1990s. Bush Mama was uncompromising in arguing that in the post Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Black Liberation phase, the class position of the majority of African Americans in modernity was responsible for the disintegrative forces that corroded the black family. Bless Their Little Hearts did not dissent at all from this historical perspective. Going much further, Bush Mama indicates that it is through struggle, specifically class struggle, that African Americans could find historical solutions to their own particular social and historical conundrums. The class confrontation would enable African Americans to forge political solidarity and cultural identification with Africa's own profound crisis in modernity. This antinomy between To Sleep With Anger and Bush Mama provides one with the opportunity to indicate that within the Los Angeles School there was a seemingly endless contestation between Marxism and Nationalism. In this, the Los Angeles School was in historical synchrony with the intellectual alignments and the political affiliations of the 1960s. It was Frantz Fanon who gave the Los Angeles School a sense of political and intellectual legitimacy and guidance in its quest for a particular form of 'Third Worldism'.

The fascination for the idea of the Third World on the part of the Los Angeles School may in part be attributed to the fact that it consisted of African American, African and other Third World students. Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth** gave ideological unity to the historical vision of the Los Angeles School. What was fundamentally important to the Los Angeles School about this book was its defense of the Cuban Revolution. By the time of the reception within the Los Angeles School of this historic idea of the necessity of identifying with and defending the Cuban Revolution, the avant-gardism of the revolution concerning artistic and political matters was already apparent given that the Cuban Revolution

had created the historical conditions of becoming that made possible the emergence of the New Latin American cinema, the New Latin American novel and the New Latin American music. The Cuban cinema of Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Sergio Giral, Julio Espinosa, Santiago Alvarez, Humberto Solas and others was at the forefront of the New Latin American cinema. The influence of the Cuban revolutionary cinema on the cinema of the Los Angeles School was profound, immediate and undeniable: note the parallels between Solas's *Lucia* (1968) and *Daughters of the Dust*, between Gutierrez's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1967) and Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years and Sankofa*, between Solas's *Simporele* (1974) and *Praise House*. The historical vision of African American women in modernity represented in *Daughters of the Dust* seems to have been inspired directly by the historical vision of three women from different classes at three critical periods of Cuban history articulated in *Lucia*.

The art of juxtaposing image and sound so brilliantly realized in *Daughters of the Dust* is learned from the Cuban cinema: note that the beginning of this film with African polyrhythms is influenced by the beginnings of *Memories of Underdevelopment* and *Simporele*. The notion of historicity in *Lucia* is formulated in a different vein than in *Sankofa*: the Cuban film is engaged with the nexus of class positions and the African film with the intersection of race and class. Given these unexpected influences across national cultures and political boundaries, another unique characteristic of the Los Angeles School can be set forth, and that is, the Third Cinema of Tomas Gutierrez Alea and others was much more important in the formation of the visual poetics of the Los Angeles School, than the effect of Oscar Micheaux on Julie Dash and the other African Americans, or the effect of Sembene Ousmane on Haile Gerima and other Africans within the movement. The Cuban cinema imparted to the Los Angeles School a particular perspective and understanding of the relationship between revolution and art in revolutionary times. In the late 1960s and in the early 1970s Black America and Africa were experiencing an insatiable desire for revolution: the mark of this historical wish and political making were the chain of urban rebellions across United States and the acceleration of the modern African Revolution, having begun in Algeria in 1954 and terminating in Ethiopia and Angola in 1975. In these 'changing' revolutionary times, the influence of Micheaux and Spencer Williams and the first African American independent film movement on the one hand, and Ousmane and Chahine and the African cinema on the other, on the Los Angeles School were later 'influences', nonetheless real despite their belatedness. The prescience of the Los Angeles School in identifying with the Cuban Revolution in the early 1970s was all the more remarkable in that it was through its Guevarism and Castroism that defended the Angolan Revolution in the late 1970s and was at the center of the defeat of the South African apartheid army in Namibia (then South-West Africa) that opened the doors to the liberation of South Africa in 1994.

The cosmopolitanism of the Los Angeles School through the visual poetics of the Cuban cinema does not obviate the necessity of contextual specificity. Although the African cinema left its imprint on nearly all members of the Los Angeles School, it should not be surprising that its indelible mark on Africans, Haile Gerima, Teshome Gabriel, Yamane Demissie was more or less permanent. The seminal moment of this influence came through a delegation of African seven film-makers who were sponsored by the State Department in 1973 or 1974 to show their films at particular Universities which had strong African Studies Centers. The delegation included Stephane Allisane, Oumara Ganda and others. The arrival of these African film-makers at UCLA's African Studies Center in the Spring of one of those years was historic in that it enabled both the African and the African American members of the Los Angeles School to have a historical awakening as to the existence of the African cinema as a historical project in modernity. Sembene Ousmane was not part of the delegation, for he passed through UCLA independently a few years later. It was the filmic practices of Sembene Ousmane and the African cineasts that made the Los Angeles School aware of the African cinema as a collective and historical enterprise. Haile Gerima never identified with the satirical component of the African cinema (Allisane and Ganda), but rather aligned himself with its revolutionary wing (Sembene Ousmane and Med Hondo), which he was subsequently to join. This revolutionary wing constructed an African cinema that through re-conceptualizations of African history interrogated European imperialism, colonialism and the recent forms of neo-colonialism. Although the early work Soulymane Cisse such as *Baara* (1976-7) and *Finye* (Wind, 1981) could be viewed as belonging to the revolutionary wing of the Africa cinema since the mode of their representation is critical realism and their content is the necessity of African people to transform themselves from being the objects of history into subjects of history, his last major film *Yeelen* (Brightness, 1987) has established a third wing of the African cinema, that of the mytho-poetic form. It was this rich cultural canvas or cultural mosaic of the African cinema that had a liberating effect on the historical consciousness and political identity of the Los Angeles School.

One of the salutary effects of this awakened historical consciousness was the discovery of the African American independent cinema of Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, Richard Maurice, and Richard and Eloyce Gist by the Los Angeles School. The awareness of the existence of this particular cinema gave the Los Angeles School a sense of belongingness, in the sense of belonging to a cultural tradition that demanded and compelled continuity be established with it. This sense of historical continuity defines another central feature of the Los Angeles School which was its membership in the black independent film movement. Given that it was located in Los Angeles and yet belonging to the independent film tradition, it was inevitable that the Los Angeles School would be anti-Hollywood in its philosophical outlook, cultural identification, political perspective and cinematic orientation. No other American independent film

movement of the late 1960s to the mid 1970s had a richer spectrum of influences defining it than the Los Angeles School: the Cuban cinema, the African cinema, the African American independent film movement, the New Latin American cinema (especially the Brazilian Cinema Novo of Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira dos Santos), the French New Wave, the Italian Neo-realist cinema, and the British documentary movement of the 1930s. Perhaps it should be mentioned in passing that both Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira dos Santos, on separate occasions, visited with the members of the Los Angeles School, a visit facilitated by Teshome Gabriel. The confluence of these influences are evidently imprinted for example on three great films of the Los Angeles School: *To Sleep With Anger* and *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sankofa*. This rich environment that UCLA incubated at the time was because in the 1960s and in the early 1970s it had arguably the best film department in the country, in both film production and Critical Studies. Ford Francis Coppola, Paul Schrader and Bill Nichols were brilliant students who passed through UCLA during this period.

Not only was the Los Angeles School attuned to intellectual and cultural situations that had occurred and were occurring internationally and nationally, but it was also profoundly conscious of the cultural history of Los Angeles. It was Robert Altman with his two extraordinary films *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *California Split* (1974) who announced to the Los Angeles School that Los Angeles was an open cultural space or territory despite the hegemony and pretensions of Hollywood. *Killer of Sheep* and *Bush Mama* are among the strongest films ever made about Los Angeles. They established a tradition of film culture on the city in which Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1993), based on Walter Mosley's crime mystery of the same name, has followed and made its own contributions. Stylistically the films differ enormously, while the *Devil in a Blue Dress* is film nourish in its narrative structure, the films of the Los Angeles School are social realist in their poetics. *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama* and *Bless Their Little Hearts* have given rise to another variation of the black urban film as exemplified by John Singleton's *Boyz 'N the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993): both films portray nihilism as a natural consequence of the oppression of African Americans in the context of the disintegration of black families. The nihilism of John Singleton, the Hughes Brothers and others is in contradistinction to the revolutionary optimism of Larry Clark, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima and others. Perhaps this nihilism was learnt from the films of Jamaa Fanaka, a controversial member of the Los Angeles School. The films of the Los Angeles School, which were very influential on several African American films in the last years of the twentieth-century, articulate an alternative view of Los Angeles than the one that is found in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) or in Curtis Hanson's *L. A. Confidential* (1997) and in many other Hollywood films.

The reason the Los Angeles School has had such a resonant influence on African

American films of the 1980s and the 1990s, for example Kasi Lemmon's *Eve's Bayou* (1997) is inconceivable without the precedence of *Daughters of the Dust*, or for that matter the chaotic iconographic space of inner city urban life so singularly delineated in *Menace II Society* and in John Singleton's recent *Baby Boy* (2001) was first formulated in *Bush Mama*, is that it had a historical awareness of the political and cultural history of African Americans in Los Angeles. This sense of historical location was fundamental to its self-awareness as a movement belonging to a particular historical legacy. The central node of African American cultural history in Los Angeles in the twentieth-century was the Central Avenue jazz scene of the 1940s and the 1950s whose participants included Dexter Gordon, Buddy Collette, Charles Mingus, Teddy Edwards, Clora Bryant, Gerald Wilson, Frank Forster, among many others. The historical awareness of the Los Angeles School of this incomparable legacy is evident in Irene zeneibu Davis' major documentary in progress on Clora Bryant, which is a continuation of a shorter version which was released in the early 1980s. Larry Clark has paid homage to the Central Avenue cultural achievements by having the film scores for his two films *As Above So Below* (1973) and *Passing Through* (1977) composed by Horace Tapscott, the late brilliant jazz pianist who could be seen as belonging to the second or third generation of the Central Avenue jazz scene. One of the reasons for the preeminence of Central Avenue cultural phenomenon was that its historical moment of emergence coincided with the entrance of modern jazz (bebop) into Los Angeles brought by Charlie Parker, Howard McGhee, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis from New York. The other reason of course was the extraordinary talent of the jazz musicians bred in Los Angeles. The sense of historical location and anchoring in the cultural history of Los Angeles on the part of the Los Angeles School goes beyond the Central Avenue events of the 1940s and reaches back to the 1930s when gospel music found a hospitable home in Los Angeles.

It is perhaps not by accident that the member of the Los Angeles School who has had greater affinity with this music is Charles Burnett who when he migrated as boy with his family from the South to Los Angeles in the early 1950s could still hear the legacy of gospel music in a fading moment as it had been enveloped by bebop jazz revolution in the cultural space of Los Angeles. The thesis Burnett's *When It Rains* (1995) postulates that jazz is a unifying center of African American culture has few parallels in the history of African American cinema. The narrative structure of the film pays homage to Muddy Waters (the blues) and John Coltrane (jazz). Coltrane is alluded to as the spiritual center of the film if we remember that the recently deceased Juno Lewis, who acts and plays a trumpet in the film, composed and played with Coltrane the great jazz hymn "Kule Se Mama" in the *Ascension* LP, one of the last recordings Coltrane made just before passing away in 1967. The film alludes to a series of homages: to the Los Angeles School itself in having some of its members Billy Woodberry and John Rier and Ayuko Babu



(actually an associate, founder and director of the Pan-African Film Festival in Los Angeles) act in it; and to the Los Angeles city itself by celebrating its blackness. This fifteen-minute film may in fact be the most quintessential representation of Charles Burnett's poetics ever imprinted on celluloid.

The profound affinity for African American music culture is fully realized in the amazing sound track that Charles Burnett has assembled together for *Killer of Sheep*: it is a remarkable mosaic of jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues music. Since there has never been an LP or CD of *Killer of Sheep*, one of the best ways of 'seeing' the film is to project it on the screen without images with only the sound track playing. The experience is so exhilarating that one feels she or he is being given lessons on the history of black music in the cultural space of Los Angeles. Charles Burnett is a master in assembling film sound track. This revelation is repeated again in *To Sleep With Anger* with the sound track here seeking to convey the remarkable migration of jazz from New Orleans to Chicago, and of the blues from the Delta region to Chicago. It is possible to argue that in this film Charles Burnett is positing two themes: through images he is seeking to articulate the incompatibility between the Old History of the South and the New History of the North; and through sound he is articulating the transformation of the rural blues into the urban blues effected by Muddy Waters. Because of its brilliance, *To Sleep With Anger* avails itself to the most wide ranging comparisons within African American cultural history: a most daring comparison would be a dialectical analysis of the film in relation to Jacob Lawrence's great migration series.

The one area of African American cultural history in Los Angeles in which the Los Angeles School has not paradoxically made a deeper sense of identification concerns literary matters. Black literary Los Angeles may in a real sense be said to begin in the 1940s with Chester Himes autobiographical novel **If He Hollers Let Him Go** and Langston Hughes' efforts to write screenplays for Hollywood. Although both of these writers were known to the Los Angeles School, they were known in ways that did not directly inform their artistic sensibility. There were two writers who influenced or fascinated some members of the Los Angeles School: Richard Wright and the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Both writers had struggled with the dialectic of Marxism and Nationalism in historical representation of the black experience. Specifically for Wright this dialectic revolved around the issue of politics and art, whereas for Ngugi it gravitated around the problem of language and art. Wright explored the possibilities of how to expand the boundaries of an art form (specifically the novel) to accommodate the unique ideas and sensibility of the black proletarian experience in modernity. This issue was relevant to any artistic practitioners wherever they were located, perhaps more so to those in the African Diaspora than in Africa.

Richard Wright's engagement with Africa was on the effects of colonial modernity

on Africa. The conversations between Richard Wright and the South African writer Peter Abrahams in Accra in the middle 1950s were on the possibilities of the emergence of African modernity when it seemed to him that tradition had triumphed over modernity. Perhaps the critical lesson that Wright imparted to the Los Angeles School was that Africa or for that matter that social and political conundrums should be approached at the level of ideas and thoughts and not on the emotive plane. The most eloquent representation of this principle within the Los Angeles School was Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976) which is a philosophical exposition on the nature of African feudal societies and the form of the class struggles that have characterized these formations. Within the United States context this principle was understood to postulate the perspective that history as well social issues should be approached artistically from the perspective of those below: witness the portrayal of Los Angeles from a black proletarian perspective in *Killer of Sheep* , in *Bush Mama* , as well as in *Bless Their*

*Little Hearts* . The fascination with American modernity, within the historical coordinates of North/South in *To Sleep With Anger* , and within the historical coordinates of Africa/America in *Daughters of the Dust* , was not really historically distant from Richard Wright's preoccupations with the dynamic of African modernity in his daily conversations with Abrahams on the beaches of Accra just before the 1956 First Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Paris, in which both were participants.

The electrifying effect of Richard Wright on some members of the Los Angeles School is principally attributable to the publication of **American Hunger** in the mid-1970s. Published nearly fifteen years after his death, **American Hunger** had originally been intended by him to be a second part of **Black Boy** . It is in this posthumously published part of the book that he conveys and attempts to explain his shift of alignment from Marxism to a form of Nationalism inflected by Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism. The reason **American Hunger** resonated with a contingent of the Los Angeles School is that this cultural movement was itself divided between these contentious philosophies of history. Africans in the Los Angeles School usually aligned themselves with Marxism and the African Americans unequivocally choose Nationalism. This historical divide in unity was what gave intellectual vitality, ideological firmness and visual resonance to the Los Angeles School. Strangely enough, George Padmore's **Pan-Africanism or Communism?** which preoccupied itself with Marxism/Nationalism divide and was read at the same moment as **American Hunger** , did not have any stimulating effect on the Los Angeles School. A possible explanation might be that Padmore postulated this historical divide within conspiratorial chambers of the International Communist Movement. C. L. R. James seems to have felt this way. Or perhaps Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth** may have mediated against the possible philosophical influence of Padmore on the Los Angeles School. While Richard

Wright fascinated the Los Angeles School as a politically committed artist, it was Paul Robeson who was viewed by many members of the Los Angeles School as the exemplary Communist intellectual and artist who had held in equipoise within his historical artistic vision the dialectic of Marxism and Nationalism. Perhaps the choice of Paul Robeson may partly have been governed by his death at height of the Los Angeles School as a cultural formation in the mid-1970s.

The book of Ngugi that had an immediate effect on the genealogy of the political and artistic consciousness of the Los Angeles School was **Homecoming**, a book in which the dialectic of Marxism and Nationalism was postulated in relation to imperialism, colonialism, national culture, politics, art and history. It was in this book of political and cultural criticism that Ngugi formulated the preliminary forms of the thesis that was to engaged him across the following three decades: that in the neo-colonial context or in post-colonial societies the intersection of art and politics was fundamentally about the language of artistic representation. Among the questions posed in the book was how is a national culture possible in a neo-colonial context when the public and private domains of creativity are under hegemonic control of Western imperialism and colonialism. The public sphere is under control politically and the private sphere is under domination linguistically. To Ngugi, this interconnected process of domination could only be overthrown by a double-pronged revolution that transforms both the public and the private spheres. Politically the revolution would attempt to effect a transition from capitalism to socialism, and linguistically it would replace the dominance of Western languages (French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.) with African languages (Bambara, Zulu, Yoruba, Shona, etc.). This thesis had profound implications for the Los Angeles School. Politically, this meant to the Los Angeles School that they should constantly attempt to make films that are in opposition to the existing order of things. Linguistically, this could only mean that the language of artistic representation had to be other and new in the same way that the language of historical representation had to be original and new. In other words, African films should be made only in African languages. Given the different contexts of both the African and the African American members of the Los Angeles School, this thesis of Ngugi was realizable in both similar and dissimilar ways.

As already indicated, the Los Angeles School was in radical opposition to both, the Hollywood cinema within the history of United States cinema because it was viewed as a cinema of imperial domination, and the Blackexploitation cinema within the history of African American cinema because it was viewed as a neo-colonial cinema. Politically, both *To Sleep With Anger* and *Daughters of the Dust* articulate a different language of historical representation than that prevalent in the aforementioned cinemas. The time/space dynamic of the narrative structure of both films is more akin to that of the European cinema of Antonioni in Italy and of Miklos Jansco in Hungary and of Andrei Tarkovsky in Russia. Narrative time

through the dialectic of image and sound is slowed down or elaborated in order to develop particular historical thesis. Linguistically, both films attempt to bring a new freshness to the dialogue: in *Daughters of the Dust* some of the characters speak the Gullah language as well as incorporating into the English language the syntactical structure of the Yoruba language; in *To Sleep With Anger* the dialogue is similar to the language of African American folk culture and to the language that Zora Neale Hurston captured in her several anthropological texts. Given this radical experimentation with form as well with the language of historical representation, it is not surprising that the Los Angeles School posited itself as the radical other of the two aforementioned cinemas, one of domination and the other of imitation.

Perhaps these multiple distinctions between the Los Angeles School, Blackexploitation cinema and Hollywood cinema should be treated with an element of caution since there is a member of the Los Angeles School who willfully violated and disregarded the artistic and political principles and boundaries of the School: Jamaa Fanaka in *Welcome Home Brother Charles* (1975), *Emma Mae* (1976), *Penitentiary I* (1979), *Penitentiary II* (1982), *Penitentiary III* (1987) and *Street Wars* (1992) attempted to combine the 'ethos' of the Hollywood cinema and of the Blackexploitation cinema with the poetics of the Los Angeles School. For this 'heresy' Jamaa Fanaka was totally ostracized and 'expelled' by practically all the members of the School. But Jamaa Fanaka was prescient in the 1970s in recognizing that the visual poetics of the Los Angeles School could still be realized through or despite Hollywood financial support as was to be the case in the 1990s with Charles Burnett's *Glass Shield* (1995), *The Wedding*, *Annihilation of Fish* (2000) and Julie Dash's *Rosa Parks* (2001). This prescience of Jamaa Fanaka in believing that Hollywood should finance African American cinema makes him in some form the predecessor of Spike Lee, John Singleton, the Hughes Brothers, Kasi Lemmon, Carl Franklin and others. Jamaa Fanaka himself was following on the precedent of Gordon Parks. It is appropriate here to mention that Gordon Parks is the shadow figure in the history of the Los Angeles School: note the affinities in artistic sensibility between Gordon Parks' *Leadbelly* (1976) and *Daughters of the Dust*, *To Sleep With Anger*.

Haile Gerima, being the African member of the Los Angeles School, approached these issues of language, history and representation from a slightly different angle. Gerima belongs to the history of the African cinema that was constituted by Sembene Ousmane in making African films in the African languages, as opposed to the pre-history of the African cinema of Ganda and Allisane which was made in the European languages. Sembene Ousmane himself crossed over from the pre-history of the African cinema as exemplified by *Black Girl* (1966) to the history of the African cinema as signaled by Borrom Sarret (1964). Gerima's first African film *Harvest: 3000 Years* was an uncompromising pronouncement that it belonged

to the history of the radical African cinema in being made in Amharic. It proclaimed its revolutionary perspective by interpreting African history from the class position of the oppressed. Given the specificity of Ethiopia in African history, the film was a new opening in the history of African cinema in that it proclaimed that the contradictions within African history were just as vital if not more so than the contradictions due to the violent clash between African history and European history. In many ways *Harvest: 3000 Years* set a major trend in the history of the African cinema, which was followed by many other African films of the 1980s such as Yeelen and Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni (The Gift of God, 1982)*, in that it preoccupied itself with an issue, in this instance the nature of African feudalism, that was outside the influence or purview of colonial history and colonial cinema or neo-colonial cinema. In other words, the film was postulating by implication that colonial history was only a small portion of the complexity and duration of Africa history, consequently its positioning within it should perpetually be interrogated and proportional to its intensity.

The other film by Haile Gerima, *Sankofa*, made approximately fifteen years after *Harvest: 3000 Years*, is also centrally engaged with both the language of historical representation as well as with the language of artistic representation. The brilliance of the film is in postulating that the nature of the Middle Passage was determinant of the structure of the philosophy of Pan-Africanism that emerged approximately one hundred and fifty years after the moment of this event. The movement of people through the historical experience of Middle Passage was from Africa to the New Worlds (North America and South America), whereas the ideas of modernity embodied in the philosophy of Pan-Africanism were from the New World (African Diaspora) to Africa. So *Sankofa* is not only about the nature of the Middle Passage, but it is also about the making of the African Diaspora as well as about the African Independence Movement that was given inspiration by the philosophy of Pan-Africanism. In this sense *Sankofa* might be designated as the first truly 'Black Atlantic' film. The film's triangular structure is reflected in the languages represented in it: one of the Akan languages of Ghana (Africa); Creole, perhaps the authentic language of the Caribbean, at least according to Patrick Chamoiseau, author of the great novel *Texaco*; and English, the language of enslavement in United States. Given the complex historical splay it straddled, *Sankofa* in a true sense is neither an 'African' film nor a 'Caribbean' film nor for that matter could it be an 'American' film. It is perhaps the first major film that belongs to the 'continent' of Pan-Africanism. The Pan-Africanism of the film is in all probability anchored on the Pan-Africanism of Paul Robeson. The visual poetics of the film are stunning. The film's lasting tribute is in its belief that the histories of Africa, the Caribbean, Black America and the African Diaspora in Latin America are by the pain of history integrated to each other.

Part of the uniqueness of the Los Angeles School is that although it is renowned

for its outstanding fiction films, it has also made noteworthy documentary films. Here the point of contrast and comparison is with the East Coast Documentary Movement of St. Claire Bourne, William Greaves and others. Both film movements emerged at nearly the same time in the 1960s conjuncture. The connecting link between the two cultural movements was Julie Dash, who moved from the documentary form of the East Coast to the fiction form of the West Coast. The absolute distinctiveness of the East Coast Movement is that it has made documentary films about the African American intellectual and political canon in the twentieth-century: largely the great men of history: this is true whether it be the documentary films of St. Claire Bourne about Langston Hughes, John Henrik Clarke, Gordon Parks and others or those of William Greaves about Ralph Bunche, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells and others.

The documentary films of the Los Angeles School are about historical eventuations in one form or another: they are about historical events rather than about historical personalities. Even when the producers wanted a member of the Los Angeles School to make a film about a historical personality, her ideology of history invariably swerves the perspective towards historical events. For instance, the German television station ZDF proposed Haile Gerima do a documentary film on the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapucinski whose reportages on African revolutions and social upheavals of the 1960s and the 1970s had been in vogue. In other words, instead of a documentary film about a white man gazing at Africa, Gerima made a document in which Kapucinski actually interacts with the African personalities caught in historical events about which he had supposedly written twenty or thirty years before. This documentary film becomes an interrogation of the authenticity of a European representation of African revolutionary struggles and social upheavals against European imperialism and colonialism. Consequently Gerima called the film *An Imperfect Journey* (1994) rather than naming it after Ryszard Kapucinski as ZDF had wanted.

In examining the question of the objectivity of historical representation, in effect Gerima was reflecting on the themes of justice, liberty, oppression and freedom. These thematic patterns characterize many of Haile Gerima's other films. The taxonomy of history and the process(es) of historical eventuations are the central preoccupations of Gerima's film work from the fiction film like *Harvest: 3000 Years* to a documentary film like *An Imperfect Journey*. Even Gerima's first important film *Child of Resistance* (1972), a short fiction film of about fifteen minutes based on the political tribulations of Angela Davis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was not really about her personality, but rather, it was about the nature of her political intervention that sought to shift the Nationalism of the Black Liberation Movement, of the Black Arts Movement and of the Black Power Movement towards the Marxism of African revolutions and proletarian internationalism.

Haile Gerima's latest film, the documentary *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), given a world premiere by my colleagues at the Claremont Colleges in Los Angeles, resonates with these present philosophical perspectives of history: the peculiar form of modernity. In this film as in the other films Gerima eschews any processes of binarism between say black and white, Europe and Africa, imperialism and communism, in favour of a contradictory dialectical unity between them. In *Adwa: An African Victory*, Haile Gerima is not really interested in the seemingly Manichaen struggle between Ethiopian patriotism and Italian colonialist pretensions, though they are fundamentally important in and of themselves, but rather, in the emergent struggle between European modernity and African tradition. Within these historical coordinates, the battle of Adwa is symbolic of African resistance to British imperialism across the stretch of the nineteenth-century, from the frontier wars between the Xhosa and the English in South Africa to the heroic efforts of the Ashanti in Ghana against the same English colonialism and imperialism. The battle of Adwa was the only singular instance in the nineteenth-century in which African tradition 'defeated' European modernity. In this instance, Haile Gerima is interrogating whether history as an eventuation is a predestined teleological process that follows a particular linear logic. The real question he poses is: What is history?

Charles Burnett in his documentaries is also centrally engaged with the question of the historicization of the interpretation of history itself. Burnett, an African American member of the Los Angeles School exemplifies a different kind of cosmopolitanism, or perhaps more correctly, internationalism, than the one expected of an African member of the School such as Haile Gerima. Burnett's *America Becoming* (1991), constrained by the parameters which were dictated by the funding agency, the Ford Foundation, and by the fact Burnett himself did not write the script for the documentary, attempted to capture the transformation of United States, as a result of the abrogation in 1965 of the racist laws that had allowed only Europeans to immigrate to the country. As a consequence, new immigrants came from Asia, Central America, the Middle East, who diversified and rendered complex the nature and postulate of Americanness. On Dai Sil Kim-Gibson's *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (1999), Charles Burnett participated as a cinematographer. The film is about Korean women who were forced into sexual servitude by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. Burnett's participation in this film exemplifies the nature of his cosmopolitanism.

To conclude, it remains to indicate that this Introduction does not exhaust the tabulation and analysis of the filmography of the first members of the Los Angeles School. Not all the films of Haile Gerima or Julie Dash or Charles Burnett or Larry Clark have been mentioned in this sketch: no mention has been made of Burnett's

Glass Shield nor Selma, Lord Selma (1996) nor Olivia's Story (1998) nor Annihilation of Fish ; no mention has been made of Gerima's Ashes and Embers (1982) and Wilmington 10---USA 10,000 ; no mention has been made of Dash's Illusions (1983) nor Four Women (1975) nor Diary of an African Nun (1977) nor Rosa Parks ; nor mention has been made of Larry Clark's As Above So Below nor his latest film Cutting Horse (2001) . Other members of this first constellation, for example Jamaa Fanaka and John Rier and Ben Caldwell, have not been mentioned because they were engaged with different preoccupations than those that structured this essay. Nor has the essay concerned itself with the second group of the Los Angeles School which consisted predominantly of women (Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, Melvonna Ballenger, O. Funmilayo Makarah, Zeinabu irene Davis, Carroll Parrott Blue); the achievement of these filmmakers was sketched in the essay: "Women Directors of the Los Angeles School" in **Black Women Film & Video Artists** (1998) edited by Jacqueline Bobo. Lastly, the essay does not equally mention the third and youngest constellation of the Los Angeles School represented by a figure like Yemane I. Demissie whose film Tumult (1996) is impressive by any measure. All of these are matters for another occasion.

The historical vision of the Los Angeles School continues in the twenty-first century with the forthcoming films: Haile Gerima's In the Eye of the Storm , a documentary film on the history of colonialism in Africa, and The Death of Tarzan, Donald Duck and Shirley Temple , also a documentary film about the history of the African cinema; Charles Burnett's Nat Turner , a documentary about a history of slave rebellion, and A History of the Blues , in conjunction with Wim Wenders, Martin Scorsese, among others, is about the history of the blues.

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