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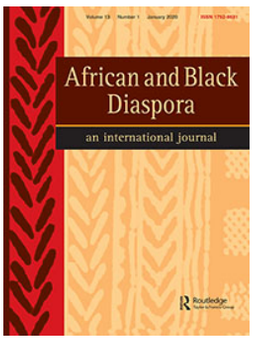

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Science-women: arcane knowledge and African spirituality in independent African-American cinema of the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the significant role played by arcane knowledge and expressions of African spirituality in the iconography of powerful black women in three films directed by independent African-American filmmakers in the 1990s: *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993, USA), *Mother of the River* (Zeinabu irene Davis, 1995, USA), and *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons, 1997, USA). My discussion draws on the orature and legendary tales of West African-based cosmologies in the African diasporas of the Americas and the concept (and practice) of 'conjure' in African–American cultures. It argues that heroic black women characters possessing extraordinary or supernatural powers not only predate the current vogue of cinematic superheroism, but that the iconography of such 'science-women' is embedded in culturally specific, African-rooted cosmological, epistemological and spiritual contexts. I argue that the feminine power celebrated in the films by the independent African-American filmmakers discussed here draw on legendary and historical accounts of women in African diasporic oral, literary and spiritual traditions for their cinematic storytelling to construct an affirmative and paradigmatic model of black female heroism based on empowering African spiritual beliefs and arcane knowledge.

KEYWORDS

African-American cinema; African spirituality; representations of Black Women; Black female heroism; African Diaspora Studies

Introduction

Although there have been a few black superhero films before it, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) attained both critical acclaim and commercial juggernaut status, shattering perceptions within Hollywood that black superhero films do not attract large audiences either domestically in the US, or globally.[1] More importantly, the film generated considerable cinematic pleasure for black audiences globally, of a kind not frequently associated with the products of Hollywood's dream factory with its long tradition of demeaning images, erasure and stereotyping of black subjects. Not only does *Black Panther* construct as its primary setting a technologically advanced country hidden in the heart of Africa and a black superhero who is African, it depicts Wakanda's social organization as one in which its women are recognized as equals to men in status, intelligence, wisdom, leadership and strength. It also explores a facet of global relations within the African diaspora rarely encountered in popular culture and only infrequently

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in scholarship. However problematically such tensions are resolved narratively and ideologically in the film, the cinematic focus on the relationship between Africa and its diaspora in the US breaks new terrain, refusing to gloss over contesting perspectives among some African-Americans and Africans on how best to face the challenges of black oppression.

The representation of women in *Black Panther* was a source of particular pride for many black women, unaccustomed to seeing themselves depicted on the silver screen in such a diversity of empowered characters. It reminds us that representation is not only key to interrogating identity politics, but can also be used to excavate, claim back, and construct a refreshed domain for suppressed knowledge. The film's depiction of secret knowledge hidden from the world to protect the technology it generates from being used to negative ends shares, in some ways, the object of inquiry in this essay. It is in the domain of epistemology that I explore how forms of archaic knowledge and spirituality were utilized to construct 'superheroines' within culturally specific, African-rooted cosmological, epistemological and spiritual contexts. To this end, I revisit how selected independent African-American filmmakers paid homage to the cultural continuum between Africa and its diaspora in three films of the 1990s, directed by diasporic filmmakers located in the USA: *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993, USA), *Mother of the River* (Zeinabu irene Davis, 1995, USA), and *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons, 1997, USA).[2] Specifically, I examine how Gerima, Davis and Lemmons draw on the rich reservoir of oral legendary tales and historical accounts of (super)powerful black women in their cinematic project of countering cultural erasure and the epistemological violence generated by enslavement, colonization and racism.

Black filmmaking and expressive culture

Black film criticism was launched in 1929 in a 'little magazine' in Switzerland founded by American expatriates (Cripps 1978), but critical inquiry into black cinematic expression only really developed momentum in the mid-1970s with the publication of several explorations of the stereotyping of black Americans in cinema, primarily in Hollywood cinema.[3] In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of young, mainly black, politically engaged student filmmakers emerged at UCLA. Their challenges to the mainstream, Hollywood-dominated forms of productions, aesthetic approaches, themes and ideological perspectives later earned them such labels as 'The LA School of Black Filmmakers' and 'The LA Rebellion.' These pioneering filmmakers mentored, and were sources of inspiration and influence on, a second generation of black filmmakers at UCLA, a number of them women.[4] Two of the filmmakers discussed here are products of the two 'waves' of this tide of fresh perspectives on black cinematic production and representations. Ethiopian-born Haile Gerima was a key member of the first wave while Zeinabu irene Davis, who spent some time as an undergraduate in Kenya, formed part of the second wave.[5]

Also part of this radical revisioning of cinema was Teshome Gabriel, an Ethiopian professor at UCLA who became a leading scholar and proponent of Third Cinema. Gabriel's influential book, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (1989), delineates a methodological framework based on the concept of Third Cinema, and argued for the use of cinema as a combative tool that mirrors Frantz Fanon's 'literature of combat.'

Released in the same year, Gladstone Yearwood's anthology, *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, mapped a black cinema aesthetic which emphasized the transformation of dominant cinematic practices. He defined a black film as 'any film whose signifying practices … emanates from an essential cultural matrix deriving from a collective black sociocultural and historical experience and [which] uses black expressive traditions as a means through which artistic languages are mediated.'

In 1993, Manthia Diawara published an anthology, *Black American Cinema*, in which he argued that the 'new Black realism' of films like John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and the symbolic, expressive style of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) reflect two primary paradigms in black (American) cinema aesthetics, a time-based aesthetic in the former, and a space-based one in the latter. The new Black realist style is characterized by linear storytelling, and a firm grounding in the materiality of black life in American society.[6] The symbolic expressive style of space-based narratives are 'where the past constantly interrupts the present, and repetitions and cyclicality define narration' (13), and whose 'themes involve Black folklore, religion, and the oral traditions which link Black Americans to the African diaspora' (10). The films discussed here reflect this conception of space-based cinematic narratives. Each draws on African-based spirituality, oral traditions, folklore and themes to tie its narrative – either directly or tangentially – to the lived experiences of its characters located in a variety of times and spaces in the United States. To varying degrees, each also positions its narratives and characters in a symbolic realm that reestablishes linkages to ancestral knowledge and the cultural systems of the African continent as well as to their manifestations in the African diasporas of the Caribbean.

African diasporic expressive culture has a long tradition of self-affirmation within the context of a brutal history of repression, slavery, colonialism as well as of migration – both forced and voluntary. In his essay on the challenges of studying the African diasporas, Paul Zeleza observes that 'a diasporic identity implies a form of group consciousness constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition, in which experiential and representation resources are mobilized, in varied measures, from the imaginaries of both old and new worlds' (2008, 7). I engage here with the expression of such representation in the independent African- American cinema of the 1990s in order to consider the role of African spirituality in the process of diaspora-making, of establishing connections through the excavation of history and knowledge that exceeds the territorial boundaries established by slavery, colonialism and nationalism and in the context of race and gender hierarchies.

In an era of (excessive?) super-heroism in popular culture, there are still relatively few black women in the universe of cinematic superhero(in)es.[7] Within a Western context, definitions of 'superheroes' – still predominantly male – all incorporate, as a foundational trait, the possession of extraordinary or supernatural powers by a benevolent human-like character who uses that power for the common good of humankind and to fight evil.[8] However, legendary tales as well as sociological and historical reports of powerful women in Africa and the African diaspora not only predate the current vogue of superheroes, they also prompt an interest in revisiting the ways in which many of these sources incorporate accounts of supernatural talents and affinities among remarkable women. This study explores the imprint of such tales on the representation of powerful black women in the black independent cinema of the 1990s in the United States.

Science women: knowledge, secrecy and spirituality in Africa and its diaspora

In Africa, legendary or historical black women include Queen Asantewaa of the Asante (in modern-day Ghana), who was renowned for her inspiring military leadership and keen strategic skills against the British colonizers (Grayson 2000; Boahen 2003). Similarly, Sarraounia Mangou was a nineteenth century Queen of the Aznas, in the West African region known today as Niger. Trained in military and herbal skills from a young age, Sarraounia achieved fame for leading her forces against French colonists, her reputation as a sorceress only enhancing her celebrated skills as a warrior and leader (Alou 2009). Her military exploits have been captured on film by Mauritanian filmmaker, Med Hondo, in the film *Sarraounia* (1986). In the 16th century, Queen Nzingha, who reigned over what are today parts of Angola and Zaire, became renowned as a superb military strategist who kept the Portuguese armed forces at bay for 40 years and resisted their incursions as slave traders (Clarke 1988). She died in 1663 at the ripe old age of eighty-one.

Across the Atlantic, Harriet Tubman was a runaway slave in the antebellum United States, who achieved a reputation as one of the Underground Railroad's 'conductors', risking her own life to escort over 300 slaves to freedom. In Jamaica, the exploits of Nanny of the Maroons became a prominent aspect of that country's folklore, which often assigned to Nanny (as to Sarraounia) skills in magic and sorcery.[9] The paradigm of 'marooning' in which the rebel figure becomes the icon of black Caribbean and South American identity is notable (especially in some parts of the Caribbean) for the prominence of women. Drawing inspiration from female models like Nanny, Caribbean women have been able to appropriate the rebel figure, viewed largely as a male construct by male-centered nationalist ideologies, to create a paradigm of the powerful warrior woman. Oral traditions, such as legendary tales, celebrate the rebel activities of female warrior leaders such as Nanny and Mama Juba in Jamaica, Melchora in Cuba, and Queen Mary and her aides Queen Agnes and Queen Matilda in the Danish Virgin Islands. Some of these women were actual historical figures while others (such as Melchora) were mythical personages. In all cases, however, their femaleness, in terms of both their sexuality and their religious power, were perceived as playing an essential role in their military prowess and in their resistance to their slave and colonial oppressors.

In the New World, the role of African spirituality and religious practices in subversive activities against slavery and colonialism can be inferred from many of the tales told in the oral tradition. Women whose strength, defiance and heroism were remarkable were often attributed mystical powers as legends revolving around their activities developed, while many of the female deities of African-based religions are constructed as complex and powerful icons of femininity.

Many of the women of influence mentioned in the legendary tales of Jamaica were what the Maroons called a 'Science-woman', i.e. a woman well-versed in the supernatural arts, and often referred to as a 'conjure-woman' in the United States. Science-women were healers and priestesses.[10] Bilby and Steady note:

> In the various maroon legends recounting Nanny's great deeds of the past, there is one dominant theme: the supernatural … Today Maroon storytellers overwhelmingly attribute the historical victories of the Maroons to Grandy Nanny's phenomenal supernatural powers … Although the … stories about Nanny are examples of legend and should not be seen as

> actual history, there is no doubt that an important personage named Nanny really existed … There are references to her in the contemporary British literature as a powerful obeah-woman, or sorceress … there are indications that she was not the only woman of influence among the maroons. Two of the minor settlements in the Nanny Town complex were also given women's names – Molly and Diana. And other powerful women are remembered in the oral tradition, such as Mama Juba, like Nanny a great 'Science-Woman' – as Maroons refer to those well-versed in the supernatural arts. (1987, 459–460)

The term 'science woman' may seem an odd choice in this context. However, it is important to note that African spirituality draws on an epistemology and cosmology in which ' there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life ' (Mbiti 1990, 2).[11] Understanding this non-dualistic perspective of reality helps us understand the term 'science-woman' assigned, within the oral tradition in the Caribbean, to women such as Nanny.

The polarization presented in the dichotomy 'science/spirituality' also highlights the existence of competing forms of knowledge embedded in various cosmological and cultural perspectives. Jenny Sharpe (2003, 2) observes that the 'story of Nanny is the story of contending forms of knowledge: written versus oral histories, colonial cultures, institutional versus popular *ways of knowing*' [my italics]. Thus, the dualism of the science/ spirituality distinction ignores the underlying unifying concept of a quest for knowledge. While science has, today, become an institutionalized system of practice that only grants the status of knowledge to that which is generated within a narrowly defined framework – in terms of its object of inquiry (the physical/material world), its pre-defined methodological approaches (observation, experiments, and measurement), and its criteria for defining knowledge (reliability, repeatability, the ability to formulate rules and principles about events, elements or phenomena) – the Maroon term clearly draws on a now archaic definition of the term 'science', namely 'knowledge', or 'the state or fact of knowing' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2016).

Within the context of an understanding of the world (cosmology) as extending beyond the physical/material/ natural, it is possible then to argue that 'magic' may simply refer to knowledge not easily or widely accessible. In other words, 'magic' may refer to the utilization of potentially 'scientifically' explainable arcane knowledge, but requires an acknowledgement that modern-day science has yet to recognize certain long existent forms of knowledge to which only some individuals with specialized knowledge have access. Additionally, knowledge may be willfully kept secret for one or more of several reasons: as a form of power, or as in *Black Panther's* Wakanda, to prevent abuses of power, or as a form of resistance to power. During slavery, when African beliefs, customs and knowledge were denigrated and prohibited, they were hidden in tales, riddles, proverbs, chants, songs, drumming and dance and made unrecognizable to slave-owners to avoid punishment (Grayson, 1997, 161) while the power of colonialists derived – at least partially – from their access to knowledge about the colonized, so secrecy became a form of resistance.

The strong black woman who obtains her power through secret knowledge that grants her affinities with supernatural forces, appears as the eponymous Mother of the River in Zeinabu irene Davis' short film, and as Nunu in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* – not as a sinister character depicted in mainstream film productions such as Christophene in *Wide Sargasso*

Sea (1993), but as one who uses her supernatural powers as a tool of resistance to oppression, or in the interests of the collective good. She also appears in Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* (1997), which depicts several characters who are involved in what Houston Baker (1991, 66) calls 'spirit work'.

For Baker, 'conjure' is a foundational component of an African-American women's literary aesthetic:

> The spirit work that is imagistically projected by Afro-American women's expressivity is, I think, like what is called by the religion of voodoo The Work. In women's narratives such as Morrison's *Sula*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, spirit work is frequently imaged by the space, place and time of the Conjure Woman. (1991, 66)[12]

Yvonne Chireau (2003, 12) defines the term 'conjure' as 'a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and self -defense' – and, it should be added, for harming. She notes that the 'exploits of conjuring specialists are ubiquitous in slave histories, autobiographies, narratives, and especially, in folklore' (16). Thus, the trope of 'the conjure woman' in a number of films by black filmmakers extends this long-established tradition to the cinematic realm, and it is black independent filmmakers in particular who have made the conjure woman a paradigmatic model of black female wisdom, power and heroism.

Female wisdom as 'spirit work': *Eve's Bayou*

Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* provides a multi-layered poetics of conjure in the form of several characters who access a mysterious tradition of mystical/spiritual power. A brooding and seductive film about an affluent Creole family in Louisiana, the film's intriguing opening voice-over by a female narrator draws on a recognition of the role of memory in African-American cultural consciousness. The film kicks off its narrative action by making the startling statement aimed at drawing in the viewer and establishing the time of its storyline: 'The summer I killed my father, I was 10 years old.'

Drawing on the African roots of the distinctive African-American culture of Louisiana, *Eve's Bayou* begins by establishing the 'motherlines' of the narrator. An adult Eve takes us back to her childhood through a voice-over commentary that accompanies evocative black-and white images of the bayou, including a slow fade in and out of an African woman in the midst of a sugarcane field[13]:

> The town we lived in was named after a slave. It's said that when General Jean-Paul Batiste was stricken with cholera, his life was saved by the powerful medicine of an African slave woman called Eve. In return for his life, he freed her, and gave her this piece of land by the bayou. Perhaps in gratitude, she bore him 16 children. We are the descendants of Eve and Jean-Paul Batiste. I was named for her.

Bearing in mind the importance of naming in African cultures, the last statement foreshadows the 'gift of sight' that our narrator herself develops, and her own predilection for intervening in the affairs of the world through the practice of 'voodoo'. Eve's 'double vision' is mirrored in the film's narrative structure and characterization as the adult narrator recounts the story of one particularly memorable summer when she was 10 years old. She is both narrator and character, storyteller and psychic, both reflective adult and confused child.

There are three primary characters in *Eve's Bayou* who are involved in 'the work.' They range in age and mastery of their power, from the budding psychic insight of 10-year old Eve, who wakes from her sleep hearing her uncle Harry bidding goodbye the very night he is killed in a car crash, to her Aunt Mozelle who has yet to come to terms with her own psychic insights, to Elzora, the old woman who is the town's voodoo practitioner and fortune-teller. There is, in addition, of course, the African slave woman who is the source, the original Eve after whom the town is named and whose descendants roam the bayous and the marketplace even as her own non-material presence permeates all of their lives. This African Eve possessed a 'powerful medicine' rooted in the arcane, ancestral knowledge of healing and African spirituality. This spiritual knowledge is passed down her female bloodline, and establishes the film's mysticism as an integral narrative thread and its esoteric mise-en-scène.

Mozelle is the central character involved in 'the work.' Sharing a deep bond with her brother – Eve's father, Louis – she has been widowed three times. Mozelle is depicted as a woman conflicted. Skilled at premonition, she is unable to see into her own future, and her gift of 'sight' depicted as subject to misinterpretation in matters closest to her own heart and those of her loved ones. While Mozelle's gift of sight makes her neither infallible nor self-insightful, she employs her powers in the interest of communal healing.

The relationship between Mozelle, as a biological descendant of the African Eve, and that of her 10 year-old niece – also named 'Eve' – the daughter of Mozelle's philandering brother, is both one of spiritual mentor as well as aunt. Eve's psychic skills are as yet unformed, her encounter with the world of 'the work' undisciplined and immature, leading to her desire to employ the forces of the supernatural to inflict harm. Eve is depicted in relation to her psychic *potential* and the experiences of childhood – its confusions, rashness and pain – constitute the ingredients necessary to form a more thoughtful and grounded practitioner of 'the work'.

Elzora's character, however, is a departure from that of the Batiste women, and appears to draw upon the so-called 'hoodoo doctors' whose work became the dominant form of voodoo practice in New Orleans during the early and middle part of this century. Jesse Mulira (1991) notes that by the 1940s, the non-religious element of voodoo, i.e. hoodoo, had virtually replaced the practice of voodoo in New Orleans. Mulira defines hoodoo as the 'money-making traffic of talismans, luck powders, and bottled love [which] nevertheless … are by-products of voodoo' (1991, 63). The latter, i.e. voodoo, notes Mulira, is a centrally organized system of faith that emphasizes the worship of African deities.[14]

Does the depiction of Elzora constitute what Baker has called an 'aversive' image of a conjure woman? Baker argues that conjure forms a foundational component of an African American women's poetics.

> One might say, in fact, that a poetics of Afro-American women's writing is, in many ways, a phenomenology of conjure. In any case, the field most decisively analyzed by such a poetics is decidedly not one where pathological or aversive images dominate. (1991, 67)

Baker defines an 'aversive' image as an 'exploitatively melodramatic or sensationalistic image in the service of a profitable ideology of shock' (1991, 67). Although balanced by the characters of Mozelle and young Eve, the film's construction of Elzora certainly

appears to be a departure from what Baker refers to as 'felicitous images of the workings of [the] spirit' (1991, 66). Lemmon's construction of the character of Elzora conforms to mainstream images of the conjure woman through the use of clichéd gestures, cackling laughter and Elzora's isolated existence on the margins of the town. Make-up and costume – wild unruly gray hair, face painted white, and a large dot on her forehead – are utilized to present Elzora as a freakish and sinister character. This caricatured representation is most apparent when one considers the nature of the images of conjure women presented by other black filmmakers – who do not isolate their conjure women from their communities or families. They are depicted, instead, as women who utilize their powers rooted in arcane knowledge and spirituality in the cause of the collective good. Two such portrayals can be seen in Zeinabu irene Davis' *Mother of the River* and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*.

Iconic women of the African diaspora: *Mother of the River*

In Zeinabu irene Davis' short film, *Mother of the River*, the plot revolves around the encounter between a young slave girl, Dofimae, and a mysterious woman on the run from slave-catchers. The injured woman, who identifies herself only as Mother of the River, wears a necklace of bones and a belt of daggers. She also has a $10,000 reward on her head because of her role in helping runaway slaves escape to freedom. The woman, as Dofimae learns, also has certain supernatural skills, including the ability to fly at night, a skill that Mother of the River herself attributes to the help of her African ancestors. Mother of the River is forced to call upon the ancestors to extend this ability to fly to daylight hours to protect Dofimae. Since the ability to fly is limited, Mother of the River has to descend to the ground eventually. Thus, she risks her own life by drawing the attention of the white female overseer and her assistants who covet the reward for her capture.

Dofimae distracts the overseer and her aides by slinging the magical eggs that the old woman had given her, temporarily blinding them and allowing the old woman to escape. The story is based on a Haitian tale, itself based on a traditional Nigerian tale, and stresses such values as mutual help, support, respect, and survival (Foster, 1997). Marc Chery, the Haitian-born screenwriter of the film, draws his inspiration for the character of Mother of the River from the historical and legendary tales of warrior women of the African diaspora in the Americas. Mother of the River evidences a combination of iconic characteristics relating to Harriet Tubman, whose role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad helping fleeing slaves is well known, and of Nanny of the Jamaican Maroons. The iconography of the Maroon leader is apparent in the belt of daggers she was said to wear around her waist, and her supernatural skills were legendary.

Mother of the River also stresses the importance of passing on arcane and ancestral knowledge from those who have mastered its intricacies to the next generation of young women. Gwendolyn Foster notes:

> *Mother of the River* is an African-American *bildungsroman* specifically made for young African-American women, eager for reflections of their own image. Dofimae travels on a spiritual journey, and becomes an action heroine who saves Mother of the River, providing an invaluable, yet rarely seen, role model, a young Black heroine. Davis and Chery endow the character Dofimae with brilliance and super-heroine abilities … Mother of the River teaches Dofimae about Pan-African spirituality … *Mother of the River* draws upon this tradition, which developed in the [American] South as the ritual of using eggs to protect the self or to put hexes on enemies. (1997, 21)

Arcane knowledge and African spirituality: *Sankofa*

Similarly, in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa,* a present-day African-American model travels back in time and experiences slavery. As the protagonist, Shola, the young slave woman overhears a story being narrated at a secret meeting of a slave resistance movement. It recounts how Nunu – an African-born slave woman with whom Shola has developed a close bond – once killed an overseer with a focused stare and a chant. Such stories draw on African oral traditions that utilize myth and memory to keep history and traditions alive. Nunu embodies the connection of plantation-born slaves to Africa whose rituals and secrets become both an inspiration and a vehicle to keep resistance alive. Chireau (2003, 33) observes that during slavery in the United States, 'the most widely respected Conjurers were "full-blooded Africans."'

The compelling character of Nunu symbolizes Yaa Asantewaa, warrior queen of the Asante in the early twentieth century:

> A two-layered story unfolds around Nunu: (1) the narrative of Nunu as oral historian, preserver of traditional African religions, leader of the enslaved Africans, and of slave revolts, embodiment of supernatural power; and (2) the narratives of women in traditional Asante culture which are projected through Nunu's chants. This second layer is linked to the women who founded the Asante clans, the ohemaa (especially Yaa Asantewaa) and female chiefs. (Grayson, 2000, 35)

In *Sankofa*, Nunu is killed by Joe, her mulatto son born of rape, who rejects her and her African spiritual traditions in favor of the slave-owner's Christianity. The film depicts her memory as being kept alive by the tales told of her body never being found among the ashes of the church in which she was laid before it was burned down by Joe. The stories tell of a buzzard carrying her back to Africa. Gerima seemingly depicts African spirituality crushed by Christianity, but the film's ambiguous conclusion offers another reading, employing the buzzard – a bird associated with the *orisha*, Oshun, one of the riverain/sea goddesses of Yoruba cosmology.[15] As a messenger of Oshun, the vulture 'carries prayers directly to Olórun [the supreme deity]' (Washington, 2005, 46). In some parts of Africa the vulture/buzzard is also associated with fertility, divination and protection.

African spirituality and diasporic cinema

How do we read the recurring images of supernatural affinities, powers and conjure in black cinematic expression? I would argue that for many of these filmmakers, the stories they choose to tell and the devices utilized to tell them, are not solely for entertainment but as 'a reaffirmation of [the filmmaker's] cultural and literary heritage' (Haynes 2002, 31). While deeply rooted in the strategies used by slaves in response to the dilemmas and challenges of dispersal and dislocation, such stories of conjure and special abilities to commune with the supernatural were deeply grounded – and persist to this day – in African (and many other) worldviews.

Susana Vega-Conzalez sees the conjure woman's role in many novels by African-American women writers as a resuscitation of their traditional role of healing:

> Conjure women, also called 'healers,' 'obeah women' or 'midwives,' among other names, were the ones who dealt with cases of both physical and spiritual illness, using mainly herbs, plants and roots or resorting to healing ritual. However, conjuring has often been misunderstood and

> misrepresented as a clear sign of primitivism and ignorance typical of the ethnic 'other' in a world where the very terms of magic and witchcraft have traditionally had pejorative connotation … Despite its detractors, the world of conjuring and spirituality has undoubtedly assuaged the horrors of slavery and helped black people in their survival in a hostile land, preventing them from being victims of spiritual enslavement. (1999, 166)

In exploring African spirituality in diasporic cinema, it is notable that female heroism is often inextricably linked to religious/spiritual power used for both individual and communal healing. Antoinette Alou (2009) notes the combination of political and religious authority invested in the female lineage of animist priestess-chiefs (*sarraounias*) of the Azna people of West Africa, while legendary tales tell of the supernatural protections afforded to Nanny (Jamaica) and Yaa Asantewaa (modern-day Ghana) as well as their skills in military leadership. Similarly, many of African-based deities such as Oshun, Oya and Yemanja are characterized as warrior-women, nurturing but also fierce, even willful, at times. Thus, African female heroism is rooted in African spiritual and cultural epistemologies which simultaneously constitute their strength through a self-affirming connectedness to, and protection of and by, a community.

In discussing the South African film *Zulu Love Letter*, its screenwriter and producer, Bheki Peterson, states:

> … in societies that are structured in racial domination, exploitation and violence … [and in] the aftermath of violence and trauma … I was particularly struck by how ordinary people, in their endeavours to grasp, deal with and overcome inequality, alienation and trauma, found succour in African spiritual and cultural rites and epistemologies. African ontology – particularly with regards to its elaboration of personhood, sociality and ancestral veneration – offered a more life-affirming and enriching alternative to the (dis)contents of the narratives and projects of the state. (2012, 215)

Peterson's sentiments are echoed in Kameelah Martin's discussion of the life-affirming imperative driving the vital project of cinematic rehabilitation of the iconography of African-based healing practices and the crucial role of women in such work.

> Dash and Lemmons' films add a tremendous force behind the cultural preservation and retrieval of the African American healing woman from the depths of Eurocentric stigmatization. Mozelle Batiste, Elzora, Nana Peazant, and Eve are but four possible branches that stem from the rich, enduring cultural icon of the conjure woman. (2006, 175)

Memory politics and cultural archives

Elizabeth West (2011, 91) argues that 'memory is what grounds the spiritual self.' In Jamaica, the legend of Nanny as an invincible warrior became a cornerstone of Maroon feminism, and was driven by an active effort to keep alive her memory, and that of the role of her African-based spirituality in resistance to the British.[16] Sharpe (2003, xiii) observes that:

> there is very little archival evidence about Nanny's leadership among the maroons because as a religious leader whose authority was derived from what the British regarded as 'negro superstition', she was considered inconsequential to the outcome of the first Jamaican maroon war. It is only due to the preservation of her memory in maroon oral histories that she is known to us today.

In discussing the erosion of female political authority in Niger, Alou (2009) locates the act of forgetting within a 'dialectics of memory politics' (43), in which the political authority

of *sarraounias* has been eroded over the past century, and 'history books … largely ignore the queens, priestesses, and female chiefs of the recent past' (44). However, she notes, that the task of excavating the figure of the priestess-chief has been assumed in Niger by artistic, academic and popular representations. For Ryan (2005, 5), it is 'Black women filmmakers and writers [who] embrace the role and responsibility of the priestess, bearing and distributing life-force to sustain the community of viewers and readers.'

Conclusion

An examination of legendary and /or historical black women in Africa and its American diaspora demonstrates the rootedness of a superheroic model of black female strength in a context of empowering African spirituality and arcane knowledge. It is the recurring image of iconic women with magical/mystical powers entrenched in African diasporic orature that provide inspirational archetypes of culturally relevant models of womanhood for several independent African-American filmmakers in their quest to tell stories of their histories, experiences and cultural legacies. Drawing on a radically different set of archetypes from mainstream American cinema – both black and white – the films discussed above each features the recurring image of women with access to, or associated with, various forms of empowering African spirituality that offer super-natural skills not incongruous with those assigned to contemporary superheroes in Western fiction and popular culture.

In the current cinematic climate dominated by superhero films that marginalize minorities and people of color, it is imperative that we make visible and encourage the recognition and excavation of inspirational black female characters in films that locate them within their culturally specific, African-rooted cosmological, epistemological and spiritual contexts.[17] The filmmakers discussed here have embraced this role and responsibility to make cinematic interventions into a politics of memory. Scholars have recognized a well-established tradition among a number of black – especially female – *writers* that may have influenced the emergence of a cinematic paradigm in the 1990s that reimagined (super)heroism within an alternative, African-based epistemology and cosmology, sustaining an empowering iconography of black womanhood rooted in a long oral and historical tradition of science-women.

Notes

1. *Black Panther's* global box office revenues exceeded the $1 billion mark just 26 days after its release (Rubin 2018).
2. Julie Dash could be included among these filmmakers; her film, *Daughters of the Dust*, has not been included in this discussion because it has received substantial attention from numerous writers and scholars, including Bambara (1993), Diawara (1993), Mellencamp (1994), Humm (1997), Grayson (2000), Machiorlatti (2005), and Missouri (2015), among others.
3. See Cripps (1987) for a decade-by-decade review of black film criticism in the US. He also briefly mentions black film criticism in England and France until the 1970s.
4. See Masilela (1993) and Field, Horak & Stewart (2015) for more detailed documentation and analyses of the movement.
5. Davis has since documented this remarkable movement in her documentary film, *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA* (2011).

6. While Diawara does not make a link to gender in his characterization of these styles, the films he cites as exemplifying the new Black realism style deal with rites of passage in manhood. However, films such as *Set It Off* (1996), in which the protagonists are female, would appear to fall into the same category. The examples cited as being expressive in style, however, are films that may have protagonists of either gender, and are directed by both male and female directors, including Charles Burnett, Bill Gunn, Zeinabu irene Davis, Julie Dash, Marlon Riggs, among others.
7. Storm, of Marvel's *X-Men* franchise, is the first superheroine explicitly characterized as being of African descent. With an ancestral lineage of African priestesses, her superpower is the ability to control the weather. Others include Vixen who can take on the power of animals, including extinct ones. Some, such as DC Comics' Catwoman, and Marvel's Valkyrie have been played by black actresses (Eartha Kitt and Halle Berry as Catwoman and Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie) but the characters were not created as racially black (nor does Catwoman have any superpowers). Several black female superheroines exist within the comic book universe, such as Spectrum, Thunder, Lightning, Friction and Vixen, but most superhero comic characters do not have widespread visibility until they are included in the lucrative superhero *cinematic* universe.
8. In Japanese manga and anime, superheroes often take the form of robots, and the ultimate goal is to achieve balance in the world and not necessarily for good to triumph over evil. For an elaboration, see Lunning and Freeman (2008).
9. The Maroons are descendants of runaway slaves who formed their own communities and fought numerous battles against the British to maintain their freedom and autonomy. They still retain some autonomy in Jamaica, nominally through separate states which are governed internally (Luntta 1993).
10. López Springfield (1997, xvii), notes that even today Jamaican health traditions are largely female-centered because 'the healing arts were not wrested from women (as they were in 'Western' cultures).' Christianity, especially Catholicism, waged brutal campaigns against women priestesses by labeling them 'witches' and defining their powers as evil.
11. A number of scholars have noted the prominence of 'survivals' of African spirituality in the literary expression of black women in the US and in the Caribbean (Baker 1991; Vega-Conzalez 1999; Haynes 2002; Ryan 2005; West 2011).
12. There is now a well-established body of scholarship that examines the historical, cultural, and political positioning of the conjure woman as a recurring figure in African-American women's writing.
13. The term 'bayou' is used in Louisiana to refer to marshy wetlands.
14. Many of these African deities have been redefined within the diasporic context.
15. Many indigenous African religions include women as not only healers and priestesses, but as revered ancestors and potent deities, or *orishas*. The female deities of the Yoruba-based religions point to notions of femininity that encompass power, strength, courage and beauty. Oya, Oshun, Yemanja – the riverain/sea goddesses – are often symbolized as women with swords.
16. See Terborg-Penn (1987), Bilby and Steady (1987), Mathurin (1975), and Tuelon (1973).
17. I am not suggesting we convert such characters into commodified pop icons. Cinematic superheroines are generally highly sexualized and, in the case of women of color, frequently deracialized.

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