

**PAN AFRICAN NARRATIVES:  
SITES OF RESISTANCE IN THE  
BLACK DIASPORA**

**A Dissertation**

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The scholarly discourse presented here is dedicated to Africans and their descendants who have inspired a legacy of solidarity, resistance and liberation globally. It is also a tribute to those who have sustained me during this journey.

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## **Abstract**

Africa as a point of reference for Africans dispersed from her shores and their descendants in the Diaspora has perpetuated discourse of longing and ambivalence. For centuries these various sentiments have emerged in Black literary expressions. The quest of this study is to advance Black narrative tradition by proposing a theoretical framework informed by these constructs and predicaments to establish a genre of literature referred to here as Pan African narratives. This work looks at Black response to the dilemma of dispersal and dislocation in the Diaspora from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. More specifically, it examines the emergence of a literary genre at the juncture of the African diaspora and Pan African paradigms. Building on the legacy of slave and migration narratives, Pan African narratives reveal manifestations of Black solidarity and resistance to oppressive forces.

## Chapter 1

### **Africa for Africans Living Within the Veil: The Nommo of Pan African Narratives**

Africa as a point of reference for Africans dispersed from her shores and their descendants in the Diaspora has perpetuated discourse of longing and ambivalence. For centuries these various sentiments have emerged in Black literary expressions. In “The Literature of Slavery and Freedom” (1746-1865), Black writers often justify their birthright as American citizens by challenging Whites to uphold the spiritual and political ideals of America (Gates and McKay 127). Phillis Wheatley intimates Black equality in her poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America* (1773), but in the process “deprecates” her African heritage:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Savior* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refined, and join th’ angelic train.

As emancipated Blacks came to grips with their new found freedom, efforts to shape social, political, and spiritual aspirations were documented in literature of the “Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance” (1865-1919) (Gates and McKay). In addition to slave testimonies, African American texts reflected philosophical views relevant to Black existence. During this time, Frederick Douglass died, Booker T. Washington gave his Atlanta Exposition Speech (1895), and the debate emerged “over the merits of Washington’s privileging industrial education and economic advancement against W.E.B. DuBois’s advocacy of political agitation and leadership from the ‘talented tenth’” (466). The rebirth of Black consciousness that evolved

during the New Negro Renaissance is depicted in the surge of artistic expression during the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1914) as diasporic Africans respond to their “ social conditions, as an affirmation of their dignity and humanity in the face of poverty and racism”(929).

Nonetheless, this affirmation of dignity and humanity brought with it some uncertainty. For instance, during the 1920s when Blacks in the United States were reacquainting themselves with Africa through artistic expression, the *New Negro* rose from the ashes of social and racial inequality determined to restore his humanity and dignity. Africa as a homeland emerged as a central theme in Black art and literature. When Countee Cullen investigates the meaning of Africa to him in “Heritage (1925),” he reveals the ambivalence often felt by diasporic Africans towards the Continent when he asks:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star on jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang? (lines 1-6)

Is it a place of regal subjects and celestial planes? Or, is it plagued with native tribes and untamed land? Is it the motherland “from whose loins” Black civilization sprang? Conversely, Langston Hughes acknowledges Africa as the source of life and vitality for Africans in the Diaspora. The Negro soul runs deep like the great rivers Euphrates, Congo, and Nile as the “low beating of the tom-tom stir’s his blood.”<sup>1</sup> While Cullen ponders the significance of Africa for Blacks psychologically, and Hughes taps into its life force to sustain the Black soul.

Central to this enduring discourse is the dilemma of transnationalism. Two cogent constructs marked by the enigma of dispersal and dislocation are African diaspora and Pan

Africanism. Contending forces for these constructs are predicaments of culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and power.

The quest of this study is to advance Black narrative tradition by proposing a theoretical framework informed by these constructs and predicaments to establish a genre of literature referred to here as Pan African narratives. This work looks at Black response to the dilemma of dispersal and dislocation in the Diaspora from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. More specifically, it examines the emergence of a literary genre at the juncture of the African diaspora and Pan African paradigms. Building on the legacy of slave and migration narratives, Pan African narratives reveal manifestations of Black solidarity and resistance to oppressive forces. Historically, Blacks have been denied certain social, economic and political rights. Therefore, any entity which denies access to these rights is deemed an oppressive force. It must be noted here that African dispersal has not been exclusively induced by oppressive forces; nor has socialization in the Diaspora been monolithically despotic. However, an exploration of African dispersal, displacement and subjugation is conducive to this study.

While collective Black resistance is a global concern, an exhaustive exploration of this reality is far too expansive for a single undertaking. Therefore, this scholarly pursuit is proposed in two segments. Phase one, as set forth here, offers a prototype of Pan African narratives as sites of collective Black resistance in Diasporan literature of Europe, the Caribbean and the United States. More specifically, Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* (1992), is read as the mother text of Pan African narratives because of its global representation of collective Black resistance. In *Sankofa*, cultural continuity, nation building, and militant revolt are explicit forms of resistance. A more definitive explanation of these constructs will be provided. Congruent European sites of

Black resistance are located in Claude McKay's novel *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929), and Beryl Gilroy's novel *Boy Sandwich* (1989). Sites of collective Black resistance in the Caribbean and the United States are detected in Martin R. Delany's nineteenth century novel *Blake; or the Huts of America*, and Melvin Van Peebles' film *Panther* (1995). Phase two—collective Black resistance in African literature will be reserved for a future endeavor. Distinctions between Pan Africanism in the Diaspora and on the Continent will be examined at that time.

This complex undertaking is a synergy of literature, history, and culture. For example, references shall be made to slave and migration narratives with emphasis on their historical and cultural aspects in order to reveal the profundity and limitations of these genres. Enslaved Africans share their responses to bondage in slave narratives and this will be revealed through a sampling of classic narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Booker T. Washington.

In migration narratives, the quest for wholeness and survival is reiterated by diasporic Africans as they encounter urban landscapes. Farah Jasmine Griffin and Lawrence R. Rodgers are two scholars whose interrogation of the Great Migration in African-American texts has established a theoretical framework for this genre of dispesal and dislocation. In *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (1997), Rodgers “maps the many ways in which African-American novelists have written about and participated in the largest common experience uniting the African-American population after slavery, the mass movement that saw millions of black southerners resettle in the Northeast and Midwest during the first half of this century” (ix). Griffin, by contrast, proposes the migration narrative as a dominant form of cultural production in the twentieth century as she explores the manner in which “African-

American artists and intellectuals attempt to come to terms with the massive dislocation of black people following migration” through literature, visual arts, and music (3). In *Who Set You Flowin’?*: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), Griffin builds on the conventions of the slave narratives to establish a theoretical framework for the African-American Migration narrative. To some extent I have appropriated Griffin’s migration narrative conventions to establish a theoretical framework for Pan African narratives and this will be clarified when Pan African narrative conventions are revealed.

The foundation for this literary framework will also be substantiated with interjections of ethnographic study that interfaces theory and praxis. While theoretical works concretize and contemplate concepts that might otherwise remain obscure and static, ethnographic research restores humanity to the starkness of conjecture. For instance, a rendering of the Sankofa proverb, which stresses the importance of retrieving wisdom from the past in order to navigate the present and the future, will be discussed in chapter 2, “Go Back and Fetch It: ‘Sankofa’ as Praxis and Theory in the African Diaspora.” The proverb is explored to emphasize the significance it holds for Gerima’s efforts and for Africans globally. Although lacking in theoretical documentation, practical applications of “Sankofa” highlight an affinity towards an African consciousness for grounding and sustenance.

All prototypes are in a perpetual state of revision, and this ambitious endeavor has not escaped that reality. There is always more to be said in reference to the philosophical debates regarding the Pan African and African diaspora constructs. I have included here a basic theoretical foundation for the Pan African and African diaspora constructs from historical and contemporary perspectives. The Pan African texts by and about DuBois and Garvey are

voluminous. Although their philosophical debates are not the focal point of this study, they do contribute to its framework in terms of the varied strategies employed to secure liberation.

The dynamic nature of language presents the challenge of negotiating an appropriate implementation of concepts and conventions critical to this study. More specifically, *African*, *Pan African*, and *African diaspora* collectively provide the foundation for this endeavor to advance Black narrative by proposing centralization of these constructs to perpetuate the emergence of a literary genre that locates sites of collective Black resistance in Diasporan texts. The propensity of this study to favor the “Afrocentric” school of thought rather than the “Black Atlantic” in defining and locating Pan African manifestations in Diasporan narrative may be problematic for astute literary critics given the varied scholarly debates surrounding these concepts. This is not a total rejection of Paul Gilroy’s proposal of an emerging, dynamic diaspora identity and culture, or an exclusive acceptance of Molefi Asante’s centralization of African tradition and culture. Afrocentricity, nevertheless, drives home the notion of Africa as a central force in collective Black resistance, African solidarity and liberation. Yet, Black Atlanticism supports the notion of varied responses to oppressive forces. Hence, the ideological ramifications of these constructs beg definition and clarification early in this study as antecedents to its content. Therefore, the intent of this effort is to conjure images of solidarity, resistance and liberation in the spirit of Pan Africanism as they are evoked and invoked in selected texts and mandates a reliance on the concepts of African, Pan African, and African diaspora. However, the universal ramifications of culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and power must first be established for clarity and theoretical grounding.

Culture may be defined as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought typical of a population or a community at a given time.”<sup>2</sup> Culture may also be defined as the “sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings to meet biological and psycho-social needs. It refers to elements such as values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, folkways, behavior styles, and traditions that are linked together to form an integrated whole that functions to preserve the society.”<sup>3</sup> In more contemporary terms, culture may be viewed as a complex, dynamic paradigm that often has no universally accepted meaning. Its designated role in shaping human behavior is as diverse as its theoretical legacy. Yet, culture as discourse may reveal the nuances of particular human experiences.

In his overview of culture, anthropologist Ward Goodenough establishes culture as a shifting paradigm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century the concept of culture was heavily influenced by the theory of social evolution; in the twentieth century it was shaped by historical reconstruction. Nineteenth century evolutionary theorists equated “culture” with “civilization” which gave rise to the premise human societies evolved in the same fashion, but at different rates of speed (291). In 1903 Edward B. Tylor proposed the following definition of culture based on this premise of “basic psychic unity.” He defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society” (291). Conversely, in the beginning of the twentieth century Franz Boas determined that “culture” (beliefs, customs, and social institutions) “characterize each separate society” (as cited in Stocking, 68: 867-882).<sup>4</sup>

Boas and his students proposed that each society has its own distinctive culture tempered by “the environmental conditions in which people live and by the accidents of history” (292).

Even though social evolutionists and historical reconstructionists had conflicting ideologies, they also shared certain assumptions. Both schools of thought embraced the notion of “psychic similarity of all humans” (292). They also believed that “culture” and all that it implies is learned through interaction with other human beings and “not predetermined by genetic coding” (292-293). Additionally, they distinguished the cultural content of each society as property of the society rather than “its individual members” (293). Attainment of cultural content through social interactions continues to “define the cultural domain, clearly distinguishing it from those things that are not learned but only activated by experience, such as the taste of sweet or the feeling of fear”(293).

While Tylor and Boas promoted tenets of a socially shared distinctive culture, Edward Sapir and his constituents challenged this premise by concluding members of a society may not have the same knowledge of or attach the same significance to customary practices. For instance, the importance of certain rituals or activities may be acknowledged by members of a society to facilitate cohabitation, but the manner in which these activities or rituals are celebrated may vary from subgroup to subgroup within the larger society (293).

Goodenough continues to explain that Sapir’s observations mandated a distinction between culture as “something learned by individuals as members of a society, and culture as something characterizing a society as such in contrast with other societies” (293).

Propriospect—an individual’s world view—comes into play here as expectations of the group override personal identity and understanding of the individual’s responsibility to the group (293).

Therefore, distinctions must be made between the “phenomenal order” and the “ideational order” of culture. The ongoing pattern of behavior observed in a society or community is the phenomenal order of culture. Ideational order of culture pertains to the body of knowledge individuals in a given society must learn in order to function appropriately within that society. These dimensions of culture are often referred to as the “etic” and “emic” respectively (293-294). The interplay between “etic records of events in the phenomenal order” and the “emic content of the ideational order” is indispensable as each provides cultural insight into a society. The etic is a “behavioral artifact” and the emic “imparts meaning to events.” Ethnographers often deduce theory regarding the emic content of the ideational order through an analysis of the etic records of events in the phenomenal order (294).

The interconnectedness of the ideational and phenomenal order was validated by Bronislaw Malinowski. Through his ethnographic work in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski showed that a people’s customary practices cannot be interpreted accurately in isolation from the other practices with which they coexist (Goodenough 294). He established that people may use culture in the ideational sense as a guide to “alter their physical environment, create social groups, and establish rules by which to conduct their affairs with one another. They create legends and myths, recipes for enacting rituals, and creeds for people to profess. Analysis of these creations shows underlying patterns to which they conform and to which they are expected to conform, such as producing episodes in threes and fours in storytelling” (295). Goodenough defines these creations as transitory and enduring as they serve as protocols for past and present applications within the society. He provides the following explanation for this cultural interplay:

Some of these creations are transitory but many are enduring. A building may endure for many years. Once constructed it may serve as model or prototype for

how buildings are expected to be constructed in the future. Similarly, myths, stories, dramas, and proverbs, artifacts of past applications of ideational culture, serve as both positive and negative models and guides for behavior, feeding back on ideational culture. The artifacts of ideational culture give structure to the phenomenal world in which people live, a structure that itself keeps changing over time. The circumstances to which ideational culture is applied today result from modifications of circumstances to which it was applied yesterday. The layout of streets in cities, the way in which property in land has been allocated, the social and economic institutions that have been created—banks, universities, clans, or age-sets, for example—all are part of the material and social landscape, constraining and channeling how people go about their lives.

Artifacts of culture, whether objects, legends, musical compositions, or imagined beings, are capable of being shared as consciously cognized objects by a society's members in ways the ideational culture that produced them cannot be so fully shared. These artifacts are experienced by people in diverse ways and, by conditioned association, acquire emotional value. As such they become symbols that evoke feelings. They can serve as focal points of similarity of feeling in some cases and differences of feeling in others. (295).

This somewhat lengthy digression is warranted here as it provides a theoretical foundation imperative to this study. Apparently human behavior may be rationalized through culture. Knowing that world view is shaped by the phenomenal order and ideational order of culture explains both common and diverse responses to societal norms. The transitory and/or enduring nature of cultural artifacts explains the epochal and geographical transcendence of a people's behavior within the larger society and externally in relation to the rest of the world. Thus, social and economic action is motivated by cultural concepts (Woodward 557). Culture is also central to this study as it places race, ethnicity, class, gender, and power in perspective.

Race, a term that has historically had at least four distinct meanings shall be used in this study in reference to “a group socially defined in a given society by visible, heritable phenotypes, as in ‘African Americans’ in the United States, ‘West Indians’ in Great Britain, or ‘Coloureds’ in South Africa” (Berghe 1054). Ethnicity, which is often used synonymously with

race, even though it has diverse meanings, references a group of people socially defined “on the basis of cultural attributes such as language, religion, lifestyle, traditions, or costume” (1055). In some instances, race and ethnicity will be used interchangeably in reference to physical and cultural traits of a group. Distinctions, however, between race and ethnicity will remain intact elsewhere, so as to reveal the social inequalities perpetuated by race (1055).<sup>5</sup>

Hybridization has forced theorists to evaluate the dynamics of race on an ongoing basis. While the issue of race takes on varied personae in different parts of the globe, a common factor is the equation of race with status internationally. Case studies have revealed the absurdity of fixed racial classifications as the status of racial inferiority shifted with economic status. In *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World*, Ellise Cose analyzes the complex perception of race in the United States as he offers steps for resolution of this issue and movement toward a “color-blind” society. Cose admits the historical differential between racial definitions and policies in the United States and those in other parts of the globe (2). He explains why fixed racial classifications are problematic:

Earlier in this century, for instance, Italians, Jews, and Rumanians were widely considered to be of different (and inferior) racial stock compared to the English, Germans, and Swedes. Just a few decades later, those groups were fully accepted into the community of whites. In an essay entitled, “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” Karen Budkin Sacks asked, “Did Jews and other Euroethnics become white because they became middle class? That is, did money whiten? Or did being incorporated in an expanded version of whiteness open up the economic doors to middle-class status?” The answer, she concluded, is both.(2)

Distinctions between class and race shall remain intact like the boundaries between race and ethnicity. In this study it shall be revealed that racial classifications are indeed shifting and often indicative of one’s status in society based on historical and/or contemporary ranking.

The concept of gender in this study moves beyond recognition of “obvious physical differences by sex” and “differences in behavior and other aspects of personality” (Ember 519).<sup>6</sup> Gender is considered in opposition to male-centered constructs of African diaspora and Pan Africanism, which often marginalize or exclude female presence. Although neither a womanist study nor a feminist critique of exclusionary practices, it serves rather as a reminder of female influences.

For an analysis of the connection between culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and power, relevant to this study, I have relied on the clinical observations of Elaine Pinderhughes. In her text, *Understanding Race, Ethnicity, and Power: The Key to Efficacy in Clinical Practice*, she explores the relationship between “culture and human functioning” (5). Pinderhughes looks at the role cultural differences play in the quality of services in the mental health care arena, which serves as a microcosm of larger society with its exclusionary practices. Pinderhughes notes the problematic impact of efficient health care delivery when cultural differences are not respected. The professional’s quality of treatment may be compromised because of stereotypes and/or prejudices he or she brings to the encounter. In a similar fashion, the client may misinterpret the practitioner’s intentions and thus reject adequate care. Central to this study also is the relationship between cultural differences and the power construct. In other words, Pinderhughes notes that people often use cultural differences to subject certain people to a state of powerlessness. This has great impact on the delivery and reception of healthcare. She explains,

Thus, the assignment of people to dominant and subordinate groups, in part based on culture, is erected and maintained by social structures that help determine how

people are viewed, how they view themselves, their access to resources, and their response to these conditions. (9)

This notion of subjugation to a state of powerlessness based on cultural differences is relevant to the function of the African diaspora and Pan African constructs in this study. Pan African manifestations occur when the dispersed are subordinated by social structures that determine identity constructs, socialization and access to economic wealth.

The term African and all that it implies shall be examined first since this study locates it as the foundation from which African diaspora and Pan Africanism have emerged. Literally, a member of an indigenous ethnic group of the African continent may be referred to as African. However, the complexity of this nomenclature requires extensive explication. African is employed here as signifier of race, ethnicity and culture as they pertain to inhabitants of the Black World. According to Koji Anyidoho, continental Africa and the African diaspora are the two main segments of the Black World. Because of the varied racial stock on the Continent,<sup>7</sup> there is a need for the term Black Africa.<sup>8</sup> Since the Black world is comprised of continental Africans<sup>9</sup> and diasporic Africans,<sup>10</sup> its inhabitants may be referred to collectively as African and/or Black. Considering race and ethnicity as shifting paradigms, this study must validate the use of Black and African interchangeably.

The epochal implications of Blackness and its correlation to Africanity from the thirteenth through the twenty-first century validate the use of Black and African interchangeably as it has given rise to *negro*, *Negro*, *colored*, *Colored*, *Afro-American*, *African-American* and numerous hyphenated African terms indicating birthplace.<sup>11</sup> The historical semantics of these terms are somewhat muted, but it has been commonly accepted that they are all racially charged

and were functional in concepts of identity. It is generally accepted that black and negro, in reference to Africans, were terms affiliated with slavery.

In his treatise on “blackness” in the United States—*Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition*—Professor F. James Davis uses the term “black” in reference to “persons with any black African lineage, not just for unmixed members of populations from sub-Saharan Africa” (5). Like Cose, Davis also confirms that the meaning of Black identity in the United States differs from other parts of the globe, which can be problematic. Davis notes that in the United States, the “one drop rule,” a term with Southern origins, has long been the model for determining Black racial identity. According to the “one-drop rule,” a single drop of “black blood” makes a person Black (5). In reference to Black nomenclature, Davis offers a historical recollection of the terms, colored, negro and mulatto:

The term “black” rapidly replaced “Negro” in general usage in the United States as the black power movement peaked at the end of the 1960s, but the black and Negro populations are the same.

We must also pay attention to the terms “mulatto” and “colored.” The term “mulatto” was originally used to mean the offspring of a “pure African Negro” and a “pure white.” Although the root meaning of mulatto, in Spanish, is “hybrid,” “mulatto” came to include the children of unions between whites and so-called “mixed Negroes.” . . . The term “colored” seemed for a time to refer only to mulattoes, especially lighter ones, but later it became a euphemism for darker Negroes, even including unmixed blacks. With widespread racial mixture, “Negro” came to mean any slave or descendant of a slave, no matter how much mixed. Eventually in the United States, the terms mulatto, colored, Negro, black, and African American all came to mean people with any known black ancestry. Mulattoes are racially mixed, to whatever degree, while the terms black, Negro, African American, and colored induce both mulatto and unmixed blacks. (5-6)

The implications of these findings confirm race and ethnicity as shifting paradigms and validate their function as indicators of social power. Therefore, references to continental Africans and diasporic Africans collectively as *Black* and/or *African* is a viable option.

Implementation of African as a noun references race, but it may also be used as an adjective to indicate ethnicity. As an adjective, African may also refer to cultural artifacts derived from Africa and her Diaspora. If ethnicity refers to a group of people socially defined “on the basis of cultural attributes such as language, religion, lifestyle, tradition, or costume” (Berghe 1055), then African may also signify world view. Since “propriospect”—an individual’s world view (Goodenough 293) is shaped by expectations of the larger society, then African world view is determined by “African realities” (Ngũgĩ 1). African realities are informed by the relationship to one’s environment (88). Therefore, conflict between the individual and his or her environment may perpetuate resistance in the Black diaspora. Africa is a continent which consists of numerous countries and more than three thousand nations (1). The controversy regarding a “monolithic African culture” has been well documented. This study acknowledges the Eurocentric research which has revealed a “plurality of primitive cultures,” but demarginalizes the “common denominator” of a “traditional African culture as a whole” (Jahn 17). Despite the diversity of African nations, common philosophical systems do exist. Joseph White equates Blackness with Afro-American (a now dated misnomer) identity and consciousness (8). This constitutes a mixture of two world views coming together with African world view as guiding force. To reach his conclusion, he considers the theoretical findings of “traditional scholars” and “revisionists.” White explains that traditionalists believe that “whatever existed in the way of African culture was stamped out by the brutal effects of slavery

and the subsequent economic, legal, and political oppression. Afro-Americans are solely the product of America” (8). He further explains that this view reduces “Afro-Americans” to the inferior position of imitators of Euro-Americans rather than people with intrinsically different cultural and psychosocial styles” (8). “This type of thinking is at the core of the pathology, deficit, deprivation models of Black inferiority”(8). In contrast, revisionists “view blackness or Black culture as representing an admixture of two world views coming together, with the African world view as its guiding foundation” (8). Proponents of these philosophical views are E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits respectively. The historical significance of their debate is acknowledged in chapter four of this study.

Despite the debates surrounding the emergence of Black identity in the New World, this study takes a revisionist’s posture in noting that African heritage has influenced the formation of diasporic identities within Diasporan communities. It is agreed that the generalization of African culture should be minimized out of respect for the diverse cultures in existence on the Continent. And, in some instances those distinctions will be made to support the mission of this study. For instance, aspects of Ghanaian culture and Nigerian culture are represented in some of the texts explored in this endeavor. To locate Pan African manifestations in the Diaspora, discussions of Akan traditions and Yoruba orisha are included. “Sankofa” is an Akan proverb and, therefore, some treatment of Akan culture must be considered relevant to the film *Sankofa*. According to Yoruba theology, the orisha “act as protectors and facilitators of humankind” (Canizares 2). In the film *Sankofa*, characters resembling the Yoruba orisha Shango and Yemonya/Olukun also mandate an overview of this Nigerian religious system. In general, however, this study will illicit the doctrine of a few black scholars who have summarized the

notion of being African in the Diaspora. Marimba Ani says all people belong to a culture of origin. “There are many, many different cultures in the world and each of them is unique. . . . The members of a culture are bonded together by the culture which they share, the culture which gives them a sense of collective identity” (11). She further explains,

We are an African people. This statement simply means that there are values, traditions and a heritage that we share because we have a common origin. The cultural process is naturally a continuous one that allows people to affirm their connectedness through being linked to their origins. (11)

Similarly, Dr. Asa Hilliard says our collective identity glued us together. The basis of our collective identity—“our cultural names, our understanding of God, our language, our stories, our proverbs, our world view, any of the things that were the ties that bound us together were crushed” (16-17). “The decision to be African is a decision about membership in and commitment to a global family. . . that carries thousands of years of history and culture. . .that still lives on the African continent and abroad in the Diaspora” (18).

Prior to the twentieth century, the term *diaspora*—a Greek word meaning “dispersion or scattering”—denoted Jewish dispersion.<sup>12</sup> Diaspora became a popular term for people of color early in the twentieth century, as scholars researched the predicament of Africans dispersed into the Western Hemisphere.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, these scattered sites of African communities were referred to as the African diaspora. While the term African diaspora implicates “commonality with Africa as a place of origin and a distinction from Africa in time and place” (Long 75), Joseph Harris adds dimensions to this construct that bridge cultural, psychological, and epochal divides. He asserts the concept African diaspora is defined by

The global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition;

and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous, and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, and gender. (3-4)

The African diaspora as defined by Harris has sentiments inclusive of African migrations that occurred prior to and after the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He also establishes an explicit connection between Africa and the Diaspora with validation for this mooring. Africans abroad evolved culturally in the Diaspora, but not exclusively of the influences associated with “origin and social condition.” Despite oppressive efforts to disconnect Africans from their culture and humanity, African world view prevailed as Africans struggled to construct their own terms of existence in an opposing environment. While ancient African invasions are seldom explored and, yet worthy of consideration, in this study African diaspora refers to modern communities . . . chiefly descended from participants in the forced trans-Atlantic migration of Black people from Africa during a period of approximately 300 years from 1550 to 1850" (Long 80). However, it is important to recognize that “Diaspora sites are global and not limited to areas with significant Black populations (Anyidoho 4).

William Safran adds another dimension to diasporan discourse which contributes to the framework of Pan African narratives theoretically, but on some level contradicts the notion of an explicit connection between Africa and her diaspora. Safran first suggests that the diasporan concept be applied to members of “expatriate minority communities” who share the following characteristics:

1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and

insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their ancestors return when the time is appropriate; 5) they believe that they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

Despite the striking resemblance of Black existence in the Diaspora to Safran's concept of diaspora, he posits that diasporic Africans have no "clearly defined African cultural heritage to preserve" (92). As a result, a connection with the homeland is mythical and translates into "solidarity with African liberation struggles and the support of a variety of the aspirations of the sub-Saharan black states, including the fight against apartheid in South Africa and demands for increased economic aid to African nations" (90). This study hesitates to accept Safran's posture in light of James Clifford's insight regarding the "currency of contemporary diaspora discourses" (187). He notes that diaspora discourse blends "both roots and routes to construct what Gilroy (1987) describes as alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (251). Rather than subjugate diasporan to an "ideal type" it is important to consider the "changing possibilities—obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and connections—in their host countries and transnationally" that inform diasporan societies (249).

In his article on contemporary African diasporas and their impact on Africa, Emmanuel Akyempong delineates "the historical experience of diaspora" (183). His historical exploration of diaspora, he claims, is equally as important as current discourse on diaspora found in literary and cultural studies. For example, he notes that "Joseph Harris has emphasized the ways in which diasporas 'affect the economics, politics, and social dynamics of both homeland and the

host country or area” (183). But, many factors validate the need for perpetual reevaluation of the African diaspora such as:

Ongoing African Diasporas, the recent growth of Atlantic and diasporic studies, the globalization of capital and culture, the technological revolution and the breakdown in information boundaries. (183)

In this article Akyeampong examines the different “trajectories” or “routes” of the original African diaspora, for the resultant global dispersion of African communities would influence the direction of travel in the circulatory phase—especially in the twentieth century (187).

The terms Pan African and African diaspora are often used interchangeably in Black nationalist discourse, oversimplifying the construct Pan Africanism, which has ancient origins, diverse visions, and dynamic characteristics. Pan African literally means all African and refers to the concept of global African unity. A dynamic ideology, however, has evolved from this concept and is manifested in diverse movements. Pan African leaders and scholars have attempted to capture the most accurate definition and purpose of the concept as well as characteristics of the ideology. As a result, Pan Africanism has been defined in terms of African solidarity, resistance, and liberation with characteristics that are political and cultural.<sup>14</sup>

Whether on the Continent or in the Diaspora, Pan Africanists recognize African commonality and foster African solidarity for the abolishment of oppressive conditions, while simultaneously striving for African self-definition and self-determination. This study promotes the struggle for African freedom globally. Solidarity confirms African alliance with specific objectives for the common good of all Africans. It moves beyond the fundamental concept of African origin and mandates recognition of a common history and destiny, regardless of ethnicity and nationality.

Pan African and African diasporan ideologies are similar, yet significantly different. The concept African diaspora is the heir of the concept Pan Africanism, and, therefore, has political and cultural tendencies (Long 75). While both constructs recognize African peoples on the Continent and in the Diaspora as one nation with “a shared cultural identity, a shared historical experience, and . . . a shared indivisible future destiny” (Ofuatey 389), Pan-African ideology remains both nationalistic and revolutionary. In comparison, dispersal, settlement, and return are particular components of the concept African diaspora; motivation for the return is usually more “nostalgic” than revolutionary, with political implications somewhat muted (Walters 470). Pan Africanism encompasses a distinct revolutionary component—commitment to liberation of a people, and strategies for achieving this goal.

Ronald Walters concretizes the convergence of Pan Africanism and the African diaspora, and explicates the function of Pan Africanism as an organizational force in the Diaspora affording the dispersed a collective means of empowerment and liberation from expropriation. The dispersed often experience a feeling of dislocation as a result of migration—voluntary or involuntary—to a new environment, which is often oppressive. In the midst of oppression, they struggle to negotiate a sense of self. Redemption of Africa provides a means of collective identity, a sense of belonging, and racial solidarity.

Walters shares St. Clair Drake’s concept of Pan Africanism which supports “the idea that Africans and peoples of African descent in the New World should develop racial solidarity for the purpose of abolishing discrimination, enforced segregation, and political and economic exploitation of Negroes through the world” (43). Walters also identifies the social dynamics surrounding “Pan African linkages” (37). Once in the Diaspora, African peoples established

“diaspora communities” which served as transmitters of culture and sources of protection (32-33). Professor E. Franklin Frazier, who argues that “cultural heritage is the substance of the adjustment which results in community” shares Walters’ position (24). In the context of diaspora communities, African peoples attempted to maintain a sense of self. The construction and reconstruction of identities were influenced by “origin and social condition” (24).

Diasporan communities were created under various conditions—free migration, refugee migration, and forced migration (Long 75). The African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere was greatly influenced by forced migration and later modified by secondary and further recessive diasporas (76).

Theoretically, global dislocation and expropriation of African peoples necessitates a collective consciousness fostering solidarity and liberation; therefore, a “linkage” between African diaspora and Pan Africanism is logical (Walters 37). African peoples scattered throughout the diaspora are conjoined by a common history of oppression and a destiny influenced by the past which justify a unified struggle for enhancement of the nation. Various manifestations of the Pan African Ideal—a common thread linking Africans in spite of the multiplicity of geographical, political, linguistic and cultural environments in which they reside are often echoed by a plurality of voices throughout the African diaspora. Since language is most efficient in capturing the spirit of a peoples, I seek the Pan African ideal in the literature of Africans in the Diaspora.

This exploration of Pan African manifestations in African diaspora literature is shaped by my own interpretation of the Pan African construct and its relevance for Africans in the Diaspora. I embrace the philosophy of Pan Africanism as providing the solidarity needed for

liberation. My analysis of Pan Africanism is guided by the concept that Africans, no matter where they are in the world, are one, with a common history and destiny. This is not a declarative statement of Pan Africanism as a monolithic concept, ideology or movement. Nor is it an attempt to negate the existence of diverse African cultures, traditions or world views. This study, however, supports views similar to those of Richards who says,

Our oppressors have emphasized the loss of language, dress, living patterns and other tangible and surface aspects of culture, just as they do in discussions of African culture on the continent. They emphasize differences in language, and customs—physique—from one society to another. They do this with good reason. It is an emphasis that serves their objectives. Until we learn that it serves our objectives to emphasize the similarities, the ties, the unifying principles, the common threads and themes that bind and identify us all as “African,” we will continue to be politically and ideologically confused. (1)

Richards encourages Africans to be ever mindful of “unifying principles” that obliges them to negate the oppressors’ goal to enforce cultural divides. When Africans fail to recognize the “common threads” of oppression that make them vulnerable to African legacies, then they are less likely to view their struggle for liberation as a crucial concern for all Africans. In keeping with the mission to reveal collective African efforts and outcomes, this study concentrates on commonalities rather than differences. In addition to African solidarity and liberation, this study places great emphasis on Pan Africanism in terms of resistance. Also critical to the significance of this work is recognition of the word as sovereign power and its role in restoring order to African reality.

The title of this chapter is inspired by the ideology of two of its most prevalent advocates of Pan Africanism in the African diaspora during the first half of the twentieth century: W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. Because of his role in bringing the Pan African construct to the

forefront in the African diaspora, DuBois has often been acknowledged as the father of Pan Africanism; Marcus Garvey has been noted as the father of the Black Pride Movement for his role in promoting self-respect among Africans.<sup>15</sup> Both of these distinguished ambassadors were activists in the push for social equality and economic advancement for Africans. DuBois and Garvey realized that the plight of the American Negro was indicative of similar positions for Africans globally, who were in need of liberation from colonial powers. Self-definition, self-determination, and self-reliance were at the crux of their platforms; however, their views varied. DuBois, an assimilationist, sought intellectual development as a means for gaining civil rights and socioeconomic advancement of the race. Garvey, a separatist, promoted race pride, industrial training, economic self-help and autonomy.

DuBois initially believed that American Negroes needed intellectual development in order to claim their rightful place as American citizens. He surmised that education and true patriotism could lead to the enlightenment of his country because it preached the tenets of democracy. This educational process would gradually eradicate the racist mentality directed toward Blacks. DuBois himself had earned degrees from Fisk and Harvard and did advanced study at the University of Berlin. He was the first African American awarded a PhD from Harvard. His commitment to exploring the historical plight of the American Negro influenced the writing of his dissertation on the African slave trade.

DuBois had been well educated and, therefore, felt that colored people would best prove their humanity through intellectual development. When we recall the vital role of history and culture in shaping human behavior, we may conclude that his views were shaped by the sentiments of early anthropologists who equated civilization with culture and literacy. His

position also reflects those of Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists who appealed to the morality of captors to end the dehumanizing institution of slavery in America. Paradoxically, the very individuals who were stressing democracy and morality, had no problem rationalizing the enslavement of human beings because of their belief that some men were not as equal as others. DuBois' own privileged New England upbringing in contrast with the cruel treatment of Blacks he witnessed while living in Atlanta also sparked the intensity of his mission to validate the humanity and dignity of the Negro by rectifying historical misconceptions imposed on his existence.<sup>16</sup>

Against the backdrop of DuBois' struggles to assimilate the race into American society and to further economic advancement, he had to contend with two opposing forces: the accommodationist views of his predecessor, Booker T. Washington, and the separatist doctrine of his peer, Garvey. DuBois did not understand the intent of Washington to encourage manual labor, which might be equated with slavery.

While DuBois culled strategies for assimilation of the Negro into American society, Garvey stressed race pride and nation building. He thought it was nonsense to expect that Negroes would ever have the equality in America. They were a nation within a nation in need of their own identity and social autonomy. Africa was their home, and, therefore, "Africa for Africans" was the most logical course of direction for an African American<sup>17</sup> in search of dignity, equality, and independence. Motivated by the self-help doctrine of Booker T. Washington, Garvey also felt that separate development was critical. Blacks must be in control of their own community, their own enterprises, and their own destiny. They should not seek assistance from their oppressors or look to them for affirmation of their Africanity. To promote

this cause, Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement Association. The funds raised from this effort would subsidize the Black Star Shipping Line which would be vital to the transporting of Africans Americans who were willing to leave America for colonization in Liberia. Like DuBois, Garvey's intent also has historical and cultural implications as it evokes the cries of Paul Cuffe, Martin Delany and William Blyden who fought for criticism from the African Colonization Society for their earlier return to Africa campaigns.<sup>18</sup> The Jamaican-born Garvey understood the importance of nation as he witnessed the racial stratification in his own country. Despite European colonization, his fellow Jamaicans had a false sense of nation. Garvey did not find support for his movement in Jamaica, but found fertile ground for his doctrine in America. The average working class Black was in need of a leader who could speak to their needs. DuBois, it seemed, was more popular among the Black bourgeoisie. His proposal of the "talented tenth" would have the greatest influence on the "bourgeoisie elitists." Garvey recognized DuBois' role in establishing the NAACP, but after making his acquaintance, he decided not to affiliate himself with DuBois or the organization. His background contrasted sharply to Garvey's humble beginnings. Yet, despite the differences in their pedigrees, in the short run, Garvey's rhetorical and leadership skills proved more successful in capturing the loyalty of the masses. He mobilized thousands of Blacks nationwide to champion the cause of the UNIA. Unfortunately, Garvey never saw the fruition of his movement and never returned to Africa. He was indicted on charges of mail fraud and deported to Jamaica. Years later, his adversary would suffer a similar fate; the elderly DuBois, despairing, left America and became a citizen of Ghana.

In his prime, however, DuBois emphasized intellectual development for advancement of the race, but when he came to recognize the hypocrisy of American democracy, he too began to assert policies of self-definition and self-determination within the Black community. Spurred on by the continuing segregation DuBois witnessed on American soil, he took part in the United Nations Conference in Paris. He knew that someone needed to be present to take up the banner for Africans globally. He also used this occasion to call to meeting the first Pan African Conference.

DuBois has left his mark on society as accomplished scholar, sociologist and international activist. Concerned with the social inequalities imposed on the American Negro, DuBois fathered several sociological studies to quell racist misconceptions and to advance the race. According to Eric Sundquist, DuBois's work is "comparable in spirit to his own intentions" (541).

DuBois, venerated as prolific writer, has penned numerous works of philosophical inquiry, memoirs and poetry. However, it seems he is most often recognized for his classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Inspired by his witnessing of the "sorrow songs" which depict colored life, DuBois' collection of essays address the breadth of racism in American society in the twentieth century. Located in this text, which has transcended generations, is his concept of "double-consciousness":

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an

American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (5)

It is this very desire for self-definition and self-determination that fueled Garvey's concept of "Africa for the Africans." The Black man should not have to allow himself to be defined by European standards or be subordinated because of his race. In Africa, he would find his true sense of self, and therefore, restore his humanity.

DuBois's career spanned from the era of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. His efforts to establish a socialist theory of African and African American life were constantly tempered by the social climate in America and abroad. Sundquist notes:

DuBois was hardly alone in recognizing that the First World War was crucial to both African and American aspirations to freedom. In practical terms, its concentrated horror summed up for him and other blacks the crisis over civil rights and home in Jim Crow America and the final collapse of the purportedly civilized ideals of European colonialism abroad. On a more theoretical level, it crystallized his view of race as a category defined less by color or by nationality than by inclusion in the African diaspora. The rise of black political consciousness that accompanied the New Negro movement—spurred on in the United States by reaction to the role played by Africa in the war and the failure of black American veterans to win any significant civil rights at home through their sacrifices abroad; by the great migratory influx into the urban North, with its resulting labor problems and violence in the early decades of the twentieth century; and by the ascendancy of white supremacist thought over the same period—had its counterpart in the growth of African independence movements and a worldwide Pan-African philosophy to which DuBois made a significant contribution. (543).

In contrast, Peter Abrahams offers his perception of Garvey, born some twenty years after DuBois and attempts to uncover the impetus for their varied approaches to advancing the Black race. While DuBois was a minority in America, Garvey was a member of the racial majority in Jamaica. It is important note that majority does not necessarily mean dominate. Abrahams does

not successfully reveal any aspect of Garvey's Jamaican heritage that would have inspired his philosophy of racial uplift. However, he notes that the subjugation of Blacks to deplorable conditions Garvey witnessed during his travels to Central and South America informed his demeanor. Abraham makes a striking contrast between Garvey's "detachment from all the traditionally accepted avenues of protest, struggle and representation of his time" and the decision of other Black leaders to achieve their mission through the power centers (10). For example, in the United States many became Democrats; in Europe many became socialists; and, the communist party attracted Black interest in the United States and in Europe (10). Garvey's spirit of independence was revered by some and feared by others. The impact of his mass black movements—the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Communities League—transcended national borders. His efforts were well received by working-class Blacks in Harlem, but often ridiculed by the Black bourgeois. Garvey's "extraordinary success frightened the government as well as many Black American leaders, including DuBois. All of the American communists, black and white, denounced Garvey's movement as 'black racism'"(12). Due to the conflict between the United States and Cuba in the 1920s, the later welcomed him with open arms (13). As a matter of fact, the response to Garvey was so overwhelming in Cuba that it was once "the second largest UNIA centre in the world, after Harlem"(13). What is most ironic is that the British government never allowed Garvey into Africa even though he professed it as the home of all Africans (11).

The warring debates between DuBois and Garvey concerning the most efficient cause and means for mobilizing Africans globally is symbolic of the polarities of this ideology. Regardless of their differences, both men recognized the importance of racial uplift, self-help

and social autonomy. I hold these two model Pan Africanists up as examples for the modalities of Pan African strategies brought forth in this study. DuBois I would propose as model for psychological return to Africa since he did not really advocate the return of Negroes to Africa even though he eventually repatriated himself to Ghana shortly before his death. He became very militant in his later years. Garvey's program at that same time represented a more militant form of resistance. His response to the ongoing dilemma of racial oppression in the Americas offered an option to living behind the veil.

The debate between DuBois and Garvey mirrored the tragedy of being disconnected from the homeland. Their lives and writings hold tremendous meaning for this study and it is in the vein of their consciousness that this work will proceed as it identifies cultural retention, nation building, and revolt as Pan African manifestations in literature of the African diaspora.

These two race leaders appropriated the oppressor's language to advance the mission of Blacks in attaining their rightful place in society. The far reaching impact of their movements indicates the potential of language to bring forth ordered terms of existence.

For centuries, the sovereign power of the word has been revered by sages and scribes universally. Whether spoken or written, the infinite power of the word to create and transform has been well noted. In the book of Genesis, God speaks the world into existence; he utters darkness into light in the Book of John. In the Black World, the power of the word has been encapsulated in the term *Nommo* which is “. . . common to several African languages, for the act of creation performed by man in naming the elements of his universe” (Robinson).

Oba T'Shaka offers an account of the origin of *Nommo* in *Return to the African Mother Principle of Male and Female Equality* as he explores African history, culture and cosmology.

His implementation of Nommo is derived from the social system and culture of the Dogon of Mali West Africa.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, he draws on the symbolism of the “ancestral Nommo Twins, who serve as God’s ordering representatives on earth” (xxi). Nommos are comparable to the Kemetic Neters who are divine principles or forces that manifest different qualities of the creator” (x). He continues to explain that “Nommo means *the word*, which is the ultimate ordering and disordering agent for humans on earth” (x).

In *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names*, Debra Walker King uses the concept of Nommo to read names in “canonical black texts” (28). Her text examines the “Nommo force” (28) or “metatext of names and naming” and notes that deep talk<sup>20</sup> may be described as utterances existing beneath the obvious (1).

Nommo signifies the power and fluidity of words to create order and chaos throughout the universe; it also implicates the humanity of naming. However, words in isolation of context rarely hold the same significance as those rooted in the meaning of language and culture. Language and culture are at once independent and interactive. At the most basic level, language consists of organized patterns of thoughts and feelings expressed through verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Culture informs the system of expression used in a “population or a community” of “people with a shared history” (Webster’s); and culture is transmitted through language. If the mere utterance of words has the capacity to create and order existence, then it is through language and culture that the manner in which these manifestations are brought forth and regulated.

In *Black Skin, White Mask*—Frantz Fanon’s treatise on the Black psyche—he acknowledges the sovereign power of language. Fanon says, “Mastery of language affords remarkable power”

(18). He also reveals the capacity of language to empower both the oppressor and the oppressed. In colonized societies, the oppressor has succeeded in oppressing the colonized through suppression of their (colonized) mother tongue. “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” (18). For example, the propensity of language to construct and deconstruct civilizations is a historical phenomenon. And, language is most efficient in capturing, maintaining, and manipulating the spirit of a people. This concept may be clearly evidenced in the efforts of European invaders who attempted to diffuse any intent of insurrection by enslaved Africans.<sup>21</sup> The captors feared the tenacity of language so fiercely that they took extreme measures in separating Africans from kindred tribes in order to abort any potentially volatile comradery on the slave ships. Despite these oppressive maneuvers, enslaved Africans still found a common thread of communication and often mobilized themselves to plot their escape. Tactics similar to those employed by the Europeans were used by plantation owners to limit collaborative efforts of enslaved Africans in the New world. However, the severity of the forces imposed on enslaved Africans only served to forge a bond among them despite diverse cultures. Their common origin and history was recognized through language; subsequently liberation became of primary concern. With Africa as their motherland and liberation from oppression as their mutual concern, enslaved Africans resisted collectively.

The organic connection between language and culture is more refined through narrative. Literacy has long been associated with humanity. Robert Stepto notes the quest for African American writers is for freedom and literacy (x). Houston Baker observes that the quest is to

create terms of order. Furthermore, it is the most manifest and coherent of all cultural systems. Black writers used language to create terms of order (1). Through language, African–continental and diasporic–griots, and rhetoricians have harnessed the enigma of the word to recall, restore, and retain their humanity and dignity from the clutches of oppressive forces.

For example, when Alain Locke introduced the nation to the “New Negro” during the Harlem Renaissance, Black American writers were exercising their new found freedom—heralded by the emancipation proclamation and then by the overall social revolution ushered in by WWI. The Black men who served in France returned with a new sense of identity and purpose. Scholars began to embrace African identity through literature, art and music. The ambivalent return to Africa was addressed through the arts. Scholarly debates continued to emerge as they had in the past as to the existence of the “Negro” and how he or she should function in the midst of this new found freedom. American Negroes continued to migrate from the South to the North to escape the continuing oppression that had taken on a new face with old underlying values. Even though slavery had been abolished, limited social, political and economic opportunities continued under the sharecropping system. American Negroes migrated north to the “Promised Land” in search of a better life. While some opportunities greeted them in their new urban landscapes, they soon found that the forms of oppression they assumed were left behind resurfaced in the form of housing discrimination and disenfranchisement. And yet, in places like New York, they developed an inherent new community in Harlem and used language to establish their own terms of order.

Historically, the Black narrative tradition has empowered Africans of the Black World to acknowledge, restore and preserve their own terms of existence. This ordering of existence is

navigated by an African world view. In *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*, Donna Marimba Richards establishes world view as both by-product and agent of culture. She defines culture as “ordered behavior (4); it provides its members “a systematic way of ordering their experiences”(3). Therefore, African world view is a sustaining force that affects the way Africans view themselves and their relationship to the universe. Richards’ definition of world view brings Goodenough’s notion of propriospect within the realm of Black culture. In the script of Black narratives, continental Africans and diasporic Africans who have been disconnected from their world view articulate a quest for wholeness. This quest often stems from a desire forged in response to the rupture imposed by imperialism. Continental Africans endured centuries of hegemonic invasion which disrupted their terms of order; this rupturing superimposed fragmentation and dehumanization on a society originally self-defined and self-determined. Slavery had an even worse effect in the New world. By invoking power of the word, Africans have retrieved African world view and in turn, restored their culture and humanity. In response to invasion and colonization on the Continent, a desire and resolution to restore African world order often exudes from the texts of continental Africans. The dispersal of Africans from the Continent created a different dilemma. Fragmentation and dehumanization were compounded by physical separation from the homeland. Therefore in African diasporan literature, longing for a physical or psychological return to the homeland and all that it implies is revealed. In this study, African diasporan literature subsumes expressions of the Black experience as documented by dispersed Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora.

The primary objective of this study , therefore, is to advance the Black narrative tradition by proposing and defining a more contemporary thematic rubric for exploring African legacies in African diasporan literature. To meet this objective, solidarity, resistance, and liberation are examined as Pan African manifestations in African diasporan literature through close readings of selected texts, which reveal the emergence of Pan African narratives—a new genre of Black world literature. To achieve this, Pan African narratives build on the tradition of slave and migration narratives, but also expand the literary borders of these established genres by transcending epochal and geographical frameworks.

According to Koji Anyidoho, “Culture, it has been suggested, is not only a force of creativity but also uses human intelligence for social development. But culture cannot achieve its creative and utilitarian potential without the vehicle of language. The fruits of human creativity and intelligence cannot be accumulated and disseminated without the vehicle of language. Yet language both represents and misrepresents truth, fact, or experience” (Language 46-47). He explains how imposed language of the colonizers on the slaves did much to affect consciousness. In a separate text he points out how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o went beyond appropriating the English language to accomplish his aims. Anyidoho points out that “His decision to turn his back on English as his primary language for writing, has had important implications, for himself personally and for the future of African literatures. His choice of Gikuya has enabled him to work most directly with ordinary people of his society, and in that context his literary activities have assumed a revolutionary force that frightens the Kenyan ruling class” (21).<sup>22</sup> “It seems clear that what bothers the Kenyan authorities most is the dangerous consequences of placing Ngũgĩ’s revolutionary writing directly in the hands of the oppressed”

(21). Anyidoho says in reference to the debate over language in African literature is that the African has not been totally cut off from his mother tongue. And as Haki Madhubuti has stated “With the killing of the language, the transfiguration of the African was complete and lasting. . . few things are as important as language and for most, the quieting of the tongue, more than anything else, sealed their faith in the new world, for without language one cannot express the indigenous self, and therefore, one has nothing to express other than the selves of others in their language” (qtd. in Anyidoho, Research).

Language in and of itself has power, but what determines the capacity of its force is the manner in which it is used. The potential of language rests in the hands of the artists who skillfully manipulate words to construct meaning. In the form of narrative, language may influence varied constructs affecting human capacity. Daily existence may be articulated through narrative. Sometimes narrative is “central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation or in collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, nations and gender” (Currie 1-2).

Narrative articulating African world view and history have been critical to sustaining African consciousness. My use of African consciousness stems from Ani’s definition of world view. In other words, through narrative, Africans and their descendants have consciously retained and or restored their African perspective on life. In *The Narrative Study of Lives*, Amos Funkenstein uses the term “narrative identity” to indicate “the unity of a person’s life as it is experienced and articulated in stories that express this experience” (7). He also asserts that people use stories to reveal aspects of their identity. Just as historians use stories to reveal things that have happened in the past, “people tell stories about their life” (4-6). Stories are not mere

descriptions of the experiences people have had in the past; they are in some way constitutive of our (past and actual) experiences (6). Narrative may also contain “major sites of contest” and “revolutionary struggle” (Nasta xiii). Accordingly, the shifting of stories from “our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them” lends itself simultaneously to literature and social commentary (White 1). Language as a mechanism for cultural expression and social change is modified as the agents who use it are transformed. In other words, cultural expression and social transformation, as reflected in narrative, characterize both the slave and migration narratives.

While slave narratives and migration narratives have been identified as significant genres of Black narrative tradition, their paradigms are limited to certain epochs and conventions. Slave narratives are generally defined as the slave’s account of his horrific experiences in bondage. These narratives were penned by enslaved Africans or an interested party authoring the narrative on behalf of the captive. The slave narrative as genre dates from the early seventeenth-century and became most popular in the nineteenth century (Samuel 123). Through slave narratives, autobiographical and biographical sketches of enslaved Africans are revealed. Prior to the nineteenth century, the slave narrative as a literary form remained unrecognized.

Scholar and historian Mary Starling is notably recognized for her contribution to establishing the slave narrative as a formidable literary form. In doing so, she expanded the myopic vision of scholars who refuted the enslaved African’s ability to analyze or articulate the conditions of slavery. For instance, in 1939 historian John S. Kendall was asked about life as a slave. He responded accordingly:

We do not know. The slaves themselves have never told. There were always. . . negroes who had secured their freedom. But they had no literary gift. If they were capable of self-analysis to the degree of distinguishing their sentiments in one estate from those in the other, they have omitted to set down the result in writing. Still less have we the story of a slave—of a slave who was nothing but a slave. (Starling x)

Kendall's ignorance about "black thought and behavior" is consistent with the historical negation of the enslaved African's humanity. I posit Kendall's lack of vision as failure to acknowledge the enslaved African's capacity to invoke the power of the word to construct his reality in bondage. Kendall also fails to recognize the African deep thought often encoded in the script of Black narrative.

Despite the sentiments of twentieth-century historians like Kendall, Starling found inspiration for her pioneer work on the slave narrative from nineteenth-century critics who acknowledged the power of language and the enslaved African's mastery of the English to construct his or her current reality. Much critical analysis has been conducted on the history, conventions and sentiments portrayed in the narratives written in response to the political, historical and cultural implications of this "peculiar institution."

Themes of dispersal, dislocation and return are common to slave narratives. The dispersal of Africans and their descendants inspired eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives which articulate the captive's quest for self-actualization and liberation from the oppressive environment imposed by fate.

Oral narrative preceded the written narrative and continues to be a popular form of expression in some cultures. In African culture, oral narratives are used as domestic entertainment, but more as "domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles articulate a

commentary upon power relations in society and indeed create knowledge about society” (Furniss 1-2). Through their commentary, these individuals have the power to support or subvert those in power. The words and texts they use are charged with power because they “have the ability to provoke, to overturn, and to recast social reality” (3).

Certain techniques and elements used in African oral literature are also used in African written literature (Okpewho 3). Modern African writers employ the literary traditions of their people as both content and technique. Isidore Okpewho explains this as a response to the misrepresentation of African culture during European dominance. After the African nations won their political independence, they strived to reclaim and rectify the so-called primitive imagery of African culture promoted by Europeans, who marginalized the quality of the oral literature because they did not understand the language or meaning behind it. As Okpewho stresses, “The aim was to demonstrate that Africa has had, since time immemorial, traditions that should be respected and a culture to be proud of” (293). Oral histories which shaped African societies are present in the text of modern African writers even though the communities are no longer primarily oral cultures. In spite of modernization, the wisdom of the elders survives through the literary creations of African writers (Wilentz xxii-xxiii).

As an African writer of the eighteenth century, Equiano appropriates the English language to subvert the oppressor. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Equiano explicitly describes his own personal experiences both prior to and after his captivity. As indicated in the title, Equiano authored the narrative. Literacy afforded him the freedom to articulate his own experience rather than risk having the details distorted by a European perspective. Authentication of the slave’s story is an important narrative convention.

Equiano's portrayal of life in Africa and his encounters during the middle passage validates the horrible conditions of slavery imposed on him by fate, while providing a stark contrast between African and European world views. He also succeeds at rectifying misconceptions regarding the supposed "uncivilized" state of Africans prior to European penetration. Equiano, in contrast, portrays Europeans as uncivilized. He was born in 1745 in Essaka, an Igbo village of Nigeria.

Equiano's family was of royal lineage and the people of his village were self-governed:

My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of and was styled Embrenche, a term as I remember importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur. . . Those Embrenche or chief men decided disputes and punished crimes, for which purpose they always assembled together. The proceedings were generally short, and in most cases the law of retaliation prevailed. (1-2)

Equiano gives a description of the remote village in which he was born. He emphasizes the remoteness of Essaka and the obscurity of European civilization: "The distance of this province from the capital of Benin and the sea coast must be very considerable: for I had never heard of white men or Europeans, nor of the sea; and our subjection to the King of Benin was little more than nominal" (12). Equiano then proceeds to explain the social customs of his people. Law and order are maintained by the elders of his village; fidelity, cleanliness and reverence for the ancestors are sacred; his people believe in one creator of all things; and, slavery exists in his village, but the circumstances and conditions are far less severe than those imposed by the Europeans (19).

Once Equiano is captured he expresses the despair and anguish he feels as a result of having his culture, family and freedom snatched away from him: "for I was quite oppressed and weighed down by grief after my mother and friends; and my love of liberty" (27). During his

captivity, he is exposed to the peculiar culture of the Europeans and is convinced that he “had got into a world of bad spirits” (33). Equiano evaluates the Europeans based on Essaka world view. He observes a lack of cleanliness and virtues among them. It is his experience during the middle passage which generates heightened feelings of anguish and despair—two themes common to the slave narrative. The brutality he and his fellow Africans suffer at the hands of the Europeans keep him in a constant fear of death and prompts his analysis of the Europeans as savages: “the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty: and this is not only shewn towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves” (34).

Considering Starling’s definition of the primary function of the slave narrative, Equiano’s narrative is successful. He adequately provides a “picture of the institution of slavery as seen through” his own eyes and gives his reflection on the oppressive environment imposed on him by fate. By fulfilling the obligation of the slave narrative, Equiano also succeeds at rectifying misconceptions about an uncivilized African culture which existed prior to European penetration. His distinction between the cultural values of his own people and those of the Europeans exposes uncivilized aspects of the European culture. Therefore, he also succeeds at providing an analysis of his fellow man.

Equiano tells the slave’s story, but also articulates the triangulation of the slave trade in his account of his journey. He is placed aboard a slave ship and taken to Barbados. His stay in Barbados is brief. From that point on he is traded several times. He is sold by a trader in Virginia and eventually traded again to a British navy lieutenant, Pascal, who takes him to England. Equiano’s narrative also serves as father text to slave narrative of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. Similar patterns of captivity, despair, a longing for freedom and the importance of literacy, may also be identified in the works of Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Booker T. Washington.

For Douglass, as with his predecessor Equiano, literacy provides the knowledge needed to gain psychological and physical emancipation. Once he obtains his own freedom, Douglass uses his literary skills to inform others of his personal experiences. Like other authors of slave narratives, Douglass' mission is to encourage the abolishment of slavery. In the tradition of the slave narrative, Douglass incorporates a number of common conventions in his narrative. However, the rhetorical strategy implemented in his narrative is one of its most compelling characteristics. Evidence of Douglass' rhetorical strategy is identifiable in the first chapter. He immediately authenticates his narrative and assures the reader of the horror of slavery. Although the identity of his biological father is questionable, he skillfully implicates his white slave master (48). Despite physical from his mother as an infant, he has knowledge of his lineage. "My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark" (47). Families were intentionally torn apart and slaves were forbidden to question their heritage. Douglass' self-knowledge in spite of the physical and psychological constraints imposed on slaves establishes a sense of grounding. This grounding lends validity to Douglass' narrative.

The horror of slavery is a common thread among the slave narratives. Like Equiano, Douglass assures the reader of the cruelty inflicted on blacks in bondage through the unadulterated, yet reliable, eyes of a child. Just as Equiano shares explicit details of bloody thrashings and other mutilating punishment imposed on slaves in his narrative, Douglass

explicitly describes his first encounter with a series of beatings inflicted on his own Aunt Hester at the hands of his slave master:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rendering shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. . . .He would whip her to make her scream and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I remember it well. (51)

The rhetorical strategy Douglass implements in his narrative lends credibility to the condition of slavery and preserves the legacy of the slave narrative. Although his narrative was written in the nineteenth century as an appeal to abolish slavery, it continues to voice concerns relevant to the twenty-first century. The narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Booker T. Washington serve a similar purpose. Jacobs was “born into slavery” (5) and through her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she reveals the institution of slavery from a woman’s perspective. Subjected to the same harshness as her male counterparts, she too has the burden of protecting her virtue. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington uses his rhetorical skills to encourage self-reliance and selfless dedication among Blacks to uplift their race. Washington argues the importance of knowledge and skills as a means for blacks to rise above the social conditions imposed on them in an America which holds them in captivity beyond slavery.

In the tradition of the slave narrative, Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs are bound by a common thread. All of their narratives contain conventions common to the genre but the manner in which each of them presents their narrative distinguishes them from the other. Self-reliance is encouraged as Washington describes how he became interested in reading. Equiano,

Douglass and Jacobs each came into contact with literacy in different ways, but collectively developed a hunger for knowledge through interaction with a white person. Each of them attained literacy in different ways but all of them understood that it served as a catalyst to bring them from the darkness of slavery to the light of freedom.

In comparison to the slave narrative, migration narratives also continue the tradition of the slave narratives. Migration narratives share common thematic threads—freedom and flight, the search for identity, dispersal (voluntary and involuntary). This genre is also epochal; migration narratives are tales of the movement of Blacks from rural areas to urban areas at the turn of the twentieth century. Blacks also migrated from the South to the Northern and Western regions of the United States in response to industrialism.

Both slave and migration narratives have made great contributions to the Black literary tradition and have served to voice the experiences and continued legacy of oppression and struggle of Africans globally. However, in this study, I venture to expand on their limited paradigms. There are several venues to explore. If slave narratives are tales of enslaved Africans, then I propose that they include the tales of enslaved Africans globally. It has been noted that Arabs invaded the Continent and enslaved Africans prior to European invasion. If there are accounts by Africans enslaved by Arabs, then their tales should also be embraced as slave narratives.

I also propose that the scope and focus of migration narratives be broadened to include movement of Africans in the West Indies who relocated to Europe in the twentieth century. It has been documented that vast numbers of West Indian Africans migrated to England in response to the need for labor during World War I. Some may argue that the dynamics of this

group of people may be distinctly different. For one thing, as the result of imperial colonialism in Africa and beyond, they looked to England as the mother country rather than Africa. And yet, it is evident in some Caribbean literature that some African values and practices remained intact.

North American slave and migration narratives are authentic literary genres, but if we expand the epochal and geographical confines of their paradigms, they may also be viewed as a subgenre of African diasporan literature—literature which speaks to the conditions experienced by Africans in the Diaspora. If the concept African diaspora is dynamic and transcends space and time, then works of literature encompassed in this frame, thematically, must not be relegated to time. If dispersal and a desire to return to Africa physically or metaphorically—as it pertains to the African diaspora—may be voluntary or involuntary, the slave and migration narratives fall under the rubric of African diasporan literature. For instance, in the slave narratives, it has often been noted that enslaved Africans yearn for a return to their homeland—Africa. Enslaved Africans struggle to cope with their present condition, but the grounding of that which is familiar is ever present. In migration narratives, the emancipated African flees the South (voluntarily or involuntarily) but may return to the South (literally or metaphorically) for guidance and/or grounding. In both instances, the narratives—slave and migration—share the condition of the oppressed and their attempts to negotiate a sense of self and a place in a strange environment. Enslaved Africans and the emancipated Africans struggle to define themselves in a hostile environment which negates their human existence.

This study assumes that African diasporan literature includes a body of narratives that portray the manner in which Diaspora Africans cope with oppression and dehumanization, and therefore, that Pan Africanism is also a theme worth exploring in African diasporan literature.

Since slave and migration narratives may be subgenres of African diasporan literature, then the Pan African narrative as a subgenre of African diasporan literature is also a viable option. It has already been established that slave narratives and migration narratives are more temporal and historical than thematic. Pan African narratives transcend time and space and are thematic in nature. This thematic approach, however, must not be minimized, for it serves to reinforce the continuity of African voices in search of a common destiny across time and space. The Pan African rubric also links Africans no matter where they are in the Diaspora to a common cause—to defeat oppressive powers to achieve liberation. Given the focus of this study on the connection between language and culture in terms of Pan African ideals as manifested in African diasporan texts, it is important to note that Pan African narratives are authored by Africans. This holds true for slave narratives, migration narratives and other genres of Black narrative which may be explored in this work.

Varied interpretations of Pan Africanism have already been established, but this study employs the thesis that Pan Africanism speaks most emphatically to the solidarity of Africans globally and their quest for liberation. More specifically, while slave narratives speak to the slave's anger and determination to document his captivity, and the migration narrative speaks to the dislocation of emancipated Africans geographically, then Pan African narratives are narratives which locate African solidarity, resistance and liberation in African diasporan literature. Given this hypothesis, Pan African themes may be present in both slave narratives and migration narratives. In other words, if a protagonist is traumatized by oppressive powers, and Africans collectively invoke forms of resistance—implicitly or explicitly—to liberate the oppressed then we may refer to this text as a Pan African narrative. Given that the concept Pan

Africanism originated on the Continent, then it is likely that Pan African themes may be identified in slave narratives. If resistance may take place in terms of cultural continuity and militant protest, then these conditions must not be subjected to time and space. Migration narratives may also be sites of Pan African manifestations when collective resistance occurs to maintain freedom for the emancipated, yet still oppressed African.

Pan African narratives are marked by African resistance to oppressive powers through African cultural continuity, nation building, and militant revolt resulting in African restoration and liberation. Pan African narratives reveal that African cultural continuity is extant; the urge and quest for unity is a force of destiny; and, a return to their place of origin—Africa—is the source of liberation. In Pan African narratives Africans invoke and evoke various strategies to resist subjugation in the Diaspora.

In this study, Pan African narratives are written by continental Africans or diasporic Africans. Pan Africanist intent may be implicit or explicit. Pan African narratives may be fiction or nonfiction, film or text. The plot of the Pan African narrative may take place on the Continent or in the Diaspora—Africa may be represented metaphorically. Regardless of geographical space, Pan African narratives transcend place and time.

Pan African narratives have qualities that are ancestral and communal. In Pan African narratives, the protagonist is traumatized by oppressive powers and the ancestor figures collectively employ forms of resistance to neutralize oppressive forces. In Pan African narratives, the African community and the ancestor figure are central to the liberation process—hence, supporting the Pan African concept of African solidarity for African liberation.

Finally, I will set up a critical paradigm that links slave, migration, and Pan African narratives. Farah Jasmine Griffin establishes literary conventions for migration narratives in the tradition of the slave narrative:

The migration narrative shares with the slave narrative notions of ascent from the South into a “freer” North. Like the slave narrative and the fiction it inspired, the migration narrative has its own set of narrative conventions. If the slave narrative revolves around the auction block, the whipping, the separation of families, and miscegenation, the migration narrative provides us with lynching scenes, meetings with ancestors, and urban spaces like kitchenettes, dance halls, and street corners. The migration narrative is marked by an exploration of urbanism, an explanation of sophisticated modern power, and, in some instances, a return South. (3-4).

A brief reading of *A Raisin In the Sun*, and *The Piano Lesson* will establish these texts as migration narratives with themes of ancestral meetings, urban landscapes and a return to the South which is often symbolic of Africa in its function as *homeplace*. This construct is borrowed from bell hooks who establishes homeplace as a site of resistance, a refuge and resource conducive to liberatory struggle (41-47). In *A Raisin In the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry addresses the challenges faced by Blacks relocating themselves to urban landscapes during the second wave of the Great Migration from the South. Lured North by promises of economic gain and better living conditions like their predecessors during World War I, Blacks still encountered housing, labor, race, and class discrimination. In the midst of this conflict, she identifies Africa as a source of rootedness for African American identity and culture (Gates 1327). Remnants of southern life serve to guide and haunt three generations of the Younger family that have migrated to Chicago to realize their dreams. The South, from which they have come, is the site of the ancestor; it is their homeplace. Lena Younger, the matriarch, keeps the family rooted in Black southern values, but also defies the laws of segregation that have excluded her family

from decent housing . She is the “Negro Mother” that Langston Hughes recalls to remind her sons and daughters of the dreadful past and the glorious road ahead. When Lena’s daughter-in-law, Ruth, plans to abort an unwanted pregnancy because of financial concerns, she informs Ruth of Black family tradition. Lena tells Ruth they are a people who give life, they don’t take it away. When Lena’s two adult children, Walter and Beneatha, squabble over insurance money left by her deceased husband, she attempts to disperse the funds in a fashion that will seed each of their dreams and sustain their dignity. Walter wants to start a business; Beneatha wants to study medicine; Lena wants a new home. The family is at odds when the plans are foiled. Africa as a source of grounding becomes evident as Assagai, Beneatha’s friend from the Continent, reveals the fault of having dreams based on funds made available by the death of one man.

The life sustaining force of Africa is not only present in the land, but also in ancestral artifacts. This becomes evident in August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson* when tension occurs between a sister and brother over a piano that holds historical significance for their family. The beautifully-carved piano has images of their enslaved Ancestors etched in its wood. The spirit of these enslaved Africans, traded by their master in exchange for a piano, are still present. When Boy Willie travels North to convince his sister to sell ancestral artifact because he wants to purchase land down south once farmed by their enslaved ancestors, she refuses. The plot reaches its climax when Berneice summons the spirit of the ancestors by playing the piano to ward off the deceased master’s ghost in search of the stolen piano. The piano as ancestral artifact becomes clear to Boy Willie as he witnesses the exorcism of the restless haint. Berneice commits to giving piano lessons to sustain her family and Boy Willie returns South.

An element common to these two texts is a connection between homeplace and newplace. Lena Younger draws from her Black southern world view the wisdom and values needed to sustain her family in the North. The piano, which was moved from the South when Berneice and her family migrated North, represents the homeplace and provides sustenance in the newplace. The point of departure from migration narrative to Pan African narrative is evidence of collective Black resistance to oppressive forces through cultural continuity, nation building, or militant revolt.

In the Pan African narrative, there may be one or more victims of oppression who are denied the freedom to be self-defined, self-determined, or self-reliant. When this occurs, revolutionary agents mobilize to rescue the oppressed. Resistance in the form of cultural continuity occurs when cultural consciousness is restored or retained. Homeplace is the site of cultural continuity and it is the source of resistance, militant or otherwise. Nation building as resistance becomes evident when revolutionary agents have established self-sustaining communities separate from the dominate social structure. Even though nation building is informed by the historical legacy of maroon societies and other separatist movements, revolutionary agents do not have to remove themselves or the oppressed from the site of oppression to achieve liberation. Militant revolt may be recognized in extreme measures taken to combat subjugation of the victim.

In a similar fashion to the migration narrative, connection between the homeplace and newplace for sustenance and grounding is central to Pan African narratives. Homeplace is the site of the ancestor literally and metaphorically and revolutionary agents must have access to this source to complete their liberatory mission. Therefore, the impetus for resistance is a bridging

of time and space. This retrieval from the past in order to move forward is familiar to Black narrative tradition. The ability to “go back and fetch it” is concretized in the proverb Sankofa.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Danse Africaine.”

<sup>2</sup> See *Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary*. Boston: Riverside Publishing, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> See Leighton, A. [1982]. Relevant generic issues. In A. Gaw [Ed.], *Cross-cultural psychiatry*. Littleton, MA: Wright-PSG. (As cited in Pinderhughes, 1989, p.6.).

<sup>4</sup> See George W. Stocking, Jr. “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective.” *American Anthropologist*, 68 (1966): 867-882.

<sup>5</sup> See Pierre L. Van Den Berghe’s article “Racism,” *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 3. 1054-1055. Race is a “term that has four distinct meanings: a synonym for our species, as in ‘the human race;’ a synonym for a subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, as in ‘the Negroid race;’ a synonym for ethnicity or religion, as in ‘the Irish race’ or the ‘Jewish race;’ and a group socially defined in a given society by visible, heritable phenotypes, as in ‘African Americans’ in the United States, ‘West Indians’ in Great Britain, or ‘Coloureds’ in South Africa.”

“The first usage is now largely metaphorical and of little concern here. The second usage is obsolete, because geneticists now use the term ‘population’ to refer to subgroups of a species isolated by inbreeding. Human geneticists are also nearly unanimous in rejecting a simple tripartite division of our species into ‘Negroid,’ ‘Caucasoid,’ and ‘Mongoloid.’ The third usage is obsolete, although confusion between race and ethnicity persists, and is confounded by those social scientists who, in an attempt to exorcize race, have banned the word, and subsume race under ethnicity. Many contemporary social scientists do not differentiate terminologically between ethnic and racial groups, and use the generic terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ to comprise both. Finally, the fourth usage is generally accepted by social scientists who continue to differentiate between ethnic and racial groups. To remove ambiguity, some specifically refer to ‘social races.’ (that is, groups that are socially defined in a given place and time, but on the basis of physical attributes such as skin color, facial features, hair texture, or cultural attributes such as language, religion, lifestyle, traditions, or costume. Empirically, some groups may be defined both physically and culturally, and thus be both ethnic and racial groups. So, while the conceptual distinction is clear in theory, the two categories sometimes overlap in subtle and complicated ways.”. . .

“There are two pragmatic reasons for keeping a clear analytical distinction between race and ethnicity instead of subsuming the former under the latter: First, the phenotypic attributes of race are more unchangeable than the cultural properties of ethnicity. One can change one’s religion or learn a new language more readily than one can alter one’s skin

color or facial features. Therefore, social distinctions based on race lead to more rigidly ascriptive stratification systems than those based on ethnicity. Second, racial distinctions seem to be individious and derogatory in a way that ethnic distinctions may, but need not, be. Racial distinctions are invariably defined in terms of superiority and inferiority, whereas this is not always the case with ethnic distinctions. Therefore, any policy, no matter how purportedly benign, that recognizes and institutionalizes racial distinctions perpetuates social inequalities, because race itself is perceived as a stigma or a badge of superiority. This is not necessarily the case with ethnicity, which can operate in a context of separate-but equal relations. This can be show in the attempt by some groups previously defined in racial terms to destigmatize their position by redefining themselves in ethnic terms, as when Black Americans, for instance, rename themselves African Americans.”

“In practice, of course, race and ethnicity often overlap: some groups can be defined in terms of both; other groups may have an ethnic self-definition and be perceived by others in racial terms (e.g.; Puerto Ricans in the United States). Despite all these empirical complications, the distinction between race and ethnicity remain both analytically and pragmatically useful.”

<sup>6</sup> See Carol R. Ember, “Gender Differences and Roles” Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology, 519, Vol. 2. “Human females and males have obvious physical differences by sex (sexual dimorphism), “they also typically display re of the differences in behavior and other aspects of personality. Currently differences between females and males tend to be referred to as ‘gender differences’ rather than as ‘sex differences.’ This change in terminology reflects the idea that male-female differences stem ultimately from cultural experiences (including role assignments) rather than from biological differences. Similarly ‘gender roles’ is now the preferred term instead of ‘sex roles.’ The term ‘sex differences’ often is used to refer to differences that are clearly biological in nature. However, most differences cannot clearly be attributed to biology or to culture, so the decision to use one term or another may be based more on assumption than on evidence.”

<sup>7</sup> The word *continent* is capitalized when used alone as a proper noun in reference to the African continent.

<sup>8</sup> See Koji Anyidoho, Pan African Ideal in Literature of the Black World” ( 2 ). Accra: Ghana UP, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to Black Africans born on the African continent. They shall be referred to as continental Africans whether on the African continent or in the African diaspora.

<sup>10</sup> This refers to Africans born in the African diaspora. They shall be referred to as diasporic Africans whether on the African continent or in the African diaspora.

<sup>11</sup> In Africanisms in American Culture, Joseph Holloway says “the term African had been used since the thirteenth century to identify black people from Africa” (xix). According

to *The American Heritage Book of English Usage: A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English* (1996), “*The Oxford English Dictionary* contains evidence of the use of *black* in reference to African peoples as early as 1400; no doubt it was used orally before then, and certainly it has been in continual use ever since.” (See Names and Labels: Social, Racial, and Ethnic Terms, § 11. black). It is also important to note that “*Black* is sometimes capitalized in its racial sense, especially in the black press, though the lowercase form is still widely used by authors of all races.” (See Names and Labels: Social, Racial, and Ethnic Terms, § 12. capitalization of black).

<sup>12</sup> Diaspora was first used in the Hellenistic age to describe the dispersion of Jews from Palestine during and after Babylonian captivity. It has only been during the last two decades that the term African diaspora has been generally used to refer to the communities of people of Black African descent, scattered throughout the Western Hemisphere. See Richard Long, “The African Diaspora,” *Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum: Proceedings of the First National Conference*, October 1989. 75.

<sup>13</sup> In *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements*, Ronald Walters says the term *diaspora* gained momentum in the mid-1960s as English and American scholars researched African dispersal into the Western Hemisphere. The scholars ultimately defined this subfield of African studies as “diaspora studies” (452).

<sup>14</sup> Sydney Lemelle says Pan Africanism is both cultural and political and warns against imposing one trait to the concept. St. Clair Drake says Pan Africanism is both cultural and political with one informing the other. Richard Long says African diaspora is heir to Pan Africanism which is chiefly political and negritude which is cultural. Peter Esedeke defines Pan Africanism as a political and cultural phenomenon which regards Africans and descendants as a unit.

<sup>15</sup> See film, *John Henrik Clarke Speaks on Marcus Garvey*.

<sup>16</sup> DuBois witnessed the aftermaths of the mutilation of an African American Negro. He and his wife were also victimized by the racial climate in the South. Their first born died as a result of medical neglect. Because of his fair skin and blue eyes, no Negro physician would treat him for fear of repercussions. No white physician would treat him because of his mixed heritage. See *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices*.

<sup>17</sup> John Henrik Clark says Garvey was the first to stress the use of African American as means of identity for the American Negro.

<sup>18</sup> See John Henrik Clarke, *African People in World History*.

<sup>19</sup> T’Shaka notes that the Dogon social system and cosmology, which are heavily influenced by “earlier Kemetic (Egyptian) systems of thought” provide “time-tested African

philosophical concepts of the day-to-day lives of their people” (See *Return to the African Mother Principle of Male and Female Equality*, xxi).

<sup>20</sup> Walker acknowledges Maya Angelou for her reference to and definition of this West African concept. See *Deep Talk* (1).

<sup>21</sup> In *Introduction to Black Studies*, Maulana Karenga asserts that the term “enslaved African” indicates that the African is a slave by “social imposition” rather than by nature and has “no identity out side of being enslaved” (116).

<sup>22</sup> He is referring to Ngugi’s *Matigari*.

## Chapter 2

### **Go Back And Fetch It: “Sankofa” as Theory and Praxis in the African Diaspora**

In the Black narrative tradition, bridging of time and space is a common reality as characters retrieve from the past in order to move forward. Sankofa,” an Akan proverb from Ghana, emphasizes the importance of retrieving from the past the wisdom and guidance therein that has been forgotten and is needed to navigate the present and the future. It is a call to remembrance, to engender the healing, holistic spirit of ancient times in order to restore and make whole again that which has been severed and fragmented. Proverbs are a form of folklore<sup>1</sup> and are often used during the exchange of formal and informal conversation, storytelling events, and sometimes ritualistic chants. In *African Oral Literature*, Isidore Okpewho notes that the concise structure and the poetic quality of the proverb makes it a popular and appealing form of oral literature (226). He endorses Chinua Achebe’s perception: “that in Igbo conversations, ‘proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’”(229). Proverbs reflect the traditions appropriated by a particular community. The folk of the community accept the wisdom of the proverb as a “truth about life” (Okpewho 226). Wolfgang Mieder offers an inclusive summary of the function of proverbs in African society:

Proverbs express behavioral attitudes, life experiences, social rules of conduct, traditional cultural values, common-sense knowledge, codified wisdom, and a generally shared world view. Proverbs permeate all African societies, and they often serve didactic, moralistic, pedagogical (educational), psychological, and rhetorical functions. Always couching the intended message in the formulaic language of folk speech. (3)

“Sankofa” is a proverb because the wisdom articulated through the proverb reflects the traditions appropriated by a particular community. The Akan and others who embrace Sankofa accept it as

a “truth about life.” And so, individuals who embrace “Sankofa” acknowledge the relevance of continuity regarding the past, present and future. It is through this cycle that the wisdom of the ancestors is revived.

The profundity of “Sankofa” transcends time and space. It has also permeated diasporic societies and often serves “didactic, moralistic, pedagogical, psychological, and rhetorical functions” within those societies. I was first introduced to the Sankofa proverb approximately nine years ago through a viewing of the film *Sankofa* in New Orleans. The film was written, directed and produced by Ethiopian-born film maker Haile Gerima. His objective was to voice the experiences of Maafa—the African holocaust<sup>2</sup>—from an African/African-American perspective in order to help Africans in the diaspora “deal with and heal from the psychological, cultural and political impact” of slavery (Independent Film News). I left the theater with more vivid imprints of slavery, and with a drive to concretize the Sankofian concept of reaching back to move forward. In pursuit of this mission, most of my scholarly research and writing has been shaped by this notion of continuity between the past, present, and future and its impact on Africans globally. I have researched and collected data here and in Africa in order to advance the study of Black narrative tradition, while exploring the utility of historical memory and cultural continuity as agents for Black liberation.

I entered this academic program with a preexisting interest in literature and culture of the African diaspora and took advantage of all opportunities to explore this subject matter through theory and praxis. The African diaspora construct refers to the voluntary and involuntary global dispersion of Africans throughout history, a cultural identity influenced by origin and social condition abroad, and the physical or psychological return to Africa (Harris 4). The African

diaspora is an extension of African heritage and reinforces the connection among African people and their common relationship to Africa (8). Therefore, “Sankofa” holds great significance within the African diaspora paradigm due to its return doctrine. Sankofa as proverb and film had such an impact on my psyche that course work pertinent to Black culture would be viewed through a Sankofian lens.

In 1997, I took a course in ethnographic methodology. My interest in “Sankofa” and recent exposure to texts on African-American return migration such as Carol Stack’s *Call to Home*, and Clifton Taulbert’s *The Last Train North* influenced the scope and focus of my ethnographic study. I decided to explore African-American return migration within the framework of “Sankofa.” In my ethnography, I discussed three types of return migration and defined them as follows: (1) physical migration, (2) migration of identity, and (3) literary migration. Physical migration occurs when an individual leaves his or her native community, but physically returns for various reasons. Migration of identity occurs when an individual who leaves his or her native community physically, but continues to identify with the cultural identity of the community left behind; a physical return to the community may not occur. Literary migration serves as a means for individuals to return to a cultural point of origin through the reading of various literary works. At that time my goal was to gain more concrete information on “Sankofa” and use it to articulate the significance of cultural continuity in the African-American community.

When I began this project, I planned to examine kinship patterns in African-American communities in the South and the nostalgic experiences of her native sons and daughters who had migrated North. In addition to interviewing African-Americans who had migrated from

southern communities, I also wanted to examine a literary work which discussed this matter because of my dual interest in anthropology and literature. In the spirit of the anthropological ancestors like Malinowski and Mead, I wanted to “blur the boundary separating art and science” (Clifford 3). I also felt that an established work would provide a theoretical framework within which I could function. Clifton Taulbert’s *The Last Train North* was my work of choice. His book was not theoretically based, but the experiences presented in Taulbert’s memoirs provided me with ideas for questions that could be used during interviews.

Ironically, the third stage of my study was birthed as a result of my own interest in reaching back to my cultural past to move forward. One day while in route to another destination, I passed Our Story bookstore on North Foster Drive. Since I was not a native of Baton Rouge, I was uncertain about the safety of the neighborhood which appeared to be one of the older areas of the city. Skepticism encouraged me to move on to my destination. I passed the store once again on my way home, but curiosity led me into the driveway and onto the parking lot. On the wall of the building facing the parking lot was a mural of African and African-American culture. As I paused to study the artistic story board, my spirit began to feel at ease. Perhaps the familiarity present in the mural made me feel culturally connected. I was compelled to “go back and fetch it.”

When I arrived, the store was just opening. I walked inside and was transported to another place and time. The books all along the walls and counter were not my initial objects of focus. Instead, I was captivated by replicas of African culture strategically positioned in every nook and cranny. To my immediate right were African artifacts from a voodoo altar which I later found out belonged to the owner of the bookstore. To my far left were a combination of

African drums, statues and containers of various shapes and sizes made out of calabash. On my immediate left, I noticed a collection of African dolls and masks which had been imported from Ghana. I was most impressed with the hand carved table surrounded by Ashanti stools which sat in the middle of the floor and was provided for the customers' use rather than as a display. All of the artifacts represented aspects of African folk culture. Most of the items were from Ghana.

The manager of the bookstore greeted me immediately and asked if she could be of any help. I told her I preferred to browse. Slowly I worked my way through the inventory and was fascinated by the collection of literary work in stock. The bookstore was small and quaint which only allowed a limited amount of space to work with. Regardless of the spatial limitations, the bookstore housed what appeared to be an endless amount of work by literary geniuses who specialize in aspects of African and African-American culture. The focus was more on quality than quantity and the seriousness of the bookstore's purpose was reflected through the presence of the large amount of nonfiction rather than fiction.

Eventually, the manager and I started interacting as I asked her questions about various works and authors. While visualizing the literary trans-Atlantic journeys I could make as I explored various works, I thought about my endless search for books on the Sankofa proverb and the movie which I had seen in New Orleans two years ago at a local theater. I inquired about the movie and when the manager produced a copy for purchase, I knew I had discovered a hidden treasure in *Our Story*. Certainly, if I could have such an experience in the short time of my visit, there must be others who shared a similar experience. The ambiance of the bookstore and the personality of the manager evoked a desire which encouraged the Sankofa spirit of reaching back to the cultural past to move forward. Hence came the idea to explore the concept

of literary migration and the use of Sankofa to explore the connection between the cultural past and the present. Sankofa seemed even more appropriate as I remembered that “ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion” (Clifford 2-3). A few days after my initial visit, I called and asked the manager if I could observe the bookstore for my ethnography. She granted my request.

For several weeks my time was consumed by observations and interviews which were required for phase one and phase three of my research--physical migration and literary migration. The interviewing not only served to provide me with the information I was seeking, but also served as a catalyst of discovery for one of my subjects. As I interviewed Geraldine Wilson, the life historian presented in phase one, she admitted that the journey back to her community as a child allowed her to examine issues that she had never considered. For instance, when I asked her why her days at the newly integrated Baton Rouge High failed to make her questionable about her identity, she said that her identity as a “colored” girl was positive to her in spite of the racial turmoil surrounding her. In spite of collaborative efforts by white teachers and students to humiliate and degrade the colored students, her identity was nonnegotiable. I questioned the source of her strong sense of identity and she did not have an answer. As she thought about my question and our prior discussions about the strong sense of community and the closeness of her family, she realized the source of her grounding. Wilson’s resolution made me think of Funkenstein’s explanation of the connection between the identity of the individual and the narrative:

The identity of an individual and the identity of a group consists of the construction of a narrative, internal and external: the narrative construed by and the narrative construed about the subject. Such is the making of a “self” --in a process that Hegel aptly described as a process of mutual “recognition” (Anerkenning). A subject’s identity, continuously construed, is his or her history. (23)

As pointed out by Harris earlier, the African diaspora is an extension of African heritage and reinforces African peoples’ relationship to Africa. We both felt a sense of accomplishment and I felt like a certified, if there is such a thing, ethnographer. I had found my calling.

Geraldine Wilson was born in the 1950s just outside of Baton Rouge in a settlement called Dennis Mills. She had fond memories of her childhood and a strong sense of family and community which she attributes to her experiences. Strong relationships were established and maintained on both her mother and father’s side of the family. Her story began with reminiscence of Sunday gatherings at the home of her paternal grandparents, the Washingtons. Wilson said her grandparents’ home was the place where all of the offspring and their children came together to bond. As she recalled this weekly reunion, I thought of the Sankofian concept of returning to the source.

In memory of her maternal grandmother, the siblings still get together one Saturday a month to continue the legacy of bonding which was established by their parents. According to Geraldine’s mother Mrs. Katie Augustus, “the gathering” has taken place since the 1980s. Mrs. Augustus initiated “the gathering” following her mother’s death. This gathering is a folk tradition of the family and is therefore a form of folklore. Although, the original group consisted only of siblings and their mates, a few close friends of the family have been allowed to join as member. They call themselves “the sunrisers” because they originally gathered in the

morning during breakfast hours. Over the years, the meetings were scheduled later during the day, but the name remained the same.

Each member of the group takes a turn hosting the gathering. During the gathering, a meal is served and then a few rounds of Pokeno are played. This time is used to reminisce about days gone by and to continue the legacy of bonding. Through the ritual of the gathering, the sunrisers maintain cultural continuity. In the Spirit of Sankofa, they retrieve from the past for grounding and sustenance.

Although Wilson has lived in Baton Rouge most of her adult life, she has migrated to other places for various reasons. She first left Baton Rouge to complete an LPN program in Kansas City , Missouri after graduating from high school. After one year, and completion of the program she returned to Baton Rouge. When asked why she did not stay in Kansas City, she pointed out that her plans were to return. She had only gone to Kansas City for school, not to relocate.

A few years later, Wilson moved to Cleveland, Ohio with her husband who moved there to embark on a new business venture. During her residence in Cleveland, she missed home. More specifically, she yearned for the warm hospitality and the strong sense of community she left behind in Baton Rouge. Wilson's affinity for her community was evident. At the time of this interview, she and her family resided in a neighborhood where everyone knew everyone and the neighbors looked out for each other's children. The old African proverb regarding the village needed to raise a child is practiced in Wilson's neighborhood just as it was when she was a child. She admitted that the collective experience in her African-American community on Spain street was one of the main reasons she continued to return to Baton Rouge. It just so

happens that Wilson's home was located only one street over from the neighborhood that she grew up in on Louisiana Street. In addition, her house was only three houses from her mother's home.

In an effort to embrace some sense of cultural familiarity, Wilson says she found herself gravitating towards an old woman in her Cleveland neighborhood who had also come from the South. The two of them met on a regular basis and shared southern cuisine and southern stories. Due to a number of extenuating circumstances, Wilson returned to Baton Rouge and remained there for another few years before moving to New Orleans to attain her degree in nursing at Dillard University. She had no complaints about New Orleans, but returned to Baton Rouge once again to her community. Of course, since New Orleans is also in Louisiana, she had no complaints about cultural deficiencies. Her main concern was that her children, who had been born of her marriage, experience the same sense of community that she had on Louisiana Avenue growing up as a child.

In the early 1990s Wilson, who was then a registered nurse, went to Saudi Arabia for a year to practice her profession. The hospitals in Saudi were experiencing a shortage of nurses and recruited nursing personnel from overseas. Wilson admitted that her experience in Saudi was one that she will cherish forever. During a discussion of her experiences in Saudi, she mentioned that the people who were there from the South gravitated towards each other and shared collective experiences. She also mentioned that a number of recruits were specifically from Louisiana and they designated one night of each week for bonding through culture and cuisine. Food recipes are also a form of folklore. On "Louisiana Night," various types of Louisiana cuisine were prepared like red beans and rice and jambalaya. Just as southern

experiences were shared among the members of the gathering which consisted of southern recruits, Louisiana experiences were shared among native Louisianans. The cuisine was a tradition shared among a group of people who shared a community--Louisiana. When her tour ended, Geraldine returned to Baton Rouge once again to her community on Spain street and the obligation of a husband and children.

When asked if she ever thought she would leave Baton Rouge, she indicated that she would like to live outside of the country for a while, preferably South Africa. However, she saw herself inevitably returning to her community on Spain Street in Baton Rouge. "Perhaps in the future," she added, "I might consider retirement in the Caribbean, but as it stands now, I will leave, but I see myself returning to my community."

In relation to Sankofa, Geraldine ventured out on several occasions, but always returned to her native community which embraces the values that shaped her identity as a child. Each time she left Baton Rouge and returned to her community, in a sense, she went back to fetch a part of her cultural past. She explicitly pointed this out when she indicated that she wanted her children to have the same experience of the village that she had growing up as a child. When she was in Cleveland, she noticed that the young people in the African-American community did not appear to operate from the same code of mores that were instilled in her by family and friends in her Baton Rouge community. Returning to her community provided a sense of security and perhaps a sense of assurance that her children would have similar values instilled if they were steeped in the cultural values of the African village present in her community on Spain Street.

In contrast to the physical return to connect with cultural identity associated with reverse migration, Clifton Taulbert presented a different kind of reaching back through migration of identity in *The Last Train North*. I selected this particular work because it falls in the category of the migration narrative according to the conventions established by Farah Jasmine Griffin in chapter 1. Through his memoirs, Taulbert tells of his experiences as a young “colored” boy who migrates to St. Louis from Glen Allan, Mississippi in the early 1960s. Although the purpose of the story is to tell of his adventures in St. Louis, Taulbert constantly interjects aspects of his life in Glen Allan. The spirit of Sankofa is evident as he transports family members and life experiences from Glen Allan to St. Louis through his memoirs .

Initially, Taulbert leaves Glen Allan to acquire a better job and educational opportunities. After working one or two menial jobs he decides to enlist in the military. His decision seems to be provoked by the issues surrounding the Vietnam War. Taulbert tells of the rigorous chores he is assigned in the military and states that he is able to endure the chores because of his cotton chopping experiences in the hot sun of Glen Allan(145-146). The spirit of Sankofa is alive as Taulbert reaches back to his days in the cotton fields of Glen Allan to sustain himself as he endures the rigorous tasks before him.

One of the most profound examples of Taulbert’s reaching back to his cultural community in Glen Allan is through his discussion of the quilts made by the women in the “colored” community of Glen Allan specifically for the southern natives who had migrated north. The quilt is a form of material folklore. It too serves to bind a community of people together. Quilts are significant archetypes in African-American literature and culture.

Taulbert states that the quilts were not only used for warmth, but served as a reminder of the connection between the relatives left behind in Glen Allan along with fond memories and the northern relatives who had moved on. He also states that the quilts were made with love and tenderness by the women of Glen Allan and that the caring that went into the creation of the quilts was transmitted through them when they were mailed north:

Without fail, quilts maintained the connecting link between the Southerners that went north and those that stayed behind. Now I had gone north and the connection was unbroken. Ma Ponk had sent me her heart and the warmth of my community. As memories flooded my mind I could hear the old people in Glen Allan saying, “Kiver up chile, it’ll keep the chill out.”(90-91)

The quilt serves a similar purpose as the Sankofa proverb. Through the quilt, a space is dissolved between two locations--Glen Allan and relatives in St. Louis. Although, the space dissolved is different from the linkage between the past and present accomplished by Sankofa, the concept of an individual’s connection with his or her cultural identity is achieved. In addition, the sense of grounding provided through Sankofa is also available through the quilts sent to St. Louis from Glen Allan.

In his memoirs, Taulbert points out that although his cultural connection to Glen Allan is important because of the sense of identity and grounding it provides, he does not have an urge to return permanently. However, he does state the need to return home at least once a year for rejuvenation. After all, one of the most exciting aspects of going north is to return south for visits (113-114). He points out that his heart is in Glen Allan, but he knows that his future is not there (133).

To test the feelings expressed by Taulbert in his memoirs, I decided to interview Mary Broussard. Mary, like Taulbert, was born in the South during the 1950s. She was a native of

New Orleans and at the time of this interview had only recently migrated to Minnesota for health reasons. Broussard, like both Taulbert and Wilson experienced Jim Crow in the South. As a native New Orleanian, Broussard missed the culture and also the sense of community she experienced growing up in the “colored” community in the ninth ward.

Broussard had been in Minnesota for six years when we spoke and her nostalgia for New Orleans was similar to Taulbert’s nostalgia for Glen Allan, but she did not have the strong desire to return to her community like Wilson. However, she did recognize the importance of her cultural connection to New Orleans and returned at least once a year for rejuvenation. Similar to Taulbert, she reached back to her cultural past to endure situations in Minnesota. One of the attributes of her southern culture that she relied on often were the skills she attained in the south regarding race relations. Broussard stated that native African-American Minnesotans seemed to have problems when they discovered white Minnesotans who were not sincere in dealing with race relations. “As a colored girl from the south, I grew up not expecting to be liked or embraced by whites. I carried that belief with me and it has allowed me to avoid the devastation experienced by black Minnesotans in the face of racism imposed on them by whites.”

In comparison to Wilson, Broussard also said the sense of pride instilled in her by her community gave her a strong sense of identity which could never be compromised. She had a keen cultural awareness which helped to strengthen her cultural identity. One of things she noticed about black Minnesotans was a lack of interest or ability to embrace their African-American culture and felt that they were crippled without their cultural reinforcement.

In order to embrace her connection with her southern culture, Broussard says she and a group of African-American women from other southern states formed a social club. Once a

month the women gathered in one member's home and shared southern cuisine and southern experiences. Broussard pointed out that the group met mostly during the winter months and as they traveled home in sub-zero degree weather, their hearts were still warm as a result of the warmth shared through the collective southern experiences.

Physical migration may not be an option nor a necessity for everyone, hence there is no need to return to the native community to reclaim or maintain a cultural connection. However, literary migration meets the needs of individuals who desire to make a historical migration to learn about or make a connection with their cultural past. Our Story book store located at 2153 North Foster Drive provided the means for return migration through literature.

Our Story was established in 1990 by Dr. James E. Hines, III, M.D. Dr. Hines established the book store as a resource center for the young people in the community. He felt that the presence of the book store might encourage young African-American children who might not otherwise develop an interest in reading to do so. Hines, who is a medical doctor by trade, also has a law degree and has studied in the field of anthropology. In addition to the traditional practice of medicine, Hines is also interested in herbalism. In the past he has studied in the field with priests in exotic places like Nigeria, Brazil, Haiti, Liberia, Ghana and the Middle East. The collection of literature in the book store in conjunction with books in Dr. Hines' personal collection, were a reflection of his vast knowledge and interest in African and African-American culture. He also owned Bambara, an African import export business located on Government Street.

Hines traveled extensively and particularly liked to travel to countries where African presence is dominant. He was in search of his own cultural identity and to gain more knowledge about African and African-American culture.

Although the initial establishment of Our Story was not connected to any long range vision, Hines eventually recognized it as a source to encourage a sense of community and cultural identity. He felt that community provided a reasonable sense of self and therefore negates self-destructive behavior and counter productivity. In relation to reaching back, in the spirit of Sankofa, Hines pointed out that reverence for those who come before you is an important part of knowing who you are and keeping you whole and sane.

My observation lasted approximately four weeks. During that time, I met a number of interesting people and was privy to cultural knowledge and humor. One day a professor from Southern University came by to purchase African attire. I listened attentively as he shared an experience with Knox during graduate school in Texas. Apparently a white instructor was uncomfortable with him as a black male and treated him unjustly. He told her he would burn a candle on her implying that a curse would follow. She believed him. We all laughed.

Near the end of my observation, I met a woman from Ghana, Ruth Mettle-nunoo. Her husband was a business partner of Dr. Hines and once managed Bambara, the African import export store on Government Street. Mettle-nunoo and I talked about the Sankofa proverb. She was able to demonstrate the function of Sankofa in African society. She admitted that she did not recognize the implementation of Sankofa in the states. Mettle-nunoo explained that the proverb is embraced in Ghana and used often to remind people to think of their actions when they are acting inappropriately. For instance, if a husband and wife are having a disagreement,

someone shouts “Sankofa.” The couple is reminded of their ancestors and is thus moved to reconsider their behavior towards each other. If a child is misbehaving, he or she is reminded of Sankofa. The child understands that the ancestors must be revered and would not condone such behavior.

The concept of Sankofa offers a means of dissolving the space between the past and the present or, as pointed out in this ethnography, dissolving the physical and cultural space between two geographical locations. Regardless of the circumstance, the common goal is to provide cultural connections between past and present or geographical locations for sustenance of identity and grounding.

In all three categories of migration explored in this report, some method of return migration is evoked in search of cultural continuity. Wilson left her native community on several occasions but always returned to her much desired experience of “the African village.” Both Taulbert and Broussard remained physically in new communities, but returned psychologically to the culture of the native communities which shaped their identities. The inventory of books and replicas of African culture at Our Story encourage the return migration of African Americans through literature and memorabilia. As Dr. Hines pointed out, “communities serve as connectors to hold people together.” If a person can embrace a reasonable identity of himself or herself then self- destructive behavior is less likely to occur. Community can provide a reasonable identity, thus affirming the significance of Sankofa.

I was pleased with the results of my research, but still not satisfied. My goals were adequately met, but some of my questions remained unanswered. I knew the cultural origin of the proverb, but not its historical origin. Written literature on the proverb was scarce. Both

written and oral references to “Sankofa” were still void of the depth which I suspected was hidden behind the literal meaning of the proverb. In addition, I was confronted with questions by others who challenged the reality of moving forward while looking back as well as the danger of looking back. I knew that I still needed to “go back and fetch it.”

In 1998, I enrolled in a graduate seminar in anthropology which allowed me to continue my research. The focus of the seminar was folklore of the African diaspora. In this extension of my initial ethnographic study, I explored interpretations of Sankofa as proverb, identified its function as folklore and used these elements to validate my original research. In an effort to obtain a more precise understanding of the Sankofa proverb, I decided to interview the late Dr. Morris F.X. Jeff, Jr. For as long as I could remember, Dr. Jeff had been a dignitary in the New Orleans community and in several communities throughout the nation. Respected for his emphasis of on social issues affecting the Black family he was in demand as a speaker and workshop facilitator. Dr. Jeff was director of the city’s Welfare Department and an advocate of Africana studies. Although Dr. Jeff was highly recognized for his outstanding role in the social welfare arena, I was more impressed by his passion for “Sankofa.” He established Sankofa Communiversity—a community-based educational program which provided intensive study of African and African-American history and culture.

In 1998, only months prior to our interview, Dr. Jeff was enstooled as chief in the Ghanaian village of Kibei. During our interview, he expressed both gratification and fear regarding his new chieftom because of the responsibility he had taken on. As chief, he was expected to contribute in some way to the uplift of Kibei. He had been granted 84 acres of land on which to build a Ghanaian based Sankofa Communiversity. He initiated the project after

discovering that all of the schools in Ghana were parochial. Due to the persistence of colonialism, the students must relinquish various aspects of their own culture in order to assimilate into the system. The school would be for Ghanaian students from kindergarten through the eighth grade and would provide a program which would encourage the teachings of their indigenous culture. Dr. Jeff had initiated this project because of his belief in the concept of “Sankofa.” He felt it was imperative that people of African descent re-establish and maintain cultural and spiritual ties to Africa. He also argued a need for African Americans to develop relationships with Africans living on the continent. He lived up to this belief and was often known to have a Ghanaian student or two residing in his home. He had plans for establishing internships in Ghana for students in the departments of Agriculture and Architecture at Southern University. He also planned to ask local schools in the New Orleans area to get involved by asking each child to donate 25 cents to the project—the cost of one brick. This way African American students in New Orleans could play an active role in assisting their brothers and sisters in Ghana.

During our interview, I initially asked Jeff when he discovered “Sankofa” and how he developed such a passion for it. In his profound response, he introduced me to concepts I had never considered in connection with the proverb. According to Jeff, he was introduced to the Sankofa proverb during the late seventies while studying the principles of Kwanza. Since that time he has embraced the proverb and traveled to Ghana on numerous occasions. His interpretation of the proverb was similar to others that have been articulated. Jeff explained that people of African descent must reach back to the wisdom of the past in order to deal with our present and future. He was attracted to the proverb because of his consciousness regarding

African Americans as a “present-future” people. “African Americans,” he said, “generally do not want to face the past because of the pain hidden back there” (Interview September 1998). He shared the story of his great uncle, Clovis, who had experienced slavery but had no one to share his stories with because his family members didn’t want to return to that part of their past; it was too painful. Jeff then proceeded to identify the spirit of “Sankofa” in the New Testament of the Bible. He noted that the genealogy given in the first book of the New Testament speaks to the importance of retrieving the past in order to move forward. “In other words, it goes back and retrieves the past of the Old Testament to validate the present of the New Testament....So the New Testament begins in ‘Sankofa’ by going back and retrieving the past and establishing that past as the certainty for the present and as a dictate for the future.”

In the midst of Jeff’s discussion of “Sankofa,” he made a connection between the proverb and the state of Africans in the diaspora. “I think the idea of ‘Sankofa’ of going back and retrieving the past is particularly important to a people who sense that they are adrift in the world.” He then retrieved from the past one of his experiences in Ghana. During an emancipation celebration in Ghana, the dance troupe did a skit which exemplified the Africans’ experience before and during the onset of slavery. One of the male dancers played the role of a warrior who is approached by strange white men who have come to their [Africans’] village. The warrior is encouraged to betray his own people. When the strangers leave he is adrift because he cannot return to his own people. Therefore, he is destined to wander through life aimlessly. Jeff used this example as an analogy to support his argument for the importance of cultural and spiritual continuity among African people. “He [the warrior] couldn’t go back to his people because he had betrayed them. And he couldn’t go with the strangers who had taken

our people, because he knew he wasn't accepted there, and so he just wandered out of the auditorium as a third party caught between these two driving forces and adrift without a sense of anchor." Jeff compared the warrior's experience to that of African people who are adrift in the diaspora. He said, "we're estranged from our ancestral homeland and caught up with White America who is institutionalizing ways and means to reject us and keep us out."

Jeff's commentary reminded me of my reason for selecting literature of the African diaspora as my major area of study. Disconnectedness is a crucial theme in literature of the African diaspora. As a result of the slave trade, people of African descent were severed from their source of sustenance. As a result of this disconnect, their psyches became fractured. Without spiritual grounding in their native African culture, African people are destined to a state of "dis-ease." Jeff explained, in his analysis between the wandering warrior and "Sankofa," "So the spirit of 'Sankofa' is really taking the wandering part and bringing some certainty to the present. And the wisdom that our ancestors had is this, they understood that back there, where that wise beak is going as the feet are moving forward, that the first step forward is a step backward. You go back there because that is where all of the certainty is; that is where all of the predictability is."

Historian W. Bruce Willis reminds us that this concept of returning back may seem new, but it is actually "an old tradition that links a people to the discovery of the past, which is a fundamental building block for the future" (189). John Henrik Clarke confirms this critical connection between the past and present in his eloquent definition of history as a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people where they have been

and what they have been, where they are and what they are. Most important, history tells a people where they still must go, what they still must be. The relationship of history to the people is the same as the relationship of a mother to her child. (*A Great and Mighty Walk*)

“Sankofa” then, encompasses these historical values as it admonishes Africans to look to the past as a beacon to the present and future. Through “Sankofa” Africans will have a sense of anchoring in the world as they maintain connection with their historical and cultural origin.

As mentioned earlier, pictorially, “Sankofa” is often represented as a bird<sup>3</sup> moving forward with its beak turned backward in the direction of its tail feathers. In so doing, it forms a circle that encompasses the time frames of the past, present, and future. It speaks of the power of continuous unity and recalls Walter’ Benjamin’s indication of memory as “the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation” (98). The species of bird representing Sankofa is somewhat ambiguous as it has been depicted in various forms through bird imagery. Encoded in the bird imagery are traditional West African religious and philosophical beliefs. For example, the Igbo maintain that the deceased often return to this world in animal form as a result of some karmic deed (Grayson 9-12). During my interview with Dr. Jeff, I asked for his interpretation of the Sankofa bird ideograph and he responded accordingly:

See the bird’s feet are moving forward, but the beak is going backward. And, inside of the bird’s mouth is its egg, but it is also forming full circle. And so it is going back to its origins. Everything that lives returns to its origins, and everything that lives begins encircled. You and I began inside the circle of our mother’s womb.”

I asked if there was really such a thing as a Sankofa bird. He said no, but added that in religious traditions, the bird represents God. The full circle also represents God, especially in the Khemetic religion.

Sankofa also offers a contrast between the linear concept of time in western thought and the African concept of cyclical time. According to John Mbiti, while western thought upholds the linear structure of time as past, present and future, African tradition embraces the concept of past and present (17). Africans focus more on past and present. “Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real. A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth” (17). Life has already been experienced in the past and therefore it has already been realized.

In Sankofa: Adinkra Poems, poet A Kayper-Mensah captures the essence and power of the symbol:

That bird is wise,  
Look. Its beak, back turned, picks  
For the present, what is best from ancient eyes,  
Then steps forward, on ahead  
To meet the future, undeterred. (4)

Unlike the “Angelus Novus”<sup>4</sup> that must be propelled into the future by a storm as it looks to the past, the Sankofa bird looks back to retrieve ancient wisdom, but does not get stuck in the past. Its feet remain anchored in the present facing forward ready to step into the future “undeterred.”

The bird Sankofa is an Adinkra symbol; Adinkra has origins dating back to nineteenth-century Ghana. By definition, Adinkra is, “A message one gives to another when departing” (Willis 29). Thus in both the communion of Adinkra and Sankofa; it is in the departing that

memory is lost and restoration is needed. Both of these expressions of Akan world view reflect “the traditional mores, and specific communal values” of the people of Ghana (1).

I feel that I had successfully met the objectives for both phases of this ethnography; however, my research was still not complete. Dr. Jeff’s interpretation of “Sankofa” did provide me with a more profound understanding of the proverb. It was substantial enough for me to validate my original research. I was also successful in pointing out elements of folklore embedded in the text of the ethnography. For the next stage of my research, I wanted to physically return to Ghana so I could “go back and fetch” information on the historical origin and function of Sankofa in Ghana personally. I also wanted to bridge the great divide forged between Africa and her diaspora.

However, the fact that I had not journeyed to Ghana troubled me. When I introduced my students to African history, culture, and literature, I wanted to share my own experiences with them. I wanted to witness the rhythmic caress of the Atlantic as it beckoned the return of the dispersed. I wanted to capture the lingering spirits of the ancestors held captive in the slave dungeons so I would be able to transport my students through time and space adequately. I remembered my own frustration as a graduate student when one of my professors could not explain the significance of sharing a kola nut in African culture. Rather than admit lack of knowledge, he simply failed to respond. When my students questioned me about African customs often portrayed in texts, but seldom explained, I wanted to satisfy their curiosity. My mission is to cultivate a burning desire in my students to return to the source mentally and physically. Therefore, it was imperative that I retrieve the historical and cultural knowledge of the ancestors in the tradition of “Sankofa.” I was eager to go back and fetch it!

In the summer of 2003, I journeyed to Ghana as a Fulbright scholar with a group of educators. The fundamental purpose for the trip was to study the history and culture of Ghana in order to develop a curriculum of instruction for our students. I welcomed this privileged and enriching opportunity knowing that my journey would be more profound.

I spent five weeks in Ghana attending lectures and participating in cultural tours. I did most things I assume people visiting Ghana do. I went to the slave castles, which is a misnomer considering the historical function of the structures, in Cape Coast and Elmina. I visited national museums in Accra and Kumasi. While all of these experiences gave me an historical glimpse into Ghanaian culture, what was most critical for me was the interaction I had with local people from all walks of life. I interviewed college professors, taxi drivers, police officers and young adults in the area. I even traveled to the village in Kiebei to experience more traditional Ghanaian culture. It was the village where Dr. Jeff had been enstooled as chief in 1998. Through their stories and testimonies, the impetus for this study was confirmed.

I always knew I wanted to spend an extended amount of time in Ghana conducting research; this visit validated my desire. I don't know that my ancestors originated in Ghana specifically, but they were undeniably African. Three days after walking on the sacred ground of my ancestors, I felt a distinct connection to the energy there. From time to time, I also felt the presence of my loved ones who have joined the ancestors. In the spirit of "Sankofa," I returned to fetch it and I did. During my interviews, I discovered that the proverb is familiar and respected. For instance, during my visit to Kiebei, I learned that the Sankofa stool had been reserved only for a diasporic African who had returned to help their brothers and sisters on the Continent. Now that Akile Sankofahene (Jeff) had fallen, a ceremony would take place to

announce his passing. The stool would remain vacant until another diasporic African worthy of the title would be selected to accept the chieftdom.

As much as I had hoped to immerse myself in the past in order to deal with the issue of Pan Africanism and African diaspora historically, I was constantly confronted with the implications of these constructs from a more contemporary standpoint. The historical divide between continental Africans and diasporic Africans was a current reality that forced me to respect the complex relationship between race, ethnicity, culture, and social power. Despite my self-acclaimed status as an “African in the Diaspora,” I held in my possession a passport that classified me as an American citizen. Much to my dismay, the authenticity of my African heritage was circumstantial to Africans. It was painful to learn that my brothers and sisters on the Continent saw me as a foreigner. There was a remote understanding that I was a descendant of the ones who were bastardized through European penetration, but I felt more of a divide than a connection. The local vendors saw me first as an American with deep pockets. Their affectation of kinship was often driven by economic gain.

Even though poverty-driven exploitation was common, however, I would be remiss in establishing this as the norm. Conversely, there were Ghanaians who eagerly helped me in my desire to analyze the ramifications of this great divide imposed on us centuries ago. Our kindred African spirits urged us to explore the implications of Pan Africanism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how this affected the relationships between continental and diasporic Africans. More specifically, we were inspired to bridge the cultural divide.

Despite the exploitation and inconveniences of living in Ghana for five weeks, I went through a series of emotions on my return. I knew it was time to come home, but for several

days I felt nostalgic and displaced. I needed to be in the states, but a part of me longed to return to Ghana. It was a peculiar state. I did not enjoy the hot weather in Ghana and while there, I missed the comforts of my environment in the states. I missed the freedom to select my own food and to have access to a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. I missed not having my own transportation and the convenience of communicating with the outside world. In spite of all this, I will yearned to return to Ghana. I wanted to commune with the land; I wanted to be reconnected to the ancestral energy that was so vibrant while I was there. I really felt a need to have a foothold in both worlds. It became evident to me that returning to the sacred land of my ancestors was critical to my emerging identity as a daughter of the Diaspora as I continue to negotiate my own terms of existence. The return also substantiated my scholarly efforts to evaluate the role of race, ethnicity, culture, and social power as I locate Pan Africanisms in African diaspora literature.

*Sankofa* acknowledges continuity between past and present. Philosophically, it also reveres the profundity of retrieving wisdom from the past in order to move forward. Historically, Black narrative has been a conduit for restoring humanity wrenched from a people through various forms of oppression. In response to a legacy of oppression, Black narratives are replete with a perpetual quest for wholeness as Africans struggle to establish their own terms of existence in the Diaspora. In the spirit of *Sankofa*, this study retrieves concepts and conventions and contextualizes them at the juncture of the constructs *Pan Africanism* and the *African diaspora* to establish a literary framework—Pan African narratives in the interest of advancing Black narrative tradition. This study concretizes Pan African narratives as a literary genre that crystalizes the reciprocity of Pan Africanism in the African diaspora. Pan African

narratives, like their literary ancestors-- slave and migration narratives--bring to the forefront themes central to the ideology of Pan Africanism in the African diaspora. Just as themes of captivity and flight may be identified in the text of slave and migration narratives, Pan African narratives highlight discourse concerning solidarity, resistance and liberation.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Numerous definitions have been proposed for folklore and to date, no one definition has been universally accepted. In "Africanisms and the Study of Folklore," Beverly Robinson offers the following definition of folklore:

The word *folklore* is of course a composite of folk, now meaning "people" regardless of its earlier class connotation, and *lore*, meaning "knowledge." Thus it is the knowledge of the people--not just any knowledge but a particular knowledge that has proved to be valuable within a community because it has passed the test of time, a lore that people have found to contain important representation of themselves as a group. The folklore of specific groups of people, moreover, helps explain how people come into unity; again, it is a way of looking at their community. (212)

<sup>2</sup> See *Yurugu*, Marimba Ani.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes a heart is used to represent *Sankofa*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Walter Benjamin describes a Klee painting named "Angelus Novus." He likens the painting to history and describes it accordingly: "A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. He angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (257-258).

### Chapter 3

#### ***Sankofa: The Ultimate Pan-African Narrative***

*It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget.*

-Akan Proverb-

The potency of Nommo embedded in the spoken and written word is also inscribed in the visual and scripted discourse of Black cinema. The codes and mores captured on film often serve as commentary on the Black experience just as literature speaks to the human condition. Exploring Black film as text complicates the Black narrative tradition since film reveals specific aspects of Black life through juxtaposition of imagery and words. Through film, the implications of spoken and written words become more explicit, leaving less room for ambiguity. Film—a historically white dominated medium—also affords Black artists an opportunity to appropriate another form of the oppressor’s language in order to tell their own stories.

This entry into once forbidden territory must be attributed to the pioneering efforts of legendary Black film maker Oscar Micheaux. Noted as novelist, publisher, producer and distributor, Micheaux was the first Black to successfully enter the film industry.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1884, in Cairo, Illinois to former slaves, Micheaux exemplified the Pan African concepts of self-definition, self-determination, and self-reliance. At the age of 17, with very little formal educational training, he left home to work as a Pullman porter on westbound trains (“Oscar Micheaux” 18). In 1904 he became the only Black farm owner in a farming community in South Dakota. Despite a life subjected to race prejudice, he was highly respected by his white neighbors (18). Eventually Micheaux’s farming efforts failed and he was encouraged to write

his first novel, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*; it was an autobiographical account of his own life. This was only the first in a series of creative works Micheaux would successfully write and use to promote himself. He established his own publishing company and marketed his books in Black communities through nationwide book tours (18). Prior to his death in 1951, Micheaux wrote, published, and distributed seven novels; he also wrote, directed, produced, and distributed approximately forty-three films (Green xi).

Micheaux's cinema career was launched when he adapted his third novel, *The Homesteader*, into a film. Using promotional tactics similar to those employed to publicize his books, Micheaux persuaded a nationwide conglomerate of relatives, friends, and owners of movie houses "tailored to Black audiences" to support his movies (18). Micheaux's self-sustaining legacy as film maker paved the way for subsequent aspiring, Black film makers; however his films were not beyond reproach. Due to time and budget constraints his films "were technically inferior and artistically substandard. Nevertheless, his films were well-received and sparked interest in the movies" (18).

In addition to breaking the exclusive barrier of film, Micheaux is also recognized for his bold exploration of consciousness raising themes ("Oscar Micheaux" 18). He used the silver screen to negate images of Blacks as slaves and buffoons by privileging racial uplift (Green xiv). Devoted to attaining and maintaining a black middle-class, Micheaux presented characters and plots that promoted this social and economic condition. Given the racial climate in the United States in the early 1900s, Micheaux used his films as portals to address the dilemma of "double-consciousness"—the philosophical contradictions of identity for Africans in the diaspora as professed by DuBois (Green xiv). Considering his pursuit of "ethnic double consciousness as

opposed to Hollywood's oneness (mass-culture single consciousness)" (Green xv), Micheaux may also be credited for laying the groundwork for the diverse and oppositional nature of Black cinema today.

Micheaux's efforts and accomplishments validate the ongoing predicaments of culture, race, class, ethnicity, and power factored into the historical dilemma of Africans in the Diaspora during his lifetime. His insistence on racial uplift is in keeping with the Pan African concerns of DuBois and Garvey. Some may claim that his stance on race and class aligns him specifically with DuBois. However, it would also be fitting to associate him with the self-sufficient precepts of Garvey. Regardless of his philosophical preferences, Micheaux obviously understood the liberating power inherent in subverting the atrocities imposed on the Black psyche through the images of Blacks portrayed in Hollywood films.

Building on the Pan-African tradition of self-definition, self-determination, and self-reliance demonstrated by Micheaux, Ethiopian-born film maker Haile Gerima, wrote, directed, produced,<sup>2</sup> and distributed his film *Sankofa*. In *Sankofa*, Gerima specifically recalls the horrific conditions of slavery and its aftermath. He also stresses the need for Africans to maintain African consciousness as a source of grounding and for healing of the great rupture caused by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Like Micheaux, he too intentionally appropriates the historically White dominated medium of film to reconstruct the reality of resistant enslaved Africans in the diaspora. In the Black narrative tradition of appropriating the oppressor's language to accommodate the needs of the oppressed, the film maker produced *Sankofa* as a counter-narrative to those depicting docile slaves who accept the conditions of slavery. "He wanted to tell the story of slavery from a slave's point of view and honor the forgotten history of the many

slaves who escaped to freedom on their own” (Haile 3). Therefore, Gerima manipulates the script to de-marginalize resistant enslaved Africans. Through masterfully crafted plots and characters, he determines how the slave narratives are told and who tells them.

Gerima has a profound understanding of the crucial role of culture and history in shaping the destiny of Africans

How can black people be anything if they are not culturally anchored? ... If one doesn't have cultural peace with one's self, does not respect one's origin, one's soul, one's spirit, one's physical appearance, how can they succeed at anything? (“Haile Gerima”)

In *Sankofa* he uses “slavery as a landscape” to articulate “contemporary echoes of the past” (“Sankofa”). This commentary on “contemporary sociopolitical dynamics” becomes evident as issues of self-awareness and “a journey home in search of pan-African consciousness” are brought to the forefront (“Sankofa”). Gerima created *Sankofa* as a “platform for diaspora Africans” to “deal with and heal from the psychological, cultural, and political impact” of the African Holocaust” (“About Sankofa”). Terms like “African Holocaust” and the “Maafa”<sup>3</sup> have been used as alternative references to the Middle Passage because of the devastating impact of this tragedy. Like Micheaux, Gerima subverted the Eurocentric distortion of the institution of slavery by Hollywood film makers which aborted the healing aspects of history and uprooted the cultural moorings of diasporic Africans

The impetus for Gerima's use of art as a weapon to reclaim and preserve African history and culture was ignited in Ethiopia during his childhood. He attended a school where Peace Corps workers subjected him to savage imagery of African culture through American films. While any teaching of his own culture was completely eradicated from the curriculum,

American hegemony prevailed.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to observe how the Peace Corp workers, who volunteered their services in the name of goodwill, imposed their chauvinistic mentality on the Ethiopians. Even though their intent was not malicious, it apparently had a negative impact on Gerima as the hegemonic imposition of the colonizers who previously invaded the Continent and denied Africans their humanity. Gerima and his classmates were disconnected from their culture, and as Amilcar Cabral and John Henry Clarke have stated, that is the best way to conquer a people. Fortunately, Gerima's father Tafeka understood the problem and made efforts to defuse the encroachment of the American oppressors. In opposition to the negative images of Africans projected by the Americans, Tafeka Gerima established a theater troupe; the company "presented original and often historical drama, always submersed in the genuine culture of Ethiopia" (Haile 2). Gerima often performed with his father's troupe and eventually left Ethiopia to pursue a career in drama.

Gerima emigrated to Chicago in 1967 to attend the Goodman School of drama, but soon discovered that he would be limited to roles as "servants and crooks" (Haile 2). Gerima came to the states during a turbulent time when Blacks, weary from turning the other cheek to no avail, asserted their rights to be self-defined and self-determined. The beauty of blackness was cultivated in Black communities. Afrocentric features were suddenly en vogue. Militant groups mobilized to restore power base to the Black community, therefore, regaining control over their destiny. Annoyed by the stereotypical mentality of the theater community and disconnected from his own culture Gerima became involved in the Black Power Movement (2).

Spurred on by the political climate of the Movement, Gerima moved to California in 1969 and immersed himself in the rebellious spirit of the times.<sup>5</sup> Gerima's dilemma and

troubled consciousness at that time confirm Pan African theories of common African history and destiny. Africans, no matter where they are on the globe, have been subjected to oppression at the hands of the colonizer and share a common destiny of oppression no matter where they find themselves. Gerima leaves Ethiopia in search of humanity and opportunity only to find oppression in a similar vein in America. However, interestingly enough, he recalls the significance of cultural retention and finds solace in a movement established by African Americans in the Diaspora who define and determine their terms of existence in society. Gerima is Ethiopian-born, but he still relates to the cause. Therefore, his identity as an Ethiopian does not take precedence over his condition as an oppressed Black man in America.

Gerima's interest in film began by accident when he "stumbled into the motion pictures department" at UCLA and realized that film was "an interesting power of expression" (Haile 2). As a result of his training in cinematography and interaction with fellow students who had also been oppressed, he became more critical of Hollywood films and vowed to avenge the demonization of Black people witnessed in these films.<sup>6</sup> He says he "turned to film to reclaim his culture" (2).

Inspired by the self-reliance of African-American film maker Oscar Micheaux, Gerima maintained his own status as an independent film maker. Gerima rejected Hollywood because he didn't want to be "subservient to the white Euro-centric cultural power" (Haile 2). After filming *Sankofa*, Gerima also had to promote the film himself because several distributors rejected the film; they felt it was "too Black."<sup>7</sup>

In the tradition of the Sankofa proverb, Gerima emphasizes the importance of reaching back to one's cultural and historical past for wisdom and guidance in order to move forward. As

the institution of slavery is recalled in the film, African traditional culture is recreated in order to promote progression and confirm the power of cultural continuity in accomplishing this task.

Enslaved Africans tap into the spirit of the ancestors to restore their freedom. Gerima acknowledges the “healing power of history” by using Sankofa as the title of his film in homage to the bird Sankofa which he describes as “a philosophical, mythological bird passed down from generation to generation from the Akan people of Ghana” (“Sankofa Fire”). “Sankofa” is concretized throughout the film by a rendering of the bird imagery encoded with traditional West African beliefs of reincarnation and circular time<sup>8</sup>. Gerima explains the significance of the bird imagery in *Sankofa* and its meaning in African and African American culture

The recurring symbol of the bird is an important symbol in *Sankofa*. From nearly 20 years of research, I have found that the bird was important to both slaves and maroons. The duality of the bird, especially the vulture, represented both life and death. For those who escaped slavery, the vulture acted as a guide to the hills, away from the dogs, the horses and overseers. For those who collapsed or died along the way, the vulture ate or devoured its prey. But then again, in death there was a certain sense of freedom to those Africans since it was believed that the vulture would carry your spirit back to your roots, back home to Mother Africa. Certain birth myths even tell of runaway slave[s] who ‘transformed’ into birds and flew back to Africa. Whether a physical or spiritual metamorphosis, both ideas express a fundamental sense of freedom or returning to Africa. (“Sankofa Fire”)

Depiction of the bird in various scenes throughout the film serves to reinforce continuity between time and space. To further advance the crucial role of “Sankofa” in bridging the divide between Africa and her Diaspora, Gerima personifies the concept through characterization of an elder, Sankofa, who carries a staff with an image of the Sankofa bird carved on it.

Gerima’s film tells the story of Mona, an African-American model who is in Ghana, West Africa for a photo shoot, specifically in Cape Coast. Mona—dressed in a tiger print

bathing suit, blonde wig and long gold finger nails submits to the white photographer's demand to flaunt her sexuality. He objectifies her with each click of the camera as he encourages her to "work it!" Mona's impious demeanor on the beach and grounds of the slave castle in Cape Coast results in a dream-like return to her ancestral past. This is dictated by the elder Sankofa who is proclaimed as sacred drummer and self-appointed guardian of the grounds. Mona's demeanor and appearance serve as commentary on the dis-membering of Africans dispersed in the diaspora and what happens when they are disconnected from their historical and cultural origin. Mona devalues the elder Sankofa's warning and is transported to an nineteenth-century slave plantation through spirit possession, after entering one of the slave dungeons on the castle grounds. She then becomes Shola, a field slave on the Lafayette plantation. Through Shola's experiences, Gerima reveals the inhumane treatment of slaves, the division of slave labor, preservation of African traditions, and the diverse manner in which the slaves responded to their plight.

Through this complex narrative, Gerima's critically acclaimed<sup>9</sup> *Sankofa*, evokes consideration of historical and contemporary African diaspora discourse as he addresses the tragic dilemma of diasporic Africans who have been disconnected from African ties. This severing of ties may be voluntary or involuntary, but the disconnect ultimately results in fragmentation and unrest. In the film, traditional diasporic themes of dispersal, emerging identities and return to the homeland are juxtaposed with more complex visions of the African diaspora as a dynamic phenomenon transcending time, space, class and gender.

African solidarity in resistance to oppression also permeates the plot and exudes through the characters in *Sankofa*. Gerima's poignant depiction of slavery captures the rebellious spirit

of enslaved Africans in the Diaspora during the nineteenth-century as it projects their quest for liberation. Pan-African sentiments of self-definition, self-determination, and self-reliance are revealed as enslaved Africans attain freedom through cultural retention, nation building and revolt. The overarching theme of Pan Africanism in the African diaspora becomes evident as enslaved Africans and emancipated Africans collectively resist oppressive powers in order to redeem and maintain their humanity accordingly. In solidarity, they redeem Shola—a cultural amnesiac—and therefore, maintain the integrity of liberation for all Africans. Both cultural and revolutionary Pan-African constructs are represented in the process<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, the text is authored by an African in the Diaspora with explicit Pan African intent. Therefore, this study justifiably proposes *Sankofa* as the ultimate Pan-African narrative. Given that this study is primarily concerned with advancing the legacy of Black narrative tradition while retrieving salient Pan-African themes within an African diaspora paradigm, *Sankofa* has tremendous meaning for this pursuit.

Keeping in mind Malinowski's concept of language as "social action situated in contexts" (Matsuki 352), a discourse analysis of *Sankofa* shall reveal it as literature of the African diaspora and Pan African narrative. Since the Diasporan text portrays the lived experiences of Africans throughout the Diaspora, *Sankofa* may be read as Diaspora text because it speaks to the institution of slavery as it existed in the Americas in the nineteenth-century. *Sankofa* may also be identified as Diaspora text because it portrays the tragic diasporic archetype of the fragmented African identity in need of healing. Reconciliation with Africa spiritually and/or physically is the remedy for sustenance and wholeness. Within the context of *Sankofa*, Pan African manifestations occur in the form of African solidarity and strategic mobilization to

resist the imposition of oppressive forces as enslaved and emancipated Africans work together to preserve African tradition, establish independent communities and rebel against their captors.

Therefore, *Sankofa* is at once Diaspora and Pan African narrative.

This study has already established Sankofa as slave narrative. A cursory reading of Sankofa reveals conventions familiar to the traditional slave narrative. Through Gerima's lens, viewers witness enslaved Africans, overseers, floggings, sexual abuse, fugitive slaves, rebellious slaves, and emancipated slaves. Based on the premise that the slave narrative is a sub-genre of African diaspora literature then *Sankofa* is rightfully classified as Diaspora narrative. A more in-depth analysis of *Sankofa* confirms it as Diaspora narrative containing distinct elements of the African diaspora paradigm: dispersal, emerging identities, and return to the homeland. Dispersal has historical and contemporary implications for the African diaspora. Since it has been established that dispersal may be voluntary or involuntary, then dislocation from place of origin is not limited to imposed circumstances, specific time frames or particular geographic locations. Since it has also been established that the intersection between diasporas and their homelands are cultivated by continuous crossing of borders, then this study ventures to propose an alternative distinction and blurring of lines between the concepts of dispersal and return within the African diaspora paradigm; the order of these occurrences are not constant. This study also proposes that these multiple crossings shape the emerging identities constructed at the intersection between Africa and her Diaspora.

The protagonist, Mona/Shola, is transformed through a series of dispersals and returns. When Mona first appears on the screen, she is walking in the Atlantic headed toward the shore of Cape Coast. One might assume that Gerima is indicating that she is coming from across the

waters. There is no indication that Mona has been forced to travel to Ghana, but as a model, she is there to fulfill some professional obligation. Since her travel to the Cape Coast grounds initially holds no cultural or historical significance for her, it is not a conscious return; it is a voluntary dispersal from America. However, if one considers the order of events that occur prior to Mona's entrance, there might be grounds to suggest that Mona was summoned across the Atlantic by the sacred drumming of the elder Sankofa. He claims to communicate with spirits across the waters through his drumming. Further, the image of Sankofa drumming on the castle grounds precedes Mona's presence in Cape Coast.

At the onset of Mona's presence, one might conclude a dispersal from any region of the Diaspora. Once again Gerima's ambiguity speaks to the global span of the dispersed. Mona's point of departure is revealed when she identifies herself as an American to the slave catchers just outside the slave the dungeon on the grounds of the Cape Coast Castle. As she attempts to escape her confrontation with the spirits of enslaved Africans, the slave catchers, who have claimed her as African, drag her back into the dungeon. "You're making a mistake!" She tells them. "I'm not African. I'm an American. I'm Mona, don't you recognize me?" Despite her protests, the slave catchers strip her and proceed to brand her. Once again the blurring of lines between dispersal and return occurs when Mona is transported to the nineteenth century as Shola, where she experiences life as a house servant on the Lafayette Plantation<sup>11</sup>. Due to the circumstances of her transport, it is clearly an involuntary dispersal as well as a return to her historical past. The impetus for her journey is made clear by the elder Sankofa who has admonished her to return. "Go back," he commands her. "Go back to your past!"

Themes of dispersal and return are perpetuated by the institution of slavery as it exists on the Lafayette Plantation where Shola encounters enslaved and liberated Africans like Nunu, Joe, Noble Ali, Jumma, Kunta, Shango, and the People of the Hills. All of them represent familiar diasporic archetypes individually and collectively. Shola immediately maps the terrain as she introduces each of them and defines their role on the plantation and surrounding areas which represent the diasporan community. Shango, Shola's West Indian lover, was sold to the Lafayettes because he is a trouble maker. Nunu, who Shola claims as "part of the memory" of her past, is from Africa and refuses to relinquish the "memory of her birthplace." Nunu, Mother Africa, is an Akan<sup>12</sup> and "she never stops talking about her Africa." Joe, the tragic mulatto, is Nunu's "rotten fruit" conceived as a product of rape during the Middle Passage. The characters of Noble Ali, Kunta, and Jumma represent the existence of head slave, fugitive slave, and storyteller, respectively; all of these figures were common to plantation culture. The People of the Hills are the enslaved Africans who escaped to the hills to establish their own communities in the tradition of maroon societies.

Shango and Nunu's involuntary dispersal to the Lafayette Plantation holds tremendous meaning for their characterization in relation to their peers, which calls attention to the dynamics of emerging identities shaped by the perpetual phenomenon of dispersal and return. Introduction of these two major characters is twofold. Gerima is establishing that the population of enslaved Africans on the plantation is diverse as it consists of Africans from various regions of the Diaspora who are suffering a similar fate. He also introduces into the mix the volatile, rebellious energy of Africa and the West Indies which often ignited the flame of resistance among the slaves, a situation most feared by slave owners. Gerima's decision to introduce

Shango before Nunu is questionable, but given the symbolic significance of her character, her late entry into the film actually gives her primacy.

Nunu, readily identified as Mother Africa, is also Sankofa, and Yemonya/Olukun. In the spirit of “Sankofa” Nunu maintains the umbilical cord between Africa and her Diaspora. Through her stories of African tradition and values, she nurtures a healing and restoration of the African psyche compromised through slavery. Nunu stands as the matriarch of the slave community on the plantation. She reminds the head slaves of the importance of collective African identity and the importance of all slaves standing together against oppressive forces. In the midst of turmoil, Nunu takes charge. Like a mother, she does whatever is necessary to restore order to chaos and goes to great lengths to circumvent the oppressor’s wrath. For example, when Kunta, a pregnant slave, is beaten to death for attempting to gain her freedom, Nunu frees the unborn child from the dying woman’s womb with a machete—a tool of the oppressor’s trade. Her courageous act is both defiant and liberating and in keeping with respect for elders and children in African tradition. Nunu cannot save the mother, but she saves the child. By saving the child, she maintains continuity between the present and the past. It has been said that Africans value the presence of newborn babies and the elderly because of their connection with the ancestors. Newborn babies have just left the place of the ancestors and the elders are about to return there. This confirms the sense of circular time and a continuous cycle between the past, present, and future. She also faithfully reminds enslaved Africans of the immortality of their African spirits. It is only their flesh that allows the white man to keep them in bondage she tells them. If not for “this flesh” she says they could fly home.

Nunu's role as Mother Africa and Sankofa is most evident when she fails to disconnect herself from Joe, the rotten fruit, who is constantly in conflict with her mission to maintain African world view. As the tragic mulatto disillusioned by his mixed heritage, Joe rejects all that Nunu represents. Spurred on by Father Raphael, the Catholic priest, Joe deems anything related to Africa as heathenistic. Therefore, he sees his mother Nunu as primitive and uncivilized. When Joe is poisoned by a fellow slave, Nunu attempts to save him. When Joe rejects her, she turns and walks away, but the pain in her womb is too great. Nunu succeeds in her efforts to save Joe from the poison, but, she fails to save him from the manipulative clutches of the oppressor. Joe, who has now demonized Nunu, repays her deed by drowning her in the river that she enters to save his life. When Shola discovers the murder, she informs Joe of his conception. This realization serves as an awakening for him. He then carries Nunu to the church, defies Father Raphael's objections to her presence, locks the doors and burns the church down. This serves as commentary on Joe's acceptance of Africa and rejection of Eurocentric hegemony. It is rumored among the slaves that Nunu's body was never found among the ashes. Some say a huge buzzard carried her back to her Africa. Once again, Gerima recalls the bird imagery of Sankofa and the notion of return to the homeland.

In addition to keeping African tradition alive and confirming the viability of African return, Nunu also takes on the persona of Yemonja/Olukun, the Orisha who has both nurturing and warrior aspects<sup>13</sup>. Nunu not only nurtures enslaved Africans of the plantation, she also leads those who will follow into battle for their freedom. Supernatural powers which may be associated with Orishas or other African deities in contrast with Christianity, emerge when Nunu wills Noble Ali to cease Kunta's flogging. Earlier in the film, Jumma tells a group of slaves of

Nunu's ability to kill a white overseer in a similar fashion. In her role as Yemonja/Olukun, Nunu represents the warrior spirit of Queen Nzinga of Angola and Queen Yaa Asantwea of Ghana who kept the encroachment of their oppressors at bay for decades. The image of Nunu greeting attendants at the secret meeting and leading rebellious slaves in revolt concretizes her warrior image.

Opposite Nunu is Shola's lover and confidant Shango. This enslaved African from the West Indies represents the Orisha of fire, thunder and lightning. As a child of Yemonja, he is described as "noble, hardworking, a great healer and clever witch" (Neimark 103, Wippler 68). While Nunu recalls Africanisms for sustenance and survival, Shango confronts the overseers on behalf of his fellow slaves. Shango represents the rebellious spirit of the West Indies, and becomes a substitute for Nunu's traitorous son, Joe.

The People of the Hills represent marooned societies—communities of enslaved Africans who escaped and established self-sustaining communities of their own. Plantation owners dreaded the potential union between their slaves and the maroons because of the potential for insurrection. In *Sankofa*, the Secret Society—a group of enslaved Africans on the Lafayette plantation, plot a revolt in conjunction with the People of the Hills.

Through the collective efforts of Nunu, Shango, the People of the Hills and the Secret Society, Shola's consciousness is restored. Restoration of cultural consciousness compels Shola to join her fellow enslaved Africans in a revolt which represents transformation. Shola returns to present day Ghana where she is re-wombed as Mona, an African of the diaspora who has regained consciousness of her past.

*Sankofa* is the ultimate Pan African narrative, because it provides a transnational depiction of slave resistance. In an interview with Pam Woolford, Gerima admits that he intentionally depicts a “diverse mixture of languages and music of people of African descent” (91). He also notes that his film is in direct opposition to the “happy slaves” in its representation of the history of slavery as one full of resistance and rebellion (92).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that Micheaux was most successful as film maker, but he was not the only Black who made attempts to rectify the stereotypes of Blacks in films by white film makers. For example, in response to the derogatory images of Blacks portrayed in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of Nation* (1915), there was a call for the formation of a black film industry. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company run by the Johnson brothers out of Nebraska and Los Angeles was one such company that responded to this call. As a matter of fact, in 1918 the Johnson brothers attempted to secure the rights to *The Homesteader* for their film company, but due to artistic differences Micheaux refused the offer and decided to establish his own film company. See *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*, J. Ronald Green (xiii-xiv)

<sup>2</sup> Gerima co-produced the film with his wife Shirikiana Aina.

<sup>3</sup> In *Let the Circle be Unbroken*, writer Miramba Ani refers to the Middle Passage as the *Maafa*, a period of great suffering and loss.

<sup>4</sup> Gerima and his sister were taught in schools by Peace Corps volunteers. They were taught how to spell names of American states, but they were not allowed to learn about their own country and culture. Instead, they were taught that everything about their own culture was backward and something to be ashamed of. The volunteers only showed American films in school which depicted Africans and savages. The films also implied that everyone must go to America to be civilized. See “Haile” (2)

<sup>5</sup> Gerima moves to California in 1969 and grew a large Afro in commemoration of the Black Power Movement. He says, “[It was] a very turbulent time, but for me it was my rehabilitation. It gave me a time to breathe, to think and to reassess my life as well.” See “Haile 2).

<sup>6</sup> Gerima says at UCLA he became more critical of the movies he had seen as a child. He also shared a collective rage with fellow students from Brazil and Mexico. “We realized we

had been betrayed by the movies.” He says as a child his consciousness was aggravated by repeatedly seeing movies where Blacks were always portrayed as violent criminals. See “Haile” (2).

<sup>7</sup> See “Haile” (2). Due to the nature of his film, Gerima says many distributors rejected his film because they felt it was too violent, too Black. They didn’t think it would be well received by the public. Gerima proceeded to rent out theaters himself to have the film shown.

<sup>8</sup> See explanation of this myth in “Go Back and Fetch It.”

<sup>9</sup> In 1993 *Sankofa* premiered at a Berlin film festival. Gerima’s film won “international acclaim and several awards.” See “Haile Gerima” (3). *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 38. Edited by Ashyia Henderson. Gale Group, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> In “Africa for the Africans Living Within the Veil” it has already been established that cultural Pan Africanists use culture and the “African personality” as tools for liberation. Revolutionary Pan Africanists seek liberation by challenging and destroying oppressive forces.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that the geographic location of the plantation is never specified. Some critics have surmised Louisiana as the location, but Gerima’s ambiguity is intentional. His objective is to project the universality of slavery and all that it implies for Africans collectively (“Haile”).

<sup>12</sup> Given Gerima’s use of ambiguity for sake of universality, it is interesting that he identifies her as Akan. One might assume that Gerima locates her origin of birth in Ghana because it was the first West African country south of the Sahara to gain its independence.

<sup>13</sup> Orishas are guardians with supernatural powers in the Yoruba tradition. See *The Way of the Orisha*, (115).. Nunu not only nurtures enslaved Africans of the plantation, she also leads those who will follow into battle for their freedom. Supernatural powers which may be associated with Orisha or other African deities in contrast with Christianity, emerge when Nunu abbreviates Kunta’s thrashing by willing Noble Ali’s collapse as he administers her beating as the “head slave for the white man.” Earlier in the film, Jumma tells a group of slaves of Nunu’s ability to kill a white overseer in a similar fashion. In her role as Yemonja/Olukun, Nunu represents the warrior spirit of African Queens like Nzinga of Angola and Yaa Asantewa. At one of the secret meetings with the people of the hills, Nunu makes reference to Prempeh.

## Chapter 4

### **Cultural Continuity as Liberating Force in *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* and *Boy Sandwich***

Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier are two well-noted scholars in the debate regarding *Africanisms*<sup>1</sup> in the New World. Frazier believed Black culture emerged in America independent of African influences; all remnants of African origin were destroyed at the devastating hands of slavery (Holloway ix). Conversely, Herskovits documented remnants of African culture in America and emphasized West African continuity in African-American culture (ix-x). Despite certain limitations of the Herskovits model, it provided a *baseline theory for assessment of African retentions throughout the Diaspora*.<sup>2</sup>

The research conducted by Herskovits and Frazier established theoretical frameworks that would serve as launch pads for contemporary diasporists. As the Black experience in the Diaspora commanded the attention of scholars in the twentieth century, theoretical debates concerning traceable elements of African culture in the New World continued to surface which explored the relevance of these elements in shaping diasporan identities. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy proposes an emerging, dynamic diasporan identity and culture independent of totalizing systems. He believes that in order to explore diasporan identity and culture adequately, a transnational perspective must be employed which acknowledges “experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement” (18). In contrast, Molefi Asante upholds African tradition and culture as elements critical to shaping Black identity. In *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante posits Africa as “subject not object” (3). In the Afrocentric paradigm, African ideals are “at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (6). Both of these theoretical

frameworks provide valuable contributions to this study. Distinct connections between Black consciousness and elements of African tradition and culture support the premise of cultural continuity as liberating force. Emergence of dynamic diasporan identities and culture validates the possibility of various forms of resistance to oppressive forces in the Diaspora.

While inquiries of African retentions and their relevance to Black consciousness in the Diaspora have contributed valuable scholarship to Africana literary tradition, this chapter explores the utilization of *Africanisms* as liberating force in Claude McKay's *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929) and Beryl Gilroy's *Boy Sandwich* (1989). I refer to these texts as Cultural Pan African narratives. In Cultural Pan African narratives, the pulse of Africa is invoked to nurture what Leonard Barrett refers to as *soul-force*.<sup>3</sup> When *soul-force* is nurtured–preserved and/or restored, an African world view is sustained and, thus provides the African with a “blueprint for the struggle from bondage to freedom” (1-2). As a result, African liberation is restored. These texts also extend the borders of the Diaspora and reveal the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade beyond the Americas. *Banjo* references the migration of Blacks from Africa and the Americas to France in the 1920s in search of work, identity, and freedom; *Boy Sandwich* articulates the history of West Indian migration to London post World War I for economic gain. Both texts demonstrate how race, class, gender, ethnicity and power are consistent in influencing the migrants' existence in their new landscape; and each text confirms the role of cultural continuity as sustaining force and as a form of resistance. These texts also depict African solidarity in resistance to oppressive forces determined to manipulate Black existence in some form or fashion. Thus, *Banjo* and *Boy Sandwich* are African diaspora texts and Pan African narratives.

Both of the texts explored in this chapter are set in Europe, but the authors were born in the West Indies and interject Caribbean motifs in their plots. As Caribbean texts, *Banjo* and *Boy Sandwich* add interesting perspective to this exploration of Pan African manifestations in diasporan narrative due to the complex nature of Caribbean constructs of identity. In a *Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing*, Gareth Griffiths renders an enlightening explanation of the issue of identity familiar to Caribbean texts

The African was colonized, the West Indian was enslaved. In the process of enslavement the West Indian was deprived of his personality, as well as his roots and his cultural identity. All that he can begin with is his own experience. Perhaps for this reason the West Indian novel has been especially rich in accounts of childhood and adolescence, tracing the individual's journey to consciousness and his struggle to understand himself and the world he lives in. (79)

Even though Griffiths makes a distinction between African colonization and enslavement, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Frantz Fanon have posited that colonization of the psyche may be just as debilitating as physical conquest.<sup>4</sup> Without a map of his own cultural terrain, the West Indian was obliged to measure his own existence according to European standards. "No words, no structures or forms were available to establish the West Indian reality. These are what the West Indian writer had to create, and create for himself" (Griffiths 84). In their texts McKay and Gilroy have invoked the *nommo* force to evoke Black identities which resist oppressive powers in the Diaspora.

The basic premise of this chapter is inspired by *the dilemma of cultural resistance*. Amilcar Cabral says the perpetuation of foreign domination is inhibited by what he refers to as *the dilemma of cultural resistance*. Culture is a valuable factor of resistance to foreign domination; "foreign domination is assured only if indigenous cultural life is neutralized" (260).

Through culture, people restore order to chaos and make sense of their environment. “One of the most significant functions of culture is its role in the determination of consciousness” (Ani, Heal, 101). Cultural consciousness fosters self-definition and self-determination. Amil Cabral describes culture as the fruit and determinant of a people’s history (261). Asa Hilliard says “loss of consciousness” has had the greatest impact on the fate of Africans in the diaspora.

Restoration of African cultural forms, values, and world views “challenges the very foundation of any form of oppression.” Therefore, restoration of a people’s “collective memory is a revolutionary act of liberation” (Hilliard 17-18).

My intent is further shaped by the significance of Leonard Barrett’s concept of *Black awareness* and Mwalimuy Shujaa’s notion of *coming home* for Africans in the Diaspora. Barrett says Black awareness “re-establishes a sense of history, culture and destiny, and eliminates the sickening sense of insecurity, uprootedness and over dependence on the wider society” (6-7). Mwalimuy Shujaa says Africans in the diaspora must return “home” for sustenance. He explains that “coming home” as a “process of personal transformation” which requires Africans who have experienced cultural alienation to “negate it” and establish for themselves a “path toward cultural centeredness” (39).

These constructs of cultural restoration and retention inform the concept and function of cultural continuity in this study. Cultural continuity bridges the divide between homeplace and newplace by transcending time and space. Therefore, it heals the legendary rupture experienced by diasporic Africans. When African consciousness is threatened or lost, *Africanisms* are evoked and invoked to preserve *soul-force*, which in turn provides the tools necessary for liberation from oppressive powers. Thus, cultural continuity is deemed as liberating force.

A quest to bridge the cultural divide fostered by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath is a theme familiar to Black narrative. Dispersal and socialization in the Diaspora stimulate this quest to maintain connection with the homeplace through cultural continuity. Given the role of culture and language as vehicles for restoration of order to chaos, then it is logical that Black narrative reveals the terms of existence negotiated by the dispersed when confronted by their newplace. Terms of dispersal and world view govern motive and method for this return. Whether voluntary or involuntary dispersal occurs, recognition of the ancestral site as the source of sustenance and grounding determines the extent of restoration and retention. Bridging may be physical, psychological or symbolic. In some texts linkage is nostalgic; in others it is mediated for sustenance and grounding germane to restoration of wholeness. Regardless of motive or method, the juncture between diaspora and homeplace is a contending force in much of Black literature.

This pondering of Africa as a legitimate homeplace for diasporic Africans played a significant role in advancing Black narrative in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As many Blacks who migrated scrambled to establish themselves socially and economically in urban locales where they were denied equality, the battle to claim an African legacy often played second fiddle to the fight for their rights as American citizens. Nonetheless, some writers still managed to demarginalize Africa as a site of redemption. Africa was summoned as a sustaining force for diasporic Africans in the midst of social and racial turmoil gripping the marrow of life from Black communities. Lena Younger, the matriarch and symbolic ancestor in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), recalls the sustaining forces of Black southern tradition to keep her family grounded in Chicago. Nana Peasant instills in her descendants a cultural legacy that will

nourish them once they have migrated to the mainland in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Aunt Cuney attempts to heal Avey's "dis-ease" through reconnection with her cultural heritage in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). August Wilson's *Piano Lesson* (1990), and Myron Goble's *Down in the Delta* (1998) demonstrate the potential of ancestral artifacts for sustaining forces in the newplace. And, Clifton Taulbert confirms the enduring bond of cultural grounding through historical memory and ancestral artifacts in *When We Were Colored* (1989) and *The Last Train North* (1992). An element common to all of these texts is the role cultural continuity plays in providing Africans in the diaspora with a formidable tool to combat the oppressive residuals of slavery. Even as Blacks advanced socially and economically in the United States, they could not totally escape the limitations imposed on them due to race.

Migration within the United States represents only one segment of the movement of Blacks from homeplace to newplace. It is also important to note the migration of Black West Indians to the United States and Europe in search of a better life. Many of them relocated to northern cities in the United States and experienced racial tension similar to their Black counterparts who had migrated from southern terrain. In fact, so many Blacks were migrating from the Caribbean that the United States government eventually placed a limit on the number of immigrants that could enter the country. In contrast to those Black West Indians who relocated to the United States, many of their countrymen chose instead to answer the call for employment in Europe. After World War I, a labor shortage compelled companies to sponsor recruitment efforts in the Caribbean. For example, many Black West Indian communities were established in London due to vast recruitment efforts for cheap labor. Like their American counterparts, many West Indians set out for the promised land and they suffered a similar fate.

Europe as a terminus of Black dispersal holds much significance for this study of Black resistance to oppressive forces in the Diaspora due to its role in colonizing much of the African continent. More specifically, England and France were major contenders in the race to take control of her human and natural resources in Africa and the Caribbean prior to and after the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While Europe held much promise of liberation in terms of humanity and dignity for Blacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, diasporic Africans soon discovered that imposition of social and racial inequality was not limited to the United States; it was a dilemma imposed on Blacks throughout the Diaspora. In England, Blacks were always viewed as a threat to the establishment.

For the Caribbean writer “re-memory” and “reconstruction of homeland” are both methods of bridging cultural divides and resistance to Eurocentric hegemony. Through narrative, the West Indian defines his own identity and refashions homeplace as a site conducive to his grounding and sustenance.

During the first fifty years of the twentieth century, France and Great Britain successfully lured Blacks to their shores with hopes of social, cultural, and economic freedom denied them in their homelands. The texts selected here will demonstrate that dispersal to these European locales validates the ongoing dilemma of the Black man in the Diaspora globally. They confirm the Pan Africanist sentiment of common origin and destiny. These texts also concretize cultural continuity as conscious acts of African resistance to oppressive forces.

*Banjo* is a Diasporan text because it speaks to the dispersal of Blacks to France as a means of escape from subjugation to cultural and social injustices in their homeland. Prior to and post emancipation, France was revered as the Mecca of freedom and equality. As early as

the nineteenth century Blacks fled to France from the United States to avoid limitations imposed by a government which continued to deny some of its citizens democratic rights. In the 1800s, playwright Victor Séjour moved to Paris where he could write freely about creole society in New Orleans. Séjour resided in Paris for twenty-eight years and his work was highly respected (Anderson 1).

Black presence increased in France during World War I. “African-American troops entered the fighting under French command, and found themselves not only accepted for who they were and what they accomplished, but also publicly recognized for it” (Anderson 1). Black soldiers were so well respected by officers of the French army that many of them repatriated to France after the war.

Many jazz musicians could not support themselves in the states but established successful careers in France. Following World War I, African-American musicians introduced jazz to the French and played active roles in making it “the most popular form of music to sweep the capital” (Anderson 2). *Négrophilie*,<sup>5</sup> “a fascination with black culture” (2) was all the rage in Paris during the 1920s and it too contributed to the elevation of jazz and the success of other African-American artists. Josephine Baker left the southern United States to escape racial upheaval and was fondly embraced by the French. Her career spanned fifty years. During World War II, Baker joined the French Resistance movement in gratitude to her new country (2-3).

France was also refuge for many African-American writers from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. The influx of Black artists in search of freedom continued to grace her shores well

throughout the twentieth century. Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin have written extensively about their relocation to Paris.

*Banjo* is a diasporan text and Pan African narrative because the novel portrays characterizations of continental Africans and diasporic Africans who have been dispersed to Marseilles, voluntarily and involuntarily. Brent Hayes Edwards provides a concise description of McKay's "portrait of a transnational community of black drifters and dockers in Marseilles" in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*

The loose-knit group includes Lincoln Agrippa Daily, better known as "Banjo," a generous and uninhibited musician from the American South; Ray, the Haitian intellectual and writer (who first appeared in McKay's *Home to Harlem*) who befriends Banjo in the second section of the book; the ill-fated Buggy, the militant black nationalist and dark-skinned West Indian; Malty, the cocky West Indian guitarist and drummer; Taloufa, the Nigerian guitar man who had worked in Cardiff and who is an ardent Garveyite; Goosey, the "high yellow" American flute player who grew up middle-class in New Jersey, but is at least as much a "race man" as Buggy...; Dengel, the fun-loving Senegalese, ...; and Latnah, the big-hearted and financially sensible ... prostitute who is the sole woman to befriend the gang. (189-190)

As Black characters from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa converge in Marseilles, sentiments of homeplace are echoed in their commentary on the plight of Blacks globally. Issues of race theory are addressed in *Banjo* which support this study's emphasis on African diaspora and Pan African constructs. Through interaction among members within this black transnational community, emerging identities are revealed which have been shaped by culture, race, ethnicity, and power in the homeplace and in the newplace. Each member brings to the group individual cultural legacies from their place of origin, but all of them also recognize a common history and destiny as Black men. Marseilles becomes a negotiated space for this

group of Black men who have been dispersed into her port. Through Ray's view of Marseilles, McKay confirms the port as a diasporic hub

The port was a fine big wide-open hole and the docks were wide open too. Ray loved the piquant variety of the things of the docks as much as he loved their colorful human interest. And the highest to him was the Negroes of the port. In no other port had he ever seen congregated such a picturesque variety of Negroes. Negroes speaking in civilized tongues, Negroes speaking all the African dialects, black Negroes, brown Negroes, yellow Negroes. It was as if every country of the world where Negroes lived had sent representatives drifting in to Marseilles. A great vagabond host of jungle-like Negroes trying to scrape a temporary existence from the macadamized surface of this great Provençal port. (68)

Regardless of the reason for their relocation, McKay brings these characters together to provide commentary which articulates the overarching theme of social and racial inequality imposed on these men in their own countries and the inescapable reality of this dilemma in France. While much of the world has been taken in by the notion of French liberalism, McKay sheds a contrasting light on the hypocrisy of the nation. Driven by his own denouncement of French liberalism given their role in colonizing Africa<sup>6</sup>, McKay reveals the discriminatory practices often imposed on Blacks in France.

An appreciation of *Banjo* as Pan African narrative must be prefaced with consideration of McKay's life. The Jamaican-born writer, noted for his contributions to Black radicalism<sup>7</sup> in the first half of the twentieth century, used language and culture to provide social and political commentary on Black life in the Diaspora. Extensive travel throughout Europe and the Americas afforded McKay opportunities to explore the dilemma of Black existence on various shores. *Banjo* was influenced by McKay's impression of French social and political views regarding Blacks. He was well aware of the major role France played in colonizing Africa.

Despite their liberal sentiments, McKay suspected the French were guilty of national chauvinism in their mission to “civilize” the world.<sup>8</sup> The French mission of civilization places Ray’s description of “Negro speaking in civilized tongues” in perspective. The conglomeration of Negro tongues were civilized and universal in articulating their existence. Like many of his contemporaries of the 1920s, McKay lived in France for several years while pursuing artistic endeavors. Edwards says it is possible to read *Banjo* as a “roman à clef” portraying friends and acquaintances from McKay’s time living in Marseilles, particularly in the summer of 1926 and the spring of 1928” (189).

Since Black writers have historically been successful at advancing the Black narrative tradition by appropriating the oppressor’s language, then McKay’s use of literary devices may be deemed as intentional acts of resistance. The subtitle of *Banjo* classifies it as “a story without a plot.” Therefore, McKay explicitly rejects Eurocentric literary standards. He uses the *nommo* force of the word to construct his own terms of order despite a title that indicates chaos. “Nearly all the contemporary reviews of *Banjo* comment on the subtitle, often in order to claim the book is not a novel at all” (Edwards 190). Even though *Banjo* appears to be lacking in structure according to Eurocentric literary standards, it does articulate Pan African sentiments of resistance and solidarity through setting, characters and tropes represented in the text.

Dispersal and dislocation are of primary concern as McKay’s decision to locate the setting of *Banjo* in France during the 1920s recalls the frequency of Black repatriation to the country of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. Paris, the capital of France, is the city most often recognized as the center of culture. Yet, McKay locates the setting of his novel in Marseilles, a city in the Southeast region of France on the coast of the Mediterranean. Situated on the

southern coast of France facing Africa, Marseilles is a major French port accessible for trading. McKay refers to Marseilles as the “gateway to Africa.” This port of entry is also a breeding ground for a creolization of cultures through trade. Edwards confirms the significance of Marseilles as a site of resistance. “*Banjo*’s portrait of the View Port section of Marseilles, especially *La Fosse* (the Ditch), a popular red-light district just off the harbor of that Mediterranean city, has been widely celebrated as well, especially after the quarter became a center of French resistance activity in World War II and was completely leveled by the Germans in February 1943” (189). The looseness of Marseilles allows the transnational community of Black drifters to exist in direct opposition to Puritan values and American work ethics. It also affords them an opportunity to immerse themselves in the “rawness” of jazz. Therefore, vagabondage and jazz are tropes of resistance.

The protagonist, Banjo, does not wander aimlessly through Marseilles without a sense of purpose, nor is he in France because he has no where else to go. Banjo intentionally rejects the rigid expectations of American life in exchange for the “looseness” of Marseilles. McKay, who is often described as “poet and vagabond,” creates a community of Black men “who would rather beg for food from sympathetic black crews on Mediterranean coal freighters than work under the racist capitalism that is the only available mode of labor relations” (Edwards 200). His dream of establishing an orchestra may actually symbolize McKay’s role as Pan Africanist to orchestrate global Black solidarity in resistance to European domination.

In *Boy Sandwich*, Beryl Gilroy tells the story of Tyrone Grainger and his quest to preserve the dignity of his aging grandparents from the inhumanity of ageism imposed on them as elderly West Indian immigrants in London. Simon and Clara, the patriarch and matriarch of

the Grainger family, were the first generation of Graingers to immigrate from “Picktown” in the West Indies to London after WW II. Eventually their son Robby and his wife joined them. Robby’s son Tyrone was born in England. As a young Black Brit steeped in West Indian culture through his grandparents’ nurturing, Tyrone’s mission is twofold. Throughout the novel, he confronts the racist establishment in London that seems determined to dehumanize the Graingers’ Black existence. In the process, he also confirms his own humanity. Eventually, Tyrone discovers an old painting hidden among his grandparents’ belongings which provides the funding for three generations of Graingers to return to the West Indies. At the novel’s end, Tyrone realizes that the West Indies is not a literal homeplace for him; he is of Black West Indian descent, but by birthright he is also British.

Through a series of encounters Tyrone and his grandparents experience with authority figures in the text, Gilroy reveals the impact of culture, race, ethnicity, and power on emerging diasporic identities. The text also provides commentary on West Indian constructs of homeplace and identity. The concept of homeplace is a critical theme in this text and the drive to relocate it is nurtured by cultural continuity as the past constantly confronts the present. The homeplace is the site of the ancestor; it is also the place where the Graingers are free to be self-defined, self-determined, and self-reliant. Therefore, linkage between the past and present is an act of resistance; and, return to the homeplace is a means for liberation. Cultural consciousness is preserved each time Simon and Clara recall life in Picktown on the island and life as new immigrants in London. Cultural continuity as liberating force is concretized each time Tyrone combats oppressive forces to retain his grandparents’ dignity as well as his own terms of existence as a young Black man in British society. It becomes obvious in this text that Tyrone is

compelled and equipped to defend the Graingers' Black existence in a racist environment due to the nurturing he has received from his grandparents. Simon and Clara Grainger have kept the history of their family's successes and failures alive by constantly recalling its history and culture. The bridge that has been constructed between the past and the present has allowed Tyrone to move into the future "undeterred" like the bird Sankofa. As a result of Simon and Clara's cultural nurturing, Tyrone is motivated and prepared to resist the oppressive forces which threaten the freedom of their existence in London.

*Boy Sandwich* is an African diasporan text because it speaks to the voluntary and involuntary dispersals of the Graingers from their homeplace in the West Indies and later from their community in London. Through Tyrone's lens, one gets a distinct impression that he has been well informed of his family's legacy on the Island and in England by his grandparents' use of narration to convey the family history. As Gilroy seemingly employs African circular time by merging the past, present, and future, in a montage of historical events, one is informed of the elder Graingers' dispersal from the Island and the conditions they encountered in their new environment. The Graingers also represent West Indian migration to England after World War I and the plight of their existence in their "mother-country." We learn of this earlier life through flashbacks. After a hurricane devastates the Island on which Simon and Clara reside, he eventually migrates to London in search of economic gain. Once established, he sends for Clara. Like their Black counterparts in the United States who migrated to other regions of the country for economic gain, West Indians responded to a similar call from London. As the white labor force diminished because of World War I, factories and plants opened their doors to Black immigrant workers. Upon arrival, Blacks were only offered minimal jobs and wages. The

conditions for Blacks in London also paralleled those which existed for Blacks who migrated from southern to northern U.S. cities in search of a better life. Simon and Clara make it clear to Tyrone that race prejudice is the culprit that determines their existence in England. This becomes evident when Grandpa tells Tyrone that he could not find work in his trade because a “Black master tailor was unheard of” when he arrived in London (20). Grandpa accepted work in a machine shop and shared a room with several other men until he could get on his feet (23). Once Simon was established, he sent for his wife Clara who suffered a similar fate. Grandma tells Tyrone, “I get dis job to stitch but nobody know how to cut. ... So I cut, but another woman get de pay for cuttin’ and dey pay me as a stitcher because black can’t earn more dan white un de place” (22)! Seventeen years later, Simon and Clara sent for their son Robby whom they left in the care of Clara’s parents because of his health problems.

In the simple, yet lyrical dialect of Clara and Simon, Tyrone learns of his grandparents’ existence on the Island as highly-skilled laborers who were underemployed in London simply because they were Black. He also learns of the struggle they endured to carve a niche for themselves in a newplace that invited them into the fold, but subsequently alienated them due to their race. In her telling of their early experiences in London, Clara also reveals deeply rooted historical and political issues concerning Blacks globally:

Dey never invite us to a social gatherin’ till de Communist Party start to collect us, and show us politics. Den de Church people shake demself and start-a-give socials for us. Dey dance wid us, hold us at arm’s length and ask where you learn English. Dey sit next to black people when dey has nowhere else to sit. You would t’ink people who give you de Bible, encourage you to watch dey mouth to learn English and teach you de alphabet tek ‘way you Africa-talk, would know dey owe you somet’ing for callin’ you beast, buyin’ you, sellin’ you, beatin’ you and sayin’ you has no soul. British history bad, you know. Parson Cuthbert say dey soak de blanket wid smallpox germ and sell it to dem poor Indans in Canada.

In India dey plunder, in Africa too. God know what dey done to us poor Island people! (22)

Boy Sandwich is African diaspora text because it speaks to the voluntary and involuntary dispersals of the Graingers from the West Indies and within their London community. The novel opens with a significant dispersal as Simon and Clara Grainger are evicted from their home due to urban development. They are the last two people to leave the neighborhood which is being leveled to clear the way for the construction of townhouses for the wealthy. Gilroy recalls the involuntary dispersal of Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade when Tyrone reminds his grandparents to make certain they have secured all of their belongings. “Make sure you have everything,” he warns them. “This is the point of no return” (3). The exit from the slave dungeons leading to the ship was called “the door of no return.” The involuntary journey they are about to take, like the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World, is filled with uncertainty and fear. Tyrone confronts the racist cops and mobs as his grandparents are escorted from their property minutes before it is demolished. As the mobs continue their taunting, Tyrone drives Simon and Clara through a path made by the police. Despite his acceleration from the scene, Tyrone informs us that his grandparents are frightened. “My grandparents were softly crying—it was as if they were singing a very sad song about their fears and the noises that now echoed in their heads” (3). As Tyrone leaves the mob scene, he assures his grandparents of their safety. Due to a lack of better accommodation, Simon and Clara are placed in an old folks home. Tyrone takes it upon himself to take care of his grandparents. The elder Graingers are then relocated to their next destination—The Birches.

The subject of home immediately surfaces in this negotiated space. It is worth noting that Tyrone does not refer to the Birches as home for his grandparents and early on states that if Simon and Clara are unhappy there, the family will bring them home with them, a place where they will maintain dignity and humanity. And, of course he will assist with their care giving. Robby, Tyrone's sickly father expresses his regret that he cannot send his parents back to the West Indies. "I feel so guilty. I'm their only son and I can't do better than this for them. They should be going home to live and die in peace among their own" (4). Robby's wife refutes his comments. "It's not their 'own' now, Robby,"...."They been in this country long, paid their taxes, did dog-work. Blood, sweat and tears! England owe it to them!" (4) This interrogation of the term homeplace recalls elements of the ongoing debate concerning race and nationality<sup>9</sup>. What constitutes a person's right to call a place home? Should they be denied democratic rights based on origin? In other words, even though Simon and Clara were born in the West Indies, they have earned their right to citizenship in London. This is reminiscent of the debate among prior race leaders who argued the question of integration, separation, or repatriation to Africa for Blacks. At this point, no one has bothered to Ask Simon and Clara what constitutes home for them. Eventually, this is revealed in the novel as Tyrone reflects on their initial time apart when grandfather immigrated to England:

It took time for Grandpa to establish himself and send for his wife. What did she do all those years while she waited to come to him? Was she ever unfaithful? Was he? Were there any regrets at leaving all that was hers by right, by birth and by nation? They never once talked of their loss of community love. It was as if they could not think of nothing they needed that was not within them. Yet they described their early yesterdays as 'days of woe and weepin' . Grandpa talked of those times with dread in his voice, as if reviving emotions that were bitter and burdensome. Even today they seem to understand only suffering. It is like the mortar that holds the bricks of their lives together. (21)

The issue of homeplace emerges as the Graingers explore their own uncertainty as to how the elders will be treated as “inmates” of The Birches. If homeplace is a site of liberation, a place where one is free to be self-defined, self-determined, and self-reliant, then the conditions prevalent at The Birches negate it as homeplace for Simon and Clara. Additionally, as aging Black adults in a society that devalues their presence, the elder Graingers are at a disadvantage.

One might question, then, why taking Simon and Clara to the family home is not the initial plan of action for the couple. This study speculates that, on some level, Gilroy chooses to have the treatment of the Graingers at the Birches serve as a microcosm of British racism and ageism against West Indian culture. To a greater extent, Clara and Simon create an “imagined community”<sup>10</sup> that extracts historical memory to ignite the flame of resistance in Tyrone. As it turns out, Simon and Clara are the only “couple of West Indian origin in the home, with the exception of Belladora, a woman of mixed race who would change anything that would ‘guarantee the extraction of coloured blood’” from her veins (4). Given the large numbers of West Indian immigrants in England, could the Graingers’ presence in The Birches serve as commentary on the lack of aging Blacks placed in homes? Perhaps this also adds to Robby’s grief and guilt for not assuming responsibility for his parents. In African tradition, unlike European tradition, the elderly are revered. Lack of Black presence in the Birches may also be confirmed when Tyrone requests that someone wash and comb his grandmother’s hair. In response to his request, the Matron—who Tyrone suspects of having some West Indian heritage herself—tells him his gran has to wait until they can find someone who can handle his gran’s hair:

Mr Grainger, you must know why! We are not used to her sort of hair. It takes effort and understanding. We can't exactly put a comb through it, now can we?" ... All I'm saying, Mr Grainger, is that we need someone patient and competent to wash your gran's hair." (51-52)

Tyrone is infuriated by the Matron's response and tells her his mom will come to do his gran's hair. "It's always difficult for you if it's anything to do with our people" (52). This objectification of Clara Grainger recalls the racist mentality of White Creoles in the West Indies as well as the alienation of Blacks by the British. The objectification of Simon and Clara is also reflected in the care giver's interest in the photo album which Simon holds as "the most treasured of his possessions" (5). When Tyrone approaches the care giver to complain of neglect she inquires about the album and offers to sell it for money:

They've got an album with some nice old pictures. I can get a good price for them—especially the ones with black people dressed up like Victorians. They must have been going out to a fancy-dress ball. Blacks are mostly naked. Aren't they?(14)

Tyrone decides to take possession of the album for safe keeping from the "hegemonic" gaze of the care giver and the antique dealer with whom she wishes to make the trade. The care giver's comments regarding the album indicate a lack of respect for the pictures. She has no idea of the historical or cultural significance those photos hold for the Graingers. To her, they are just interesting pictures of Blacks playing dress up. To the Graingers, the photos represent a historical documentation of their lives in the West Indies as well as and in London. The photo album "which now serves as a beacon" to Simon's past allows him to maintain connection between the past and present; it preserves cultural continuity between the West Indies and England (14). Therefore, the album is an ancestral artifact and a symbolic homeplace, wherein the elder Graingers can recall a time when they were self-defined, self-determined, and self-

reliant. The album also holds numerous photos of family and friends who have contributed to the Graingers' existence on the Island and in England.

The potency of historical memory is substantiated when Tyrone recalls Simon's "testimony of self." "He talked about himself with such certainty! He once told me of his humble beginnings. He said, 'Tyrone, if I tell you where I come from, you would know where you must go'" (5). This recalling of the past assists Tyrone in his own struggle to find his place as a young Black of West Indian descent in London as he embraces the certainties of the past and the possibility of the present. Tyrone visits his grandparents at The Birches with knowledge of the great strides they have made in their lives as Black West Indians in England. He insists that the care givers and the Matron give them their due respect. His persistence in seeing that his grandparents receive proper care despite the administration's attempts to silence him represents the emergence of a diasporic identity of resistance. Tyrone's struggle on behalf of his grandparents leads to an exploration of his own identity and existence:

Sitting here with them makes me realise that I too am struggling to claim my place, my identity, my share. But my caution has more daring than pain. I belong, regardless of those who say I don't. Inside me there is an oasis where my identity blooms precariously and my certainties flicker like lights and then die down. This place, where my grandparents are, will destroy what is left of their bodies and even dash their spirits into the ground and they will forget just who they are and what they were in their long span of years. (30)

This spirit of resistance forces Tyrone to find a way to free his grandparents from The Birches. When he discovers a valuable painting among his grandparents' belongings stored in the loft at his parents' home, he sells it and uses a portion of the cash to fund a return to the Island for his grandparents, his parents, his girlfriend Adijah and himself. Adijah is also of West Indian

descent and has been badly burned in an explosion set by a group of white racists. Tyrone feels that the trip will serve as respite for her.

Everyone is excited about the return but Simon. The issue of homeplace emerges again as he debates whether or not the Island really is still his home. He has been in England so long, he wonders if he will have problems adjusting to life on the Island.

As three generations of Graingers journey to Picktown, West Indies, the issue of homeplace surfaces once again. Simon, Clara, Robby and his wife adjust to the return. Tyrone, oddly enough, does not feel at home. Picktown is the site of the ancestor; it is a place where his grandparents and parents are free to exist with dignity and humanity. To the best of their ability, they are free to be self-defined, self-determined, and self-reliant. Tyrone exerts his desire for freedom once again. He chooses to liberate himself from external expectations of his existence as West Indian. Tyrone ultimately determines that he is of Black West Indian descent, but he is also British by birthright. At the novel's end, Tyrone makes a conscious decision to defend his right to exist as a Black Brit and returns to England.

Beryl Gilroy, like Claude McKay, is also of West Indian descent. This Guyanese-born writer has often referred to herself as an “ethno-psychologist.” In an interview with Roxann Bradshaw, Gilroy explains how psychological interpretation of culture has informed her work

When I write, I have a plan which is always an ethno-psychological plan, and in this plan I try to discuss experiencing identity. What identity is and how we experience it, both externally and within a group. (2002)

Though critical reviews of *Boy Sandwich* are scarce, Gilroy's ethno-psychological interests appear to have informed the plot of her text to a great extent. Formation of identity and how it is experienced “emotionally and within a group” is the crux of her novel. The propensity of

colonization to prohibit cultural self-definition has also influenced her plot. When Simon and Clara Grainger maintain connection with their island through psychological and symbolic returns to the homeplace, they defy neutralization of their cultural existence. Each time Simon and Clara tell stories about life in Picktown and their previous conquests of unjust treatment in London, the elder Graingers confirm their own existence and in turn construct terms of existence for Tyrone. Picktown, a mythical construct of homeplace,<sup>11</sup> also confirms the autonomy of their existence. It represents an idyllic, negotiated space where the Graingers can exist independently. Construct of independent existence inspires Tyrone's declaration of independence as a Black Brit of West Indian descent who returns to London determined to establish his own terms of existence.

Beryl Gilroy is the mother of the literary critic Paul Gilroy, author of *The Black Atlantic*, and one can only speculate how extensively her work has influenced his theory of diasporic cultures. One might also question the impact of Paul's life on her decision to render a Black male protagonist. In *On Being Black in Britain*, Chris Mullard explains the dilemma of the Black man in England

A black man born in Britain is a shadow of a man. A form but no identity, because you are black. You are not a West Indian, Indian, Pakistani, or African, because you were born in Britain, and know little or nothing about your parents' country. Even if you wished to you cannot pretend you are a black immigrant, because embedded in your being is the knowledge that you are not. If you choose to ignore this then it is forced upon you by the way black immigrants see you, treat you, and react towards you when in the presence of fellow black immigrants or white people. Similarly, if you choose to identify with whites the same mechanism goes into reverse gear. In the end you have no alternative but to remain alone, insecure, without an identity of your own making. (14)

Both McKay and Gilroy share a common history and destiny as Black West Indian writers who have appropriated the English language to provide commentary on Black existence

in the Diaspora. Colonialism has influenced their texts. The impact of colonialism on Black life in Europe provides the tension needed to inform explicit and implicit Pan African constructs. In *Banjo*, much of the militant spirit of the West Indies is acknowledged through discussions of Marcus Garvey—who is also from Jamaica—and the consciousness of negritude reflected in the characters of Ray, Buggy, and Taloufa. The Haitian intellectual, the militant black nationalist, and the Garveyite respectively. Migration, vagabondage and jazz are forms of resistance to colonialistic powers that would have the Black man abandon his identity for conformity to European standards. Refusal to reject his African origins is an act of resistance. Deception of French liberalism is exposed. Equality for some, but not for others is similar fate for Blacks in the United States. While McKay sheds light on this dilemma for Blacks in France during the 1920s, Beryl Gilroy explores these concerns in England. However, both texts are sites of collective Black resistance perpetuated by cultural consciousness.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway uses the term *Africanisms* to refer to “those elements of culture found in the New World that are traceable to an African origin” (ix).

<sup>2</sup> Holloway says as more historical and ethnographic data on the African cultural background became available, the limitations of the Herskovits model became evident. “Although Herskovits spoke of Africanisms in the United States in a global sense, he looked for evidence to prove his theory almost exclusively in the Caribbean and South America. Moreover, his concept of Africanisms was based on a notion of West African cultural homogeneity that is not supported by more recent scholarship, which suggests a Bantu origin for many facets of African-American culture” (x).

<sup>3</sup> See *Soul-force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*.

<sup>4</sup> See *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey, 1993 and *Black Skin, White Mask*.

<sup>5</sup> According to Petrine Archer-Straw, *Nérophilie* was a “term used by Parisian avant-garde in the 1920s to affirm their love of black culture as a provocative challenge to bourgeois values. Interest in black culture became highly fashionable and a sign of being modern.” See *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (9).

<sup>6</sup> See Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourn*. Also, according to Brent Edwards Banjo inspired students of the Negritude movement.(187).

<sup>8</sup> See Fabre.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Gilroy’s discussion of race and nationality in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*.

<sup>10</sup> See Benedict Arnold’s concept of “imagined communities.”

<sup>11</sup> In *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*, Mary Condé notes the Caribbean female writer’s tendency to reconstruct imaginary homelands. “Beryl Gilroy uses an island, referred to simply as ‘the island,’” in *Boy Sandwich* (2).

## Chapter 5

### **The Snake Shall Have Whatever is in the Belly of the Frog by Any Means Necessary: A Reading of *Blake and Panther***

Retention of African tradition proves successful in the restoration of Gerima's Mona/Shola, but Shango, Nunu, the Secret Society and the People of the Hills go further, as they choose revolt and nation building as their tools for liberation. As related strategy maroonage is portrayed in the text. When Shola rejects Shango's request for her participation in their rebellious schemes, she declines by appealing to human ethics and morality. Shango quickly reminds her of the evil imposed on her by her white captor who disregards her humanity. This is evident every time he brutally rapes her. "The snake shall have whatever is in the belly of the frog," Shango tells her. In other words, their freedom must be secured at all costs. Unfortunately, the snake, which is revered in West African tradition, must devour the oppressors and their accomplices if liberation is to be achieved.

Nunu's cultural nurturing helps to raise Shola's consciousness, but it is Shango's fearless sense of entitlement to human dignity that gives her the confidence to embrace the secret society. As enslaved Africans plot insurrection on the plantations, the People of the Hills offer liberation in the form of maroonage. The union between the Secret Society and the People of the Hills has as its agenda self-definition, self-determination and self-reliance for all of the enslaved Africans because they are "one people." The leader of the marooned society assures the members of the Secret Society that they will not cease until they have brought them to the hills "one by one."

Black militancy has historically been a viable option to passive resistance. The primacy of this more aggressive form of resistance emerged early in the African slave trade and continued to perpetuate a legacy of radical protests against oppressive forces. The mythical complacency of enslaved Africans on the Continent, during the Middle Passage, and in the Diaspora has been negated by numerous accounts of insurgence on land and at sea. One of the most significant resistance movements, the Haitian Revolution(1791-1804), lasted nearly ten years and fed the flames of resistance throughout the Americas. Spurred on by the duplicitous dealings of the French and the “fervour of the French Revolution for ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’” the Haitians were determined to liberate their country from the slave owners (Thompson 301-302). Inspired by the accomplishments of Boukman, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe enslaved Africans led revolts throughout the states (Roberson 45). The case of St. Domingue, which eventually became Haiti, revolution has many aspects:

First, it was the only successful slave revolt in the Americas to overturn the system and, in fact, the only recorded one in modern history. Second, its impact on other slave theatres was dramatic; the spectre of revolution that it created continued to haunt slave societies long after the demise of slavery. Third, it had inspirational value for the black peoples throughout the Americas. Fourth, it had some effect, too, on the psychology of European slave holders whose attitudes to the descendants of Africa were, in the main, contemptuous. Fifth, the reasons behind the success of the revolt which became a revolution help us to understand more fully why the slave revolts in other theatres failed. Sixth, it is important because it enables us to study the colour divisions in the slave theatres and to focus on their implications which notably affected the fortunes of the revolution in its initial stages, in its developmental stage too, and which still continue to plague Haitian society to this day. Seventh, the revolution had an international dimension because of the conflicting interests of European and American powers, which further complicated the course of events. (Thompson 301)

This spirit of resistance should be related to contemporary and subsequent hemispheric uprisings led by Gabriel Prosser (1800), Sancho (1802), and Nat Turner (1831) in Virginia (45). It also inspired the Stono Rebellion (1739), and the uprising staged by Denmark Vesey (1822) in South Carolina (45). This spirit of resistance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led entire nations to aggressively secure their freedom. For example, the Seminole Nation, an alliance between self-emancipated Africans and Native Americans waged war against the United States from 1776-1858 (45).

The mutiny on the *Amistad* in 1841 led by Joseph Cinque is the most important account of rebellion at sea. In 1730, Africans aboard the Little George defeated their captors and navigated the ship back to Africa (Roberson 45). Africans aboard the Williams in 1732 took hold of the ship and returned to Africa. In a similar fashion the Creole, in route from Hampton, Virginia to New Orleans is taken over by Africans and sailed to the Bahamas in 1841 (45).

Maroonage may also be deemed a more assertive response to oppressive forces. Rather than contend with injustices imposed by enslavement, many Africans defied the system by fleeing to exclusive areas to establish their own communities where their African soul-force would not be compromised. Adhering to the premise of this study that Africa is the source of sustenance and grounding, then Maroon Communities were reconstructed African sites. Within these refashioned constructs of home, maroons could embrace an African identity and employ African tradition and culture as standards for their existence. Therefore, separatism and nationalism were upheld in Maroon communities. Due to their tenacity in upholding this tenet of nation building, leaders like King Zumbi of Palmares in Brazil were immortalized. The Republic of Palmares (1630-1697), was one of the earliest examples of militant resistance to

colonization of Brazil by the Portuguese and Dutch (Thompson 287). Fugitive slaves formed *quilombos* “along lines familiar to them in their regional homeland in Africa” (287).

It is also important to remember that these stratagems often informed each other. Even in maroonage, Africans were often called to the task of militant revolt in order to protect their communities from invasion. For example, King Zumbi and his warriors fought many wars against the encroachment of the Portuguese. As portrayed in Sankofa, members of the Maroon societies often assist enslaved Africans with their plots for uprisings. Much like black militancy, maroonage is one form of nation building that has also left its footprints on subsequent black liberation movements in terms of “black separatism” (Hall 1). Since nation building subsumes tenets of nationalism and separatism, It also perpetuates the concept of nation within a nation.

The methodologies of this radicalism have varied, but agents of these movements have been consistent in charging their oppressors with the crime of dehumanization. Fed up with religious hypocrisy and doctrines of peaceful coexistence, these revolutionary agents were determined to restore their humanity. No measure was too extreme.

Two texts that portray revolt and nation building in resistance to oppressive forces are Martin R. Delany’s novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1970), and Melvin Van Peebles’ film *Panther* (1995). Set in the South during the nineteenth century, Delany recalls the spirit of Black militancy that arose in response to slavery. Based on social and historical accounts of bondage and rebellion, Delany gives a fictional rendering of the encounters of Henrico Blacus, a “pure Black West Indian.” Like Aphra Behn’s Oronooko, Blake is lured into slavery under false pretense. Once enslaved, he is called Henry Holland and subjected to a life of captivity in the Red River Region of Louisiana as faithful servant to Colonel Stephen Franks. Henrico resigns

himself to slave status but becomes belligerent upon discovering the sale of his wife Maggie. The Ballards, her new owners, have plans to take her to Cuba with them as their servant. Henry defies his master, emancipates himself, reclaims his identity as Blacus–Blake, incites mass insurrection in the United States and Cuba, and secures his wife’s freedom.

*Panther*, set in the late sixties during the Black Power Movement presents an account of the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in California. Through the fictional character of Judge, a young Black male recently discharged from the military due to injuries incurred in Vietnam, Peebles presents the prevailing dilemma of Blacks in the midst of social unrest at home and abroad. When a little boy in route to school on his bicycle is hit and killed by a white motorist crossing a busy intersection in the Black community, the plot is set into motion. It is revealed that this is the third child killed at the intersection which is badly in need of a traffic light. Members of the community have informed city officials of this dangerous intersection. They have asked for resolution of this matter. Typical of the powerlessness of the Black community at this time, prior requests to have a stop light installed at the intersection has fallen on deaf ears. When the church community marches through the streets, mounting a prayer vigil to commemorate the child’s death, the police attack them when they refuse to disband. Members of the Panther Party come to the marchers’ aid; while imprisoned for retaliation, mobilization among the Panthers and the spirit of militant resistance are heightened. Set more than a century after Delany’s *Blake*, *Panther* reiterates the lingering impact of slavery on conditions for Blacks in the United States. Both texts contain elements of dispersal, emerging identities, and visions of homeland; they also reveal manifestations of unified resistance to oppressive forces. In addition to theoretical framework which makes them central to this study,

both texts are penned by diasporic Africans. Therefore, Blake and Panther are justifiably classified as Diaspora and Pan African Narratives.

An old African proverb teaches the importance of telling one's own story for accuracy and perspective. It says: "Until the lion tells his own story, the tale of the hunt will continue to glorify the hunters." Through *Blake*, Delany appropriates the oppressor's language to tell the collective story of the millions of Africans who were dispersed into the Diaspora during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Delany did not suffer the bondage of slavery himself, but as an African-American male in the nineteenth century, he recognized the impact of its aftermath. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy notes elements of Delany's life which make him a central figure in Diaspora and Pan African studies:

The powerful and important figure of Martin Robison Delany—journalist, editor, doctor, scientist, judge, soldier, inventor, customs inspector, orator, politician, and novelist—provides an opportunity to examine the distinctive effects produced where the black Atlantic politics of location frames the doorway of double consciousness. His life also offers an invaluable opportunity to consider some of the issues raised within the histories of black culture and politics by travel and voluntary relocation. Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes. Focusing on a figure like Delany demands careful attention to the interplay between these two dimensions of racial ontology. His life confrontation between his nationalism and the experiences of travel that have been largely ignored by historians except where they can be read as Ethiopianist or emigrationist gestures against American racism. This is no longer sufficient. (19)

Delany's Mandingo heritage, Southern and African travels, and promotion of autonomous black settlements in Central and South America may have influenced his development of characters and plot in *Blake* (20-21). Delany's primary concern was not with Africa as such but rather with the forms of citizenship and belonging that arose from the (re)generation of modern nationality

in the form of an autonomous, black nation state” (23). Gilroy also notes Delany’s relationship between “nationality, citizenship, and masculinity”(25). Delany, he says, “aligned the power of the male head of household in the private sphere with the noble status of the soldier-citizen ....In doing so he “sought a variety power for the black man in white world that could only be built on the foundations which the roles of husband and father provided” (25-26). These views are confirmed in his frequent reference to Africa as the “fatherland” (25).

Sankofa says there is continuity between the past and the present; James Baldwin notes that history is not the past, it is the present. By reaching back in time, Delany is able to bring to the present mitigating factors concerning the plight of Black people in the nineteenth century. He recognized that the same issues that affected the lives of Blacks during slavery still hovered over them like a menacing cloud. Could the Black man ever truly be free in America? Would he ever have dignity and humanity that he rightfully deserved? How could he ever hope to have equal footing in a country that for centuries issued false promises of democracy and justice for all mankind? This was problematic in a society where dominant Whites did not view Blacks as being fully human. Delany articulates this sentiment through an exchange of opinion concerning slavery among white plantation owners:

My opinion, sir, is a matter of record, being the first judge before whom a case was tested, which resulted in favor of the South. And I go further than this; I hold as a just construction of law, that not only has the slaveholder a right to reclaim his slave when and wherever found, but by its provision every free black in the country, North and South, are liable to enslavement by any white person. They are free-men by sufferance or slaves-at-large, whom any white person may claim at discretion. It was a just decision of the Supreme Court—though I was in advance of it by action—that persons of African descent have no rights that white men are bound to respect! (61)

Through his scholarly writing, Delany was able to present philosophical debates and rational solutions for Africans in the Diaspora. His political concerns were addressed in the *North Star* with Frederick Douglass. Active participation in back to Africa movements alerted cohorts to his concerns about the grim prospects for quality of life for Blacks in the Americas. Delany, like Cuffe and Blyden, was a predecessor to the back to Africa movements that Garvey would later present to Blacks in search of justice and equality.

Since literary conventions are central to Black narrative tradition, it is important to explore the language Delany implements to portray dispersal, emerging identities and visions of homeland. These elements are highlighted within the realm of the slave narrative. Like *Sankofa*, occurrence of multiple dispersals throughout the text confirm *Blake* as Diaspora narrative. Blake, a Black Cuban, is enslaved after traveling to Africa as a sailor on a slave ship. He is sold into bondage in the South. Disgusted with his master for selling his wife Maggie, Blake escapes from the plantation and travels throughout the South mobilizing Africans to secure their own freedom. He eventually travels to Africa again as a crewman on a slave ship in order to lead a slave revolt in Cuba to abort the South's plans to annex Cuba. The piracy of Blake's freedom and the trading of Maggie's ownership to the Ballards are explicit examples of involuntary dispersal of diasporic Africans. Through flight, fugitive slaves initiate their own dispersal for self-emancipation. Dispersal is also substantiated each time Blake speaks of "planting and cultivating seeds" of rebellion throughout his sojourn.

Carrying with him the prayers and blessings of his people here, Henry made rapid strides throughout this state, sowing in every direction seeds of the crop of the future harvest. (Delany 123)

Emerging diasporic identities are projected in the reactions of Blacks—enslaved and free—to Blake’s existence and intentions. Enslaved Africans view Blake as the prophet sent by God to lead them out of bondage; freed Blacks see him as a threat to their own somewhat privileged existence. Visions of homeland differ; some deem liberation from the institution of slavery as homeland while others believe that freedom is waiting for them in heaven. Realizing the powerful role religion has played in maintaining slaveocracy, Blake, as Pan Africanist, encourages the slaves to place the oppressor’s religion in its proper perspective:

You must make your religion subserve your interests, as your oppressors do theirs!...They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of ‘obedience to your masters’ and ‘standing still to see the salvation,’ and we must now begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us. (41)

Discourse analysis of *Blake* unveils his use of one of the most lethal weapons

implemented by Africans to subvert tactics of the enemy—the pen. In *Blake*, Delany creates a character that not only resembles Denmark Vesey through his efforts to promote collective African resistance but also may have represented his own militant psyche. If one recalls the power of nommo to invoke life into the images it evokes, then *Blake* foils the repressed Black character often projected in slave narratives. He succeeds at providing insight into the conditions of slavery by querying the enslaved Africans he encounters.

Through language and implementation of literary conventions peculiar to the classic slave narrative, Delany creates a “factional”<sup>1</sup> slave narrative resembling a montage of slave narratives. Even though *Blake* is not an “unvarnished tale,” Delany authenticates his narrative by combining fact and fiction and documenting his facts by using footnotes. Authentication is also confirmed as Blake queries enslaved Africans he encounters as a means of providing insight into the conditions of slavery. Techniques used by Delany in the writing of *Blake* may have

influenced the development of more contemporary “factional” slave narratives like *Jubilee*, *Our Nig*, *Clotel* and the epic saga *Roots*. All of these texts combine fiction and fact to articulate narratives of slavery. Through the lives and experiences of the slaves, Delany presents, cruel masters, kind masters, bondsmen, auction blocks, whipping posts, separation of families, victimization of women and fugitive slaves.

Pan African manifestations also become explicit in Delany’s novel as Blake takes on the mission of ending Slavery in the Americas. Moved by the oppression of Africans collectively, Blake’s quest for freedom reaches far beyond the interest of his wife and child or the slaves on the Franks plantation. Delany makes a dramatic statement by creating in Blake a character similar to Solomon Northup<sup>2</sup> who was born into freedom and stolen into slavery. Yet, like the character Shango in Gerima’s *Sankofa*, Blake does not flee from bondage. This was a common plight, but it also speaks to the commitment of the true Pan Africanist in recognizing that all Blacks must be free in order to uplift the race, not just a select few. It is revealed in the story he shares with his cousin in Cuba that he was securely bound by his captors when in an environment conducive to his escape to prevent such actions. And, Blake admits that his love for Maggie influenced his decision to remain on the Franks’ plantation. Blake’s love for this “handsome” woman represents his love for and commitment to his race.

Pan Africansim also becomes obvious as the enslaved Africans on the Franks plantation create a diversion to distract Colonel Franks in order to give Blake time to escape. Even though Judy and her husband feel they are too old to escape, they give him the support that he needs to advance the cause. They understand that Blake’s actions will at some point benefit them all. Militant revolt is made explicit by the manner in which Blake champions his own cause. In

addition to inciting insurgence on a large scale among enslaved Africans in the states through which he travels, he has no problem killing men or beasts who pose a threat to this mission. Delany uses the nommo force in his narrative to confirm Blake's militancy as well as the volatile merger of African tradition and resistance. When Blake learns to "charm" the blood hounds who are released to retrieve escaped slaves, Delany recalls the African tradition of conjuring (90). He also recalls the power of the orisha, the gods representing elements of the universe, to incite insurrection on the second slaver Blake boards to start a slave revolt in Cuba (234).

Like Gilroy's *Boy Sandwich*, *Blake's* ending leaves the reader with uncertainty in terms of the revolution. Delany does not indicate whether Blake's efforts succeed or fail, but the seed of resistance and revolution have been harvested.

Black militancy continued to thrive throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; it was necessitated by the ongoing injustices hurled at Blacks during Reconstruction and the early decades of the twentieth century. While the country pretended to respect their humanity by releasing them from slavery, it was later discovered that the decision was based on business as usual. It is well noted that ulterior motives inspired Lincoln's freeing of the slaves.<sup>3</sup> Lincoln was "convinced that emancipation of slaves in disloyal states was necessary to win the war" (Berry 65). As Judge Ballard indicates in *Blake*, commerce takes precedence over all other concerns. Despite freedom, Blacks continued to find themselves in one form of bondage or another.

Resistance proved difficult because of continued isolation. The fragmentation fostered by the slave trade left a more impressionable imprint on some than on others. Emancipated Africans too severely afflicted by the slaveocracy, chose to remain on the plantation with their

masters. They had little sense of their existence apart from the one inscribed for them by life in slavery. Those who were able to maintain a sense of self in spite of the constant degradation of their worth set off to stake their rightful claim to a life void of the shackles of slavery; hence, the impetus for the early stages of mass movements of Blacks to other regions of the country. Of course, many of them soon discovered that oppressive forces would still manage to marginalize their existence through social injustice and inequality. Many of the considerations given during Black Reconstruction were quickly annihilated.

White supremacists and other agitators were determined to turn back the clock for fear of their own demise which was captured in graphic detail in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Based on Thomas Dixon's racist novel *The Klansman*, his film articulates trepidations in minds of most Whites who were determined to maintain the racial status quo. In their arrogant domination of the nation, Whites continued their push to subjugate Blacks. Once again, Blacks united to push back.

Fed up with denial of their civil rights as human beings in a democratic society, Blacks recalled the spirit of resistance invoked by their ancestors in prior centuries to unshackle the chains of segregation and disfranchisement in the twentieth century. The continuum between past and present again became imperative. Standing on the shoulders of Africans who incited mutiny prior to the twentieth century, Blacks united to define their existence and determine their destiny in America. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement spearheaded by Black community activists throughout the South, consisted of a series of peaceful marches, rallies, and set-ins. With Dr. Martin Luther King at the helm of this Christian-based protest of oppressive forces, thousands of Blacks were encouraged to pursue their rights without violence.

This nonviolent approach to oppressive forces that continued to be violent in return pushed some Blacks beyond their limits. A segment of the Black community felt it was time to push back.

The Civil Rights Movement played a pivotal role in attaining civil and human equality for all people of color, but it was the Black Power Movement, emerging in the 1960s, that restored the drive for militant resistance and affirmation of cultural consciousness in the Black community. Like a panther cornered by the pressure of its intruder,<sup>4</sup> Black people were ready to fight to the death. They were tired of being hosed, beaten, and viciously attacked by dogs for merely pursuing their right to equal existence in a country responsible in some way for their dislocation. Reels of testimony bear witness to contemporary objections to Black unification, often this resistance took the form of violence documenting which recalls the abuses inflicted on enslaved Africans. The whips are now clubs used by police officers to administer senseless beatings to defiant Negroes. Descendants of bloodhounds, once in hot pursuit of fugitive slaves now feast on the flesh of Blacks still in pursuit of liberation. The bondage of slavery continued to confine them in modern day captivity.

African Americans had served their country in two wars to save democracy, with the hope that patriotic combat experience would prove them human and equal. In the spirit of DuBois, they had proven their intellectual prowess by excelling educationally and professionally. In the spirit of Garveyism some had become self-determined, self-sufficient, and self-defined. Great strides had been made not only through participation in war efforts, but also through critical contributions to society and yet they were still denied civil and human equality.

One of the most ironic tragedies of these exclusionary practices resulted in the death of Dr. Charles Drew. This “world renowned surgeon, medical scientist, educator and authority on

the preservation of blood” died from injuries sustained in a car accident because white hospitals in the vicinity refused to give him “the blood transfusions needed to save his life” (Empak 8).

On the heels of the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement came the Black Power movement. It took peaceful protest to a totally different level. If the Civil Rights Movement with its creed of nonviolence recalls images of rational appeals to slave owners to end the institution of slavery based on benevolent principles, then tenets of the Black Power Movement is its antithesis as it promotes nation building through nationalism, separatism, and black militancy. Urged on by the philosophical teachings of Malcolm X, Blacks had alternative options. Malcolm X had aligned himself with the Nation of Islam and professed Africa as the true salvation of the Black man. Interaction with whites was discouraged as Blacks needed to build their own communities. Black nationalism called for empowerment of the Black community by means of self-definition, self-determination and self-reliance. African Americans no longer needed to attain permission or approval from the establishment for the terms of their existence nor the means for their survival.

Malcolm X and his teachings were often misconstrued. For those who had never read his autobiography, Spike Lee’s film, *Malcolm X*, did much to shed light on the man who stood for so much more than the perceived image of violence so often associated with him. Although it is important to remember that, like the writer, the film director’s lens is influenced by his own viewpoint, Lee’s film placed in perspective Malcolm’s eminent quote “by any means necessary.” His rationale and purposeful crusade to empower Africans was often obscured by depictions of the rifle-toting Malcolm contiguous with the quote. The danger of this vision is its lack of contextualization; it was void of principles rooted in self-defense and racial uplift. Those who

had not acquainted themselves with Malcolm's life experiences and ideology, might assume that he promoted unmitigated violence against white people. Malcolm promoted self-defense in retribution for unwarranted acts of violence imposed on Blacks. This was his response to the arm of justice that refused to protect the rights of Blacks. He said that Blacks would be nonviolent with those who were nonviolent with them, but they would retaliate, "by any means necessary," to protect their humanity if threatened. Malcolm was assassinated in 1965, but the African American quest for liberation from oppressive forces continued to thrive. One of the ways his legacy survived was through the Black Panther Party for Self-defense.

As a young, African-American female coming of age in New Orleans during the sixties, I must briefly contemplate my own experiences regarding the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Like Delany who did not live the experience of the slave, but felt the lash of the institution in its aftermath, I was not actively at the center of either movement. Nevertheless, the efforts and outcomes affected my colored existence just the same. I must recall my observation of the movements through the lens of a child. My contemplation is imperative to this study as it has tremendously shaped the orientation of my discourse analysis of *Panther*.

The height of the Civil Rights Movement is but a blur to me. I vaguely remember as a small child seeing coverage of Dr. King and activities surrounding him on our small black and white television, and, I remember the rioting evoked by his assassination. I also have sketchy impressions of being denied access to some public accommodations. As we drove, for what seemed an eternity, past the cow pastures for a family outing at the now defunct Lincoln Beach, I asked why we couldn't go to the park we had passed miles earlier along the way. My father

gently informed me that Pontchartrain Beach was for whites only. Being the culturally astute sage that he was, he must have softened the blow. I don't ever remember, as a child, feeling an identity crisis due to limited access to anything. As I matured, I would understand the implications of denied access.

Perhaps the devastation of segregation was kept at bay for me by the Black community in which I was immersed. I attended one of the more highly respected Black public schools in the seventh ward during the sixties and seventies. In the walls of that institution I was nurtured academically and ethnically. At home, sandwiched between my parents who were both college educated and culturally conscious, I blossomed as a Black child, assured of my own right to dignity and humanity in a Negro world. My sense of self was nurtured, much like Beryl Gilroy's protagonist Tyrone in *Boy Sandwich* who is rooted in Blackness and West Indian tradition by his aging grandparents. Confident in my existence, I knew I could conquer the world and all of its challenges. Race was not an issue for me until I graduated elementary school and attended a predominately white private school. Armed with the assurance of my divine Black existence, I was able to weather the turbulence in this exclusive institution.

Minimized experiences with the Civil Rights Movement were soon shadowed by the onset of the Black Power Movement. Amid the wearing of dashikies and Afros reverberated the lyrics of James Brown's "say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud." All things African were suddenly in vogue. Nestled in the security of my own Afrocentric, middle class surroundings, I was out of touch with the scope, focus, and intensity of the cause championed by the Black Panther Party for Self-defense. In my childhood innocence, I did not recognize the contradictions that influenced my conception of the panthers at that moment in time. The media

portrayed them as shotgun carrying renegades proclaiming Black militancy with reckless abandon. Many residents in the Black community feared them. Even my parents, with their keen perception of the Black condition, did not have favorable comments about them. Like a sponge, I absorbed their sentiments. In 1970 my fear of the Party was substantiated when the public was informed that Panthers had taken hold of an area in the Desire Community to assert their stance against the police. My mother was a veteran school teacher at one of the two schools located within the parameter of the community held hostage. When the chaos subsided, she was released unharmed.<sup>5</sup>

To say the least, that incident left a lasting imprint on my psyche that would not be modified until some thirty years later. In the course of time, I experienced my own ethnic awakening. The cultural foundation established during my formative years compelled my voracity for an elevated consciousness of my Black existence in America. As materials had become more readily available due to the surge of Afrocentric scholars emerging in the wake of the Black Arts Movement, I devoured as much literature as I could get my hands on. I also took advantage of every opportunity in academe to incorporate Black studies into my mandatory curriculum. Of course, this was at the college level but still somewhat of a challenge at a predominately white state institution of higher learning like the University of New Orleans. The only formal exposure I had to Black History in the high school curriculum was confined to a few lines of text acknowledging the existence of slavery. I was offended by this marginalization of centuries of struggle and achievement. However, my reconsideration of the Black Panther Party did not occur until a viewing of the film *Panther*, in 1995. I had recently attained my master's degree and with a heightened sense of the implications of colonialism for Africans in the

diaspora, I was primed for a critical reevaluation of the Black Power Movement, which nevertheless still held some ambivalence for me. The telling of this “lion’s tale” by Melvin Van Peebles was epiphanic for my cultural identity.

After viewing the film, I came to the conclusion that the Panthers represented a component of Black America responding to the pressures of confinement, exploitation, and brutalization in their own community by the establishment. Like the panther, they had been pushed to the limit. Much like the literary geniuses who had appropriated the oppressor’s language to tell their own stories, the Panthers held White America accountable to their promises of democracy. The Panthers were revolutionaries and Pan Africanists who mobilized the Black community to take charge of their own destiny. One might say they were renaissance men and women who were ahead of their time. Other members of the Black community were hesitant to embrace their militant form of resistance. Some of their tactics were questionable, but the intent of their actions was honorable. Retrieving here the concepts of emic and etic in determining the cultural significance of conduct within a given community, it was difficult for some people to understand or rationalize their methods. Like any mass movement, the Panther Party had its faults, since some members were looking for a vehicle to indulge in misconduct. Of course, these isolated improprieties were overshadowed by the positive contributions the Panthers made to the community, such as voter registration drives, literacy programs, health initiatives, and school breakfast programs for children in the community. I would later learn that the Panthers made the community aware of sickle cell anemia and its impact on the Black community. I would also discover the unadulterated circumstances of the Panthers’ hostile take over of the community.

As I recalled my perception of the New Orleans Chapter of the Black Panther Party in particular, I also realized that class had created a formidable divide in the Black community. I associated the Panthers with the Desire community which was often depicted by the media as an area ridden with crime, drugs, and poverty. To this day, I respect my mother's heroic years of service there, and her commitment to that community as an educator. It was through her experiences in that community that I became privy to what seemed like another world. It was a striking contrast with my middle class environment. Both of my parents knew families who resided in the Desire community and through their interactions, I learned that the community consisted of numerous Black families with strong work ethics and family values.

Years after viewing *Panther*, I had the honor of meeting a key member of the New Orleans Chapter of the organization. Throughout the years, we have had several informal discussions regarding his experiences in The Party. Tyronne Edwards has granted me permission to share highlights of his story. He was one of thirteen Panthers arrested and brought up on charges for attempted murder of police officers in the Desire area.<sup>6</sup> Edwards and his cohorts were eventually found innocent and released from prison. My acquaintance with this historical icon afforded me an opportunity to authenticate my new found appreciation of the Panthers and their cause. For those who had sincere motives, their concerns were driven by the quest to uplift the Black community. Trapped in an environment of poverty and crime perpetuated by inequality and segregation, like the panther, these warriors were ready to fight to the death. Not with reckless abandon, but through well-organized strategic efforts to affect change. During my conversations with this Brother Panther over the years, he has demythologized the Panthers' malicious intent, and I have come to understand the passion of the

movement for him. It is a guarded topic and he is selective in his discussion of it. He holds his former affiliation with the Party in high regard. In some ways, the ideology of the Party continues to influence his community activism today.

I bring to this scholarly analysis of *Panther* a lens shaped by my own experiences during the Black Power Movement, interaction with a legacy of the Party and critical reviews relevant to this study. Therefore, an exploration of *Panther* as Diaspora text is augmented by praxis and theory. Dispersal, emerging identities and visions of homelands are implied and literal. Steeped in Pan African tradition due to the collective efforts and concerns of the Party, manifestations of nation building and Black militancy are explicit.

Melvin Van Peebles' film, *Panther*, is obviously not an "unvarnished tale." Prior to the opening of the actual film, a disclaimer lends clarity to the source and validity of the script:

This film is a dramatization which depicts some real persons and historical events to tell its story. As such, the film uses fictionalized events and dialogue for dramatic purposes. The depiction of any real persons as a part of this story should therefore not be taken as an accurate representation of historical facts. Any similarity between fictional characters and actual persons, living or dead, is unintended and coincidental.

Based on his novel of the same title published some years earlier, Van Peebles uses the conventions of film to say one thing while also saying another. *Panther* at once serves as commentary on the social and political climate of the decade as it pertained to African Americans in the 1960s and it projects Van Peebles' perspective on the Party. He portrays the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self-defense as a rational response to the brutal injustices sweeping the landscape of the Black community in California during the sixties, but film footage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Marches, and Malcolm X precede the

onset of the film, thus properly documenting the oppressive forces infringing on Black communities nationwide. These historical recollections were also indicative of the ideological polarity plaguing the quest for Black liberation. Just as DuBois and Garvey shared a common goal while taking divergent paths, so did Dr. King and Malcolm X. King advocated civil rights for Blacks and human rights for mankind through Christian-based nonviolent protests; conversely, Malcolm X promoted the separatist tenets of Islam. He moved for Black empowerment and liberation from oppressive forces “by any means necessary.” In defense of their humanity, Blacks were encouraged to reciprocate the manner of treatment dealt to them. In other words they would be nonviolent with people who were nonviolent with them, but would also resort to violence if attacked physically. If a government legally bound to protect the constitutional rights of a people fails to oblige, then the people are justified in defending their own cause.

The diasporan nature of *Panther* is implicit, as elements of this paradigm are readily identifiable in the film. The concept of dispersal is somewhat sketchy, but attainable through historical consciousness. Van Peebles never addresses the dispersal of Blacks during the Great Migration or the West Coast as a site for Blacks relocating themselves from the South to an imagined “promised land.”<sup>7</sup> However, Huey Newton, as self-proclaimed Minister of Defense and co-founder of the Oakland chapter of the Party represents convergence between dispersal and visions of homeland. In him resides the spirit of Southern resistance and the potential for liberation in a new urban landscape. In his narration of the impetus for the Party in California, Van Peebles reveals the impact of slavery as it transcends the twentieth century. As the film reveals, more than one hundred years after emancipation, diasporic Africans are still subjected to

forms of apartheid resulting in a continuum of poverty, illiteracy, and disfranchisement. In an effort to gain equal footing in a society that has devalued their humanity for centuries, Africans continue to mobilize their communities in the quest for liberation. Emerging identities materialize in the discord of opinions and reactions to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. When two of the Panthers attempt to recruit a group of Black males shooting hoops in the hood, the basketball court immediately becomes a space for projection, negotiation, and transformation of identities. When Tyrone, the older of the two recruiters, issues a call for the hoopsters to take an active part in revitalizing their community, conflicting responses emerge. Some of the males feel that any form of protest is a waste of time since the voices of the Black community are irrelevant to the government. Others feel that interaction with whites is forbidden and they must look to Africa for salvation. Judge and his best friend are the only two males who agree to investigate the claims of the Party, and both eventually become active members.

Judge, the protagonist, establishes the framework of *Panther* by giving a brief synopsis of the Oakland Chapter of the Party in its initial stages with Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale as its founders. He then authenticates the impending narrative. “For me,” he informs, “the Black Panther Party started in my mom’s front yard.” Like Blake in Delany’s novel, Judge becomes the medium through which Van Peebles tells his “tale” of the intense efforts of a group of Black radicals who mobilized the Black community to revolutionize the plight of their existence.

Judge’s character symbolizes the thousands of Black men who have fought wars to preserve democracy. In comparison with the World Wars, the ambiguity of the Vietnam War made it one of the issues during the ‘60s and ‘70s. Implications of discrimination on the front

lines was a common complaint. Through a conversation with Judge's best friend, it is revealed that Judge joined the service in lieu of an impending jail sentence. When he returned to the states, he pursues his education.

For Judge, education alone constitutes his resistance to social inequality until he is convinced by a series of Panther activities that their program offers a viable tool of resistance. Judge seems most impressed when he witnesses a group of Panthers "policing the police." When Huey and Seale confront a group of police officers brutalizing a black man in the alley just outside of a nightclub, they abort the flogging and maintain dignity of the Black community. When the police order the Black spectators to leave the scene, Huey quotes California state laws which entitles them to witness cops carrying out their duties. The vision of Black men, carrying rifles and holding the "pigs" accountable to state codes liberates the community from oppressive forces. After witnessing this event, Judge joins the Party. Collectively, the Panthers represent the African warrior who defies the brutality and bondage of the establishment because it is wrong. Like Blake, they reject dehumanization at all costs.

Visions of distraught mothers separated from their sons through wrongful shootings replace the auction blocks that ripped families apart in the name of commerce. When Darryl Dowell, a young Black male in a neighboring city, is unjustly shot by police, a group of Panthers seek justice. They travel to Dowell's town to confront the law enforcement officers there at the request of Darryl's mother, but to no avail.

The cruel slave masters materialize in the guise of corrupt law enforcement officials and mobsters, who partner to ensure continued domination of the Black community. When J. Edgar Hoover feels that the Panthers have gained too much of a power base in the Black community,

he flags them as public enemy number one and orders the ultimate contingency plan for annihilation. The ghetto is flooded with heroine to promote genocide, but like Blake, who attempts to abort annexation of Cuba by the Southern United States, Judge, Tyrone, and Alma blow up the warehouse where the drugs are being stored. Once again, the Panthers have employed extreme measures to maintain liberation of the Black community.

Delany and Van Peebles were separated by decades of experience, but shared common history and destiny as Black men subjected to discrimination in America. Delany had the fortune to observe conditions for Blacks in the United States, Europe and Africa. Van Peebles shares a similar background. Like many of his predecessors, Van Peebles began his artistic career in France. Regardless of the differences in their backgrounds, both men understood the importance of being self-defined, self-reliant, and self-determined. In their own right, both men have made critical contributions to the Pan African movement through their works of creative expression.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Note source. This is a combination of fiction and fact.

<sup>2</sup> See *Twelve Years a Slave: Solomon Northup*

<sup>3</sup> Explain here the social political implications of the emancipation proclamation

<sup>4</sup> “The black panther is an animal that when it is pressured it moves back until it is cornered, then comes out fighting for life or death” (25). See *Panther: A Pictorial History of the Black Panthers and the Story Behind the Film*.

<sup>5</sup> Give details of the event that took place between Panthers and NOPD.

<sup>6</sup> There were fourteen accused, but one member was a minor and therefore released.

<sup>7</sup> Discuss migration of Blacks to the West Coast.

## Chapter 6

### Healing the Rupture and Extending the Splendor

When I viewed Gerima's film *Sankofa* in 1995, his graphic depiction of slavery in America confirmed the importance of African continuity for sustenance and grounding in the Diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Through Gerima's lens, I experienced the slave dungeons on the coast of Ghana, the expanse of the great Atlantic, and the insurmountable spirit of the ancestors that bridged the divide metaphorically, but actual experiences are far more emphatic than those lived vicariously.

Gerima provided a brief glimpse into a space previously crafted for me by texts and acquaintance. I had experienced imaginary crossings of the Atlantic to the shores of Ghana with Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah.<sup>2</sup> Acquaintances fortunate enough to make the journey returned to the states with tales of both splendor and rupture. As a conscious daughter of the diaspora, I longed for my own return to the motherland. I intentionally use the terms "return" and "motherland" here in celebration of my Africanity and in protest against those who would have me reject it. My classification as African-American speaks to the hybridity of my existence; I am of African and American descent. Or, as some Pan Africanists would say, I am an African who happened to have been born in America. This hyphenated classification is indication of a legacy of dispersal and dislocation. Therefore it is expected that my existence as a diasporic African, with an emerging identity shaped by social conditioning encourages concerns about the native land of my ancestors. Historically and culturally it has influenced my presence in the Diaspora and the pulse of the Continent flows through my veins. I cannot ignore the cultural crossing. Through syncretism, acceptance of America, but never rejecting the African, the motherland has influenced impressions of my world view.

I have no indication that Ghana, in particular, is the birthplace of my ancestors. As a native of Louisiana, I can consider Senegal or Gambia as possible sites. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall notes that many of the Africans brought to Louisiana originated in the Senegambia region. “Two-thirds of the slaves brought to Louisiana by the French slave trade came from Senegambia... The great medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were founded in the Senegambian region” (29).

At the risk of being criticized for my monolithic view of Africa I defer to the Pan-African concept of common history and common destiny, a motto which Awi Kwei Armah says was upheld prior to European invasion.<sup>3</sup> When the Europeans realized that diluting the units of African nations would advance their cause, then national distinctions became the norm. Africans became more interested in pursuing Ghanaian concerns of Nigerian interests rather than collective concerns of the African Nation. This wedging created a more conducive environment for European encroachment.

As a daughter of the Diaspora, an inclination towards Africa was natural; when I recognized my calling as Pan-African scholar and educator, I understood that a literal return would be mandatory. It would be some time before I would make this journey. In its admonishment to look to the past to make sense of one’s experiences, Sankofa holds tremendous significance for Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora; for me as a daughter of the Diaspora, and for the study proposed here.

In my capacity as educator and facilitator of learning in the academy and the community, I am particularly disturbed by the number of youth and adults who are adrift in the Diaspora without a sense of anchoring because they lack knowledge of their African past. For the past

two years, I have used the Black aesthetic to teach writing in the academy. In my courses, Black literature must be grounded in history and culture. I have been appalled by the minuscule level of consciousness demonstrated by my African American students enrolled in a predominately Black institution. Many of them made references to slavery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they had heard of the Emancipation Proclamation but did not know when it was passed. The terms “Middle Passage,” “diaspora,” and “Pan Africanism” were foreign to their ears. And, several of them were disgruntled by my decision to have them research social movements that were historically relevant to Black advancement. The only concerns important to them dealt with attaining the degree that would give them entry into a white world to make green money. I was saddened by their disillusion.

Some students appreciated the opportunity to explore an aspect of their history that had been neglected. One student actually thanked me in writing for introducing her to a part of her heritage which she knew little about. She was a product of a biracial marriage and had lived in Iowa most of her life. The only Black writers she was familiar with were Alex Haley and Alice Walker. She had seen the movie *Roots* and read Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. This young student who had come to the South to attain an education, was pleased to gain entry into a Black World that would lend balance to her multi cultural existence. In a similar fashion, a woman who attended a work readiness class I facilitated for a local agency acknowledged the impact of her immersion into Black history and culture. One day after class, she thanked me for filling an unidentifiable void in her life. As the woman proceeded with her testimony, I listened intently. For years I have known religion” she said, “but I have not been happy.” The participant confirmed that the conscious awakening of her African identity was the substance needed to fill

the void. As I witnessed the transformation of this diasporic African from fragmentation to wholeness, my allegiance to “Sankofa” was strengthened. The African Diaspora construct was also confirmed.

These two females represent a segment of the Black population who are cultural amnesiacs destined to an eternity of “dis-ease;” they have no inkling of the sustenance and grounding available to them through their rich African heritage. Unfortunately, they have also marginalized the importance of forging contemporary connections between continental and diasporic Africans. Their state of consciousness ,or lack thereof, demonstrates the need for a continuation of this exploration of Pan African manifestations in literature of the African diaspora. In my quest to bridge the divide between Africa and her Diaspora, I am committed to implementing African-centered learning as a source for healing the rupture that still has great impact on our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The study presented here proposes a framework for Pan African narratives as a genre that advances the Black narrative tradition. It is my desire to build on this framework to establish a set of conventions that will also be useful in concretizing Pan African manifestations in literature of the African continent.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The word diaspora is capitalized when used alone as a proper noun in reference to the African diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Dilemma of a Ghost, Two Thousand Seasons, and Comes the Voyager at Last*.

<sup>3</sup> Armah made this statement publicly at a book signing at Community Book Center, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2001.

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## **Vita**

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