

Feeding off the Dead:

Seven Songs For Malcolm X



Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN AKOMFRAH

Critic Kass Banning and British filmmaker John Akomfrah on necrophilia, *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* and Black British cinema.

John Akomfrah, member of the London-based film workshop, Black Audio Film Collective, was in Toronto at the Festival of Festivals with his film *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, a meditation on Malcolm X. Akomfrah is and was at the centre of the black British new wave that took both the black diaspora and international film communities by storm in the eighties. Taking the "riots" of '81 and '84 in Birmingham and London as its starting point, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) offers an unforgettable, poetic rumination. Juxtaposing found images of struggle within the public sphere with moments of intimacy, the film offers up archeological accounts that insistently gesture towards their origin—colonialism. Two innovative narrative films with overarchingly archeological projects, *Testament* and *Who Needs A Heart*, swiftly followed. These works signalled "new times"—offering an aesthetic intervention around race—dismantling earlier designations of what black cinema could and should be. They have met with unprecedented success (and debate).

Seven Songs For Malcolm X is no deviation from the project. Re-forging earlier successful combinations, archival footage and Malcolm's extracted writings, words by cultural commentators and friends are punctuated by haunting stylized tableaux which, ultimately, rework Malcolm X as icon. While stressing his more internationalist political views, what emerges, surprisingly, given the broad global canvas of his thoughts and the film's insistent formalism, is a more tenuous, and hence more human Malcolm figure than is usually conveyed. Melodiously weaving from exterior to inner speech and back again, the voices of Toni Cade Bambara, and Giancarlo Esposito eloquently hold it all together. Stellar participants include Patricia Williams, Betty Shabbazz (at her most disarming best), Yuri Kochiyama, Robin Kelly, Thulani Davis, William Kunstler, Greg Tate, and others. Given the timing of its release, we can only read this (comparatively) modest film as a compelling footnote to Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, but as a most necessary one. In addition to its overwhelming inherent value, *Seven Songs*' emergence will recharge debates specific to black filmmaking and the difference difference makes.

B/L The first film I saw by you was *Handsworth Songs*, I believe it was here in Toronto at the Festival of Festivals, at least six years ago, folks were blown away by it. There was a sense that this film signalled something new. Dealing with the politics of representation and displacement, but at the same time pleasurable and smart, it constituted a riveting mesh of poetics and "realness."

I think *Seven Songs* negotiates a similar structure: real folks, fellow activists, friends, giving differing testimony juxtaposed with surreal tableaux and archival footage that similarly excavates the imaginary while building up "the idea" of a person. Why Malcolm, why now?

J.A. I think you're right to say that there's a connection between *Seven Songs* and *Handsworth*, and you're right, they're much more formal connections. I think, talking personally about the work that I've directed for Black Audio, *Touch of the Tar Brush* and *Who Needs a Heart* were very much detours into attempts to think through questions of representation by the route of other cinemas, independent in particular. With *Seven Songs* I wanted to return to the idea of a fixed narrative that you couldn't change and try and build counterpoints with poetry within that. With *Handsworth Songs* there is a fairly straight story there, there's been a riot, it had a beginning and an end, and you have to make sense of that. It's the in-betweens that mattered. I think the same applies to *Seven Songs*.

B/L Formally it had, I don't know if ambivalence is the right term, much more differing...

J.A. *Handsworth* is more of a blend, much more open-ended, and built into the structure was the notion of ambivalence because it was very clear that the predetermined readings of the riots were either pathologizing—this is an act of criminality—or humanizing or rationalizing it by saying they were a product of unemployment. What we wanted to do was work through some of the more intangible reasons why rupture and outbreak may well be the outcome to blocking desire.

B/L How this is translated to cinema makes the work so evocative.

J.A. I think there is a sense that we look for moments of solitude and intimacy, not even necessarily look for it but construct moments of intimacy and solitude through which one can then look at very public information, a black leader, for example. The question is trying to find a way of providing people with a vantage point which is not current affairs but poetry if you like. So yes, there is that similarity, but I have to say that I do think *Seven Songs* has a lot more a rigid structure because we actually thought through the structure so clearly.

B/L Purposefully so, the end is rather overdetermined as well, as you do begin with Malcolm's death.

J.A. It's incredibly overdetermined in a way in which *Handsworth* wasn't. It was an incredibly open text. It wasn't even the same film. We shot a series of tableau about the surplus underclass which are the sequences that appear at the end of the film, we moved to *Handsworth* to document what was happening and then we had already a tape slide interest in photography which we were pursuing throughout the work. So in many ways what you get in the structure of *Handsworth* is a coming together of a series of concerns which were at that point mutually exclusive and the tape slide carries on to show these relations. The reportage stuff was simply done as part of a desire to keep an archive, there was never a film in mind, just a series of things which then, at some point somebody, I think it was Trevor or Reece (Auguste) said we should pull it all together, make a film. That's how that arrived, a very different emphasis.

B/L The original scuttlebutt, in conversation with mutual friends about *Seven Songs For Malcolm X*, was that it was going to provide a different angle on Malcolm, that it would redress what Spike Lee left out in his epic *Malcolm X*. Given what I perceive to be a radical difference, in emphasis, or politics, if you will,



I was frankly surprised to see Spike in the film. Why Spike, was this an ironic commentary on the commodification of the figure of Malcolm X?

J.A. He's partly there in that form, but the point was that by the time we started the name Spike Lee and Malcolm X had become almost synonymous. With Spike's *Malcolm X* what we were witnessing was a kind of return of Malcolm through commodification. So in a way any attempt to go to the source had to go through him. The desire certainly wasn't to include Spike Lee in the film as a palpable figure, but as a kind of a sign for this reinvention of an Afrocentric Malcolm, but he was uncooperative as that sign, so he remains effectively as a kind of elliptical specimen.

B/L He looks uncomfortable, as usual.

J.A. He does. It was difficult. I tried to get a decent interview with him but he didn't want one. I think he did feel at the time he had said everything he had to say on it so the interview he gave us was frankly boring. I remember him coming to London a couple of weeks afterwards and telling me that the reason he gave us a boring interview was because I asked him stupid questions. Wait a minute. I did not.

B/L Rejection. When did you conceive of the project?

J.A. Immediately after we finished *Who Needs A Heart*. What we wanted to do with this film was to find, if one can call it that, the genesis of black radicalism, or the strands that fed into the genesis.

B/L In London.

J.A. Yes. It became clear in the course of the research that there was a very straightforward transference going on because Malcolm came there and met Michael X, who was then called Michael De Freitas, and he said, you should be doing what I do. And at that moment Michael X was born. It seemed almost inevitable that we would arrive at some point at a project about Malcolm. And it just so happened that at the moment we then thought about doing this project, we also heard that Spike Lee was making this major film. We thought, this is even better, it would mean there would be a huge explosion of interest that we could ride and sneak ours in. Of course, once he started it, and we read about his project and what else was being written in the States, it became clear that other things were not being included that had to be included.

B/L Obviously it is quite fitting, starting with Michael X, and then moving to Malcolm. This relation

crystallizes or is an exemplary instance of the inherent transmigration of ideas (and bodies) in the black diaspora. In your hands, this relation was foregrounded in *Who Needs a Heart*, the meeting of Malcolm and Michael, how black nationalism was played out and became quite something else in London in the sixties and the extradition of Michael X back to Trinidad, towards death, viscerally marks the darker side of that exchange.

J.A. The diasporic sensibility, as you know in my work, is quite ingrained. The theme of memory is something I return to again and again and I think the trans-Atlantic nature of that memory is also important to evoke — where it's possible we do. I think in this particular instance, rather than simply inventing that memory or reactivating it, one simply had to hijack an ongoing one which is the figure of Malcolm X. The very invoking of the name Malcolm is also then to invoke the emergence of that inordinate variant of that diasporic sensibility. Here's the fellow that said Africa, the Caribbean and Europe are all connected because they are peopled by blacks and all have something in common which is their African origin. Blah blah blah.

B/L So you stress that international aspect by the people you chose to interview.

J.A. Very much. It was important to us that the participants in the film who really knew about Malcolm, had, if not the semblance of diversity, at least the presence of a semblance of diversity. The minute you say lets look at who can represent his life, all kinds of things happen.

B/L A rhetoric emerges.

J.A. Yes. It was difficult in a way to get a much more even-handed performance from people if I can use a dramatic metaphor.

B/L Is that why you punctuated the interviews with black and white, to tone it down.

J.A. Yes.

B/L Really. I thought it was a marker for memory or a past/present device.

J.A. There was partly a desire to shift from black and white and colour, which was then to be a kind of past/present device, but then once we started thinking through it, it became clear we couldn't sustain that.

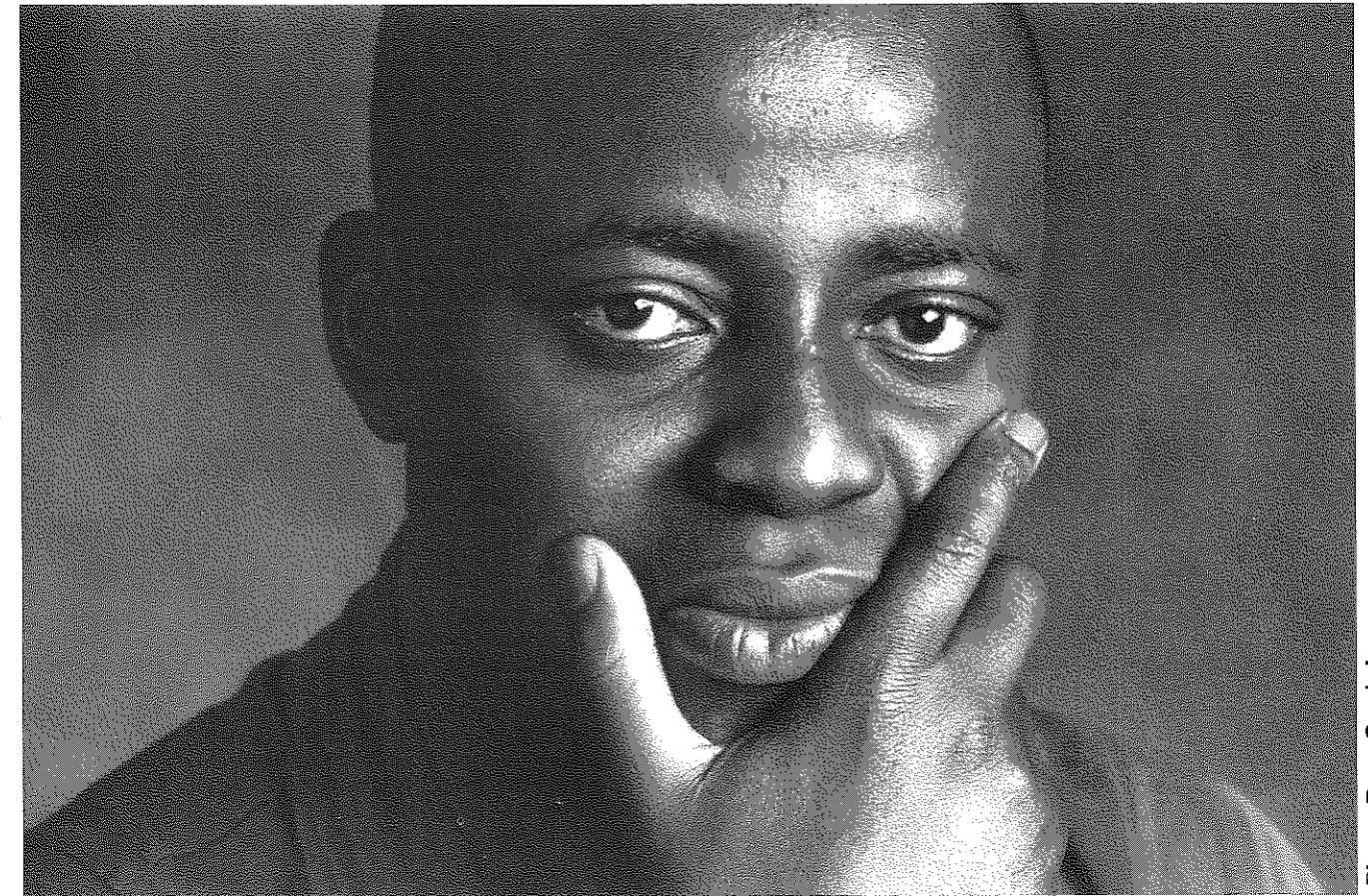


Photo: Dean Goodwin

John Akomfrah

B/L It does initially trick and lull you into how the narrative works.

J.A. I think partly why the drama and the portraiture of black and white, which is interspersed between interviews of people and so on, evolved because of an uneasiness with the deploying of rhetorics about Malcolm X. The minute you start listening to people talking you feel, my God, this is not history. The terror of being accused of being hagiographic, I think, necessarily forced us to make a choice about whether we were going to be even-handed and objective or to push the hagiography further than it was at the time. I'm glad we did it in the later way.

B/L Yes. I think it's tempered somewhat by the film's overarching movement, the subjective narrative, Malcolm moving towards death as well as the flattening effect of the tableau. They seem to have been relatively dispersed, not privileging any particular moment of his life.

J.A. There are two things that I wasn't very comfortable with. One is the way in which Malcolm's life has always been narrativized as a movement from darkness to light, which I frankly don't believe. The other was the way in which death functions in the narrative of *Malcolm X* as sign of victimization, when he rears his head and goes down and rears his head again. We weren't comfortable with that.

B/L You work against that though, it was a sliding rather than...

J.A. We tried to construct a more circular structure. At the very beginning we start with the death and work our way backwards, and that was a way to try to avoid melodrama.

B/L Do you think the tableau format works against that?

J.A. The tableau format sometimes helps and sometimes works against that. They work for me because





John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs For Malcolm X*

they help to disrupt this notion that he came out of darkness into light. To be very specific, we tried not to light things in terms of that narrative structure. Each moment of his life was given due reverence and respect.

B/L They are beautifully done, such artistry there.

J.A. Yes it was very much a way of getting away from starting his life in red, then orange, then blue when he dies. I didn't want that because I thought that would be, thematically, the wrong pattern set. We didn't believe in that dark and light trajectory and it would have been wrong to then reproduce it at the level of form. That's partly why we divided it into seven sections with each section playing a theme, helping us to find a theme that each section could play rather than an overall theme, hence the headings. There really isn't an overall theme if you watch it at all carefully, over and above a clear narrative curve, if you like, there is no overall theme. And I'm much more comfortable with that, it's fragmented and uneven, but it's a deliberately constructed unevenness, it's creative disjunctiveness, it's bricolage. I tend to always parody the structural canvas size, except in this case, as well as in *Handsworth Songs*,

these were already existing components that we then tried to wield into a creative block. We went looking for blocks.

B/L And you got them. That's a good word, actually, block, Gramsci's blocs fit, with the working of the sequestered sections of the film.

J.A. One of the problems with the documentary is the cut away, you have to have it partly because it's just technically difficult to avoid. What we wanted to do was find formal reasons for cutting away as opposed to pragmatic ones. It was completely random, Joy and I would shut our eyes and say, cut there.

B/L *Seven Songs* looks like your slickest film to date, the production values were higher, was this due to the backing of Channel Four?

J.A. I think the production values were certainly a lot more slick than they hoped for, but that had a lot to do with our collaborating with Arthur Jaffa (cinematographer for Julie Dash's *Daughter of the Dust*). That's where the slickness comes in because we had talked for a long time about trying to do work together and trying to do work towards a homage toward

people we had liked in the past, Janov, Tarkovsky, Dreyer, people like that, as well as Van Der Zee, the Harlem photographer. Van Der Zee is the most explicit reference in the film through *The Book of the Dead*. That book made it explicit for us what we were trying to do. In a way it is an act of necrophilia to try and resurrect a dead figure. Van Der Zee's mode, the whole line of benches, the opulence of death, etc. That's what necrophilia is.

B/L Now I understand the extended return to the table, the elongated frames and lines, the kids with the balls, the chair. (A photograph by Van Der Zee also inspired Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*).

J.A. I mean necrophilia not in a literal sense, but in a postmodern sense in which people are invoking figures, there is an act of feeding off the dead. This was one way of making it more explicit, underwriting it is a desire for opulence.

B/L It was also the look you wanted.

J.A. Yes. For example the very last set of stuff that James Van Der Zee did was a picture of John Michele Vasquez sitting in a chair, the same chair that we used in the film. He uses a vaseline effect that led to the use of lenses that we used. So there is a very specific and explicit acknowledging of that work.

B/L Perfect marriage. I should have known, given that the past, or at least referencing is your thing. Your collaboration with AJ obviously worked. But tell me something, what do you think of his theory that I have heard him elaborate on several occasions, you know, the idea that a "real" black cinema approximates or is the visual equivalent of black music, jazz in particular? I don't really see this played out in your film.

J.A. I just don't buy AJ's thing about the essential black cinema residing in rhythm, in cutting. I think it's in the frame, hence we went for those elongated lenses, he called them his Masai lenses, where the participants looked somewhat skewed, stretched out. This was an opportunity for him to do his thing.

B/L And he did it well.

B/L Why the omnipresence of the corpse in Black British film? *Looking for Langston*, *Dreaming Rivers*, *Mysteries of July*, this film?

J.A. Again, I think necrophilia is at the heart of black filmmaking. I wanted to make that very explicit with this film. I think that it always was apparent.

B/L It's not a negativity, it's a marker. The way that imagery works in other forms of filmmaking. Here, there is mourning, but much more.

J.A. It's a definite marker. This is why I suddenly thought about why certain filmmakers would also be so attractive, Chris Marker, Para Jenov, in terms of death. Why certain ideas are so attractive, the "Mourning and Melancholia" piece, and what has been done with it in terms of AIDS activism and so on, has to do with getting to the heart of something that is intangible, a memory of ourselves.

B/L Without an originary moment.

J.A. But that is where the melancholia comes in because there never is, but when you think you've located it, it becomes...

B/L An icon?

J.A. Right. I think that in the beginning we were disturbed by that, the way in which when you seize hold of these figures they literally turn into masks and statues in your hand, but when you get over it I think it happens, as in the case of *Looking for Langston*, where you're comfortable with that mask, when the desire shifts from melancholia to necrophilia almost. You almost begin to desire these figures precisely because they are irretrievable, impossible to capture, therefore dead.

B/L Is that a contemporary corollary to the bones of the ancestors?

J.A. The most powerful moment actually in *Testament* for me is the very end and the very beginning, both images really of death, a kind of stultification, atrophy, when she goes to the graveyard at the end and burys her father, or when the man walks in the beginning of *Testament*, a wish fulfillment of death, a drowning wish going on there. There is a kind of level of morbidity which I think people have to realize in the quest for identity. It is morbid business.

B/L Solidifies and rigidifies.

J.A. The attempt is to find a solid thing and when you can't find it you begin to literally patch it together which is a process of mummification of ideas in a way.

B/L Do you want to disclose your next project, or not?

J.A. I can talk about two projects, I don't know if that's the one you're talking about. I'm just finishing a



feature script, finally, for the BFI (British Film Institute) a kind of adaptation of Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*.

B/L Oh really, your neorealist phase, I think not, not enough layers for you.

J.A. You'll see, it's an important work, but that's another interview. Also I have got to finish off a project on the nineteenth century emergence of the African middle class. A new diasporic adventure.

B/L You just can't give it up.

J.A. In order to survive I may well have to take a job called *Harlem Diary*, to fashion a film out of the work of a black anthropologist, Terry Williams, who has spent the last twenty years on this project.

B/L Well, archaeology is your thing. Not in a literal sense, a Foucauldian sense. Excavating.

J.A. You're right. And taxonomizing, and building inventory, the usual standard nineteenth century obsession of the older middle class gentleman married to neo/post marxist obsessions of the minutia of the everyday. I think you become aware that the diasporic is an act of will and memory because there are very few institutions that can substantiate that presence. There are no statues, no buildings, no libraries, no "here is black history." These are acts of will and memory and the very mode of remembering is essential for any historic project and I am not talking about just the very obvious mode of remembering history.

B/L Recently, a number of "emerging" Canadian filmmakers have adopted memory as a defining trope, without, unfortunately, the deeper, more sophisticated resonances, including historical, evident in work such as yours. I fear this clichéization, if you will, flattens or collapses memory into a simplistic rendering of the autobiographical.

J.A. Any project which doesn't realize the potential that the end of its quest is a cul-de-sac, is headed for disaster. We use these categories in a very Derridean way, in erasure. We are very aware of the pitfalls now of invoking identity and evoking memory. On the other hand, you have to be strategic, as Stuart Hall says, you have to write the sentence, you can change your mind afterwards, but you have to write first. So you are caught in a double bind because you want to both be agonistic enough about the transcendental value of a category, but you also know that the erosion of those categories then allow you to open areas for illuminating what otherwise would have

remained closed. Without invoking the notion of identity we would never have gotten into the business of the connection between document and poetry. Simply because each one of them had a very clear agenda. Use poetry for self-expression, the document for validation, or whatever the binary was. Invoking a notion of identity and cleave it and use it as anticlimax somehow creates an abyss between the two.

B/L In spite of all the dialogue in the past, say fifteen years at least, individual ethnic, or racial, identity remains an end point. Single-issue work often prevails, this is how identity is mostly being invoked, especially by a new generation of filmmakers, here, in the New World. I think this is a problem, it has institutional roots, and is perhaps, generational.

J.A. I think people should not invoke identity as a way of side-stepping turbulence, then your heading for the cul-de-sac that I'm talking about.

B/L Exactly. The essentialist route, it's tricky.

J.A. You can use essentialism but you have to be strategic.

B/L The flip side of single-issue identity politics is that things get done.

J.A. I have to keep reiterating that there are pitfalls of identity politics and one of the major ones is to invoke identity politics as a search for harmony, for wholeness. We have never done this, we're bricoleurs.

B/L Some young people, especially coming out of universities, are more inclined to interrogate rather than reduplicate the hegemony of the Hood. I have seen films influenced by your work and others, but I think our proximity to the States has made more of an impact, more of a swing toward feature filmmaking. I also think it's gender specific. Women seem more influenced by the ideas that have informed your work, and I think this is due partly to the points of contact with your project and the feminist one that preceded it in Britain.

J.A. But I think personal, reflective black cinema has been eclipsed in a way by a much more aggressive, marketed cinema that speaks certainty in the language of violence.

B/L And realism.



Handsworth Songs

J.A. I think there is very little room now for the kinds of work that we were seen as pioneering, the cinema of ideas, of agnosticism, of invoking turbulence, desire for history.

B/L It's no longer funded?

J.A. It's no longer desired. People are now aware that there are easier ways of doing this work. It's potentially about to disappear. I wish people were invoking it but I don't think that's the case. I don't want to sound like an old man whose time has come and gone, but our exploration had to stop.

B/L You anticipate my next question. It would seem that the main achievement of the Black British film movement, and I include intellectual movement, has been to complicate the old oppositions and to question the uniformity of black struggle, and to articulate

the complexity of black experience in the diaspora. Is that something you agree with?

J.A. Wholeheartedly. I wouldn't claim it all for us. A lot of interesting stuff came out of Britain in the eighties, fine art, literature, photography. At the heart of it was not simply just the work done by Hall and Gilroy, Kobena Mercer. But also the work of the likes of Homi Bhabha, the return to Fanon, Lacan, differently. The return of the specular as a legitimate area of black interest was incredibly useful and valuable for re-engaging in cultural work and defining cultural norms.

B/L You formed a different kind of race politic.

J.A. My generation, the bastard children of 68, who came of age in the early eighties were the first generation to be fully processed by British society. Other people had allegiances, alternative histories, which



they fused with British history but we were the people who were first fully formed by British culture and had to, in a sense, discover blackness accidentally, or as a supplement. The very act of being trained as bourgie bourgie kids in cultural studies departments meant that we were going to be clearly the ascendants of that work in Britain at the time. Screen, Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis. These were some of the discourses, along with national identity, cultural identity, that were being contextualized at the time, as well as investigations of spectatorship.

B/L Indeed, I come out of that theoretical moment as well, but positioned from here, and perhaps that colonial distance, if you will, intensified my desire for works that, similarly, came out of these concerns. I had a long time waiting. Perhaps that is why I have felt so connected to your project. But why do you think this moment is over, or at least has waned?

J.A. People want the earnestness which characterizes that moment to disappear and they want a much more ironic invoking of it that tells a story.

B/L It has been suggested that work by people of colour arises out of duty—what has come to be known as the cinema of duty. This strikes me as somewhat rudimentary, but sometimes necessary. I tend to fall into the trap, and it is difficult to avoid, of framing this kind of work in an evolutionist manner, in stages if you will. Over the years I have come to see it as related to the class issue, which is often veiled by discussions of that nebulous term audience.

J.A. Specifically, the notion of duty. Yes I think that is clearly the case. Yet this is another case of the flip side of identity politics, what Kobena Mercer has referred to as the burden of representation. The very act of evoking a cultural identity at the same time as one evokes their personal identity—I'm a black filmmaker—means that there are certain proscriptions that you're expected to take on board. I'm not particularly troubled by that because that is par for the course. What I am troubled by is the Kantian nature in which that prescription is placed on us as a separate categorical imperative—a black filmmaker has to do this. I think this is not just wrong because it's absurd, but it's also wrong because it forecloses questions we need to ask. It prescribes in a very teleological way what it is that should be the curve of the black narrative. What I always liked about the term black filmmaker was that the very way in which it gave you the impression of a terra incognita, unknown territory, unknown quantity, the possibility of stripping away determining prescriptions. The extent to which people read this as a call to arms in

the name of duty, I had a problem with, not with the expectations. I think it's still right that people had expectations because that is one of the ways to talk about what an audience was in cinema; if you could suss out what a set of expectations were, you're already half way through working out what a critical community could be, what I assume an audience was. The business of duty was a problem because underpinning the notion of a transcendental value of black filmmaking serving a transcendental god, duty, was, that it was underwritten by an essentialist code. Being a black filmmaker, therefore, these are the rules of the game to being black and they should apply equally to the rules of the game for being a black filmmaker. The transposing of one set of rules to the next is simply essentialist because it assumed the categories filmmaker didn't exist. The familiar I'm a black person, you wouldn't necessarily know what the law of the narrative should be for black filmmaking. I never accepted it because of the essentialism as well as the philistinism of the position.

B/L Could you talk about the conditions and your previous work that produced your generation of filmmakers, and theorist-filmmakers, specifically in England. It seems to me that a lot of what you were dealing with and reacting against was the civil rights and black power movements in America. Was there anything specific about the British context that produced that? That is precisely what *Who Needs a Heart* does.

J.A. What was unique about "my generation," it is a necessary point of departure. A number of currents were running concurrently at the time when we came of age, an anxiety of national identity, what Englishness constituted in a world where the foreigners were within.

B/L Thatcher's swamping speech, before that with Enoch Powell.

J.A. Right, he started in the sixties. The fear that Britain had produced a surplus mutant population which had no roots, no connectedness, to home, elsewhere or here. We seemed very much a wild card and also a surplus, people didn't know what to make of us. I think in their anxiety about who we were they found an anxiety where Britain was going. At the same time finally the major gains of the sixties were played out in institutional terms. Socialists who grew up in the sixties were finally in institutions of power, places of learning, local government; there was a desire and an anxiety about what difference that generation could make.



Photo: James Van Der Zee

B/L You responded because you were IT.

J.A. We really were, we were IT. We were the best thing that ever happened to that country. We were strategically placed to answer some of the major questions about that culture. And this is not only of value for race, here you're talking about the intersection with national identity. Through race, people were beginning to experience a sense of nationhood. In order to do that we were either the trope of terror or the trope of desire. One is the same as the other. We were at the crossroads, IT, a mutant strain. I think that gave our work a very specific inflection, it freed us from the burden of migranhood. It also produced the terror of uncertainty, we felt trapped in a Derek Walcott poem, writing everything anew. Which partly accounts for both the excesses of the films and the icons, the feeling of liberation.

B/L It translates to the work.

J.A. I am also conscious of the fact that maybe what I'm offering is stressing the uniformity of the moment at the expense of diversity because clearly people experience this mode and lived this moment very differently. Someone like Isaac Julien, for example, growing up in the East end of London had a very dif-

ferent experience than mine, growing up in the west of London, or like Lena (Gopaul), or other people in Black Audio. We realized that the only way in which these differences were going to empower or enable was to strike a dialogue so the invoking of race, class, and gender wasn't just a stylistic device, it was also literally a way of self-understanding, an examination.

B/L It seems to me, and this is only from my recent limited experience with the English scene, that there were institutionally-based black left writers and thinkers in England who were as influential as the more civil rights or black power leaders. Whereas in the States it seemed like the movement, since the 60's, came from the broad-based grassroots level and there didn't seem to be the matching institutionally-based intellectual response.

J.A. We always did have the Sartrean figure in England. It's not an accident that most of the major activists were poets or writers in a way. This is really partly an experience of migranhood. People ended up in England for a reason. It wasn't entirely accidental that at a certain point there were all these intellectuals around, they had come to study. Whereas the American situation was very different.



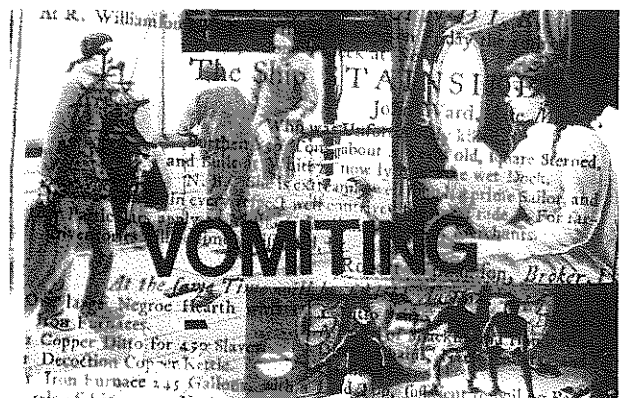
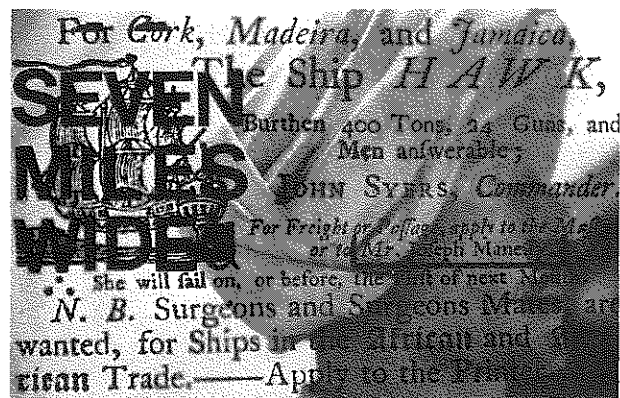
B/L Could you talk about the importance of critical writing to the development of a black film culture in England. One of the things that impressed me, and others in Canada, was the strategy of creating a discourse around the Sankofa and Black Audio films, and also the "taking over" of *Framework* and for a short while Screen, as you know that was indeed short lived. Or was that moment symptomatic of a flavour of the month syndrome?

J.A. I think the flavour of the month syndrome is a simple reading for things that were done in good faith. They weren't necessarily acts of benevolence, but they were in the end concessions which were acts of good faith. Kobena, Isaac, Martine, myself, went to the Screen board, for example, and did push for it. This is something I'm thinking through now, I think the major difference with black filmmaking of the eighties, as distinct from other black filmmakers at the time, is that so many of us came through the academy. That wasn't the traditional mode of independent emergence. People either tried to do things within the BBC or got fed up and left. One advantage was that we were familiar with the texts. So it wasn't by accident that we got into this.

B/L There is still the current notion (within more nationalist strains here) that theory is inappropriate or suspect as far as the black struggle goes, and that white-informed or European-informed ideas don't engage with the majority of black people's lived experience. This has been levelled at Black Audio, and Sankofa, it's even in *The Passion of Remembrance*. How do you answer that question?

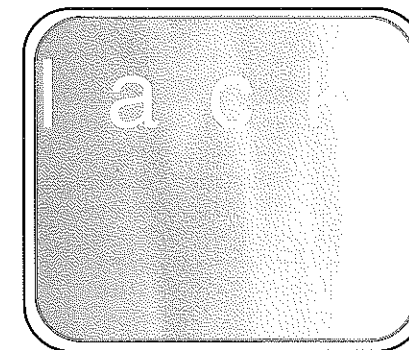
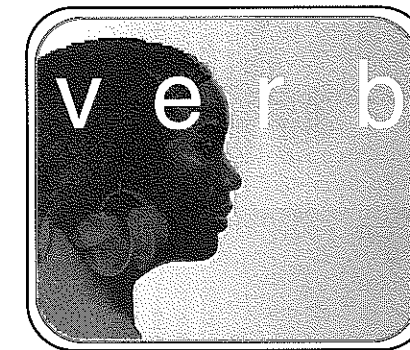
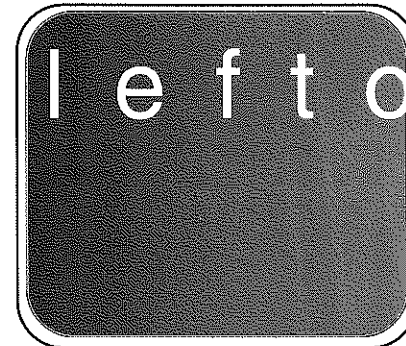
J.A. My sense is if people think that theory doesn't apply for them, that's fine, but it would be an act of denial on our part because it is through theory that we got into filmmaking in the first place. The second is that underlying the assumption that theory has no value, is the assumption that we are still in what Stuart Hall calls the moment of innocence, that somehow there is a moment that you can unproblematically fall from grace to bear witness, either to joys or disaster. I think we're too aware of the modes of constructing identity to simply go back to unproblematic representation. We're not in church anymore, Sunday is over.

Kass Banning is a Toronto critic, cultural theorist, and lecturer in film.



Expeditions, Black Audio

by Ramabai Espinet.



Leftover black is
What I call myself
On days when skin
Is too thin to take
The rain of blows
Eyes too tired
From frost and worse
To explain

Seated between two windows
A train rushing headlong
Into God-only-knows-which-territory

I, signed by nothing
Neither clothes, nor hair,
Skin or any other mark

I signed by nothing
Leftover Black
Is what I call myself

On days when wounds of race
Wounds of love, of war
Cannot heal

(Some hidden truth
Twisting out of reach
Spitting itself
Into a salt rain)

(Between two windows
Of a rushing train
I, sit still
Wondering about tomorrow)

Excerpt from Poetry/Dance Performance piece "Indian Robber-Talk" by Ramabai Espinet. Choreographed and danced by Sudharshan. Presented at Desh Pardesh, 1993 and at Harbourfront's Rhythms of India Festival, 1993 by Ramabai Espinet.

Days when wounds of race
Wounds of love, of war
Cannot heal

When tears -
Thin skeins of filament
Thin threads of rain -
Wash everything
Even echoes
Out of hair
Flown past
Like corbeaux' wings

Most days seam themselves
Over like this
fingering the map

Chorus:

Of a home
Still to be found
A home
Not found today,
Tomorrow
And tomorrow too

For Patricia Deanna

(In the summer of 1976 a young pregnant Caribbean woman, Patricia Deanna, fell to her death from a balcony as she tried to escape from immigration officials who had broken down the doors to the apartment where she was baby sitting. She was in Canada, pregnant, illegal and utterly alone).

That day Patricia fell
No elements grieved
And all the stars swung safely
Through their accustomed orbits.

(I, leaning over a balcony
Found I could not measure
The quantum and heartbeat
Of her dread fall)

Could only imagine
Panic, groping fingers
Her unborn child's tears
The desperate climb
Away from the immigration
Hunter-man
And how
In haste and miscalculation
She missed
And then
The fallen heap below.

A knock on the door
That day in summer
And she knew
She was alone.

From *Nuclear Seasons*,
Ramabai Espinet,
(Sister Vision Press, Toronto, 1991).