

## NGOZI ONWURAH

### "A different concept and agenda"

BLACK DIASPORIC CORPOREALITY—the body—is the mise-en-scène of Black British filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah. Onwurah consistently navigates and challenges the limits of narrative and ethnographic cinema by insisting that the body is the central landscape of an anti-imperialist cinematic discourse. Onwurah's films address the Western ethnographic texts that objectify non-European "subjects" as "the Other" in one of the most specious and persistent acts of colonial domination. However, as Jennifer Barker persuasively argues:

The authority of the Western ethnographic text, and that of narrative theories which claim the cohesive, all-encompassing authority of the implied author and the narrational system as whole, is not so easily asserted. These narrative and theoretical systems fail to account for one inescapable and powerful presence: the body. (66)

Onwurah magnifies the disruptive force of the body in her films and in the process opens up an intertextual anti-colonialist cinema practice. Recognizing the need for an autobiographical approach to ethnography, Onwurah creates an "auto-ethnography," such as that described by Bill Nichols, one that opens up "dialogue, debate, and fundamental reconceptualization" (64). Onwurah's cinema stands in direct contrast to traditional ethnographic (and I would add, narrative) cinema that suppresses knowledge and contains bodies. As Bill Nichols comments, the "anthropologist filmmaker usually disappears behind the optical vantage point where camera and filmmaker preside . . . transforming first-hand, personal experience into third person disembodied knowledge" (68). The disembodied voice of authority is disrupted most radically in Onwurah's *And Still I Rise* (1993) when the "subject," an African woman, directly addresses and criticizes the disembodied voice of authority.

*And Still I Rise*, inspired by a poem by Maya Angelou, is an examination of ethnographic films, particularly African and other Black women's images in colonialist documentary practice. The film opens with a parody of the typical

colonial ethnographic paradigm, an African woman viewed as the subject while a disembodied white male voice describes (and contains) her:

She walked with measured steps, treading the earth proudly with a jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high with a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable glass beads on her neck. Bizarre things. Charms. Gifts of witchmen glittered and trembled at every step. She was *savage* and *superb*. Wild-eyed and magnificent.

Suddenly the subject speaks, moving from object status to subjective identity. At once speaking to the viewer and also the disembodied voice-over, she mocks: "*Sultry. Savage. Dirty. Hard. Exotic*. Many people have trouble seeing Black women as they are because of an eagerness to impose an identity on us." Her disembodied knowledge becomes embodied, and the important work of testifying and breaking down filmic boundaries begins. The central woman narrator is joined by the voices of a multitude of narrators who, like early African-American women writers, for example, use their status as speaking subject insider informant. As Frances Smith Foster writes, women narrators actively "testify to the fact of their existence and insisting that others acknowledge their existence and their testimonies . . . consciously creating new criteria against which the testimonies of others might be judged" (2).

Among the testifying auto-ethnographers in *And Still I Rise*, Onwurah includes a multivoiced range of Black women who speak the body through the history of colonial domination. Singer/songwriter Caron Wheeler explains: that her body, her sexuality, has been inscribed in a history of pain and rape both in her life and in her ancestors' lives. The body of an African slave woman naked and bound, illustrated in an eighteenth century colonial text is interspersed in the film and underscored with a loud crack of a whip and the cry of a horse. As the film continues to unfold, another narrator, Dr. Christopher Davis, a social anthropologist, explains the psychology and economic imperatives behind the history of the ownership of Black female bodies. When Europeans colonized West Africa in the seventeenth century they saw only nakedness and assumed that there were no codes of kinship—only "barbarity." The sexuality of African women (and men) was coded as something that needed to be contained and "civilized." The economics of slavery needed to be supported by theories to "justify" the mistreatment and torture of the Black body and African people. As Stella Dadzie says in the film, "You had a whole range of theories about Black people, Black sexuality, Black social behavior, which were designed to justify the basic idea that Europeans *had the right* to go in and

rape African land and African people and steal their human material and resources."

*And Still I Rise* continues with the documentation of the history of the rape and torture of African women's bodies and in doing so directly confronts painful imagery, as does Jean Rouch, a French ethnographic filmmaker who was lambasted for his ability to "document the unthinkable" (Stoller 85) and whose films were dubbed "the cinema of cruelty," in an effort to dismiss his cinema, which was anticolonialist, antiracist, and antiimperialist. Onwurah also documents the unthinkable, that which seeks to testify to the pain inscribed in Black women, particularly with regard to sexuality. *And Still I Rise* documents what many Europeans, and perhaps even some Africans and African-Americans, would rather not address. The rape of African women became institutionalized by slavery, the filmmaker explains; in many cases slaveowners used rape as a tool of submission, "like breaking in a horse," and the myth that women "enjoyed it" was perpetuated in order to further subjugate Black women and Black sexuality. Some critics may have problems with Onwurah's unflinching approach, her documentation of the unthinkable, but as Manthia Diawara writes in his essay "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," the cultural work of Black independent cinema must produce more than simplistic "positive images" that can "serve the function of plotting Black people in white space and white power" (1993, 12). Ngozi Onwurah maps ethnographies of Black corporeal space and marks out territories of anger and unflinching criticism of colonialist discourse. For example, historian Barbara Bush, interviewed within *And Still I Rise*, reminds us that Victorian Europeans engaged in the invention of supposedly "scientific evidence" that Africans had smaller brains and larger sexual organs. Onwurah reenacts this colonialist scene with the visual representation of Africans being "measured" and objectified. These practices have reappeared in writings such as *The Bell Curve* and in more recent postcolonial efforts to rationalize institutional racism and further the motives of institutionalized racism.

*And Still I Rise* moves to counter such practices and also to remake ethnographic cinema practice. The use of multiple narrators, multiple subjects, and multiple subjectivities moves disembodied knowledge into the body of the film itself and ultimately into the viewer. *And Still I Rise* is itself a viewer, looking back at the first world viewer, indeed, looking back at European history as an object of inquiry. Onwurah's films exemplify the "nomadic" cinema described by Teshome Gabriel:

[one that] brings an unprecedented and unexpected jolt to cinematic reality by smashing down boundaries—between documentary, ethnographic, travelogue, experimental and narrative fiction. . . . It brings the unknown to recognition, the unrepresentable to representation. (1988, 73)

*And Still I Rise* ends with a call for Black women to own their own sexualities and multiple identities. The film revels in "a nomadic type of feminist theory as described by Rosi Braidotti, one "where our discontinuities, transformations, shifts of levels and locations can be accounted for . . ." (172). A nomadic, multivoiced, auto-ethnographical approach is clearly being worked out in Onwurah's earliest film, *Coffee Colored Children* (1988), the performative auto-documentary.

*Coffee Colored Children* blurs the boundaries between autobiographical cinema, experimental cinema, and ethnographic cinema. It is a poetic, black and white, short film, in which the violence, pain, and degradation of children of mixed parentage is fully articulated. This auto-ethnographical film addresses the unspeakable, almost immediately at the beginning of the film. A young white skinhead smears excrement on the front door of the central narrator's childhood home. The film alludes to documentary practice by showing frame pictures of the "subjects," the children who undergo racial harassment, self-hatred, and the ghastly memories of the internalized effects of racism. The central voice-over is embodied in the visuals of a young girl who hated her own reflection and who felt completely isolated and alienated. "We were so strange. The only Black children in the area. The first. We had no father and a white mother." The narrator, like Ngozi Onwurah, was born in Nigeria to a white British mother and a Nigerian father. When Nigeria was undergoing civil war, her mother and her two children were sent to England. The pain and humiliation that both children suffered is recorded, reenacted, and graphically excised by a final sequence of burning all of the symbolic referents of pain in a scene of enduring power and significance. Ngozi Onwurah (and the narrator of *Coffee Colored Children*) throw off the shackles of the burden of representation of what has been termed "the tragic mulatto." As Alile Sharon Larki notes, "The Tragic Mulatto is the Black who is constantly told she/he is neither Black nor white but a hybrid. Seeking her/his identity becomes the primary preoccupation" (160). *Coffee Colored Children* exposes the lie behind the unquestioned celebration of the so-called melting pot ("melting pot or incinerator," the narrator asks) and testifies on behalf of the "coffee colored children

who were "used at school for tag." Included are extremely disturbing sequences in which the children try literally to scrub off their skin with harsh cleansers. The soundtrack is a melange of the children's voice-overs, children's taunting songs, and the voice-overs of the grown-up adults looking at their own internalized painful images. The brother explains (from the adult point of view) how he could not draw himself in art class with a brown face. The sister admits that she wanted to grow up to be a "white princess," a "wonder woman." Extradiegetic noises of scrubbing are overlaid on the soundtrack. Children's voices sing "Ba ba, Blacksheep and Eeney Meenie Miney Mo," and the children continue to self-mutilate themselves with peroxide and cleansers. Onwurah refuses to be victimized as the "tragic mulatto," nor does she allow her auto-ethnographical filmic representatives to be unable to move beyond the stereotype of "tragic mulatto." In unflinchingly speaking the pain through multiple voices and in imaging the pain, Onwurah turns pain into agency. *Coffee Colored Children* becomes a weapon of agency against pain and further self-mutilation. As an auto-ethnography, *Coffee Colored Children* acts out real pain and torture. No longer is the pain contained within the boundary of the sufferer's body, because, as Elaine Scarry explains, "What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency" (my emphasis, 27).

The excesses of the body and pain are moved into the realm of embodied onto logical experience, having an impact upon both the "subject" and the viewer (who, in a sense, becomes a subject). Images of pain have an effect that is physical and corporeal. As Steven Shaviro reminds us, "Perception is turned back upon the body of the perceiver, so that it affects and alters the body, instead of merely constituting a series of representations, for the spectator to recognize" (50). *Coffee Colored Children*, like all of Onwurah's films, is intensely corporeal. The body is a central metaphor for both colonialist oppression and a vehicle for agency. This preoccupation with the body, visual pain, and visual pleasure rises to a crescendo with the final primal scene of catharsis through the agency of the film medium; however, Onwurah problematizes the issue of the politics of bringing racially mixed children into the world. The voice of the female narrator suddenly and markedly redirects her address, with the statement, "Who am I talking to now? . . . My child." After voicing her love to her child, the narrator vows that "the man I love may be white but the father of my child will be Black." The narrator admits that she can't alter the world or its treatment of "coffee colored" children. *Coffee Colored Children* takes issue

with the political machinery of melting pot thinking and describes it as a dangerous lie, a failure, "an incinerator." This is a radical gesture; for the ethnographic film traditionally operates "on the assumption that it can and should alter the world itself or our place within it" (Nichols 63).

The difference between *Coffee Colored Children* and Onwurah's next film, *The Body Beautiful*, is a marked shift of authorship. In *Coffee Colored Children*, Onwurah displaces her autobiographical voice to some extent, while *The Body Beautiful* is not only narrated from the point of view of Ngozi Onwurah herself, but is co-narrated by the filmmaker's mother, Madge Onwurah, who also plays herself in the film. It is impossible to decide whose story the film is: the mother's story of marrying a Nigerian, raising two mixed children, and dealing with breast cancer and a mastectomy, or the daughter's story of growing up in a different image than her white mother, being objectified by a white male gaze as a model, admitting to being unable to see her mother as a sexual being, and finally realizing how to be her mother's daughter. The film is obviously, on one level, an auto-ethnography. It is Onwurah's narrative; her editing, image-making and mise-en-scène. On the other hand, the film certainly belongs to Madge Onwurah as well. Because she appears in the film she becomes a coauthor. *The Body Beautiful* demonstrates the difficulty of answering the question, "whose story?" because it engages in multiple identities. Onwurah problematizes authorship, recognizing that "the question of 'whose story?' has both ontological and moral dimensions" (MacDougall 1994a, 29). These ontological and moral dimensions in turn reflect back on the ethnographic process itself, on filmmaking, and on the politics of representation.

True to form, Onwurah presents images in *The Body Beautiful* that court taboo, reflecting that which is often deemed unrepresentable, painful, unknowable, disruptive, even ugly. The film opens with a painful image of an argument between mother and (then) adolescent daughter. "You titless cow!" the daughter screams, as she accuses her mother of never doing anything in life. The strain in their relationship is at the core of the narrative, and it is visually mapped in the body of the mother in the next scene in which the mother and daughter lie naked together. The camera observes the missing breast and scar of the mother, and the audience is forced into confirming and identifying across the visual apparatus with the unspeakable, the unspoken, the veiled image of a scar of mastectomy that has been rendered an image of greater taboo than almost any other image in the sexual and corporeal economy of body imagery. What is the body beautiful in Western society? Onwurah gazes at this

question, through the imagery of the scar, and the scar itself becomes a simulacra of all the baggage in Western culture strapped onto women's images of beauty and the measurement of women in the sexual economy of the body.

In a typical evocation of the oppositional critical Black gaze, Onwurah opens up the cinematic representation of women by enunciating that which has been rendered taboo. The scar of the mastectomy stares at the viewer, much in the same manner that the Black filmmaker interrogates the gaze of the Othered Western male gaze, looking back and naming the pain. It is important to note that the scar signifies the memory of the senses of pain and pleasure. As Nadia Seremetakis writes, "The points of the body once awakened are not merely marks on the surface but are an active capacity. Awakening these points as sensate is opening the body to semiosis" (216). The suture of the vicious remark on the soundtrack ("You titless cow!") across the representation of the scar demonstrates a remarkable filmic fissure of the sensory memory of pain. Seremetakis writes, "The memory of one sense is stored in another: that of tactility in sound, of hearing in taste, of sight and sound" (216). Onwurah's mining of the memory of the senses, her memory of her senses, both in *Coffee Colored Children* and *The Body Beautiful*, grinds her authorial signature in the frame and the sound in ways that are designed to tap into the stored pain of sensory memory and alter it through the filmmaker's journey. Onwurah's mapping of the memory of her mother's senses is transgressive, yet understandable within the semiotic economy of the mother-daughter exchange system. This bound energy has as immeasurable amount of capacity for healing, yet it is difficult to render on film because of the audience's tendency to separate their identification amongst bodies of individuals. The mother-daughter economy of the senses is the shared frame of *The Body Beautiful*. The fragmented narrative style of the film marks a return to the senses, which "can never be a return to realism . . . always mediated by memory and assembled from sensory and experiential fragments, this assemblage will always be an act of imagination—thus opposed to the reductions of realism" (Seremetakis 217).

As the camera pans across the bodies of mother and daughter to reveal the scar of the mastectomy, the voice-over narrates the life of the filmmaker herself. The film revisits the pain of the mother's preparation for the mastectomy and fight with the cancer inside her. A cold clinical authorial voice-over announces, "It's important for you to realize that you're far from being the first woman to face the prospect of losing a breast. These days we do more mastectomies than tonsillectomies." The voice enunciates the painful memory of the

medical profession's dismissal of women's rights of ownership over her own body, her own pain, her lack of voice in the medical arena.

The authorial voice shifts back and forth between mother and daughter as their story unfolds. As the daughter embarks upon a career as a model we hear Madge Onwurah: "I watched as she joined the elite breed of women penciled in by men who define the sliding scale of beauty that stops at women like me. I had been muted." The daughter, as filmmaker, retrieves her mother's memories and sees through their lines the pain rendered by the beauty system that separated them yet gave the daughter a great deal of pleasure in the beauty of her own body. In a scene in which the pair go to a bathhouse, the daughter is forced to recognize that she has never understood how others might view her mother. As the mother falls asleep, her towel drops away from her missing breast and all of the women in the shower gaze on with looks of shame and horror. In the next scene, the daughter and mother envision the mother having sex with a young Black man. The forbidden fantasy remakes the sexual economy of racial bodies. The mother voices her fantasy to be "desired for my body and not in spite of it." The daughter voices her fantasy to resexualize her mother's body through imagining/imaging this scene. Intercut with the lovemaking scene, the daughter laughs and puts makeup on her own cleavage as she revels in the pleasure of her own body and the body of her eroticized mother. The scene threatens to objectify the Black male body, yet the filmmaker subverts objectification by intercutting a voice-over of the white male authority (a doctor) describing how a woman should have no problems getting along after a mastectomy. This disembodied voice-over figure, first heard at the beginning of the film, is used deliberately by the filmmaker to displace the eroticized gaze of the viewer. The audience is moved into a distanced, critical stance, where he/she is reminded of the mother's ordeal at the hands of the medical establishment. The pleasurable sexual image is marked by the mother's pain, and sexual objectification of the Black male body becomes problematized. A voice-over of the daughter interrupts the scene, screaming at the man, "touch her you bastard," when his hand comes near the mastectomy scar. There is no question that the filmmaker here claims ownership of the scene (which is co-owned by her mother). The filmmaker and her mother control the gaze, the image, the film.

Madge Onwurah and Ngozi Onwurah move from objectified bodies to subjective identities. In the final image of the film, the women lie naked together embracing. The daughter reflects upon her own struggle for a sense of image:

A child is made in its parents image. But to a world that sees only Black and white, I was made only in the image of my father. Yet my mother has molded me. . . . fought for me, protected me . . . I may not be reflected in her image but my mother is mirrored in my soul. I am my mother's daughter for the rest of my life.

The enunciative power of the filmmaker's naming herself her mother's daughter records the exchange from object to subject in a corporeal exchange system in which "the act of calling and naming is also an act of exchange. . . . The transcription of self onto substance and then into the child's body is inseparable from the transmission of emotions as a fuel for this exchange" (Sere-metakis 216). The exchanges of sensory memory and experience across and between mother and daughter render the film as a medium of exchange of bodily senses. Onwurah works in that constantly evolving stage of memory image-making that reworks the boundaries of narrative and ethnographic films. Nevertheless, as James Clifford comments, "the subjectivities produced in these often unequal exchanges—whether of 'natives' or of visiting participant-observers—are constructed domains of truth, serious fictions" (10). The serious fictions produced by *The Body Beautiful* are emphatically multivocal, especially with regard to mother-daughter authorial signatures and authorial intents. However, I agree with Bill Nichols, who claims that films like *The Body Beautiful* do not need to be analyzed so much as experienced (15).

*The Body Beautiful* and *Coffee Colored Children* are sutured by the image of the veil. In both films the central female protagonist, who is to a large extent the alter ego of the filmmaker herself, spends considerable time playing with (or struggling with) a veil. In the case of *Coffee Colored Children*, the young girl wraps herself in a white wedding veil as she attempts to scrub the blackness off of her skin. In *The Body Beautiful*, the veil recurs most blatantly in the fantasy sex scene, which is shrouded in draped veils, and in numerous scenes in which the central heroine, Ngozi's stand-in, seductively plays with a veil, often in a mirror. Gloria Gibson writes that "the veil or mask is a recurring symbol incorporated in Black film and literature" (371). The veil is dialogized as a signifier of the shroud that silences Black women's sexuality, and yet it can also represent a liberating force, a reclamation of Black female space, the female gaze, the scars of the body, and a new skin of self-ownership. Onwurah's continual ludic play with the image of the veil, especially as an eroticized trope in *The Body Beautiful*, combined with the ritual burning of the white wedding veil in *Coffee Colored Children*, demonstrates the filmmaker's mastery of the

veil as a multifaceted representation of the scopic (the visual) and the haptic (the corporeal) knowledge invested in the overloaded signifier of the veil. The veil is at once a shifting signifier that moves between signing captivity (in patriarchal hegemonic discourse) and freedom (as a liberated speaking subject). Veiling and unveiling act to "reappropriate space or to claim anew difference, in defiance of genderless hegemonic standardization" (Minh-ha 1991, 151).

It is deeply significant that Onwurah invokes the mask and masquerade in the trope of the "masked image" in both *Coffee Colored Children* and *The Body Beautiful* because she inverts the traditional European gaze that seeks to encase the body of women, and Black women in particular, in an exotic mask, a clinical shroud of medical discourse, and a fetishized object in fashion discourse. In *Coffee Colored Children*, the filmmaker burns the wedding veil signifying defiance of societal codes that only see skin in binary terms of Black and white. In *The Body Beautiful*, she attacks the clinical gaze of the medical establishment that seeks to deny her mother's pain and mask her removed breast. The unveiling of the mastectomy scar rejects the eyes of medical discourse. In the process, the film reminds us of the patriarchal European configurations of femininity as a reminder of "elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity" as Mary Ann Doane explains (1987, 38). Ownership of the body of both the scopic and haptic zones of the body: the skin and embodiedness, corporeality is Onwurah's project.

In a brilliantly executed scene in *The Body Beautiful*, the young model stands before a mirror and removes a veil from her breasts. She tries to imagine what it might be like to not have a breast. "It is pointless," she concludes, "like trying to imagine being blind." This is the final recognition of the mask and masquerade between women. It is an acceptance of difference between mother and daughter, and on a larger scale, a political statement about difference. The real world of racial difference, which is so often denied by overdetermined essentialist feminist proscriptions, is unveiled as a masquerade itself. As Onwurah cannot know the experience of her mother's mastectomy, we as viewers cannot know the experience of growing up in Britain with Black skin and a white mother. We can identify to some extent, but we risk essentialism if we attempt to speak of a unified woman subject as a monologic representative of the feminine. In this manner, Onwurah displaces visual pleasure and identification and demands subjectivity. The mask and the veil appear as "signs of the same need for, and a very similar drive toward, the representation of a subjectivity that, however diverse its sociohistorical configurations and modes of

expression, has come into its own as political consciousness," according to Teresa de Lauretis (1986, 17).

The cinema of Ngozi Onwurah threatens to remake subjectivity outside of the shrouding, veiling discourses of film theory that so often focus on the psychoanalytic over the phenomenological, the mind over the body. As Bill Nichols argues, the phenomenological tradition "takes considerable interest in the question of the body and how embodied action—performance—constitutes a sense of self in relation to others. . . . It brings into focus the (largely absent) body of the filmmaker him or herself as the organizing locus of knowledge" (72).

By foregrounding the body, the auto-ethnographic films of Ngozi Onwurah engage in what feminist anthropologist Allison Jablonko terms "haptic learning, learning through bodily identification" (182). Moving across the boundaries of visual pleasure, both scopic and haptic, Onwurah carves out a space for the skin, the body, the uncontained and uncontainable vessel of subjectivity. The body as haptic and scopic is irreducible and yet embodied. As Jennifer Barker explains, "the body as excess presents such a problem for current theories . . . that posit narration as cohesive, unambiguous containment of different and contradicting voices within the text" (68).

Ngozi Onwurah's films are similar to those of Trinh T. Minh-ha in that they both address assumptions behind narrative theory and ethnographic theory, as well as the larger issues around the representation of difference. It is imperative to recognize that these works, as Bill Nichols concludes:

draw much of their inspiration from elsewhere, from other traditions, other forms, other perspectives and emphases . . . they invite "us" to reflect on the current state of, and discourse about, ethnographic [and narrative] film tradition that have sought to represent others when, "we" [white Europeans] have been told they could not represent themselves. (91)

Self-representation owns both filmic space, haptic space, and cultural space in *Monday's Girls* (1993) and *The Desired Number* (1994), Onwurah's more straightforward ethnographic film. In *Monday's Girls*, Onwurah documents two young Nigerian women's different experiences of the traditional rite of passage of the ceremony in which young virgins, iriabo, spend five weeks in "fattening rooms" and emerge to be celebrated and confirmed as women of their community. Onwurah cautiously avoids the traditional ethnographic objectification and silencing of African subjects by strategically choosing to allow the self-representation of the speaking women, Florence, who is honored to

take part in the ceremony, and Asikiye, who has been Westernized<sup>1</sup> by living in an urban environment and who finds the ceremony intolerable. In choosing to juxtapose Asikiye and Florence, Onwurah avoids the typical Western-centered binaristic judgmental approach that would seek to represent the African ceremony as sexist and "savage." *Monday's Girls* inverts the cultural paradigm within which most ethnographic films operate, the realm of imperialist nostalgia and what has been called "the white man's burden," or as Renato Rosaldo defines it:

a peculiar sense of mission, "the white man's burden,"—where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones . . . static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining the felicitous progress of civilized identity. (1993a, 70)

*Monday's Girls* refutes the example of the "savage" reference point, one that constructs easily read "Third World subjects for first world consumption" (Arora 293). Instead, Onwurah documents the plurality of tradition, modernity, and the speaking subjectivities of Florence and Asikiye. Like *The Body Beautiful*, *Monday's Girls* moves across boundaries of scopic and haptic knowledge, letting women bespeak the pleasure and pain of the rituals. The scenes of the young girls being celebrated and worshipped, through body-painting, feeding, and dancing, are indelibly corporeal. When the girls wear large copper coils on their legs and learn the traditional dances they talk about their feelings and relate the joy of the experience, as well as their boredom and discomfort. Florence emerges from the ritual with palpable pride, exuberance, and a sense of herself as "a real woman now," a woman of community, while Asikiye is unable to bare her naked breasts and is thus disqualified from the proceedings because of her Westernization.

*Monday's Girls* forces the question of conflicting interpretations of cultural ideologies and culturally defined senses of space. The iriabo women clearly own the spaces of the fattening rooms, therefore they own space in a way not usually represented by a Western gaze. This rendering space ownership defies Western feminism's insistence that all women have been trapped in a captive domestic space that oppresses them. As cultural anthropologist Henrietta L. Moore confirms "the plurality of culture and the existence of alternative interpretations and values are not usually emphasized in the symbolic analysis of space, or indeed in the symbolic analysis of any form of cultural representation" (74).

Space is not read through a colonial gaze in *Monday's Girls*, nor is the

female body. Women of the African village have alternative models of the world and the gendered organization of space. Their traditional world view is encroached upon by the actions of Asikiye. Asikiye brings with her the acquired sense of shame and privacy she feels about her body as she reads through her Westernized cultural self-representation. She has shamed her family because she was unable to bare her naked breasts in front of the entire village. The conflict between African models and Western models of knowledge are highlighted in the case of family planning issues in *The Desired Number* (1994); (also known as *A Question of Numbers*).

*The Desired Number* refers to the number of children that is traditionally hoped for in the families of the Iwollo village in Nigeria where women usually have at least nine children, we learn, because of a traditional need for labor, combined with the high infant mortality rate in Nigeria. *The Desired Number* demonstrates the hardships of women because of this cultural practice. Women are recognized for their efforts with the Ibu Eze ceremony. *The Desired Number* demonstrates that birth control has been misused as a colonializing practice imposed upon African people. A Nigerian nurse, for example, argues that the common use of Depo-Provera, which is an injected form of birth control, implies that African women are too irresponsible to take the Pill or use another type of birth control. A better option, she suggests, is the self-managed family-planning clinic, where women are able to learn about various methods of birth control and make a choice in consultation with their families. Instead of enforcing birth control upon Nigerian women, the West might do better to stay out of the issue and stop sending Christian missionaries who preach against birth control.

Onwurah's ethnographic approach to the women and men of the Iwollo village in *The Desired Number* rejects First World consumption of Third World issues and people. As Poonam Arora reminds us, films that successfully manage to avoid this pattern demonstrate "attention to culturally specific structures of representation" (294), thus avoiding the tendency to characterize African women as disempowered, tradition-bound, weak, passive, and incapable of free thought or action. This is not to say that Onwurah completely embraces cultural difference and disavows her own Western feminism. Instead, she walks between the margins of cultural representation as she exposes them in all of their paradoxes. Most importantly, in both *Monday's Girls* and *The Desired Number*, Onwurah sheds light on the ways in which:

Contact with white societies has not generally led to a more "progressive" change in African and Asian sex/gender systems. Colonialism attempted to de-

stroy kinship patterns . . . disrupting, in the process, female organizations that were based upon kinship systems which allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation. (Carby 224)

As Hazel Carby comments in *The Empire Strikes Back*, African women's struggle to gain control over their own bodies and reproductive systems has been undermined by intrusive colonial practices, including the invasive "racist experimentation with the contraceptive Depo-Provera and enforced sterilizations" (219). *The Desired Number* demonstrates that Nigerian women are taking control of their bodies, by either choosing to remain traditional or opening family planning clinics. *Monday's Girls* celebrates the power and autonomy that young African women gain in the iraye ceremony, and at the same time dialogically enunciates the manner in which the disruptive forces of colonialism have rendered Asikiye completely unable to take part in the female celebration of power and community, nevertheless she affirms her own Westernized sense of autonomy and pride in this choice. Few ethnographic films articulate the multifaceted experience of Black women across differing systems of economy, kinship, and community.

In 1994, Ngozi Onwurah directed one of the first authentically independent Black British feature films, *Welcome II the Terrordome*. *Welcome II the Terrordome* is a dystopic political action thriller. Its militancy has come under criticism; however, its reception must be read within the context of its ability to disrupt Hollywood films that generally draw upon a "variety of narrative and visual 'strategies of containment' that subordinate the Black image and subtly reaffirm dominant society's traditional racial order" (Guerrero 237). Critics' discomfort with the militancy of *Welcome II the Terrordome* reaffirms the legitimacy of the experiences of bell hooks, who also found that her militant writings voiced "ideas many Black folks hold but dare not express lest we terrify and alienate the white folks we encounter daily. . . . Black militancy is always too extreme in the white supremacist context, too out-of-order, too dangerous" (1994, 359). British critics' discomfort with the film demonstrates a parallel phenomenon in America noted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in which African-Americans have demonstrated a "paradoxical tendency to censure its own" (200). Ngozi Onwurah breaks the binds of the critics who attempt to enforce a gag order of sorts, one that Kobena Mercer dubs the "social responsibility of the artist Paradigm" (248). As a member of the Black British community (and the larger diasporic Black community), not to mention the Black women's community, Onwurah flies in the face of the notion of the artist who is assumed, at times to be "racially 'representative,' in the sense of speaking on

behalf of a supposedly homogeneous and monolithic community . . . binding him or her ever more closely to the burden of being 'representative.' " (Mercer 248).

Ngozi Onwurah refuses to be a so-called "representative" Black/woman. As she told Trevor Ray Hart, in an interview in *Time Out*, "what they expect a Black woman film-maker to be making is definitely not the kind of movies I want to make" (22). Onwurah readily admits that she has a "different concept and agenda for film-making," and she remarks upon the importance of the fact that her film features "Black women with guns." While traditional action films from Hollywood champion white (or Black) men, with guns, they generally function to remove the dangerous threat of blackness. *Welcome II the Terrordome* disrupts this colonizing signification, and, as Onwurah herself says nothing to assuage anyone's fears, "I don't expect to feel safer walking around because my film was seen by some people" (Hart 19).

*Welcome II the Terrordome* is a highly disturbing and disrupting call for action. By placing the narrative in the future of a grim dystopic science fiction landscape, Onwurah displaces and rereads Black history. In this way, Onwurah masterfully evokes the past and the present through the scopic prism of the future. The absences of popular memory of colonialist domination of the Black body, and the present Black struggles against drugs, continual racism, unemployment and poverty, are evoked through a multiple chain of associations in the film. *Welcome II the Terrordome* proves that it is possible for "the 'colonized' [to] express an authentic self in an alien language imposed by the imperial power of the colonizer" (Mercer 63). It forces the viewer to confront the Black body as a site of commodification, sterilization and culturally approved genocide. It is unflinching in its exposure of police brutality against Black people that is supported by institutionalized racist theorizations of blackness, which, as Paul Gilroy comments, "legitimate new police tactics and methods for containment of social disorder" (154) and are based on "pathological conceptions of Black life" (153). The most chilling moment comes for the spectator when she/he realizes that the grim science fiction *mise-en-abîme* of the Terrordome is hardly a fiction at all, only a slightly exaggerated simulacrum of reality as it is faced every day by Black people in American cities. It is this unflinching re-vision of reality across the chain of multiple signifiers that is so brilliant in the film. The filmmaker's state of mind when she wrote the film accounts, in part, for its *mise-en-abîme*:

I wrote it in about three days when I had a toothache and couldn't get to the dentist and they put me on painkillers, so I was smashed out of my head, sleep-

ing Public Enemy in my bedroom, in agony. And what I did was put lots of true stories in—like a white friend of mine who was pregnant by a Black guy, and her ex-boyfriend [who is white in the film version] came and punched the baby out of her, and then there was the Howard Beach incident—and I put all these things together happening to a group of people during one night. (Hart 19)

*Welcome II the Terrordome* takes its name from the music of the rap group Public Enemy, dragging the politics of hip-hop Hollywood films into direct confrontation with the economy of the Black body. This economy continually reinforces codes that measure the worthiness of bodies according to race and gender. Black women and men are routinely devalued, murdered and sacrificed in Hollywood feature films. The dystopic world of the Terrordome is a city ghetto of the future, where only blacks live and the economy is drug based. Two rival Black gangs fight for business with white customers from outside the city. Angela (played by Suzette Llewellyn) is married to Black Rad (played by Felix Joseph). She tries to shield her son, Hector (played by Ben Wyter), from the drug-dealing life. Black Rad's brother, Spike (played by Valentine Nonyela), is living with a white woman, Jodie (played by Saffron Burrows), who is pregnant by Spike. Jodie's white ex-lover, Jason (played by Jason Traynor), is a vicious racist. One day he sees Jodie with Spike and decides to turn in Spike's gang to the police. He assaults Jodie and kicks her until she begins to miscarry. Meanwhile, Angela's son, Hector, dies trying to flee Jason's gang. Angela shoots Jason and the white cops who try to arrest her. Angela's family turns on Spike and Jodie, blaming them for the death of Hector and the arrest of Angela. Hector's grandmother, Rosa, explodes in a tirade against white people. A voice-over of a Black man explains that he has no pity for the white woman or the fetus. He has only anger. "I want you to be angry with me. I'm sick and tired of going to the funerals of Black men who have been murdered." On the soundtrack we hear excerpts from speeches of Malcolm X:

Until the American Negro lets the white man know that we are really really ready and willing to pay the price that is necessary for freedom, our people will always be walking around here second-class citizens, or what you call, "twentieth century slaves." The price of freedom is death.

Onwurah cuts this extradiegetic speech into the scene of the funeral for Hector. She intercuts it with shots of Black men training to overthrow the government, shots of Jodie in horrible pain, shots of Angela being brutalized by the police on videotape, and an overhead shot of Hector's dead body as it is

in a film that demands a lifting of the veil of suppressed realities, and demands the desensitized viewer to engage in sensitivity, in looking at, and being looked at, by images of unspeakable horror. The unspeakable images include a neck-lacing of a Black man by a rival gang, the brutality that Jodie suffers at the hands of her ex-lover, numerous scenes in which police brutalize Black men and women, the death of Hector, and the horrible, sadistic beating of Angela, who is tied to a chair and tortured by a white woman prison guard. These scenes are particularly horrific, because they are viewed off of the panopticonic video monitor of the police station, and they force us into an admittance of the role of white women in oppressing Black women. In her writings, Alile Sharon Larkin underscores the importance of asking the question, "What about the historical oppression of Black women and men at the hands of white women?" (166). A moment in the opening sequence of the film suggests that Onwurah recontextualizes this question across the span of time, beginning in the seventeenth century, in the roots of slavery.

The opening sequence, the Ibo landing of *Welcome II the Terrordome*, confronts us with the sexual politics between white women and African slaves that continues to be played out in a hybridized modern fashion. During the prologue, filmed in sepia tones, the Ibo people of West Africa are shackled and chained in leg irons and collars. A captured African slave is dragged to the ground and branded. A colonial woman with a distinctly southern accent says, "Thank heavens they got him. I'm sure I'll sleep better." Another white woman, who is Jodie in the future world, exchanges a sultry look with an African man in shackles. The sexual politics of racism are indelibly grounded in the commodification of Black bodies, and white women are inescapably significant in this historical and cultural moment. Onwurah avoids the problem of rendering an oversimplified historical narrative by embracing the volatility of the power of the oppositional gaze. In the words of Kobena Mercer, "What made Black Power such a volatile metaphor was its political indeterminacy: it meant different things to different people in different discourses" (302).

Reading the signifier of Black militancy in *Welcome II the Terrordome* across cinematic discourse is a hyperrealist act of revisualizing the past and future of Black people. Onwurah embraces the hyperreal (as it is described by Baudrillard), the narrative of Black bodies floating through time and space, transgressing the binaries of subject/object, death/life beyond the codes of the Western constructed panopticon projection space. Onwurah's hyperreal not only reaches out to the audience but is manifested in the metaphor of the spiritual voyage across liminal time and space. In the prologue of the film, the Ibo

people walk into the sea to their spiritual lives. They end up at the Terrordome, and after a lifetime of slavery as drug dealers they finally throw over the white ruling class in an armed uprising. In the final images, Onwurah cuts back to the Ibo landing, where the Africans emerge from the sea and raise their arms to break their shackles. If the price of freedom is death, as the film argues, it must be remembered that according to Ibo legend, "Death is not the end, but the start of a voyage back to the spiritual homeland." If the images of *Welcome II the Terrordome* are sometimes received as unwelcome, it is only further proof of Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that "At the moment . . . Europeans embarked on one of the greatest enterprises of appetite, acquisition, and control in the history of the world, their own discourses became *haunted by all that they could not control*" (my emphasis, xvii).

The Black rage that is routinely contained by mainstream Hollywood hip-hop/gangsta films is fully unleashed in the powerful narrative of *Welcome II the Terrordome*. The film exposes the market economy of drug-trafficking of the modern city of "enclosed illegality" (278), as described by Michel Foucault. In the film, the Terrordome is a metonymic metaphor, at once signifying a prison and the city, where Black men are enslaved in the economy of the drug trade. In the film, the drugs are provided by white drug lords. The police, in turn, "make sure the drugs stay in the ghetto." This schema reflects the rise of drug traffic in Black urban communities, which is contained and monitored by the police who report to the ruling class. The attitude toward the drug trade, like the attitude toward the slave trade, as Michel Foucault explains, springs from the prison organization of enclosed and controlled illegality "of which the poorer classes are often the first victims" (278). This breeds a life of super-vised delinquents. The imprisonment of Black people, as in the Terrordome:

. . . cannot fail to produce delinquents. It does so by the very type of existence that imposes upon its inmates: whether they are isolated in cells or whether they are given useless work, for which they will find no employment. . . it is to create an unnatural, useless and dangerous existence. (Foucault 206)

At the same time, the carceral system "succeeds in making the power to punish [seem] natural and legitimate" (Foucault 301). *Welcome II the Terrordome* is a horrifyingly dystopic glimpse of a carceral society to come, as much as it is an indictment of the carceral society of today and the carceral society of colonial slavery of the past. The carceral colonization of the Black body is monitored by the police through the panopticonic video camera, in which all events are recorded. *Welcome II the Terrordome* evokes the penitentiary system

described in Foucault's study of the prison system and studies the politics of the colonial subjugation of Black people. Onwurah turns the panopticonic gaze against itself, and unveils the Black-speaking subject as an agent of self-empowerment. The film's movement across historical time periods "requires the spectator's recognition of the double, or paradoxical, status of moving images that are present referring to events which are past" (Nichols 117). The doubling of temporal zones mediates the filmic knowledge across boundaries of the border zones of realistic narratives. Ngozi Onwurah, in both *Welcome II the Terrordome*, and all of her other films, works within what Bill Nichols terms "the blurred border zones of realism" (119). The cinema of Ngozi Onwurah demands that the participatory viewer engage in embodied knowledge that lies beyond traditional hermeneutic knowable truths. In all cases, we are moved to ask questions beyond the text, we are moved beyond objectivity into subjectivity and left with the desire for introspection. In so doing, Onwurah responds to Homi K. Bhabha's demand that we begin to "open up an intertextual space in between the signposts of traditional inquiries" (1992, 82). Ngozi Onwurah's auto-ethnographic, ethnographic, and (hyper)narrative films move the knowledge of Black corporeality across the boundary of colonialist hegemony. If she incites rage and invokes pain, she does so to indict received notions of passivity and ignorance. Hers is a thinking and feeling cinema, a wedding of formalism and realism and something irreducibly and excessively corporeal and hyper-real.

## JULIE DASH

"I think we need to do more  
than try to document history"

HOW HAS HOLLYWOOD filmmaking constructed blackness? Perhaps an even better question is: How has Hollywood filmmaking constructed American whiteness? How do the films of Julie Dash, an African-American woman who is widely regarded as the most successful Black woman filmmaker "working within the system," question Hollywood constructions of American blackness, whiteness, and multiracedness? Julie Dash is a member of a group of Black independent filmmakers known as the LA Rebellion, a group of UCLA graduate students who were "engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema, screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people" (Bambara 119). First and foremost, the films of Julie Dash take on constructions of whiteness and blackness against the grain of American cinema.

Mark Reid has aptly noted that "film imagery has its roots in slavery," and that Hollywood studios have "portrayed race relations as a static exchange in which all the villains and victims are Black, and all the saviors are White" (1992, 26). The early short films that Julie Dash directed worked to displace Hollywood imagery and replace it with an oppositional cinema of Afrocentricism. In *Diary of an African Nun* (1977), *Four Women* (1978), and *Phillis Wheatley* (1989), Dash rejects the "Klan mentality" that Mark Reid locates in American films, including D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) "and its descendants" (1992, 28). Julie Dash's work is a direct response to a cinema that seeks to silence her voice, locate her as an exotic threatening Other, and signify her as "lack" or "absence," both because of her gender and race. *Diary of an African Nun* is an adaptation of a short story by Alice Walker, *Four Women* is an experimental dance film, and the more recent *Phillis Wheatley* is a celebration of the early African-American poet, Phillis Wheatley (1753-84), who is undergoing a renaissance in feminist and post-colonial literary circles.

In 1982, Dash completed *Illusions*, the first in a series of films that decon-