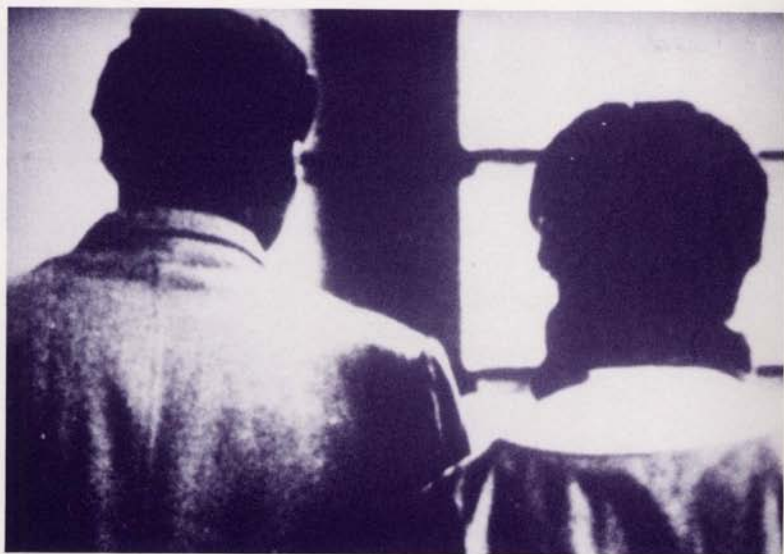


YOUNG BRITISH & BLACK

A monograph on the work of
SANKOFA FILM/VIDEO COLLECTIVE
and
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE

by Coco Fusco



YOUNG BRITISH AND BLACK

The Work of
Sankofa
and
Black Audio
Film Collective

By
Coco Fusco

"A Black Avant-Garde?" by Coco Fusco originally appeared as "Black Filmmaking in Britain's Workshop Sector," *Alterimage* (Rochester), Vol. 15, no. 7 (February 1988), in a slightly different form. It is reprinted with permission.

ISBN: 0-936739-15-0

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Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Center
700 Main Street, 4th Floor
Buffalo, NY 14202
(716) 854-5828

This publication has been organized by Steve Gallagher (for Hallwalls) in conjunction with Coco Fusco and Ada Gay Griffin (of Third World Newsreel). It is designed to accompany a touring film exhibition of the same title curated by Coco Fusco and produced by Ada Gay Griffin.

This publication is made possible, in part, with funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Photo (inside front cover): Frame enlargement from Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986).

Photo (inside back cover): Joseph Charles and Anni Domingo in a production still from Sankofa's *Passion of Remembrance* (1986).

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Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am uninterested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

W.E.B. Du Bois

For all of us who have lived between two worlds.

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A Black Avant-Garde?

Notes on Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa

Coco Fusco

One of the crucial things about media education in Britain is that you're involved in very Eurocentric theories, and if you have any sort of Black consciousness you begin to wonder where there might be room for your experience within these theories. In Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, one of the key texts for students of semiology, the only reference to anybody Black is to the soldier on the cover of *Paris Match*. The very superficial critique of colonialism found in such texts really isn't enough.

As we began to think about images and about our politics, we realized that the history of independent film and Black images was pretty dry politically speaking. And political films were also really dry stylistically, mostly straight documentary. And there is always the problem that there hasn't been much space for Black filmmakers in Britain. In terms of political film also, there wasn't much room for pleasure.

Martina Attille, Sankofa¹

In the winter of 1986, two films from the British workshops opened at downtown London's Metro Cinema². One was a multilayered dramatic feature, and the other a nonnarrative, impressionistic documentary—formats usually considered to be too difficult for the theatrical market. While it was highly unusual for low budget "experimental" films to find their way to commercial venues, what made

these runs even more unusual was that the films, *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986), were produced by the London based Black workshops Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective. Those theatrical screenings were firsts for local Black film collectives, and are one of the many signs that the Black workshops are effecting radical changes in British independent cinema.³

Sankofa and Black Audio's intervention in British media institutions seems to have touched several raw nerves. Their insistence on shifting the terms of avant-garde film theory and practice to include an ongoing engagement with the politics of race sets them apart from longstanding traditions of documentary realism in British and Black film cultures. Black Audio's *Handsworth Songs* is a collage of reflections on the race riots that have shaken Thatcherite England, and the inadequacy of all institutional explanations of them—particularly those of the mass media. The filmmakers weave archival footage with reportage, interior monologue, and evocative music to create a gracefully orchestrated panopoly of signs and sounds that evoke Black British experiences. Sankofa's *The Passion of Remembrance* is the story of Maggie Baptiste, a young woman grappling with the problematic legacy of a Black radicalism that foreclosed discussion of sexual politics and with the differences between her vision of the world and that of her family and friends. Public and private memory reverberate through interconnected stories that take different forms: dramatic narrative, allegorical monologues, and film within film.

Critical attention to *Handsworth* and *Passion* has outstripped the response to other workshop films of the same scale. The films are at the center of polemical debates in the mainstream and Black popular press that often do little more than bespeak critical assumptions about which filmic strategies are "appropriate" for Blacks. At its best, institutional recognition takes the form of the John Grierson Award, which Black Audio received in 1987 for *Handsworth Songs*; the more common version, however, is the constant scrutiny to which the entire Black workshop sector is subjected.³ All the Black workshops contend that they must conform much more consistently and closely to the laws that regulate them than their white counterparts.

As filmmakers and media activists, Sankofa and Black Audio question Black representation in British media from mainstream television to such bastions of liberal enlightenment as the British Film Institute (BFI), and academic film journals such as *Screen* and *Framework*. They are interrogating "radical" film theory's cursory treatment of race-related issues, and subverting the all too familiar division of independent film labor between first-world avant-garde and third-worldist activism. Sankofa and Black Audio are also concerned with mainstream images of Black identity, preconceived notions of Black entertainment, and the terminology and mythologies they inherit from the '60s-based cultural nationalism that remains allied with a realist tradition. Sankofa's reflections on the psychosexual dynamics and differences within Black British communities, and Black Audio's deconstruction of British colonial and

postcolonial historiography are groundbreaking attempts to render racial identities as effects of social and political formations and processes, to represent Black identities as products of diasporic history. While these workshops are not the first or only Black filmmakers in Britain, they are among the first Black British film artists to recast the question of Black cultures' relations to modernity as an inextricably aesthetic and political issue.

Although racism is not a problem specific to Britain, the English version has its own immediate history. The existence of the Black British workshops and the nature of their production are due to the 1981 Brixton riots and the institutional responses that gave the filmmakers access to funding.⁵ The newly established workshops provided the infrastructure that, combined with racially sensitive cultural policies, created conditions for them to explore and question theoretical issues. Though the chronologies of events that inform *Passion* and *Handsworth Songs* are specific to Britain, institutionalized racism, its attitudes, arguments and historical trajectories are not. In addition to institutionalized racism, we in America share the legacy of cultural nationalism, its ahistorical logic, anachronistic terms, and the sclerotizing danger of separatism. The U.S. psycho-social dilemma of belonging, which harshly affects people of color, might be offset slightly by melting pot myths and a longer history of Black American presence. But the massive influx of peoples from Latin America and the Caribbean since World War II (not to mention the abundance of mixed-race Americans) is both evidence of a similar plurality of Black cultures here and a symptom of the U.S. neocolonialist projects. The contemporary U.S. situation, then, exceeds any monolithic discourse on race, calling for strategic recognition and articulation of a plurality of racial differences. The British use of "black" as a political term for all U.K. residents of African, Afro-Caribbean, and Asian origin expresses a common social, political, and economic experience of race that cuts across original cultures, and works against politically divisive moves that would fragment them into more easily controlled ethnic minorities. As mainstream American media constitute new markets by race (the heralding of the new Hispanic moviegoer with the opening of *La Bamba* is one recent example) and as critical reflection on media culture hovers around the question of colonialism, treating it at times as if it were a phenomenon that exists "elsewhere"—we must continue a systematic, ongoing analysis of the homogenizing tendencies of both the mass media and post-structuralism, as well as the contrived segregation of post- and neocolonial subjects into folklorically infused, ahistorical, ethnic groups. Recognizing nationality's problematic relationship to the diasporic phenomenon, I will, in this article, examine the work of Black Audio and Sankofa as an instance in the development of a necessarily international critical study of race and representation.

Given the two Black workshops' stress on how multiple histories shape their presence/present, it is appropriate to begin by outlining events that led to their practice. Sankofa's and Black Audio's members

are first-generation immigrants, largely from West Indian families that arrived in Britain in the 1950s and '60s. The combination of an expanding post-World War II economy in England, changing immigration laws and chronic economic hardship in newly independent colonies resulted in rapid growth of the British-based Black population into the mid-70s, when economic decline and stringent immigration policies began to close the doors. Most of the first generation of Black British subjects reached adolescence in the '70s, with little hope for decent employment, a minimal political voice, and virtually no access to media. This atmosphere of despair and foreboding was sensitively portrayed by Black British independent pioneer Horace Ove in his first feature, *Pressure* (1975) focusing on the frustrations of Black youth, and later addressed by Menelik Shabazz in his 1982 feature *Burning An Illusion*.

Britain in the last years of the Labor government before Margaret Thatcher saw the rise of neofascist groups and racially motivated attacks against Afro-Caribbean and Asian peoples, coupled with changes in policing tactics now aimed at containing the Black population. Public gatherings within the Black community, such as carnivals, were increasingly perceived and constituted as sites of criminality⁶. The Brixton riots of 1981 were not the first violent response by Blacks to their situation, but the ensuing spread of civil disturbances throughout the country generated enough fear and media coverage to prevent the explosive situation from being ignored by the government. Despite statistics indicating that the Brixton riots resulted in the arrests of more whites than Blacks, the mass media and adjunct power mechanisms had already succeeded in constituting a new Black Threat, with a new Black, male youth as its archetypal protagonist.

The independents and the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) directed many of their efforts toward the establishment of Channel 4 as a commissioning resource and television outlet for British films.⁷ Its charter affirms the channel's commitment to multicultural programming. Those interest groups' lobbying, together with support from Channel 4 and the BFI, also led to the Workshop Declaration of 1981, giving nonprofit media-production units with at least four salaried members the right to be franchised and eligible for production and operating monies as nonprofit companies. Workshops are expected to engage in ongoing interaction with their local communities through educational programs and training, and at the same time produce innovative media that could not be found in the commercial sector.

1981 was also a crucial year for the Greater London Council (GLC), as the beginning of its governing Labor party's six year effort at social engineering through politically progressive cultural policy.⁸ This project ended with Thatcher's abolishing the council by decree in 1986. A race relations unit and Ethnic Minorities Committee were instituted largely in response to the 1981 riots and sociological studies that follow-

ed. Within the Ethnic Minorities Committee was the Black Arts Division, which, under the supervision of Parminder Vir, slated monies for Black cultural activity, particularly those areas such as film and video that had previously been inaccessible due to high costs. The future members of Sankofa and Black Audio had, at this time, just completed their academic and technical training—Sankofa's members were primarily from arts- and communications-theory backgrounds, and Black Audio's members had studied sociology.⁹ Funding from organizations such as the GLC and local borough councils financed their first works and made them eligible for workshop status.

By the time Sankofa and Black Audio began to work collectively, a race-relations industry had developed not only in the nonprofit cultural institutions, but in academia as well. Those theoretical debates on colonialism and postcolonialism, in which Black Audio and Sankofa actively participate, draw extensively on the work of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy.¹⁰ Bhabha's writings combines a Lacanian perspective on the linguistic construction of subjectivity, with Fanon's investigations of racism as a complex psychic effect of colonial history.¹¹ These ideas provide a theoretical framework from which to investigate the unconscious dimensions of the colonial legacy, to understand racism as a dialectical encounter in which victim and oppressor internalize aspects of the other, at both the level of the individual and the social.

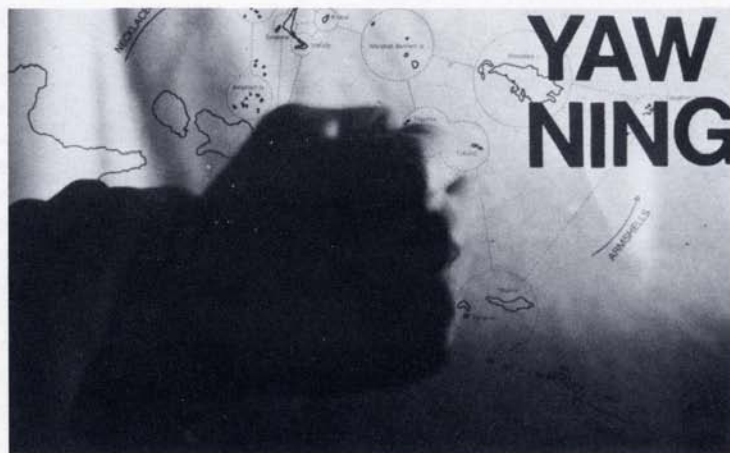
Passion's concern with sexual conservatism in contemporary Black communities and *Handsworth's* poignant resurrection of the '50s immigrants' innocent faith in the "motherland" resonate with these psychological dilemmas in an expressive manner that transcends didactic illustration. They suggest alternatives to predominant forms of representation that posit the colonized as helpless victim (the liberal view) or as salvagable only through a return to an original precolonial identity (the underlying assumption of cultural nationalism). They also undermine the liberal assumption that racism is an aberration from democratic ideals of the nation-state, by bringing out their historical inextricability. In other words, the development of capitalism and the rise of the British Empire were contingent on colonial exploitation and racism—the colonial fantasy, as Bhabha puts it—is nationalism's unconscious, its dialectical negation. Black Audio's stunning reassemblage of archival images from the British colonial pantheon—*Expeditions* (1983)—is a critical reinterpretation of the fantasies that give rise to both the imperial project and its documentation.

Also influential to Sankofa's and Black Audio's aesthetics are the writings of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. The two social theorists bring Foucauldian methods of institutional critique to the issue of race and the constitution of the Black subject. In their analyses of racism's many mechanisms and manifestations, they are acutely sensitive to the significance of the media and image production as means of transmitting ideas about nationality and nationalist prejudice.¹² Gilroy's inter-

pretations of Black British culture (particularly music) as a synthesis of modern technologically influenced aesthetics and Black oral traditions theorize cultural dynamics in the Black diaspora, significantly shifting the terms of contemporary debates on postmodern eclecticism. While Hall employs Gramscian theories of hegemony to comprehend the complex power relations between institutions and the "resistance" of specific groups, he is particularly sensitive to the danger of imputing radicalism to all forms of popular expression, tempering widespread tendencies of cultural nationalism to project resistance as a leitmotif onto all popular history. The character Maggie's search for new ways of approaching past and present desires in *Passion* evokes the condition these writers address. Like them, she seeks a more nuanced political vocabulary to approach a range of subjective and collective concerns.

Before Maggie's passions, and Handsworth's songs, however, came the two workshop's earlier, more esoteric endeavors: Black Audio's *Expeditions* and Sankofa's *Territories* (1985). *Expeditions* is a two-part tape/slide show, subheaded *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality*, in which archeological metaphors organize an aestheticized, ideologically charged enquiry. Drawing on images from high colonial portraiture, ethnographic photography, and contemporary reportage, Black Audio uses them as raw materials in a choreographed audiovisual performance. Over images of the past are inscribed philosophical phrases of the present. Between images of present conflict are "expeditions" that open onto a past seen through the representational genres that elide the violence of the orders with which they collude. From this new angle, maps become measurements of both distance and domination, and placid portraits take on a sinister cast. As a majestic male voice claiming that Blacks "don't know who they are or what they are," repeats over and over, it becomes a stutter-like symbol for the speaker's own incapacity to comprehend the Other's identity. Ambient sounds and manipulated voices resonate forcefully, unearthing the deep structural meanings that bind the signs together. *Expeditions* is a decidedly antirealist document; instead its makers struggle with every possible formal means of achieving a vision both poetically allusive and lucidly interpretive.

Sankofa's *Territories* also uses formal experimentation as a means of decentering thematic and structural traditions. Their first collectively produced film was made after founding member Isaac Julien's video documentary, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983) about the mysterious death of a Black male youth—a case similar to that of American graffiti artist Michael Stewart. It is a self-conscious return to the most visible Afro-Caribbean stereotype—the carnival—examining its places and displacements within British society. Charting the intensification of policing practices over three decades, *Territories* represents carnival as a barometer of institutional attitudes. Interconnected with these political and historical developments is a critique of ethnographic representations of carnival, which reify it as a sign of "original culture," masking its evolving sociopolitical significance. The two strategies bespeak the



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 Iron Furnaces.
 1 Copper Ditto for 450 Slaves
 1 Decoction Copper Kettle.
 1 Iron Furnace 245 Gallons, with a
 full sent to mill

ITS DIRTY CONTENTS



"THERE;/IN THAT MONSTER MOUTH/[OF THE CONGO]/YAWNING/SEVEN MILES WIDE/VOMITING/ITS DIRTY CONTENTS/INTO THE BLUE ATLANTIC." Frame enlargements from *Expeditions* (1983) by Black Audio Film Collective.

colonialist presupposition that carnival, as an archetype of Black expression, is by nature eruptive (savage) and erotic (dangerously pleasurable and potentially explosive), and therefore calls for order imposed from without. The film's second half, a surreal collage of gay couples dancing over riots, bobbies and burning flags, is a formal rendering of that very threat of chaos, a site of excess that mocks attempts at discursive and institutional control. The film, however, not unlike the carnivalesque, is somewhat limited by its own idiom, falling back on an all too familiar avant-garde conflation of all forms of realism and narrative to add strength to its counternarrative's assertions.

This issue, however, was not central to the film's critical reception in Britain. Like *Expeditions*, *Territories* was deemed by many to be too intellectual and inaccessible. According to the filmmakers, the doubts about both works often came from white media producers who had surfaced after a decade of immersion in structuralist stylistics with a zealous new concern for "the popular." Also participating were proponents of the "positive image" thesis who argue that positive representation of Black characters is the answer to racist misrepresentation. They faulted the two workshops for, in a sense, missing the point. The ironic result of this sort of social engineering is that, despite its sensitivity to media and its attempts to create new spaces, it imposes limitations that eschew any psychological complexity. As Julian Henriques puts it in his article, "Realism and the New Language,"

The danger of this type of approach is that it denies the role of art altogether. Rather than appreciating works of art as the products of various traditions and techniques with their own distinct language, art and the media are reduced to a brand of political rhetoric.¹³

What is at stake in all these arguments, and what explains Sankofa's and Black Audio's notoreity is that their works implicitly disrupt assumptions about what kinds of films the workshops should make and about what constitutes a "proper" reflection of the underrepresented communities from which they speak. As BFI Ethnic Affairs Advisor Jim Pines put it, the overriding assumption of the debates is that Black filmmaking is a form of social work, or rather that aesthetically self-conscious film practice is too highbrow and superfluous.¹⁴

Clearly, there are also economic imperatives operating here. As many more established British independents gain international acclaim, arguments in support of a more commercially viable product gain momentum. And for the burgeoning collectives, the production costs of dramatic narrative are prohibitive. But the problem for the workshops remains that the combined effect of the arguments is to restrict the space they need to develop a critical voice and vision, to experiment with a variety of ready-made materials and discourses in order to "tell stories of our experiences in a way that took into account the rhythm and mood of that experience."¹⁵

Confronting the positive image as a problem rather than a given and defining relations to trends beyond the traditional parameters of "black communities" are issues that figure prominently in *The Passion of Remembrance*. Its dialogues are filled with questions about the images of Black identity that surround the characters and inform their behavior. The allegorical Black radical woman rebukes the allegorical radical Black man for the latent sexism in his Black Power ideology; Maggie and her family evaluate the Black couples on a prime-time TV game show; she and her brother attack one another's visions of political struggle; Maggie faces her peers' accusations that her interest in sexuality and sympathy for gay rights are not really Black concerns. Contradictions between self-image and prescribed images, between desired ones and painful ones, are repeated in the film's different generic sites, or levels. In the dramatic narrative devoted to the Baptiste family, identity conflicts are articulated as generational and cultural. The immigrant father's skills are no longer applicable in the labor market. As if to protect himself, he holds onto an outdated image of both England and the West Indies, while his son's grass-roots radicalism fossilizes into romantic nostalgia. When Maggie and her friend get ready for a night on the town, the conflicts between the men's world view and Maggie's are beautifully underscored by vivid intercutting of calypso and pop music. Indeed, what stands out most in *Passion* is the soundtrack, rich in music, poetic excerpts and charged verbal exchange. At times the filmmakers rely a bit too heavily on dialogue to carry the film's ideas, rather than exploiting the possibilities of its visual material. But even if *Passion* suffers at moments from a lack of formal cohesiveness, its intellectual strength comes from its insistence on the multiplicity of elements and images that shape Black consciousness.

Perspicacity of this sort appeared to be beyond the capacities of mainstream documentation of the 1985 Handsworth and Broadwater



Frame enlargements from Passion of Remembrance (1986) by Sankofa. Above: Joseph Charles and Anni Domingo. Below: Maggie (second from right) and the Baptiste family. From left: Ram John Holder, Sheila Mitchell, Tania Morgan, Anni Domingo and Jim Findley.

Farm riots.¹⁶ In response to this conceptual lacunae came Black Audio's first film, *Handsworth Songs*, which shatters the reductivism of previous media coverage. Countering the desire of the nameless journalist for a riot "story" is the film's most often quoted line, "There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories." In the place of monological explication are delicately interwoven visual fragments from the past and present, evoking larger histories and myths. Among the images are familiar scenes from previous riots, such as the attack of nearly a dozen policemen on one fleeing dreadlocked youth from the Brixton uprisings. With the shots of news clips, they remind us that by the time of the 1985 riots, an established and limited visual vocabulary about Blacks in Britain was in place. These references to a "riot" iconography form the synchronic dimension of Black Audio's poetic analysis of the representation of "racial" events.

The film uses archival cut-aways to reveal an uneasy relationship between camera and subject. At one point, an Asian woman turns, after having been followed by the camera, and swings her handbag at the lens; at another, the camera swoops dizzily into a school yard, holding for several seconds on children's faces, nearly distorting them. This dreamlike movement is repeated in the filmed installations of family portraits, wedding pictures and nursery school scenes, which, combined with clips from dances and other festivities, become images of the "happy past" that are a precious part of the Black immigrants' collective memory. Juxtaposed against the violence and frustrations of the present, these "happy memories" brim over with pathos, but they are also set against other images from the past which betray their innocence. Newsreel images highlight the earnestness and timidity of the immigrants, while voice-overs belie the hostile attitudes expressed at their arrival. The film depicts how a Black Threat was perceived to be transforming the needs of British industry into the desires of an unwanted foreign mass. These judgemental voices are confronted by newer ones, which offer no direct explanations or responses. Refining the style they developed in *Expeditions*, the filmmakers achieve such an integration of image and sound that the voices seem as if to arise from within the scenes. We hear poems, letters, an eye witness account of Cynthia Jarrett's death by her daughter, introspective reflections, which together create a voice-over marked by lyrical intimacy rather than omnipresence. That sense of intimacy shines throughout both *Passion of Remembrance* and *Handsworth Songs*. Rarely do such formally self-conscious projects express comparable sympathetic bonds with their characters, maintaining a delicate balance between a critique of liberal humanism and a compassion for the spiritual integrity of their subjects.

Some British critics have attempted to identify specific avant-garde influences in Sankofa and Black Audio's works, citing Sergei Eisenstein and Jean-Luc Godard as predecessors. While these assertions have doubtlessly helped to legitimate the filmmakers in the eyes of some, Sankofa and Black Audio's direct concern with current media trends and with rethinking Black aesthetics compel us to look elsewhere. The

two groups, while well schooled in Eurocentric avant-garde cinema, are surrounded by and acutely aware of “popular” media forms. They can draw on the experiences of a cultural environment in which musical performance can function as a laboratory for experimenting with ready made technologically (re)produced materials.¹⁷ They also produce films in an environment where television is the archetypical viewing experience. The fast-pace editing and nonnarrative structures found in advertising and music video—not to mention the effect of frequently flipping channels—have already sensitized television audiences to “unconventional” representation, upsetting the hegemony of the classic realist text.

The filmmakers are also concerned with how to develop an aesthetic from diasporic experiences common to Black peoples. This involves rethinking the relationship between a common language and a people, between ideas of history and nation. Paul Gilroy has pointed out that modern concepts of national identity and culture have invoked a German philosophical tradition which associates a “true” people with a place.¹⁸ Access to historical identity as a people with a common voice is bound to the idea of a singular written language and of place. Yet centuries of capitalist and colonial development have literally displaced Black populations. Their cultures have evolved through synthesis with others as much as through preservation and resistance, forging an ongoing dialectic of linguistic and cultural transmutation. While I am wary of labelling this process a kind of proto-postmodernism, I cannot avoid noting the formal resemblances. What seems more important than ascribing terms to diasporic cultural dynamics is to be aware of the ways in which Black Audio and Sankofa have taken this dynamic into account.

Our task was to find a structure and a form which would allow us the space to deconstruct the hegemonic voice of the British TV newsreels. That was absolutely crucial if we were to succeed in articulating those spacial and temporal states of belonging and displacement differently. In order to bring emotions, uncertainties and anxieties alive we had to poeticize that which was captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units—by poeticizing every image we were able to succeed in recasting the binary of myth and history, of imagination and experiential states of occasional violence.¹⁹

Sankofa and Black Audio speak from Britain, with a clear focus on the conditions of racism in a country where their right to full participation in civic society is more obviously complicated by legal questions of citizenship. Given our own immigration dilemmas and chronic inequities of Black American participation in the political process, however, parallels are far from contrived. The Black British filmmakers are keenly aware of their spiritual kinship with Black American cultures, though their actual connections are primarily textual. They clearly see

themselves as heirs to developments that have roots in this country, evidenced by *Handsworth's* poignant passage devoted to Malcolm X's visit to Birmingham, and Sankofa's acknowledgement that their critique of sexual politics in Black communities draws on Black American feminist writings of the '70s and '80s. The same GLC policy-makers who funded their first works also organized Black Cinema exhibitions, introducing audiences to the cinematic endeavors of Julia Dash and Ayoka Chenzira, Haile Gerima, and Charles Burnett.

Nonetheless, there are certain distinctions between the American and British conditions for Black independents. Institutional structures such as the workshops and ACTT grant-aided division, while far from ideal, do not work against notions of shared interests the way that America's individualized, project-specific funding procedures can. And competition with the more monied, auterist ventures of Britain's more mainstream independents is a far cry from the economic and philosophic chasms that divide marginalized independent experiments from high-budget production in the U.S. But Britain specifically, and Western Europe in general, is involved in a larger postcolonial crisis that has forced them to rethink national and cultural identity; the dilemmas touched on by Black Audio, Sankofa and others are part of that crisis. Theirs is a poetics of an era in which racial, cultural, and political transitions intersect. It is no surprise then, that their works contain references to sources as varied as Ralph Ellison and Louis Althusser, June Jordan and Jean-Luc Godard, Edward Braithwaite and C.L.R. James. On this very sensitive point I must insist that this is not a rejection of the goals of Black consciousness. This "eclecticism," aimed at theorizing the specificity of race, reflects the mixed cultural, historical, and intellectual heritage that shapes life in the Black diaspora. The sad truth is that many Blacks must live that biculturalism, while few others seek to do so. If dominant cultures' relation to Black cultures is to go beyond tokenism, exoticizing fascination or racial violence, the complexities and differences which these film artists address must be understood. Sankofa, Black Audio and many other Black media producers in Britain are mapping out new terrains in a struggle for recognition and understanding.

I would like to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance in providing information for this article: Julian Henriques, Parminder Vir, June Givanni, Fred D'Aguiar, Colin McCabe, Jim Pines, Stephen Philip, Dhianaraj Chetti, and of course, the filmmakers of Sankofa Film/Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective.

Notes

1. Martina Attille, interview with the author, in "Young, British and Black: The Sankofa Film and Video Collective," *Black Film Review* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1986-87), p.12.
2. The Metro Cinema occupies a place analogous to that of the Film Forum in New York City.
3. Menelik Shabazz was the first Black British independent filmmaker to screen his film commercially in London. *Burning An Illusion* opened in 1982.
4. I have chosen to limit my discussion of the Black workshops to Black Audio and Sankofa because of the debates around them and their filmic strategies set them apart from the rest of the Black workshop sector. Other Black workshops in England are: Cardiff, Macro, Star, Retake, and Ceddo. The last two are also London based, and I conducted interviews with their members as part of my research. I should mention here that Ceddo also produced a documentary about racially motivated riots, entitled *The People's Account* (1986). It was commissioned by Channel 4, but has not yet been aired, due to an unresolved conflict involving Channel 4 and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). The IBA found the original version of the documentary unacceptable for its accusations against the British state, even after Channel 4 lawyers had submitted requests for minor changes and had them attended to. When I was conducting research for this article last summer, the IBA was insisting on a balancing program to accompany the documentary, and on the right to cancel the airing of both if they did not approve of the balancing program.
5. Although there had been outbreaks of violence in the '70s and earlier in protest of harassment by police and right-wing groups, and in protest of the state's strategic neglect of racial injustice, the riots that took place in 1981 mark a watershed moment in the history of British race relations. The first disturbances in Britain were immediately related to the suspicious deaths of three Black youths. But what began in the Brixton area of London spread to urban ghettos in most of the industrial centers of London, lasting an entire summer. The scale of the protests, as I mention later in the article, made it impossible for the government and the media to ignore the situation. Sociological investigations into the conditions of Blacks in Britain, such as the Scarman Report, were a direct governmental response to these events. The cultural policies of the GLC and new attention to race in many British cultural institutions were other responses.
6. For an in-depth discussion of this, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1987), chap. 3; also Cecil Gutzmore, "Capital, 'black youth' and crime" in *Race & Class* XXV, no. 2 (Autumn 1983), pp. 13-30; and Lee Bridges, "Policing the Urban Wasteland" in the same issue, pp. 31-48.
7. Channel 4 started broadcasting in 1982. It is government subsidized but funded by a number of sources, including advertising and subscription payments. When it was set up it was supposed to commission and air a variety of voices, including ethnic minorities, the independent filmmaking sector, foreign programming, and nontraditional formats. The actual percentage of airtime and monies allocated to the independent sector has been exaggerated in the U.S. Most of what would be considered innovative

- programming is shown on two one-hour weekly slots ("Eleventh Hour" and "People to People") at off-peak hours.
8. For an in-depth discussion of this, see Franco Bianchini, "GLC R.I.P.: Cultural Policies in London, 1981-1986," in *New Formations* (Summer 1987), pp. 103-117.
 9. Sociology departments in the more progressive British Polytechnics (such as Portsmouth, Middlesex, and South Bank) have a quite different course of study from their American counterparts. Theory and Research Methods are distinct branches of study, and it was within the theory rubric that Black Audio members John Akomfrah, Reese Auguiste, Lina Gopaul, and Avril Johnson encountered the critical writings that would later inform their creative work.
 10. This list is not exhaustive. The work of Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and London's Institute for Race Relations is also extremely important. The filmmakers are also interested in the work of many Black American essayists, particularly June Jordan.
 11. For more about Bhabha's relation to Lacan and Fanon, see "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *October*, no. 28 (Spring 1984), pp. 118-124. Also see Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markman, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
 12. See Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, and *The Empire Strikes Back* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).
 13. Julian Henriques, "Realism and the New Language," *Artrage*, no. 13 (Summer 1986), pp. 32-37.
 14. Jim Pines, interview with the author, London, July 1987.
 15. Attilie, "Young, British and Black," p. 14.
 16. In 1985, riots in Handsworth and Broadwater Farm were set off by the deaths of Cynthia Jarrett and Cheryl Groce. Police entered the Jarrett home and began to question Ms. Jarrett, who suffered from a heart condition and began to feel ill when she was questioned. The police did not respond to the oncoming heart attack. She died shortly thereafter. Ms. Groce was shot by police who were supposedly searching for someone else. The Broadwater Farm riot gained infamy from the killing of a policeman by rioters on the first night.
 17. See Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, chap. 5.
 18. *Ibid.*, chap. 6, p. 69.
 19. "Handsworth Songs: Some Background Notes," an unpublished paper by the Black Audio Film Collective, 1987, p. 4.

An Interview with Martina Attille and Isaac Julien of Sankofa

Coco Fusco

Coco Fusco: What was happening in the independent film sector when you formed as a group? What made you come together to form a workshop?

Isaac Julien: We wanted to challenge the fairly Eurocentric positions of white independents making films about Black people. In 1984 we organized a discussion series called "Power and Control." One of the issues in the series concerned the power to appropriate. What was being asked at the time, and what continues to be asked, is whether Third Cinema¹ can be produced by white filmmakers. The kind of questions that we tried to propose had to do with power, i.e., Black people's relationship to the media technology and where they were placed in them.

CF: What was different about your situation, comparing it to that of the first generation of Black filmmakers in Britain?

IJ: There's a gap between the first Black films that were made in the 1960's by Lionel Ngakane and Lloyd Reckord²; and our work. There had not been a full development of Black film culture until the development of the workshops. Other filmmakers appeared such as Menelik Shabazz and Horace Ove, but they were working as

individuals. There was no Black film organization making institutional demands. It was precisely because we went to university and because of the 1981 riots, that we could then pull together and make an intervention into the media. The Workshop Declaration was designed without our participation but we saw it as a very important space where we could develop several things at once.

Martina Attille: The programs of study we chose at university were critical of cultural forms and their production. When we began to work as filmmakers we were compelled not only to make films but also to make an intervention into film theory and critique it. We did not only want to address mass communications but also education—everything that threatens to take away the autonomy that we have to define ourselves. For Black people there are very few spaces where you can actually define your own activity and define and control the quality of your life.

Film became available to us because Channel 4 came on the scene. That was a moment in which we had an entry point into media. There have been other Black people in television, but they were on the periphery, working on short term contracts, trying to negotiate membership into the union. The workshop movement offered a certain amount of security just to develop ideas, to make interventions that were broader than just television or just cinema or individual programs. The workshops were built around the idea of continuity of work. That's what we wanted.

CF: What prompted you to make *Territories* (1985) at the time that you did and in the way that you did?

IJ: In retrospect, I was tired of the realist debate, the populism versus modernism debate, which was focused on fairly conventional documentaries. In looking at several of those documentaries in the very limited Black film history that existed in Britain at that time I noted that there were several films about carnival, because it was the biggest event. At the same moment I was reading "The Other Question" by Homi Bhabha which appeared in *Screen*³ in 1983. In a way those two things synthesized. I saw many films about Blacks made by Black and white filmmakers which didn't really grapple with the question of exotica in that representation. There wasn't a politics of representation in those documentaries.

Territories was a film about the politics of representation which included the Black subject. Within the arena that included the Black subject carnival was a very pivotal point. (I wasn't familiar with the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin⁴ at the time, but in retrospect I can see the way they are directly related.) Carnival was the space where, for a day, disorder was allowed. That is what is so interesting about carnival: there were so many different eruptions around sexuality, around smoking "ganja," around the way that area was policed. Those different tensions were all placed in that space.

- CF:** What were the cultural questions that were relevant for you to deal with in *Territories*?
- IJ:** Questions of the diaspora, questions of policing. The significance of the sound systems in the carnival. In other words, what does Blackness mean to a Black culture? That was the main question. What does it mean for us? There are many films about racism and anti-racism, but what do these signs mean for us? In the second part of the film there are montages of the two Black men dancing with each other, which you see a lot in carnival, but you wouldn't necessarily interpret it as something that would be called a homosexual relationship. I wanted to explore those questions, anchor the debates in that space, in a Black space. I can look back on it now and I can see how I was trying to break with the realist debate and do something else. I can see now how the format I chose also had its limitations, but it was important for me at the time to try to do something like that. I saw *Territories* as a film essay around civil disorder and semiological questions for Black people.
- CF:** Do any of those issues carry over to *Passion of Remembrance* (1986)?



A still frame from *Territories* (1985) by Sankofa.

MA: *Passion of Remembrance* (1986) started as a project called "Systems of Control." The reality of the way Black communities are policed is still very much a part of our experience and it is part of our concern. When we started doing the research, however, we looked away from the traditional areas—such as metropolitan policing—focusing instead on the ways in which policing takes on more intimate forms within our communities and relationships.

CF: Why was policing an issue?

MA: Because control is an issue. If you're engaged with a medium like film, you're trying to communicate ideas to people. And those ideas inevitably come from your experience of the world. We as filmmakers had control over the images we created. But there was a sense of accountability imposed on us by our community to produce certain types of images. In a way we anticipated that. We had had screenings and discussions called "Power and Control," and we heard audiences ask for positive images. There needed then to be a critique around what positive images were.

IJ: At the same time we were sick of seeing images of Black people involved in civil disorder, because of the riots.

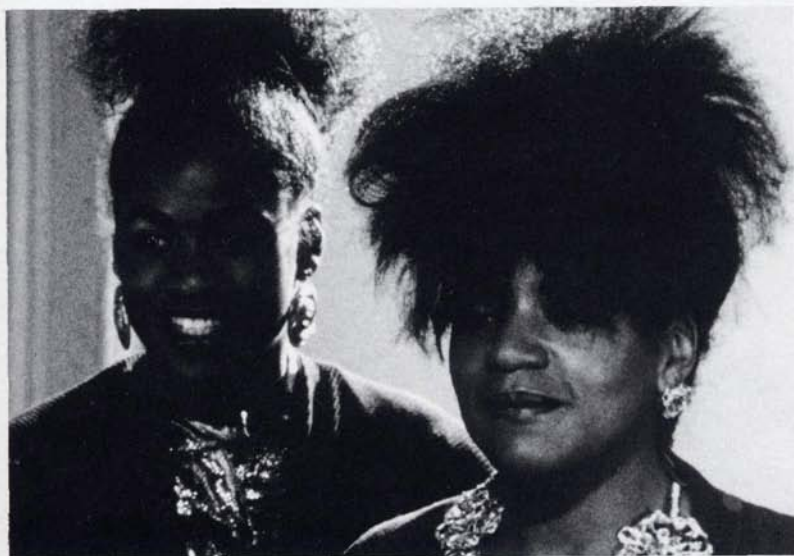
MA: The cliché of Black person as victim of police brutality was a quite sensational way of looking at Black experience. I think there are many more subtleties to it than that.

With *Passion* we took things to point zero: the family, the man and the woman. Those were metaphors we used to talk about our experience in Britain at the time. We quite deliberately chose to look at the intimacies of our relationships to each other. And we also wanted to open up certain ways—we're not only talking about Black people, we're talking about British society as well. When you set up a company like Sankofa it is important to have a profile, to gather interest in your work. So we chose to work on a feature length fiction, rather than documentary, in part as an attempt to expand our potential audience. Working within that medium we wanted to create a narrative rich in imagery. Some people say it was quite literary.

IJ: Or eclectic.

MA: We quite deliberately used two geographic spaces. One is the urban landscape, the cityscape with the Baptiste family placed in it. Maggie Baptiste is looking at England. She's looking at archive footage, looking to history for some sense of what has gone on before and what's going to come in the future. She's looking at English streets cast with long shadows of previous struggles and protest. At the same time she and her friends look for release of the tension on those same streets, in the cheap glitter of their clothes and the cheap glitter of the West End. The urban land-

scape, that claustrophobic landscape, that was our experience. There is no time to sit down and explain to people how you're feeling or what's going on in your mind, or that you're worried about the future. It's jobs or no jobs. You dance, kiss, and run.



Louise (Janet Palmer) and Maggie (Antonia Thomas) in *Passion of Remembrance* (1986) by Sankofa.

With the open landscape, on the other hand, we wanted to evoke a dreamscape. A place of deliverance, of redemption. A place where there's nothing to get in the way of intimate contact. The man and the woman in the landscape don't touch each other because there is so much between them that hasn't been resolved. There is so much bitterness and frustration. They can't even come close to each other in the end, and instead look away from each other.

CF: What were the most important agendas?

MA: The legacy of the sixties is important. The Black movement has a particular style which historically has been male dominated. As the woman in the landscape says, you can't hide behind the fist forever. Although the fist was a crucially important rallying symbol we must look behind the sign to see what it stands for.

IJ: It has to stand for much more now. Its agenda has to broaden. Other men have found the Black fist to be something that doesn't include them. Nor did the symbol originally include questions of sexuality and gender. Those questions informed *Passion* to a great



Ann Domingo in Passion of Remembrance



extent. Many Black male directors continue to make films about policing and racism because those are the areas in which they feel most directly affected.

- MA:** We're not just making films to entertain, to get people to relax. We're trying to make some intervention, or take up and respond to our environment. If we sit down as three Black women and a Black man, whose parents come from the West Indies, or whatever, we do so with certain cultural and political positions and priorities. *Passion* is a fiction film but it is very much a document of the time we came together as four young Black people. It embodied that coming together as a relatively young media organization on the media scene. The media scene here is extremely competitive—not just among Black people, but as a whole. So *Passion* represents all the tensions of those things. The man and the woman in the landscape could easily be the old guard versus the new guard; the static old guard man, and the young, volatile woman with a new sense of politics, full of resentment and frustration. *Passion* comes out of a time when there didn't seem to be that much dialogue between different sections of our community. The leaders weren't as obvious as they had been in the past and *Passion* was suggesting that it was about time that we talked.
- IJ:** I don't think *Passion* was only about the politics of us coming together though. It was also about what had come before. Extensive research was done on Black political organizations in the '60s and the '70s. We did an enormous amount of research on policing. Altogether this work informed the characters. They were archetypes.
- CF:** Can we discuss the way in which the legacy of Black American radicalism from the '60s and '70s informed the film. What is your relationship to this? Why turn to it, as opposed to, let's say, African nationalist revolutionary texts from the '50s and '60s? Obviously, we're not talking about a film history informing your films, we're talking about a political history and a written history informing your films.
- IJ:** There was a Black Power movement in Britain that borrowed many of its signs and symbols from America. We do borrow from other cultures within the diaspora, but we are specifically talking about a Black British experience—and we have to be very careful not to substitute an American experience for a Black British experience.
- MA:** The similarities between the American and British experience are in the politics of the diaspora really. It's not like an African nationalism directed back to the homeland, back to the source. We wanted to follow the journey back in stages. The experience of migration, of coming to England, and of people being taken to America—of having to assert your identity within a foreign

environment—was quite important. In some parts of Africa we're still talking about colonial relationships, about the involvement of outside forces occupying those territories. People have migrated here following the resources, following their own resources. And then they have to assert their right to be part of society in the same way that Black Americans had to do. There are differences between our and their experiences, different experiences within the economy—slavery in that country—whereas the West Indian experience was one of colonialism and coming over here—leaving, to some extent voluntarily, though in reality people didn't always have the choice.

- IJ:** In relation to your question of borrowing or talking about influences from the Black American experience—in borrowing those things, we were also prioritizing issues such as British national identity. We did not naively try to transplant a Black American experience onto the Black British experience. It was very important to us to talk about our experience in the diaspora, and the specificity of that Black experience.

We always thought that *Passion* would be very interesting for American audiences. Not very many people had recognized Britain as being either Black, or mixed-race, or Asian. They didn't recognize all those other identities in Britishness.

- MA:** In the male speaker there's the popular rhetoric of that movement that echoed out into other territories. But at the same time there's the character Maggie who is our vehicle for looking specifically at England. Our eye through the Baptiste family is very firmly on the British experience. Whereas the landscape represents a more international concern, something that is transatlantic, something more universal.
- CF:** We've talked about philosophical, theoretical and literary influences. What about visual? Much of the criticism concerning your work claims that the arguments are Black and the film style is Euro-American, i.e. white avant-garde. I don't believe that that is really the issue, nor is it the way that your approach need be characterized. What are the dynamics that you seek to evoke on a visual plane?
- IJ:** The white avant-garde can't help but try to seize upon *Passion* and claim it as borrowing from *The Grammar*, from their film grammars. I've never seen, for example, *Riddles of the Sphinx*⁵. I've never seen many of these films. As much as I like Laura Mulvey and her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"⁶ which is very important, her pleasure is not the same as the kind of pleasure that we're talking about and articulating. There's a difference. And I think that in a sense, when you talk about the avant-garde as it were, it's very easy to try to compare the way *Passion* is made with white avant-garde filmmakers. That's not to say there aren't influences.

There are some avant-garde filmmakers, such as Ken McMullen and Sally Potter, whose work I am interested in. But if I were going to cite direct influences, I would look to Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett.

MA: And Med Hondo's work.

IJ: There is still to be developed a vocabulary of Black film criticism that can start to talk about our work.

CF: Some Black cultural critics have argued that "authentic" Black cultural tradition is found in preaching and other oral, performative discourses. In thinking about culture and colonization, it has historically been the case that visual culture is the first to be dominated, and is extremely difficult to develop as a sphere of resistance. How do you relate these issues to your own situation as, in a sense, visual artists?

IJ: *Territories* was an attempt to deal with the question of what Black representation means for Black people. That was its first question. As far as I'm concerned the avant-garde is dead. *Territories* and *Passion of Remembrance* are not about the things that were going on in the white avant-garde. We're not interested in just breaking rules and conventions. Which is not to say that there isn't a cultural and political world that informs the white avant-garde of the '70s, because there is. But I think that it's too easy to reduce cultural endeavor to a formal exercise.

CF: How do you respond to the argument that these issues were hashed out in the '70s, because in a sense, sexism, racism and colonialism are the same problematic being recast over and over again on different terms?

MA: Each of these moments—the prioritizing of race, of sexuality, etc.—has almost been like an academic exercise, an intellectual exercise in which we explore in more depth what the crisis in each of those areas is. But I don't think that it really happens like that in real life. One's experiences of these states is more relational, shifting in relation to who you are talking to, where you're standing, what country you're in. The frustration I feel with the way our work is put into established categories is that although we were educated with those theories, we also resisted them. We had no choice but to resist because there wasn't really a place for us. We hadn't actually shaped that theory. We had to study Eurocentric traditions in our own absence. One of the reasons that Sankofa formed was to explore the gaps in the theory and also the gaps in the visual representation. We, as Black media producers, have self-conscious political priorities which we bring to that. Our work isn't just informed by established traditions that existed before us. We also sought to transform the established

theories. The work that is being produced by groups like Sankofa is a few steps ahead of the language of critique that could actually make sense of the work.

CF: Could you say more about the problem of a lag in critical language?

MA: A workshop movement develops in England, and then an established white film critic can say something to the effect that Black groups came along on the tail end of that movement. Now, we came into the movement knowing what the inadequacies were, realizing the ways in which Black film was marginalized. Nonetheless, the workshops offered the chance to have some autonomy over what we created. In addition to this, there were certain experiences—certain histories that hadn't really been talked about in the British context—which we could begin to talk about.

In forming as Black groups, we identified our specificity in terms of race and other issues of interest such as gender and sexuality. On the other hand, in terms of critics and film theory—the voice of authority—the subjectivity of the voice is never clearly identified. It's asexual, classless, raceless. Until you can get to the point where the theory can identify its own cultural and political priorities then it's going to be out of step with the work, which is very self-conscious, very specific about what it's trying to do.

IJ: The Black cultural theories that are being developed at this particular moment are largely limited to the historical traditions which Black people have been participating in and developing and shaping. These traditions have influenced the twentieth century to such an extent that one has to talk about vernacular culture and the relationship between those cultural practices and the Black intellectual.

On the other hand, when we talk about the visual we must address the psychoanalytic, which also has its limitations. It's only very recently that any work has begun which tries to look at Franz Fanon's writings and derive a theory of Black representation, and which confronts the pleasure of the visual. Psychoanalytic discourse has been the most successful intervention in developing a critique of the visual dimension of cinema in its attention to fantasy and memory, to spectatorship, gender and sexuality. What we are now developing is a discourse about the Black subject and the visual plane.

MA: Once we had the responsibility of Black representation or Black images, we found out that there's no space for fiction allowed. Even if you say that you're making a fiction film, people still want to know who those characters are. They want them to add some sort of credibility to their own lives. There still exists a desire for identification among Black audiences. As a filmmaker you try to

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create a fiction in which there is enough distance for you to read what the film is saying as a whole. Still, the grip of realism remains very tight in terms of a Black audience.

IJ: One of the phenomena you can trace in the diaspora is that Black subjects are never really in the visual plane. We want to explore what happens to Black subjectivity when it sees white images. We know that 40% of American film audiences are Black, and they see many kinds of films. There don't have to be Black images all the time, but then we know from the psychoanalytical work done on Black subjectivity that in our psyches there is a massive dilemma taking place. It affects you in every moment as a Black person. You don't see yourself.

MA: You think you're white.

IJ: How do you start to grapple with these sorts of questions? Well, these are questions that we are starting to grapple with. We do need psychoanalysis.

CF: Is it psychoanalysis precisely or a more reflexive position towards representation?

IJ: You must realize that linguistic, literary, and in some cases theoretical arenas of representation, are not talking about representation, as it were, in the visual text. We must develop a contestation as we theorize how our work functions visually. Filmmakers such as Haile Gerima have compared their work to experimentation in jazz and bebop. You can look to Langston Hughes' poems, like "Montage of a Dream Deferred." He uses the word montage, which is very interesting to me, in order to talk about Black urban experiences. I would say that *Passion* is a montage. In *Passion* we're asking questions about the state of British culture. There are no whites in the film—but why shouldn't white people go to see films about Black culture and Black people the same way that Black people go to see films about white culture and white subjects?

The crisis around race is not just a theoretical one, it's a crisis at all levels. It's very obvious what informs it in the age of Reaganism and Thatcherism. When you walk in New York streets and you see the number of Black people on the streets begging something tells you that there is something wrong about the system. If you go to the Dia Art Foundation for a lecture on issues relating to colonialism and there are no Black people in that room, but there's one Black person giving the lecture, you think to yourself, well there's something wrong. In London this hasn't happened as much. I was really surprised by the cultural apartheid in New York. Issues such as Nicaragua, first world involvement in the third world, and the invasion of Grenada—these are questions that we cannot not talk about. And these are key sites of

representation. And this is precisely what is being signalled when people like Jean Baudrillard⁸ talk about the end. It's about certain kinds of worlds coming to an end. We can see that one of the biggest problems in the discourse of postmodernism is that it doesn't talk about the Black subject. Nor does it address colonial discourse.

- CF:** There is some discussion in third world cultural debates about postmodernism in that context as a kind of appropriation or reinterpretation of the strategies that are associated with postmodernism in the first world. The formal relativism implied by postmodernist discourse might have specific resonances for those who have been in a situation of subjugation, in terms of a visual vocabulary. It has been argued that this can have a kind of emancipatory potential, because it makes anything available without any guilt attached. It can be seen as the theoretical recognition of a situation in which the cultural producer is constantly bombarded by images coming from all over the place all the time. There is an extremely problematic history to be dealt with here. Historically speaking, when third world artists borrow from the first world it has been called colonialism, but when the modernists borrowed from Africa, for example, it was an enrichment of the vocabulary of the fine arts.
- IJ:** Can there be a return to an an enrichment of the white avant-garde in its Eurocentric vein, or is it truly dead? At moments of crisis it does turn to other things to revitalize it. There are positions from which we can debate these arguments. This time the old arguments are not going to work. Our entry into postmodernism is predicated on being used as an alibi for the West, for white critical discourse. And I think that that is very important in relation to all the different struggles that are being waged at this time, by other Black peoples. Theorizing our own experiences around modernity is very important.
- MA:** If anything, Black representation must confront modernity, and question whether our understanding of modernity embraces Black experiences. Black people's experience of capitalism hasn't really been dealt with enough. For us to leap to the postmodern would be to overlook the unfinished business of modernity: the way that Black people have travelled, in search of resources, in search of better lives; how they shaped new societies, new cultures, new vocabularies, and new accents within the modern world. There are great gaps in documenting that experience from a Black perspective.

We must be sure that when we talk about race, the white subject doesn't slip out the back door, and leave the Blacks to sort this out among themselves. It's as if whiteness doesn't find a place within the discourse around race until you actually get



A production still from Passion of Remembrance. Director Maureen Blackwood (center) with actors Joseph Charles and Anni Domingo.

white subjectivity to declare its interest, to actually explore its colonialist past, its fascination and its fetishes.

IJ: Its fears and desires and pleasures.

MA: Unless you get people to discuss race in terms of what is invested in Blackness, and what is invested in whiteness, what is denied by both, then you're always going to get the subject of race being the subject of Blackness.

CF: You just talked about how the race question is not just a Black question. How can you relate that to the question of whether or not there is a Black aesthetic?

MA: I think that if aesthetic is determined by your relationship to power, then yes, there is a difference. It results in a difference in one's perception of the world. But we are part of an environment which is Black and white. It seems to me that to construct a notion of a Black aesthetic allows you to leave another aesthetic untouched, unchallenged. It's never clearly labelled as such, but it's a white aesthetic. We have to adjust ourselves in relation to that aesthetic. When people talk about Black aesthetics and go on a search for one, I see a kind of reductionism in the assumption that we the Black people must be doing something else outside and separate from our total environment. There are many

aesthetics, not just one. There are many experiences, many economies to work with. I resist actually trying to form a Black aesthetic that doesn't take into account the diversity and range of our experience.

IJ: Because of modernity, I think our interception there can be called upon to make things more interesting. Where does Black experience fit in? In a sense *Passion* and Black Audio's *Handsworth Songs* are trying to grapple with these issues.

To talk about diasporic culture is to talk about the process of modernity and your relationship to it as a Black subject. In a sense, I am not a postcolonial subject, I'm sorry.

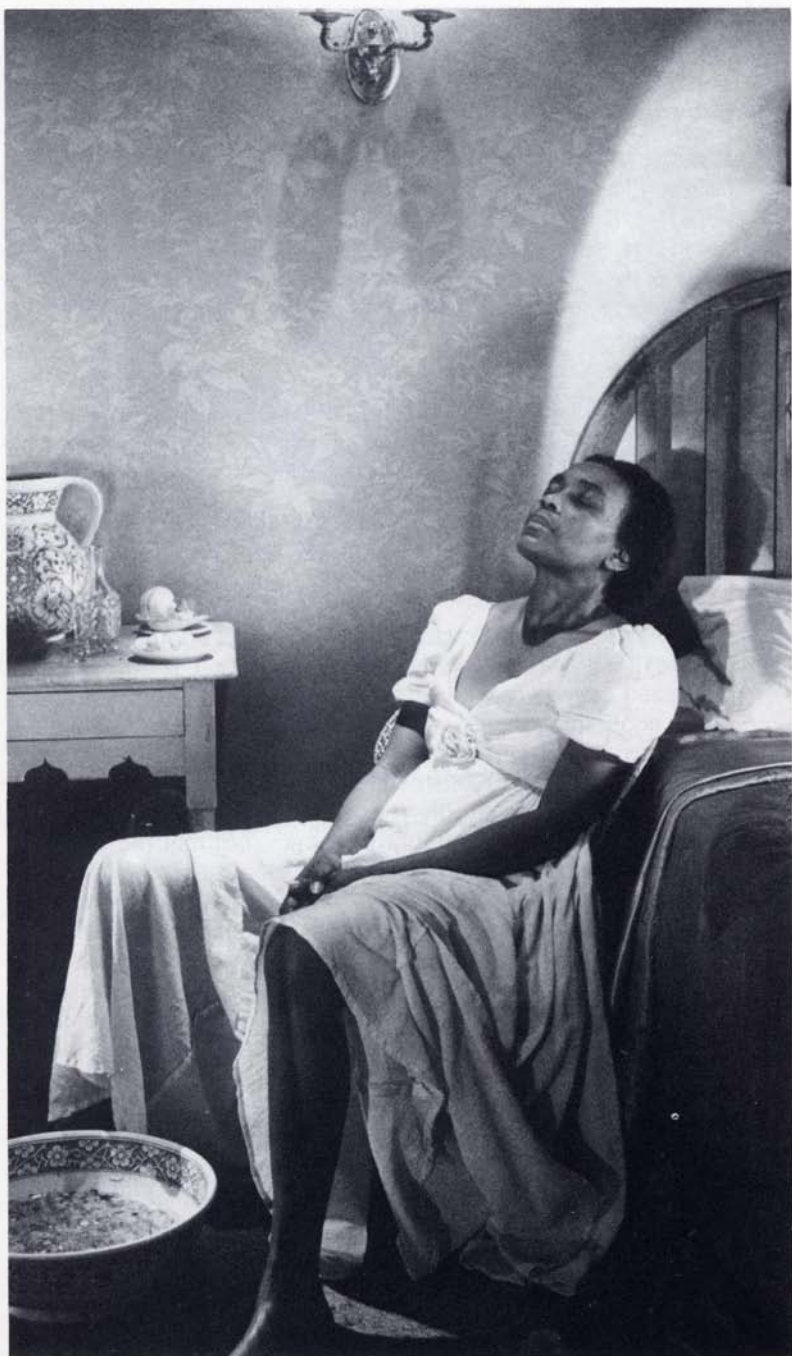
MA: If I am a postcolonial subject, then so are the white people. This is the aftermath. We're still reaching for things. Our colonial history isn't that far away. We're still going through that process. Colonialist attitudes are still quite strong in our society.

IJ: Especially when you start talking about the nation. People talk about multiracial culture, but what about multiracial nations?

CF: Can we talk about *Dreaming Rivers* a bit?

MA: *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) started off as a project about representation of Black women, following a discussion series we had organized called "Black Women and Representation." I wanted to talk about images of Black women in film. And what audiences were meant to see or read from images of Black women. In researching it and talking to artists such as Sonia Boyce, Simone Alexander, and Marlene Smith—I began to feel that the original conception was to talk about the images, but that the moment would be best used by trying to make an image, to tell a story through the images, to express a mood, a feeling. Discussions with Sonia Boyce (who became the film's set designer) were quite crucial—her practice as a visual artist for me captures some of the intimacies of Black life in this country without being apologetic, without relying on theory. Her point of view, her family, the textures, and even the smells and tastes of that experience. I wanted to capture something as unapologetic and as there and as real as those pictures, those paintings. And so, with *Dreaming Rivers*, although the issues were there—in those images—they are less dependent on the spoken word, and more dependent on the knowledge of the recent history of visual representation produced by Black women artists in the U.K. The film is therefore about continuity and transformation.

Dreaming Rivers is about Miss T., a Black, dark skinned woman from the Caribbean. A colonial subject relocated physically, but psychically connected to that past homeland. She is caught between both directions really, leaving the Caribbean to come to England—for dreams, for hope, for love. And then not realiz-



Frame enlargement from Dreaming Rivers (1988) by Sankofa.

ing some of those ambitions, she is caught in the stormy sea, in the Atlantic, on the way back to a place of security, past happiness of youth. Miss T. is a subject in the process of migration, in the midst of the journey. And the imagery for that is like death, which promises new life. The journey hasn't ended—it's represented by her children, who have to lay her down. They represent differences—one person split into three—which fractures into even more again. I wanted to deal with the postcolonial situation and the experience of migration. I would date one point of our modernity from the stage of migration, and the complex processes by which we constantly interact with and change our environment with our histories.

Sankofa: mythical bird which signifies the act of looking into the past to prepare for the future.

Notes

1. Third Cinema is a cinematic term originally proposed by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their 1969 essay, "Towards A Third Cinema." In contrast to the commercially-oriented "first cinema" of Hollywood, and auteurist endeavors—which fall into their "second cinema" category—they posited a third cinema of liberation, a politically engaged, militant cinematic practice integral to decolonization, and unassimilatable to any dominant political system.
2. Lionel Ngakane made *Jemimah and Johnny* in 1963, and Lloyd Reckord made *Ten Bob in Winter* in 1959.
3. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question—The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (November-December 1983), pp. 18-36.
4. Mikhail Bakhtin, Soviet literary theorist of the early revolutionary period, is the author of *The Dialogic Imagination*. His studies of the novel present notions of literature and language in modernity as stratified, fragmented subunits of constant flux and in constant conflict with one another.
5. *Riddles of the Sphinx* is a film by Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18.
7. "Montage of a Dream Deferred" is an extended work, divided into 87 sections, depicting Black urban experiences. Formally, the structure of the work is influenced by bebop and jazz. The poem can be found in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1959), pp. 221-272.
8. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's books include *The Mirror of Production*, *The System of Objects*, *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, *On Seduction*, and *Simulacras and Simulation*.

An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson

Coco Fusco

Coco Fusco: Rather than asking you when the riots took place and when you came together, I would like to get a sense of what ideas, what arguments were being debated at the time that you all began to work.

Lina Gopaul: I'll just open by saying that there was always a sense of the lines we didn't want to pursue, lines which were more didactic. That the riots, for example, happened because of x y z, and that these are the reasons and these are the solutions for it—

regardless of whether they were being thrown out by the Left, be it the white or the Black Left. I think our coming together at that time was an expression of not wanting to take up one of those particular positions. And by choosing not to we threw ourselves into a field that was very grey. We then tried to pull out certain themes that we agreed with—what Stuart Hall¹ might have been saying at that time, or what Paul Gilroy² might have been saying. They weren't as didactic.

John Akomfrah: But you're not just talking about making *Handsworth Songs* (1986) are you?

CF: I'd like to go back further, prior to *Handsworth*.

LG: Even before that our position was not one of which you could actually say that it takes its meaning from this or that.

CF: It seems that there was a strong cultural nationalist position that was generated by the Black activist community—and to some extent, the more conventionally oriented Black media sectors. But speaking in terms of ideas, in terms of theorizing race and nationality, such activity was not coming out of those sectors.

Reece Auguiste: They were the residues of the 1970s, of the Black Power movements that existed here, which did have a very strong nationalist slant. What motivated us was not wanting to rearticulate past political positions but rather to engage with broader theoretical issues which had not yet been addressed, or at least not in the way that we wanted to address them.

There were many discussions in the '70s and early '80s about the post-pan-Africanist vision, or the pan-Africanist vision. And a lot of that was, in many respects, undertheorized. So what we did was to combine, very critically, elements of those debates, drawing also on our own theoretical background which we had developed at colleges. We are in many respects a kind of hybrid: we are able to draw from Foucauldian³ discourse, psychoanalysis, Afro-Caribbean discourse, and colonial and neocolonial narratives. I was going to signpost Jacques Lacan, but in many respects I think that Franz Fanon⁴ would be closer to what I am communicating. *Expeditions* (1983), which was our first cultural project, was a way of testing those ideas and trying to extend the power of the images and debates around the colonial and postcolonial moment. In order to do that we had to articulate a particular language and vision of that moment. We felt we could only do so by drawing on those European, theoretical discourses.

JA: If you look at the moment of becoming for the Black film and video sector in this country, there are a number of words which were key. One of them obviously was representation. The other was more a category than a term: colonial discourse. The minute you begin to work out the political etymology of those terms themselves you

are effectively charting the histories and trajectories of those individuals and collectivities.

The notion of representation has been jettisoned into the forefront by a number of discussions in post-Althusserian⁵ circles. Different political currents in this country had interest in it for different reasons. What was being debated was the value of a Left political culture and how one represents that culture in discourse theory. Gramscians⁶ had an interest in it because they had come to the conclusion that political power and cultural symbolic power were organized around consent. In terms of a Black interest—on one level a number of collectivities, including ourselves, were familiar with the semiologic activities of Parisian intellectuals who were interested in fashion and so on.

CF: You make them sound so trivial. The English talk about politics, and the French talk about fashion.

JA: The interesting thing was when they stopped talking about fashion and started talking about spaghetti.

So all those currents inform how the collective was set up. Four years ago in England you couldn't sit through a discussion, a film meeting, without representation coming up about fifteen million times.

CF: What was meant by that?

LG: It goes a bit further than that. Before the issue of representation comes about, we were involved in doing work with *Expeditions* in an attempt to put another phrase or category on the political agenda—colonial discourse. It wasn't being discussed everywhere, mostly in discussions in particular academic circles. And what we wanted to do was to address those debates, those theories, and to bring that onto a visual landscape.

JA: People used the term representation for a number of reasons. The different uses give you a sense of the complexity of the trajectories involved. At one level people used it to simply talk about questions of figuration. How one places the Black in the scene of writing, the imagination and so on. Others saw it in more juridic terms. How one is enfranchised, if you like, how one buys into the social contract. What is England and what constitutes English social life? Some interests were broadly academic, but we were focussing on how to turn our concerns into a problematic, to use an Althusserian term, in the cultural field. We were interested in representation because it seemed to be partly a way of prying open a negative/positive dichotomy. It seemed to be a way of being able to bypass certain binaries.

CF: Are you referring now to the negative and positive image debates?

JA: Yes, and its specifically English variant—which is obsessed with stereotypes, with grounding every discussion around figuration and the existence—presence and absence in cinema in terms of stereotyping. It was a way of going beyond the discussions which would start at the level of stereotype, then move on to images, and then split images into negative and positive, and so on. We wanted to find a way to bypass this, without confronting it head on. I think that the lobbies which were really interested in debates around stereotyping were too strong, to be honest. And we were too small to take them head on. In a sense the negative/positive image lobby represented all that was acceptable about anti-racism, multiculturalism, etc. It's the only thing that united everybody who claimed they were against racism.

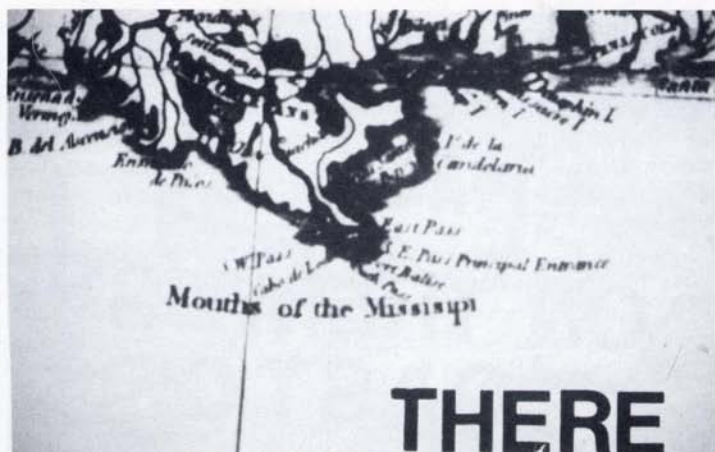
Everybody was talking about a non-pathology of racism. The Labor party activists would talk about it. So would the Liberals. For the anti-apartheid groups it was the limit-text, if you like. We sensed that it had political inadequacies, and cultural constraints, and that the theoretical consequences of it hadn't been thought through. But we didn't know exactly how to replace it. We did not want to try to set ourselves up as another interest group to combat the multiculturalists or the anti-racists.

CF: Can we discuss *Expeditions* more specifically than in terms of mapping out a political etymology?

RA: The positive/negative image discourse had become the organizing principle of what representation was supposed to have been about, what representation was. *Expeditions* was an attempt to critique that discourse on positive and negative images. We wanted to go beyond purely descriptive categories and try to forge another kind of analytical strain, which could then open up that space in which we could begin to articulate our own ideas about representation by problematizing representation itself.

When *Expeditions* was first completed we had a number of theoretical, political and cultural battles with those who had very defined ideas about what representation was. The first point that was made was that it was inaccessible, because we were using language which was grounded in Foucauldian ideas, and Fanonian ideas, and so on. Second, there was the issue of the kind of images we used, which had not been used before. The way, for example, in which we would actually appropriate from English national fictions—like the Albert and Victoria Memorial—going back and really engaging with the archive of colonial memory. We were not only constructing a colonial narrative, but also critiquing what was seen as the colonial moment—critiquing what was seen as the discourse around empire.

JA: When we were making *Expeditions*, a number of tentative voices were beginning to challenge what was effectively an orthodoxy



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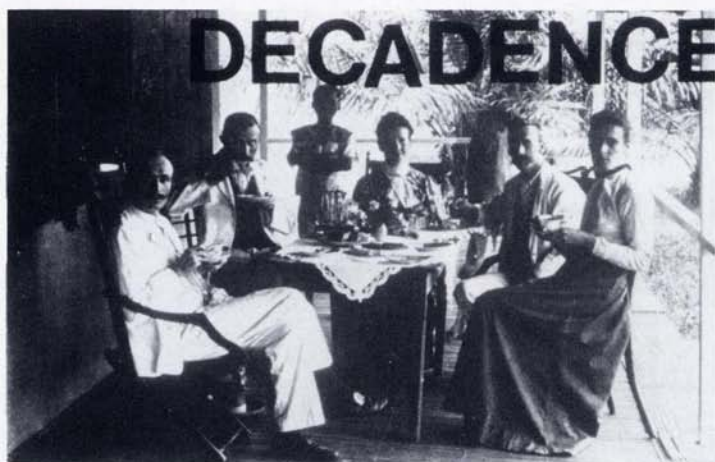
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in English cultural debate, which was the notion that colonial history and the colonial narrative was past—that it was the instrument of a past English glory which has now foundered. Before there was colonial history, after there's postcolonial history. And we wanted to problematize that very obvious splitting of memory into past and present. It seemed that the only way we could do that was to pay less attention to what historiographers and political commentators said about past and present, and look at what the iconography of those moments signified now. We weren't really interested in whether the Victoria and Albert was built in 1898. Nor did we believe that was the only moment that it meant anything, because it is still here and it is still in the middle of London. And ten thousand tourists see it every day. We felt then that the politics of signification was alive.

Avril Johnson: What was also happening around this time was the Falklands war, which had begun the year before. Margaret Thatcher called upon a notion of British identity in which, supposedly, all true Englishmen could identify.

LG: And there were many who argued that the fact that we were chronologically in a postwar era made everything different—that we were postwar theoreticians engaged in a postwar agenda.

CF: I have a clear sense from what you are saying about how this relates to the politics of social life in contemporary England, but I wanted to ask some more aesthetically-oriented questions. Many of the images of empire you use are ones that had already been displaced from classical civilization. The recycling of images that you were playing with for political reasons taps into an aesthetic discourse of neoclassicism that connects you to postmodernism and the transavant-garde.

JA: Two things were happening at the time. On the one hand, formalist photographers and artists—such as the constituency around *BlockZ*—were becoming much more interested in the expressive qualities of the remnants of the English national past. They were using these remnants in a very formalist sense, as a kind of backdrop against which one mapped out one's anxieties of difference onto the past. You could see that people were drawing on the neo-expressive qualities of those statues and icons, without necessarily thinking about questions of desire.

Photo credit (pp. 45-46): "THERE/[YOU SEE THE SAD]/& SYMBOLIC STORY OF/DECADENCE ON THE WEST COAST OF/AFRICA/HYSTERIA + IMAGINARY THREATS." Frame enlargements from Expeditions (1983) by Black Audio Film Collective.

CF: One of the desires of postmodernism in its most Eurocentric form is to sever the tie between the political implication and the formal manifestation. In *Expeditions* you use similar strategies of appropriation with a different motor. Do you see these as two postmodernisms hitting off one another? Were you misread because of this?

JA: Our enterprise emerged before the category of postmodernity meant anything in English aesthetic debates. At the time not even Victor Burgin⁸ or any of the high priests of avant-garde theories and debates in this country were using it.

RA: One of the problems of the discourse of postmodernity lies in what it excludes. The crisis that the postmodern is supposed to address is seen as something internal to the logic and the rationale of Western Classical Civilization. In philosophical discourse there is the crisis around reason. Then there is a crisis around form, as manifested in architecture. What interests me most about these debates is the exclusion of the so-called neocolonial world. To me the crisis doesn't have so much to do with what's happening to the West, to the internal discourse of the West, as it does with what the non-European world is doing to the West. The crisis now is in Lebanon, in South Africa.

JA: In terms of the beginning of making *Expeditions*, it's important to say that there are two convergences there. On the one hand, we realized that there was a kind of reappropriation, which we now understand to be postmodernist reappropriation of the past, taking place in very formalist circles, such as the kind of work that Victor Burgin and others were doing in photography. What we decided to do—which again, with hindsight, we now realize places us firmly in that camp—was to appropriate classical or neoclassical images. But we appropriated them using methods of avant-garde photography which effectively begin with Alexander Rodchenko⁹—extremely angular kinds of framing, etc. That was the key difference. If you look at the formalist work on the other hand, the methods of composition were extremely straightforward. Henri Cartier Bresson¹⁰ could have done it. What people found unnerving about what we were doing was that the play of postmodernism wasn't there. *This* parody and pastiche was underpinned by biblical sounding tones concerning colonial narratives and expeditions and so on. We wanted to say that it was an expedition, that on the one hand you went through these exhibitions—you pack your bag from different aesthetic fields, from neoclassical architecture, from Russian formalist photography. But the interest was in colonial narrative. The interest was not, in the end, in play.

CF: Let's move on to *Handsworth Songs*. I am interested in the symptomatic qualities of the responses to it. I do think that the fact *Handsworth Songs* has been the subject of controversy has to do



Frame enlargement from *Expeditions*.

with something larger than the film. It has to do with a desire to damage the kind of position you represent. Salman Rushdie's frequently mentioned review in *The Guardian*¹¹ doesn't really address the film—he demonstrates no relationship to the filmic aspects of the work. He juxtaposes the notion of an authentic voice to image manipulation.

LG: I think this goes back to what we were saying about where we located ourselves in relation to the political and theoretical positions that prevailed prior to our existence as a collective. When we emerged people tried to didactically map out the cultural and visual terrain for us to slot into.

If they are not actually addressing the film, well then what is it that they are addressing? Transgression, basically. Why is it such a strong response not to the film, but our existence? To what you represent? Those who criticized us most vehemently were prioritizing a line about community and people in the streets. There was no other way of representing yourself other than the way they put forward. That's what I think is largely behind the sometimes almost violent responses to us.

JA: The question of paternity and transgression was very important. One of the things which people would always say to us was, isn't *Handsworth Songs* too avant-garde? Quite simply, the problems we faced in making *Handsworth* were very practical ones—to do with melodrama—orchestrating means of identification, rather than distancing people and dazzling them with techniques. The editing

might be considered unconventional, but the techniques are very straightforward. So it's not avant-garde in that sense. My mistake was in assuming people wouldn't see it as a transgressive text.

In terms of the established boundaries of discussion—aesthetic interventions around race—there were questions of paternity at stake. In other words, who was the holder of the law—the law of enunciation? Who had the right to speak, who had the right to map out and broaden the field that everybody had to speak in? It was in that sense that the film was received as a transgressive text, because it clearly didn't fall into line with the established concordat concerning the Black intelligensia and their discussion of race. That then makes the film an avant-garde text. Those who were willing to live with a more mixed economy of dialogue around figuration and race accepted it, and those who didn't, didn't accept it.

That was one symptom, but the morbidity also has to do with the inability of cultural workers to make any meaningful sense of that moment. One has the sense that people were trapped in their own rhetoric, claiming that the 1981 riots occurred because of unemployment, etc. having to signpost all the social reasons why Black people take to the streets. The minute we began to speak and give the impression that somehow one was going to reopen the questions rather than repeat the answers, people got very nervous.



Frame enlargement from Handsworth Songs (1986) by Black Audio Film Collective.

AJ: Those people who felt trapped had benefitted from what happened in 1981. They don't want to recognize that the problem still exists.

LG: It was also a move away from the specificity of location. After 1981, there was a generalized understanding of the riots, whereas in 1985 it was different. How can we begin to understand this situation, people would ask, in Birmingham, which didn't riot in 1981? Birmingham has a very specific Black political history. It's one of the central spots for Black political development and for anti-racist development. It has a number of institutions, like the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which are based within those communities. There is something quite specific happening there.

JA: We have to be careful not to overestimate the transgressive potential of certain kinds of aesthetic intervention. At a certain point, the nightmares which weigh on the brain are not necessarily historical ones—they are very conjunctural ones. The fact of the matter is that a number of things were collapsing at a certain point. And the film in many ways mirrors that collapse. It's not an avant-gardist intervention, in the sense that it doesn't frame a series of devices that would get us out of the crisis. It mirrors those forms collapsing, and it says what a shame.

CF: How did people respond to that sort of mirror?

JA: When people saw the film they saw all the fractures, all the unevenness—which are quite deliberate. Part of the problem that we have has to do with the question of whether Black people should be involved in visual arts, in creating aesthetically challenging visual work. The assumption when we foreground avant-garde technique is either that we don't know anything else, and have stumbled across it by accident, or that we are imitating other forms.

LG: Or that we have no foundation in the Black communities, that we've left that behind too.

JA: The idea of prefacing the film with a phrase—"There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories"—and then to work on it in terms of splits and unevennesses and so on without trying to center it was what alarmed many people. The triumphalist vision of race and community operates on the assumption that there is essentially a core of affect that is structured around oratory, around song—giving it an irreducible unity—which wasn't present in the film. It played with it, at some stages discards it, it takes it on board, then it says it's probably not possible, do not work with it, but there you are, and so on. But the film doesn't fix its sentiments around it. That is what was frightening. It then leads to the discussion of whether avant-garde techniques, or disruptive techniques, profilmic techniques, are in safe hands when they are given to Blacks. Both certain Black theorists and the white theorists would say that; they would want to know whether authorship is really safe with us.

If the notion of diaspora has any credibility, it has to be understood as a formation which exists both on the margins at certain points, and at the center of English social life. And if it plays those dual functions, then it's bound to be negotiated into a series of practices, visual or otherwise, which exist in this country. So that even if a visual history wasn't present in our "history," the very fact of communality at the center of the metropol makes it impossible to ignore, to put it crudely, that every little Black kid in this country, at one stage or another, will have the chance to go to an art college, or to take part in art classes at school.

CF: And they live in a world that is absolutely inundated with images, although the vast majority of them do not include Black people. Would you want to venture into theorizing around what this absence does to the psyche, and the question of representation and race?

JA: In terms of reproduction in the very classical sense, Marxian or otherwise, of social relations in this country, I know that the Black independent sector, which has organized itself around questions of representation and collective practice, represents the new wave of English filmmaking. I also know that in terms of the kinds of questions raised by filmmaking practice in this country, which took its cue from Jean-Luc Godard, from Chris Marker, the Nouvelle Vague, political cinema in Russia and so on—this new wave comes to it with a certain kind of agnosticism and skepticism around its transgressive potential as we hit the 1990s. And I also know that our interest in filmmaking as a new wave possibly gives English independent film practice a chance to breach what has been an impossible gap between the mainstream and independents. We are obviously aided by the existence of television—nevertheless, we are the fortunate inheritors of that confusion, that growth, that progression. And I don't think it is possible to be that closely associated with all those things without having some very deeply entrenched familiarity with the visual landscape in this country. That's what I know. What I don't know is how we then proceed. What I don't know is what to say to people who say, well how can Black people be in that position.

One of the problems that the independent sector always faced in this country is this crisis of identity around collective security—it never really understood its strategic power. It never truly understood where it stood in relation to mainstream audiovisual culture in this country. People always assumed that the very act of doing something is transgressive. In a culture where the transgressive is in fact the cutting edge of advertising, that makes your identity very unstable.

CF: How do you respond to the claim that while you get attacked for the forms you operate within, the fact that you choose to work

within those forms makes it easier for your work to be aired on television, whereas a more straightforward, monological documentary on a politically controversial issue, like *The People's Account*,¹² cannot.

JA: On one level, we've had people who've "told it like it is" in their documentaries. That has to be said with a certain element of skepticism, because ultimately one needs to challenge the assumption that you can tell it like it is.

Can we talk about where aesthetics used to belong in classical philosophy? The term "aesthetic" was coined by Baumgarten, who was an ally of Herder, who was working with Kant. Black filmmaking has and will probably continue to be straddled with what Kant calls the categorical imperative. People assume that there are certain transcendental duties that Black filmmaking has to perform. They assume that and because of that Black filmmaking has to work with the understanding that it's in a state of emergence. And because it is in a state of emergence its means always have to be guerilla means, war means, signposts of urgency. When that begins to inhibit questions of reflection—doubt, skepticism, intimacy and so on—then the categorical imperative does exactly what it is supposed to do—it imprisons.

CF: It is precisely the arguments around urgency that foreclose entry into aesthetic practice, or any discussion of aesthetics as the property of a Black artist. How can you start to talk about a term that exists within aesthetics, when you're supposedly not engaged in aesthetics?

JA: Because the transcendental duties are always *a priori*, because they are always there before you start. Everything else is only given contingent licence. Aesthetics, efficacy, are each given tentative license. Their only use is the extent to which they take you closer to your transcendental mission, which is to announce that we are here and we can't take it anymore.

If the situation of war is an apt metaphor, and in many ways it probably is, then I would say that our position of dissidence is that one resolutely refuses to be turned into cannon fodder. We would like to take our bread and hit the mountain because it is safer to be a guerilla. The struggles we've engaged in have had some moderate successes. We've argued that we don't just live beneath our navel.

CF: In what sense do you deal with sexuality and gender in your films?

JA: We've decided to deal with these questions in different ways. It's a very complicated question for us. On the one hand we try to deal with it by working with Pratibha Parmar on her videotape *Emergence* (1987), trying to make an input into an area which is already defined as one of sexuality. On the other hand, we try to

make sure that it gels into the mesh of concern that we have for the Black subject in our own work.

When Isaac Julien's *Territories* (1985) appeared it was obvious that we were beginning to swap one set of transcendental clothes for another. Once you stop being angry you had to be another other, and adopt another transgressive tone. And we began to think of ways to slip past that. If there is a voice of dissidence that echoes and strains in our work, it's an attempt to find a position from which to speak certain questions—which beguiles expectations and is genuinely uncanny in many ways. It was obvious that once *Territories* appeared, with the kind of reception that it got in this country—it was then supposed to be the beginning of a convention. Regardless of what one's interest in the politics were. I don't think, in the end, that we don't deal with sexuality. But we try to find a much more complicated dialogue with the issues than was expected of us once *Territories* appeared.

- AJ:** The other thing is that we are not making sexuality a cornerstone. We are making it something that is mediated, not necessarily the central process. It's informed by a number of different things.
- LG:** There are times when people prioritize sexuality as a singular issue, which is what tends to happen in moments of struggle or crisis. But after that—how do you then bring it back into an everyday part of your life, and then into a filmic practice? I find that far more difficult than addressing it head on. People don't live like that.
- JA:** We are also in a position to take a number of things for granted. The search for intimacy, the reflective quality of *Handsworth Songs*, does not simply have to do with a realignment of Black discourses. They have to do with our sensitivity to questions which are raised in other sorts of politics, not necessarily racial ones. Obviously, Black women talk about questions of femininity. We try to make sure that the text you operate with is open enough to allow for those kinds of interventions.

Two articles appeared in the *London Review of Books* a while back—I didn't realize how informative they were until much later. It was a debate between Richard Sennett¹³ and Michel Foucault. And it's also a kind of debate that has taken place since then in the gay community.

CF: What were their positions?

- JA:** They had to do with whether or not when one forged a politics around identity, placing it in the public arena—whether doing that was simply allowing oneself to become inserted in a well policed arrangement of things. What does calling yourself a Black collective entail, or imply? Is it possible to work through identity politics without having to announce the name of your identity? I was left with a deep sense of skepticism around identifying identity and

championing it in a very triumphalist way.

Blacks are expected to be transgressive in English cultural life. To me this is just as wearying, just as draining as the old "you must be the conscience of the nation" approach. Either one of them requires a certain act of a kind of emancipatory front—for the nation. We don't have the strength or the energy. So there may be reticence around these questions on our part.

CF: Africa has an extremely important symbolic function in the history of Black film and Black images—and in the Black consciousness movement—as the promised land—the age of innocence. With your new film, *Testament* (1988), which was shot in Africa, you seem to have walked into a rather overloaded symbolic minefield.

JA: It is loaded. In many ways, Africa is one of the key primal scenes, one of the primal moments in diasporic culture. I suspect that what we are going to do with that understanding isn't going to please everybody, but there you are. That is the way of the world.

RA: Specific histories of subjectivities is not the issue. The issue is that within the Black community, there is a lot of innocence and naivete about the continent Africa. There is a certain kind of romantic engagement with Africa, which is one of the residues of the neo-nationalist moment. On one level, Africa should be celebrated; on another level, people in the diaspora should critically engage with the continent. And in particular they should engage with those historical figures who have supposedly enunciated Africa, or the pan-Africanist movement. All those Africanist leaders are still held in a frame of innocence. What that has done is to project a certain kind of retardation in thought. It's feeling and not thinking.

What we are saying now is that after 20-25 years of independence, no one can argue that the problem in Africa is something outside—that it's the West, always the West. There are real problems that are internal, that are specific to the continent. In order to break away from this romantic engagement one has to recognize and smash that innocence and rip it up and see what is really taking place. Otherwise we are engaged in transcendental thinking about the continent, which doesn't get those out here in the West thinking about the continent very far.

JA: Let's speak about it also in terms of the aesthetics of that primal moment. If the dichotomy in Black art is between protest and redemption, or protest and affirmation, and if Africa as the primal scene functions significantly in the affirmation moment, as the moment of liberation, of catharsis, what if—and this is an aesthetic question we pose in the film—what if you have a character for whom that redemption is a problem? What if you have a character who can't live with that primal moment? One of the things that the character says in the film is that perhaps I am a new kind of animal for whom the very thought of peace is a burden. We have

a number of alternatives—we can debunk the lore, with reference to sociology, or we can take the rhetoric of the primal scene seriously and say that it does exist, and that it has real effects on people's lives. There are people whose lives have been made much more complicated, destroyed almost, by these sorts of assumptions around Africa. That seems to me to be a starting point. We must go there and find a character for whom Africa is not a place of redemption, precisely because Africa thinks of itself that way. We have to come out with a character like that. That is the aim of the film. Once you decide that the primal scene is that borderline, which people cross in different ways—once you have defined it in those terms you get stuck on one side or the other. What I am not exactly sure about—it doesn't worry me or anybody else here—what we are not sure about is whether that person actually comes back or gets swallowed up by the border.

CF: Perhaps we should also talk about the U.S. as a *place of redemption*. Black American culture carries a tremendous amount of weight here in England. You touch on it in the film with references to Malcolm X and the dialogues and questions that are raised about a legacy of radicalism.

AJ: It has to do with what you hear on the news—that what happened in America ten years ago happens in Britain today. And I think that is because Black people have been there in much larger numbers much longer—and in a sense people still look to what Black Americans are doing. And it is also easier not to look at what is happening here.

JA: The connection goes back a long way. At each moment of Black radical life in this country there has been an interface with concerns around race in America. You can go back to the discussions around emancipation here. Black people who lived in this country at that time, their concerns with slavery here and in the Americas were always interlocked. The founding of the pan-Africanist conference was always only possible when in many ways the anti-colonial fighters began to take W.E.B. Du Bois¹⁴ seriously and work with him in some ways. Marcus Garvey went to America and then came here. There has always been a sense of exchange, if you like, between the two spaces. And there was that famous conference in this country in 1967 called "The Dialectics of Liberation," where people were first exposed to the personages of Black Power—Stokely Carmichael turned up and made his famous speech in which he said that the only place for a woman is prone. This first symbolic contact with Black Power left a very contradictory legacy in this country.

1968 itself—the founding of the New Left in this country—was deeply implicated in a kind of dialogue and exchange with Black American culture.

Now if we are talking about our own fascination with America I suspect that it is split in very different ways—there is a kind of aura around American life in its different manifestations, which you find in different spaces. For Black women's politics in this country, Black American women writers have almost canonical significance.

LG: There is a sense that they had all done it before we had done it.

JA: There is sense that Black American culture throws down a certain gauntlet which people then have to pick up and live through and with.

CF: What about in film?

JA: In film I don't think the connection is there that much.

AJ: It also has to do with the Caribbean. Most of us come from the Caribbean, where America is *it*.

JA: Wim Wenders said that Americans have colonized our unconscious. In many ways he is right. Anywhere in the world—in the darkest part of Manchester even—you find counter-culture which premises American life in some form, be it hip hop, or whatever. And it is in that very generalized sense that America has been useful. But I don't think I ever really seriously thought that Black American independent filmmaking was something to take a cue from.

RA: I think we have been more interested in the New Latin American Cinema, the so-called Third Cinema.

Notes

1. Originally from Kingston, Jamaica, Stuart Hall is one of the founders of Black cultural studies in Britain and one of the leading spokesmen of the New Left. He was the first editor of *New Left Review* and assisted in organizing the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCS) at the University of Birmingham. He is currently professor of Sociology at Open University. He is coeditor of many CCS volumes, such as *Culture, Media, Language*, and coauthor of *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*.
2. Paul Gilroy is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Polytechnic of the South Bank. He has also worked as a musician, disc jockey and journalist. He is coeditor of *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in '70s Britain*, and the author of *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*.

3. The reference here is to the writings of the French theorist Michel Foucault, whose books include *Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things*, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality*, and *The Uses of Pleasure*.
4. Franz Fanon was born in Martinique, studied psychiatry in France and worked in Algeria during the Franco-Algerian War. He is the author of *Black Skin, White Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and *A Dying Colonialism*.
5. One of the leading Marxist philosophers of the 1960s in France, Louis Althusser is the author of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Known for having emphasized the implications of Marxism for philosophy and aesthetics, Althusser developed a concept of ideology as a "lived" relation between human beings and their world. He saw this as different from science in its giving more weight to the social and practical modes of understanding, rather than theoretical forms of knowledge. He employed Freudian terms such as condensation, displacement and overdetermination to explain how contradiction—the dialectical process of historical development—can be understood in relation to its time and place in history.
6. Antonio Gramsci, the most important Italian Marxist theorist of the early twentieth century, is the author of *The Prison Notebooks*. He is best known in England for his theory of hegemony and the concept of national-popular politics, which provides the groundwork for understanding cultural and ideological production and reception and for analyzing the politics of the modern nation-state as effective through consent, rather than force. Like Althusser, Gramsci also employed categories from Freudian psychoanalysis.
7. *Block* is a British art magazine.
8. Victor Burgin is a British photographer and theorist and the editor of *Thinking Photography* (London: MacMillan, 1982).
9. Alexander Rodchenko, the Russian constructivist artist and photographer of the early revolutionary period.
10. Henri Cartier-Bresson, the French photographer and photojournalist.
11. The following is Salman Rushdie's article, "Songs doesn't know the score," from *The Guardian* (London), January 12, 1987, p. 10.

"In *The Heart of a Woman*, volume four of her famous autobiography, Maya Angelou describes a meeting of the Harlem Writers' Guild, at which she had read some of her work and had it torn to pieces by the group.

It taught her a tough lesson: 'If I wanted to write, I had to be willing to develop a kind of concentration found mostly in people awaiting execution. I had to learn technique and surrender my ignorance.'

It just isn't enough to be Black and blue, [or] even Black and angry, the message is plain enough in Angelou's self-portrait, in Louise Meriwether's marvellous *Daddy Was A Numbers Runner*, in Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall; if you want to tell the untold stories, if you want to give voice to the voiceless, you've got to find a language.. Which goes for film as well as prose, for documentary as well as autobiography. Use the wrong language, and you're dumb and blind.

Down at the Metro cinema in Soho, there's a new documentary starting a three-week run, *Handsworth Songs*, made by Black Audio Film Collective. The 'buzz' about the picture is good. New Socialist likes it, City Limits likes it, people are calling it multi-layered, original, imaginative, its makers talk of speaking in metaphors, its director John Akomfrah is

getting mentioned around town as a talent to watch.

Unfortunately, it's no good, and the trouble does seem to be one of language.

Let me put it this way. If I say 'Handsworth,' what do you see? Most Britons would see fire, riots, looted shops, young Rastas and helmeted cops by night. A big story; front page. Maybe a West Side Story: Officer Krupke, armed to the teeth, versus the kids with the social disease.

There's a line that Handsworth Song[s] wants us to learn. 'There are no stories in the riots,' it repeats, 'only the ghosts of other stories.' The trouble is, we aren't told the other stories. What we get is what we know from TV. Blacks as trouble; Blacks as victims. Here is a Rasta dodging the police; here are the old news-clips of the folks in the fifties getting off the boat, singing calypsos about 'darling London.'

Little did they know, eh? But we don't hear about their lives, or the lives of their born-British children. We don't hear Handsworth's songs.

Why not? The film's handouts provide a clue. 'The film attempts to excavate hidden ruptures/agonies of "Race": It 'looks at the riots as a political field coloured by the trajectories of industrial decline and structural crisis.' Oh dear. The sad thing is that while the film-makers are trying to excavate ruptures and work out how trajectories can colour fields, they let us hear so little of the much richer language of their subjects.

When Home Secretary Hurd visits Handsworth looking bemused, just after the riots, a Black voice is heard to say: 'The higher monkey climb the more he will expose.' If only more of this sort of wit and freshness could have found its way into the film. But the makers are too busy 're-positioning the convergence of "Race" and "Criminality"', describing a living world in the dead language of race industry professionals. I don't know Handsworth very well, but I do know its bursting with tales worth telling. Take a look at John Bishton and Derek Reardon's 1984 photo-and-text essay, Home Front. There are Vietnamese boat people in Handsworth, where Father Peter Diem, a refugee himself, runs a pastoral centre to which they come for comfort.

Here are two old British soldiers. One, name of Shri Dalip Singh, sits stiffly in his army tunic, sporting his Africa Star with pride; the other, a certain Jagat Singh, is a broken old gent who has been arrested for drunkenness on these streets over 300 times. Some nights they catch him trying to direct the traffic.

It's a religious place, Handsworth. What was once a Methodist chapel is now one of many Sikh gurdwaras. Here is the Good News Asian Church, and there you can see Rasta groundations, a mosque, Pentecostal halls, and Hindu Jain and Buddhist places of worship. Many of Handsworth's songs are hymns of praise. But there's reggae too, there are Punjabi *ghazals* and Two Tone bands.

These days the kids in Handsworth like to dance the Wobble. And some of its denizens dream of distant 'liberations,' nurturing, for example, the dark fantasy of Khalistan.

It's important, I believe, to tell such stories: to say, this is England: *Allahu Akbar* from the minaret of a Birmingham mosque, the Ethiopian World Federation which helps Handsworth Rastas 'return' to the land of Rastafari. These are English scenes now, English songs.

You won't find them, or anything like them, in Handsworth Songs, though for some reason, you will see plenty of footage about troubles in

Tottenham and Brixton, which is just the sort of blurring you know the Harlem writers would have jumped on, no matter how right-on it looked.

It isn't easy for Black voices to be heard. It isn't easy to get it said that the state attacks us, that the police are militarised. It isn't easy to fight back against media stereotypes. As a result, whenever somebody says what we all know, even if they say it clumsily and in jargon, there's a strong desire to cheer, just because they managed to get something said, they managed to get through.

I don't think that's much help, myself. That kind of celebration makes us lazy.

Next time, let's start telling those ghost-stories. If we know why the caged bird sings, let's listen to her song."

12. See footnote 4 in "A Black Avant-Garde?"—the first article in this publication—for more information about *The People's Account*.
13. Richard Sennett is the author of *The Fall of Public Man and Authority*.
14. Poet and essayist W.E.B. Du Bois is one of the greatest and most influential Black American writers of the late 19th and early 20th century. He is the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

Filmography

Black Audio Film Collective

Expeditions: Signs of Empire/Images of Nationality (tape/slide), 1983, 40 min.

* *Handsworth Songs*, 1986, color, 60 min. Directed by John Akomfrah. Produced by Lina Gopaul.

Testament, 1988, 90 min. Directed by John Akomfrah.

Sankofa Film/Video Collective

* *Territories*, 1985, color, 25 min. Directed by Isaac Julien.

* *The Passion of Remembrance*, 1986, color, 80 min. Directed by Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood. Produced by Martina Attille.

* *This Is Not An Aids Advertisement*, 1987, color, video, 10 min. Directed by Isaac Julien.

* *Dreaming Rivers*, 1988, color, 30 min. Directed by Martina Attille.

In progress:

Looking For Langston (Director: Isaac Julien)

and

Perfect Image (Director: Maureen Blackwood)

*Distributed in the U.S. by Third World Newsreel, 335 West 38th Street, 5th Floor New York, NY 10018. Telephone: (212) 947-9277.

All other work can be obtained directly from the filmmakers.

Black Audio Film Collective

Members: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Eddie George,
Lina Goupaul, Avril Johnson and Trevor Mathison

Address: 89 Ripley Road
London E8 2NH

Telephone: 01 254 9536

Sankofa Film/Video Collective

Members: Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Isaac Julien
and Nadine Marsh-Edwards

Address: Unit K
32-34 Gordon House Rd.
London NW5 1LP

Telephone: 01 485-0848

Coco Fusco is a New York based writer and curator whose special interest is in media on and about the third world. Her articles have appeared in *Art in America*, *Impulse*, *In These Times*, *The Independent*, *Cineaste*, *Black Film Review*, *Wedge*, *Social Text*, *The Portable Lower East Side* and *Afterimage* (Rochester). She is the editor of *Reviewing Histories: Selections From New Latin American Cinema* (HALLWALLS, 1987) and curated a travelling film exhibition under the same title. Together with Robert Knafo and Andra Mesz, Ms. Fusco is the co-producer of *Havana Postmodern: The New Cuban Art* (1987), a video documentary made with support from the Bela Belasz Studio in Budapest, Hungary. She is currently a Program Officer for the New York Council for the Humanities.



Sankofa Film/Video Collective and **Black Audio Film Collective** are the most celebrated and controversial Black media groups to emerge from the British workshop movement of the 1980's. Their work focuses on the representation of the Black subject in mainstream and alternative media, also touching on such issues as institutionalized racism, sexual politics and national identity in postcolonial Britain. Challenging stylistic conventions of both documentary and fiction film, their work provides a basis for critical reflection on the history of Black film culture, Third Cinema, and their future directions.