

Uncovering Unofficial Versions of the 1965 Watts Riot: UCLA and the L.A. Rebellion Films

By

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INTRODUCTION

“No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. But what we want is to walk in the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times.”¹ In 1963, Frantz Fanon wrote these words in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a text that would influence the foundation of organizations such as the Black Nationalist Party, the IRA, and the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers at UCLA in the 1960s and 1970s. Fanon’s words spoke to the growing unrest between black and white citizens due to an increasingly segregated society despite political and legal efforts to create equality. These tensions came to a head on August 11, 1965 when California Highway Patrol (CHP) pulled over two young, black men, Marquette Frye and his brother Ronald in Watts, Los Angeles, California. The arrest incited six days of violent uprising, which caused thirty-four deaths, property losses of about forty million dollars, over a thousand injuries, and approximately four thousand arrests. However, this violence did not awaken any great changes in American society. Thirty years later, another equally devastating riot raged in the same area of South Central Los Angeles, not to mention the many other urban riots that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. After analysis of the Moynihan report, the McCone Commission’s report, and three black independent films, it is evident all parties identified similar major issues underlying racial tensions in America. However, the upper echelons of white society assumed the passage of civil rights legislation would solve racism and improve the standard of living for lower class black citizens. Through depictions of black urban life after the Watts Riot, three filmmakers, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark, proved that assumption erroneous.

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 238.

EXAMINATIONS OF THE WATTS RIOT

Since 1965, scholars have investigated Watts in various ways, but those analyses rarely focus on the individual perspective of Watts citizens as Burnett's, Gerima's, and Clark's films address. At first, as in Marxist writers Robert Vernon and George Novak's 1965 text, *Watts and Harlem: The Rising Revolts in the Black Ghettos*, scholars compared Watts to previous urban riots such as the 1964 Harlem uprising. Vernon and Novak's pamphlet contains four articles that originally appeared in *The Militant*, a weekly socialist newspaper, during 1964 and 1965. This pamphlet intended to highlight every instance of black urban uprising. The authors strove to frame the uprisings in a larger Negro Revolution movement that was fighting back against whites and the government more effectively than the Civil Rights movement. In "Birmingham, Harlem and Watts," Vernon wrote, "[d]ecades of segregation, discrimination, humiliation, pauperization, degradation, deprivation, superexploitation, and every other kind of -ation, are not going to be alleviated or corrected by a stroke of the pen, a few assuring words of liberal rhetoric, or by War-on-Poverty social work and charity."² This statement simultaneously criticized Civil Rights leaders' and government officials' work toward equality.

Two years later, journalist Robert Conot echoed Vernon and Novak's criticisms when he wrote about his disappointment in white comprehension of the event – instead of trying to understand the conditions that caused the chaos, middle-class white citizens tried to explain it away. Conot provided some examples, including this quote from an Associated Press dispatch: "Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut declared that 'organized extremist groups under Havana and Peking influence' appeared to have been a factor, because 'such violence runs counter to the entire tradition of the American Negro and counter to the teachings of the legitimate civil rights

² Robert Vernon, "Birmingham, Harlem and Watts," in *Watts and Harlem: The Rising Revolt in the Black Ghettos*, eds. Robert Vernon and George Novak (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1965), 4-5.

movement.”³ This attitude proliferated in the government’s and the media’s depictions of the violence, which reinforced the idea that this revolt was an isolated event, organized by international, hostile forces.

Scholarship on Watts slowed in the seventies and eighties, perhaps due to the increasing number of race riots and civil rights demonstrations. With myriad similar, and more devastating, events, the 1965 Watts Riot failed to garner attention. However, scholarship sharply renewed after the Rodney King incident in South Central Los Angeles. On March 3, 1991, police officers stopped black motorist Rodney King after a high-speed car chase. After removing him from the car, the officers beat King. In a nearby apartment, George Holliday caught the abuse on videotape and sent the footage to local television stations. It became a national story and the officers were criminally tried for their actions. A defense motion moved the trial from Los Angeles to Simi Valley, a mostly white suburb, and as a consequence, no blacks served on the jury. The court acquitted the officers in April 1992, and South Central Los Angeles erupted in violence again. This time the death toll reached fifty-three and over two thousand were injured.⁴

The similarities in these riots prompted new attention to the 1965 Watts Riot. In *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, historian Gerald Horne investigated every facet of the Watts Riot and its aftermath in an effort to illuminate the reasons for the 1992 resurgence. Overall, Horne found many links between 1965 and 1992 including; increased vigilantism, a rush to purchase firearms, government/authority breakdown, and LAPD failure to stop

³ Associated Press, Dispatch September 3, 1965 quoted in Robert E. Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 425-426.

⁴ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 227-237.

disturbances in the region.⁵ In Horne's opinion, however, the most glaring issue was the LAPD's lack of improvement in the interim following the 1965 riots. If the problem of police brutality had been addressed after 1965 and the civilian complaint process enhanced, perhaps South Central Los Angeles would have known greater peace. Even so, Horne believed the deteriorating economic environment of the area would have caused tension eventually.⁶ He argues that insufficient concessions were given to the black working class following the 1965 riot and the civil rights movement had greater impact in the South than the West, leaving urban blacks in LA to discover their own ways to attract national attention.⁷

Historian Taylor Branch also noted the tension between the Watts Riot and the Civil Rights movement in his book, *At Canaan's Edge*. This text from 2006, the third volume in an anthology detailing the life of Martin Luther King Jr., evaluated Watts as a component of the larger Civil Rights movement. Watts did not warrant an entire chapter in his anthology, but rather was paired with a similar contemporary event in the Civil Rights movement – a protest of white-only stores in Fort Deposit, Alabama on August 13, 1965.⁸ These events were comparable because during the Watts Riot, blacks targeted their destruction at white-owned stores in Watts while sparing black-owned enterprises from harm. While the Fort Deposit protest, with only twenty-nine participants, was on a much smaller scale, the intent of the action was similar. In his commentary on Watts, Branch also describes tension between King and Watts residents during King's visit in the days following the violence. During this time, King spoke to some residents and they heckled him because his efforts to secure civil rights did not give them what they really

⁵ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 360.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁸ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 300-305.

wanted – jobs. King told the press after his visit: “We as Negro leaders – and I include myself – have failed to take the civil rights movement to the masses of the people.”⁹

Historian James Patterson’s *The Eve of Destruction*, is a closer look at one year in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, rather than an overarching evaluation of the entire period as seen in Branch’s volumes. Due to this focus on 1965, Patterson emphasized the event’s political and social consequences rather than comparing it to other uprisings. In this text from 2012, Patterson postulated that 1965 was a critical year because while the early 1960s saw a vibrant economy, optimism, and high expectations, 1965 brought military escalation and unraveling social cohesion.¹⁰ Patterson did recognize that this transformation did not spontaneously begin on January 1, 1965 and end on December 31, but his argument maintained that Watts had disastrous consequences: “Aside from the escalation in Vietnam, no occurrence that year did more to damage American race relations or to undermine the power of Johnsonian liberalism in the United States.”¹¹

Patterson’s evaluation of the downfall of Lyndon Johnson’s liberal agenda reflects a popular theme in the previous literature pertaining to 1965 and the Watts Riot. In *Law and Order*, a text from 2005, political historian Michael Flamm explored Johnson’s confidence in the War on Poverty, War on Crime, and Great Society reforms. By June 1965, extensive legislation including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Voting Rights Bill, Medicare, and Medicaid was enacted or soon to be on the way.¹² Johnson gave an optimistic, egalitarian speech at Howard University on June 4, 1965: “All of our citizens must have the ability to walk through

⁹ Ibid., 298.

¹⁰ James Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xiii-xv.

¹¹ Ibid., 190.

¹² Michael Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Disorder, and the Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 54.

those gates [of opportunity]. This is the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity – not just legal equity but human ability – not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result.”¹³ Despite these sentiments and the enactment of legislation, equality would remain elusive. Flamm argued Johnson’s War on Poverty and Great Society reforms failed due to the complex political and social environment rather than “to a shortage of political acumen or a surplus of liberal naiveté.”¹⁴ On the other hand, some scholars, including Patterson, argued that a major source of Johnson’s failure was a document called the Moynihan Report.

The 1965 Moynihan Report, officially titled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, argued that Negro Americans, as a group, are unequal to other ethnic, religious, and regional groups due to their family structure. The author of this paper, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, called for a national effort to establish a stable black family structure. Overall, Moynihan stated that while many factors contributed to the devastating conditions for lower class black citizens in the United States, “at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure.”¹⁵

In *Freedom is Not Enough*, Patterson discussed how Moynihan aimed his report at top administration officials in an effort to present evidence that such a problem existed to those in power who believed legal rights through legislation would provide a natural disappearance to

¹³ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Road To Justice: Three Major Statements on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 33.

¹⁴ Flamm, *Law and Order*, 66.

¹⁵ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 30.

racial struggles. In fact, Moynihan mentions this intention in the report's conclusion.¹⁶ Patterson also detailed the report's reception; once publicly released after the Watts Riot, blacks denounced the report, charging that it smeared black culture and blamed the victim rather than actively attempting to fix the problems that created their oppression.¹⁷ Patterson, however, disagreed with these criticisms and heralded Moynihan as a "messenger of inconvenient tidings" with insight: "Indeed, many of Moynihan's alarms in 1965 were prophetic."¹⁸

In addition to the Moynihan Report, another document frequently mentioned in Watts Riot scholarship is the McCone Commission report of 1965. After the Watts Riot, Governor Brown formed the McCone Commission to complete the following tasks: prepare an accurate chronology and description of the riots, discover why the riots continued and spread, describe the efforts of law enforcement, probe the immediate and underlying causes of the riots, and finally, develop recommendations for actions.¹⁹ The Commission concluded that no single circumstance served as the sole reason for the riots, but agreed with the Moynihan report that unemployment posed a serious threat to black citizens.²⁰ The Commission broadly stated that the government, private business sector, organized labor, and the black community needed to focus more on helping blacks find jobs. In addition to this suggestion, the Commission also called for reorganization and strengthening of the programs for schools in disadvantaged areas, adjustment of complaint policies, strengthening of the Board of Police Commissioners, formation of

¹⁶ James Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough: the Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life: from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xii; United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, 47.

¹⁷ Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, xiv-xv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

¹⁹ McCone Commission, "Violence in the City – An End or a Beginning?" Mayor Tom Bradley Administration papers, Collection Number 293. (UCLA: Charles E. Young Research Library, 1965-1968), i-ii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

programs to encourage black youths' support of the police, and an increase in the number of minority officers.

Like the Moynihan Report, the McCone Commission met with extreme criticism. Flamm asserted that the Commission blamed the riot on a small percentage of "riffraff" and black leaders for failing to take personal responsibility for their community.²¹ Journalist Paul Jacobs suggested a more complete failure: "The initial failure of the commission was in the very limited conception the governor and his associates had of its function [...]"²² Jacobs accused the liberal governor and his staff of an unwillingness to diagnose the true ills of society. Instead, the commission preferred to find solutions that were only acceptable to those who were responsible for the creation of the malignant environment in the first place.²³

Rather than focus from the top down, as McCone and Moynihan do, Screenwriter Budd Schulberg provided a glimpse at new social history through providing works that focused on the perspective of Watts residents in his anthology, *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts*. In his introduction, Schulberg wrote: "You may read in the \$300,000 McCone Report that 'the Commission believes that immediate and favorable consideration should be given to a new, comprehensively-equipped hospital in the area.' The authors of this report go on to describe an urgently critical situation in the comfortable language of bureaucratic polysyllables. They fail to look into the face of the bitter young mother who sees her infant sacrificed [...]"²⁴ Schulberg's response provided a collection of fictional works from eighteen writers who contributed to the Watts Writers' Workshop that Schulberg founded in the months following the 1965 riot.

²¹ Flamm, *Law and Order*, 62.

²² Paul Jacobs, "The McCone Commission," in *The Politics of Riot Commissions, 1917-1970*, ed. Anthony Platt (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), 288.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Budd Schulberg, ed., *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1967), 7-8.

While Schulberg created an arena for the Watts writers in his anthology who attempted to illustrate the realities of life in Watts through their fictional essays and poems, this paper will raise awareness about the black independent film projects located in the UCLA Film and Television Archive and simultaneously analyze those works. Using film in tandem with textual sources will bring a depth of historical understanding about the Watts Riot that does not currently exist. As philosopher Vilem Flusser illuminated in “The Future of Writing,” non-literate messages are growing in importance in our society as writing is growing a less favorable means of communication in comparison to photographs, films, and TV.²⁵ Film historian Robert A. Rosenstone, in “The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History,” continued this dialogue and argued that postmodern history exists in film, whether documentary or dramatized. He contends that films are historical:

Because such films are serious about describing and understanding, in however unusual a form, the beliefs, ideas, experiences, events, movements, and moments of the past. Because they accept the notion that the weight of the past has somehow helped to shape (us in) the present, even if they are not certain about how to assess that weight. Because even though they refuse to think in terms of linear cause and effect or to accept the idea that chronology is necessarily useful, and even though they insist that past material is always personal, partial, political, problematic, it is still possible to see them fulfilling traditional tasks of history and telling histories [...]²⁶

This paper will analyze the black independent films, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), *Bush Mama* (1975), and *As Above, So Below* (1973) as historical documents that represent the marginalized voices of the citizens of Watts. The directors, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark, completed these projects during their master’s degree studies at the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television. *Killer of Sheep*, an eighty-one minute film, was Charles Burnett’s first full-

²⁵ Vilem Flusser, “The Future of Writing,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1993), 299.

²⁶ Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 215.

length project although he completed two short films before 1977. Burnett now has more than twenty completed works in various genres including documentary and television series. *Bush Mama*, a seventy-nine minute film, was Haile Gerima's third work, preceded by a short project titled *Hour Glass* (1971) and a film called *Child of Resistance* (1972). Gerima has since completed eight additional films. *As Above, So Below*, a fifty-two minute piece, was Larry Clark's second project. After 1973, he completed only two additional feature films.

Killer of Sheep, *Bush Mama*, and *As Above, So Below* fit the classification of history as experiment due to their opposition to mainstream Hollywood film.²⁷ In, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age," Rosenstone detailed the three types of historical film as drama, document, and experiment. According to his definitions, the three films discussed in this paper reside in the category of history as experiment.²⁸ These experimental projects encourage a different way to think about the past: "Not tied to 'realism,' they bypass the demands for veracity, evidence, and argument that are a normal component of written history and go on to explore new and original ways of thinking about the past."²⁹ Burnett, Gerima, and Clark, like other students at UCLA the late 1960s and early 1970s, rejected Hollywood's portrayal of blacks and chose to focus on exposing the immediate reality of urban ghettos.³⁰ According to James Snead, during the 1960s and 1970s, black people gained political and symbolic significance in the American mind, which meant their images in mainstream

²⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁸ Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 53-54.

²⁹ Ibid., 58-59.

³⁰ Nathan Grant, "Innocence and Ambiguity in the Films of Charles Burnett" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 138.

Hollywood “race films” now seemed inaccurate.³¹ Unfortunately, the new black American image to arrive in Hollywood during the seventies was little improvement, as Blaxploitation films dominated mainstream black American cinema.³²

The emergence of Blaxploitation films undoubtedly affected Burnett’s, Gerima’s, and Clark’s characterizations and narrative, which makes it an important aspect to note here although direct analysis of the directors’ films in comparison to Blaxploitation pieces goes beyond the purview of this paper. *The Encyclopedia of Film Themes, Settings, and Series* defines Blaxploitation films as a term coined in the 1970s which described low-budget, action pictures that featured mostly black performers, were typically shown in black neighborhood theaters, and were considered offensive due to stereotypical black representations as private eyes, drug kingpins, and prostitutes.³³ Blaxploitation films generated a new stereotype, dubbed the “bad nigger,” derived from societal prejudices about urban black society.³⁴ In *Hollywood Films of the Seventies*, authors Seth Cagin and Philip Dray discussed reasons for the emergence of these films, “[...] the black market was quickly overwhelmed by ‘blaxploitation’ – e.g., *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972). The reasons for this are diverse, but may include the fact that blacks did not control Hollywood’s purse strings; also, Hollywood found it could tap the black audience without having to specifically address films to it.”³⁵

³¹ James A. Snead, “Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films: A Brief Survey,” in *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, eds. Mbye B. Chan and Claire Andrade-Watkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 21.

³² Charles Kronengold, “Identity, Value, and the Work of Genre: Black Action Films” in *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York: Routledge, 2000), 110.

³³ Richard B. Armstrong and Mary Willems Armstrong, *Encyclopedia of Film Themes, Settings, and Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1990), 27-28.

³⁴ Grant, “Innocence and Ambiguity in the Films of Charles Burnett,” 135.

³⁵ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *Hollywood Films of the Seventies: Sex, Drugs, Violence, Rock ‘n’ Roll, & Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 116.

Burnett, Clark, and Gerima were a part of UCLA's "Ethno-Communications" initiative, designed to focus on communities of color. Scholars Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, in *Contemporary American Independent Film*, categorized this initiative as a part of a collegiate movement in the sixties and seventies that established courses and schools specifically devoted to avant-garde-independent film.³⁶ While an increased focus on independent film at American universities likely contributed to a stronger UCLA film community, the formation of the black independent movement in Los Angeles was a unique development only possible because of the international contextual conditions: "For these African and African-American filmmakers, imagination was inescapably wedded to political and cultural commitment. The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the anti-war movement, and activities in America in support of national liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America informed the political consciousness of the members of the group."³⁷ These political and cultural influences played an important role in the directors' films.

The L.A. Rebellion group consisted of socially aware filmmakers with Marxist ideologies who channeled influences from Third Cinema in Argentina, Chile, Cuba, etc., and used their cameras as guerrilla weapons.³⁸ Third Cinema became so popular amongst UCLA filmmakers that the students formed a Third World Film Club and screened many of these films. The prevalence of Third Cinema films contributed to UCLA filmmakers' tendencies toward revolutionary and reflexive techniques as well as concerns about internalized colonialism,

³⁶ Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, eds., *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 39.

³⁷ Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107.

³⁸ George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 518.

themes tied directly to the Vietnam War.³⁹ Just as footage of the realities of combat in Vietnam shocked the world, Burnett, Gerima, Clark, and their contemporaries attempted to awaken American minds to the tragedies occurring at home. With this context, it seems impossible to evaluate the conditions leading up to the Watts Riot and their aftermath without considering the black independent film movement at UCLA. The filmmakers' creations are inexorably tied to the landscape of Watts and this paper intends to evaluate three of those projects in relation to key political texts in order to extrapolate a visual and textual reality of black urban existence in Watts in 1965.

To evaluate these three projects, it is first necessary to discuss the historiography of film, or as historian Hayden White called it, historiophoty, which provides some examples of methodologies historians have employed to analyze film.⁴⁰ The film analysis in this paper will then build upon film historians' previous techniques. White explained in "The Modernist Event," that historians criticize films for their failure to distinguish between the "real" and "imaginary." As an example, he used Oliver Stone's *JFK*, a film which was not well received among historians due to the fact that Stone depicted all events in the film, as equal, whether they were based on historical evidence, conjecture, or completely fictional.⁴¹ While other historians refuse to consider films equal to texts for this reason, White argues:

However, any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is

³⁹ Paula Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: Killer of Sheep, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 4 (October 1999): 24.

⁴⁰ In "Historiography and Historiophoty," Hayden White defines historiophoty as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" in contrast to his definition of historiography as "the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse." This idea was a response to Robert A. Rosenstone's article "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film." Both of these articles appear in *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1988).

⁴¹ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 20.

infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable. Moreover, the historical event, traditionally conceived as an event which was not only observable but also observed, is by definition an event that is no longer observable, and hence cannot serve as an object of a knowledge as certain as can a present event which can still be observed.⁴²

For these reasons, White continued, it is respectable to use the time-honored tradition of storytelling, as Stone did in *JFK*.⁴³ Burnett, Gerima, and Clark also utilized this tradition by telling stories about individuals living in Watts. All three directors are American counterparts to Aleksandr Medvedkin, a Soviet Russian film director. Medvedkin's film, *Happiness*, showed the downsides of the kolkhoz system in the Soviet Union through the story of one peasant named Khmyr.⁴⁴ Like Medvedkin, these three directors believed in the power of film to act as a mirror for communities, to exhibit the realities of societal dilemmas, and to compel viewers to take necessary action for improvement. But how should historians analyze these stories in order to generate a greater understanding of the past?

One method is to combine examination of visual representations of history with textual sources. In "Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the Films of Ousmane Sembène," African studies historian Mbye Cham analyzed Sembène's film *Ceddo* through discussion of his major plot points, characters, and imagery related to colonialism, Islam, and the community at large. Cham argued Sembène's films revisited and reinterpreted African history through popular memory of African citizens rather than allow a definition of the past based solely on official, white history such as the White Man's Burden and Manifest Destiny.⁴⁵ Cham's argument supports this paper's main intention to examine the histories

⁴² Ibid., 22.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For more information about Aleksander Medvedkin, see Chris Marker's 1992 film *The Last Bolshevik*.

⁴⁵ Mbye Cham, "Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the Films of Ousmane Sembène," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 262.

Burnett, Gerima, and Clark present in comparison to the official Moynihan and McCone Commission reports.

Another method employs discussion of major historical themes throughout various filmic works. *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama*, and *As Above, So Below* all serve as memorials for an urban black community of a shared, traumatic past. Historian Michael S. Roth provided a similar commentary in “*Hiroshima Mon Amour*: You Must Remember This.” In this article, Roth analyzed director Alain Resnais’ film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, through examination of the connections between history, memory, and trauma. Roth focused on the film’s themes of trauma and forgetting by analyzing the dialogue and characters, while simultaneously comparing *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to other works like *Casablanca* and *Shoah*. These methods ultimately allowed Roth to conclude that *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, “shows us that the acknowledgement of trauma and forgetting is also a condition of piety, of the caring attention one can provide to parts of one’s past. Whether history is written for accuracy or for expressivity, it is always written against forgetting and perhaps ultimately for either freedom or piety. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is *douée de mémoire* because it is a film that remembers forgetting.”⁴⁶ The Watts Riot in 1965 was a traumatic event for the community and while all three films in this paper approach the event in disparate manners, each serves as a way for the community to address the past, to heal, and to remember.

The previous two articles focused on narrative films, but sometimes directors blur the lines between dramatic works and documentaries, which is a practice Burnett, Gerima, and Clark all utilize. In “*The Battle of Chile*: Documentary, Political Process, and Representation,”

⁴⁶ Michael S. Roth, “*Hiroshima Mon Amour*: You Must Remember This,” in *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 101.

communications professor Ana M. Lopez analyzed the documentary film *The Battle of Chile* through contextualization of cultural and ideological production during Salvador Allende's Popular Unity coalition. Lopez used this context to explain that while many consider this film a documentary, that classification is far from simple: "This is not a film presenting itself as a record of how things 'really were' in Chile in 1973, as many critics have argued. It is a precise, calculated, intentionally political, Marxist dialectical analysis of those events that uses the narrative strategies of fiction as a legitimating device."⁴⁷ While *The Battle of Chile* is considered a documentary that utilizes narrative techniques, Burnett, Gerima and Clark show the opposite by using documentary film techniques in their dramatic pieces.

The film analysis in this paper will build upon these methodologies. First, it will contextualize the films through discussion of the 1965 Watts Riot and dominant white ideologies presented in the Moynihan and McCone Commission reports. Then, it will discuss the major themes, characters, and techniques of *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama*, and *As Above, So Below* to demonstrate the three directors' examinations of the same event. This film analysis coupled with an examination of the Moynihan and McCone Commission reports will demonstrate the dynamics of power in 1965 by showing the opinions of prominent white men in comparison to the insights of black citizens in Watts. This paper will endeavor to show that while these five works identify similar causes for the riot, their disparate audiences, purposes, and solutions demonstrate an irreparable gap between the two genres and perhaps even in society.

⁴⁷ Ana M. Lopez, "The Battle of Chile: Documentary, Political Process, and Representation," in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julianna Burton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 278.

CHAPTER ONE: THE WATTS RIOT AND OFFICIAL REPORTS

The 1960s were tumultuous years marked by a sense of hope and transformation amidst times of crisis and tragedy. John F. Kennedy's election signified a belief in change, which permeated American society as evidenced by Rachel Carson's environmental plea in *Silent Spring* (1962), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech in 1963, among others. In this Era of Good Feelings, Lyndon B. Johnson ushered in his Great Society reforms, legislation that included the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare, Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, and the 1964 Civil Right Act. Throughout 1965, Johnson publicly declared his optimism in America's ability to navigate the racial divide. On August 6, 1965 at the signing ceremony for the Voting Rights Bill, he said: "Thus, this is a victory for the freedom of the American Negro. But it is also a victory for the freedom of the American nation. And every family – across this great, entire searching land – will live stronger in liberty, will live more splendid in expectation, and will be prouder to be American because of the act that you have passed that I will sign today."⁴⁸ These hopeful sentiments starkly contrast with the darker periods of the decade such as military escalation in Vietnam, violence in Selma, Alabama, and race riots throughout the nation.

The twentieth century was rife with racial tensions. One of the first major race riots occurred in Chicago in 1919. The violence lasted for six days and resulted in thirty-eight fatalities. That was merely the beginning. Harlem experienced three separate uprisings: one in 1935, another in 1943, and again in 1964. The first two consisted of one day of unrest, while the 1964 riot endured for six days, caused the death of one individual, and injured hundreds.⁴⁹ After the 1965 Watts Riot, America still suffered – Detroit erupted in 1967, Chicago blacks responded

⁴⁸ Johnson, *The Road to Justice*, 1965.

⁴⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 3-43.

to Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 with another riot, and South Central Los Angeles rebelled a second time in 1992.⁵⁰ This is hardly an exhaustive list of hostilities; cities such as Philadelphia, Houston, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Newark, Baltimore, Washington D.C., Camden, and Miami also experienced violent clashes during the century, particularly from 1960 to 1992. While the instigators and targets of these race riots differ in each instance, especially in most pre-WWII riots when whites attacked communities of color, the extent of these uprisings proved the government's legislative actions could not stand alone. Legal rights did not guarantee equality.

The riots leading up to August 1965, coupled with civil rights hostilities in the South, created an agitated national environment and showed the citizens of Watts they were not alone in their misery. On March 7, 1965, approximately six hundred individuals gathered in Selma, Alabama to march in an organized voting rights protest. On their way to Montgomery, just after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the protesters met a host of state troopers, blocking the road.⁵¹ A few leaders tried to generate conversation and dissolve the confrontation, but the troopers began to shove demonstrators. The situation escalated as troopers beat the unarmed citizens with nightsticks, fired tear gas into the crowd, and charged them on horseback. News stations showed images of the attack and newspapers plastered the brutality on their front pages. Thus, the media helped generate a sense of black nationalism, connecting individual and community frustration with distant incidences of racial violence.

The war in Vietnam also began to inundate American homes. Before August 1965, news stations mentioned the Vietnam War on their broadcasts, but few images or actual footage

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, xiii.

reached the American people. On August 5, CBS News featured a story that showed an American marine setting fire to a Vietnamese village. Correspondent Morley Safer declared this was the reality of the conflict. Viewers complained that CBS lied about the incident, but this footage started a realization that America might not “win” in Vietnam, especially if soldiers could not distinguish between the Vietcong and innocent civilians.⁵² By the end of 1965, peace faded, as did black hopes for nonviolent solutions.

THE MOYNIHAN REPORT

In March 1965, the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, completed a seventy-eight-page report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This report utilized statistics from the Policy Planning and Research staff of the U.S. Department of Labor in an effort to encourage government officials to initiate socioeconomic reforms. Moynihan aimed his liberal ideas toward top administration officials using a cool, diagnostic tone without specific policy recommendations in the hopes they would better understand the realities of unemployment and poverty that devastated lower class black families.⁵³ Indeed, Moynihan began his assessment with flattery: “In the decade that began with the school desegregation decision of the Supreme Court, and ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights was finally met.”⁵⁴ He then went on to detail the specific political and legal civil rights improvements the country experienced since the beginning of Kennedy’s administration. However, his analysis of the current state of black families began with an acknowledgement of a major challenge – to make certain that equality

⁵² Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction*, 178.

⁵³ Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, xii.

⁵⁴ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, i.

actually happened, rather than simply believing these legislative changes would erase the problems of the past.

Using statistics to support his arguments, Moynihan illustrated a growing divide in the black community between a stable middle-class group and an increasingly disadvantaged lower class. He explained that the appearance of a middle-class black community blinded white society into believing an overall stability of family structure. In addition, mass media and the development of suburbia created an image of standardization that simply did not exist for everyone.⁵⁵ Moynihan dispelled these myths with charts and tables based on the 1960 census that showed nearly a quarter of urban black marriages were dissolved, almost a quarter of black births were illegitimate, and about one-fourth of black families depended solely on females. Due to these rising rates of divorce, separation, and desertion, Moynihan demonstrated a great crisis in black family structure, which then contributed to an increase in welfare dependency.⁵⁶

Without offering solutions, Moynihan detailed six main causes for these growing deficiencies in the black community: slavery, reconstruction, urbanization, unemployment and poverty, the wage system, and population growth. First, Moynihan acknowledged the debilitating effect that three centuries of slavery had on blacks. Second, he argued the atmosphere of reconstruction, which provided liberty rather than equality, did not allow blacks to realize their full potential as members of society.⁵⁷ Next, the mass migration from rural areas to cities disrupted traditional social patterns and caused great strain on family life. One of these great strains was unemployment, which in turn caused great poverty: “During times when jobs were reasonably plentiful the Negro family became stronger and more stable. As jobs became more

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6-12.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

and more difficult to find, the stability of the family became more and more difficult to maintain.”⁵⁸ When jobs were available, the federal minimum wage of \$1.25 per hour provided a basic income for an individual, but was well below the poverty line for a family. Moynihan argued that black fathers were unable to support their family. In many situations when the father was not present or unemployed, the mother went to work, which undermined the father’s status and deprived the children of necessary attention. Finally, extraordinary growth in the black population led to increasing problems. Moynihan noticed a dangerous family cycle: “Low education levels in turn produce low income levels, which deprive children of many opportunities, and so the cycle repeats itself.”⁵⁹

Moynihan concluded his analysis with a plea for national action. He stated his intent was to define the problem, rather than find solutions because he felt many people were unaware of the necessity for action. He wrote, “[w]here we should break into this cycle and how, are the most difficult questions facing the United States. We must first reach agreement on what the problem is, then we will know what questions must be answered.”⁶⁰ With communication and collaboration among whites and blacks, Moynihan believed an effort to enhance the stability and resources of the black family would improve the standard of living and create equality for all.

Moynihan initially released the report only to top government officials, but someone in the administration leaked it to the public in mid-July 1965. The White House then decided to print the report for public release, although this did not happen until after the Watts Riot. Demand for the report exploded, as America tried to analyze the causes of the unrest. While some acknowledged the report’s focus on white racism and high unemployment, others only

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 47.

recognized dramatic passages that deemed black culture nearly irreparable, such as: “There is no one Negro problem. There is no one solution. Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.”⁶¹ By September, Moynihan resigned. Identified as the report’s author, he received myriad criticisms. Civil rights leaders charged Moynihan with demeaning black culture while women resented his descriptions of black matriarchy. The leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), James Farmer, stated: “We are sick unto death of being analyzed, mesmerized, bought, sold, and slobbered over, while the same evils that are the ingredients of our oppression go unattended.”⁶²

Amidst such turmoil, rather than focusing on statistics that proved the existence of a problem, the government might have looked for solutions. Even before August 1965, the evidence of a problem existed in the persistent urban uprisings in Harlem and elsewhere, as well as the resistance civil rights protestors received from bus boycotts to Selma, Alabama. Perhaps Moynihan’s report should have both proved the existence of the decline in black family structure and offered solutions to fix his so-called “tangle of pathology.”⁶³ Moynihan explained that he did not include a series of recommendations for actions in the report because he wanted a clear focus on the need for family stability.⁶⁴

It is unsurprising that black women objected to Moynihan’s treatment of matriarchy – he seemed disturbed at the notion of a woman earning money for her family’s survival. Not only did his commentary disadvantage women, it also placed the blame on them: “56% of Negro women,

⁶¹ Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, 54; United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, 30-31.

⁶² Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, xv.

⁶³ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, 30.

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, 59.

age 25 to 64, are in the work force, against 42% of white women. This dependence on the mother's income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of the kind of attention, particularly in school matters, which is now a standard feature of middle-class upbringing."⁶⁵ In addition, through his concern about increasing welfare dependency, Moynihan classified black mothers as irresponsible members of society who have more children than they can ever hope to support. Moynihan argued the problems he outlined in his report would increase due to black population growth. This connection cast doubts for the reader – was Moynihan genuinely concerned for black citizens' chances of survival or did his analysis of a growing fertility rate originate from his opinion as a white male in authority determined to hinder an uncontrollable black population?

Regardless of the report's gender bias, the larger issue was unemployment – whether male or female, black citizens needed more opportunities with higher pay to support their families. Throughout the report, Moynihan neglected to highlight the ways in which low-income families were able to survive despite the circumstances he outlined. Patterson perceived, “[t]hough [Moynihan] twice noted the resilience of black families who rose to middle-class status, he otherwise concentrated on the lower classes, dramatizing the seriousness of their situation in order to make his readers take notice and act.”⁶⁶ Overall, Moynihan cited a key proponent to the problems of black families as a collapse of black family structure and culture. As an observation from a white, government official, this argument ultimately overpowered any other causes Moynihan identified. Even though he noted the devastating effect of continued white racism, his report could never receive support from the black community due to the extent of his own biases that were all too evident in his critique.

⁶⁵ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, 25.

⁶⁶ Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, 61.

In a later essay, Moynihan reminisced that the reaction to his report hindered the opportunity for discussion to improve race relations. Moynihan had good intentions but his report came at an inopportune time. The statistics he highlighted were important, but the black community did not want to acknowledge the possible consequences, especially because the conclusions originated from a white government official in the midst of civil rights upheaval. Instead, if individuals within the black community, such as filmmakers Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, or Larry Clark, had illuminated similar issues, the reaction may have been quite different. However, for Moynihan, as soon as the Watts Riot occurred, the moment for discussion was lost.⁶⁷

THE TUMULTUOUS EVENTS OF AUGUST 1965

On the night of August 11, 1965, California Highway Patrol (CHP) pulled over Marquette Frye and his brother Ronald. Marquette emerged from the vehicle and tried to placate the officer, but he had been drinking and did not have his license. After a few DUI tests, the officer began to write up a ticket, called a tow truck to detain the vehicle, and asked for backup. During this time, Ronald remained in the vehicle, only emerging once the tow truck arrived to produce his driver's license. By then, their mother, Rena Price, arrived at the scene. She claimed, and proved, ownership of the car, and the two officers granted her permission to take it home, although they still planned to arrest Marquette.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 69. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's political career launched after his notoriety involving the Moynihan Report. He served the Nixon Administration as Counselor to the President for Urban Affairs due to his academic research related to social policies. Nixon later appointed him the US Ambassador to India, and then Ford named him US Ambassador to the United Nations. He followed these appointments with a long career in the Senate from 1976 to 2000.

⁶⁸ Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 206-207; Errol Stevens, *Radical L.A.: From Coxe's Army to the Watts Riot, 1894-1965* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 307; Conot, *Rivers of Blood*, 7-13.

The incident could have ended there, with Price and Ronald taking the car and Marquette arrested for a DUI. However, Price began to scold Marquette, who became increasingly agitated. As he began to shout and resist arrest, a growing crowd of bystanders materialized. Nervous, the officers called for backup while one grabbed his baton and the other, a shotgun. They pushed the crowd back while attempting to detain Marquette. Fearing for his brother's safety, Ronald interfered and both he and Marquette met the force of a baton. In response, Price attacked one of the officers. The officers handcuffed all three and forced them into their vehicles. By now, the crowd was unruly, shouting police brutality. An increasing number of LAPD and CHP vehicles arrived at the scene, drawing more attention.⁶⁹ As they watched the arrest, someone in the crowd commented: "It's just like Selma."⁷⁰

With Marquette, Ronald, and Price detained, the police vehicles began to disperse. As the motorcycle cops departed, someone in the crowd spat on one of them. This officer and his partner dismounted, ran into the crowd, and grabbed a young woman they believed to be the culprit. In addition to this woman, the two officers arrested a man inciting the crowd to attack them. Witness Ovelmar Bradley later described the scene to ACLU representatives:

Attracted by all the noise of the sirens, a large crowd gathered on Avalon, curious to know what was happening. There were as many as five or six hundred people lining Avalon. As the people came to see what was happening, the police got out of their cars. I arrived just in time to see the police with their billy clubs trip people in the crowd who tried to run. As they lay there, the police beat them. Some were on their knees begging the police to stop beating them with their clubs. My husband and I actually counted ten policemen beating one Negro man as he lay on the sidewalk.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 207; Conot, *Rivers of Blood*, 14-16.

⁷⁰ Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction*, 180.

⁷¹ American Civil Liberties Union, "Watts: Police Malpractice and the Watts Riot," ACLU of Southern California records, Collection Number 900 (UCLA: Charles E. Young Research Library Special Collections, 1966), Appendix A, 13.

After placing more offenders in squad cars, the police withdrew for a second time. The crowd, now numbering about one thousand, did not. They began to stone passing cars and pulled white motorists from their vehicles to beat them. The riot had begun.

Marquette's DUI arrest triggered a violent uprising that lasted six more days until August 17, 1965. During these six days, racial tension not only increased in South Central Los Angeles, but reports of conflicts generated from cities all over the United States including Philadelphia, Chicago, Springfield, MA, and Morristown, NJ. In southern California, panic caused movie theaters to close, traffic on the freeway halted, and gun sales to whites doubled.⁷² While Southern California froze in panic, the government froze in shock. Deputy Attorney General Ramsay Clark acknowledged that Washington had not seen the warnings.⁷³ President Johnson flew to his ranch in Texas on the second day of the disturbances. As the burning and looting escalated, Joseph Califano, a top aide in Washington, called the President for instructions. For about two days, President Johnson refused to answer the phone.⁷⁴ At the same time, the Governor of California, Pat Brown, was out of the country when the riots began. After he saw the news, he flew home from his vacation, reportedly stating: "Nobody told me there was an explosive situation in Los Angeles. California is a state where there is no racial discrimination."⁷⁵

It was not until two days later that the Lieutenant Governor of California, Glenn Anderson, called in the National Guard to assist Chief of Police Parker's men.⁷⁶ On August 13, KNXT Channel Two newscaster Joseph Benti reported the decision to bring in the National Guard. According to the broadcast, Mayor Yorty and Chief Parker forced Anderson to call the

⁷² Flamm, *Law and Order*, 59.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁷⁴ Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction*, 182; Flamm, *Law and Order*, 60.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Della Rossa, "Why Watts Exploded: How the Ghetto Fought Back," Debbie Louis Collection on Civil Rights, Collection Number 1111 (UCLA: Charles E. Young Research Library, 1966), 8.

⁷⁶ Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction*, 180.

National Guard. He requested one thousand troops, but the entire force was on alert. Parker urged Johnson to declare martial law and stated he was uninterested in meeting with black leaders, “[t]here are no leaders in the riot area, this is just a mob.”⁷⁷ Describing the beginning of the riot, Parker told the media: “Somebody threw a rock, and then, like monkeys in a zoo, everybody else started throwing rocks.”⁷⁸ Activist Bayard Rustin later asked the Chief about his choice of words and Parker responded that this was the only language blacks understood. Rustin elaborated: “His reference to the Negro rioters as ‘monkeys,’ and his ‘top and bottom’ description of the riots, speak for themselves, and they could only have further enraged and encouraged the rioters.”⁷⁹ The government’s response and Chief Parker’s comments in particular, alienated and dismayed the leaders of the black community.

By Saturday, August 14, thirteen thousand national guardsmen joined police to try to clear the streets. Authorities created a curfew zone of approximately forty-six square miles, which made it a crime for any unauthorized person to be on the streets after eight o’clock at night. Reporter Ralph Story talked with freelance reporter Joe Dyer who actually went into the curfew zone during the riots. On national television, Dyer said he felt as though he entered a war zone, “I didn’t go to Vietnam today, I went to Watts.”⁸⁰ By the time they lifted the curfew on August 17, fatalities reached thirty-four, property losses totaled forty million dollars, over a thousand were injured, and the police arrested approximately four thousand individuals.

⁷⁷ KNXT news (Los Angeles, Calif.) 1965-08-13. VA2648 T. Television Collection. UCLA Film and Television Archive.

⁷⁸ Qtd. in Rossa, “Why Watts Exploded,” 8-9.

⁷⁹ Bayard Rustin, “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ & The McCone Report,” Mayor Tom Bradley Administration papers, Collection Number 293 (UCLA: Charles E. Young Research Library, 1966), 32.

⁸⁰ KNXT news (Los Angeles, Calif.) 1965-08-13. VA2648 T. Television Collection. UCLA Film and Television Archive.

When President Johnson finally answered Califano's calls, his reaction was extremely personal. He could not fathom the extent of the anger and destruction in the face of all of his political progress with civil rights. Agitated, he ordered an investigation into the likely communist conspiracy behind the rioting.⁸¹ It eventually became obvious that communists and/or outside agitators were not behind the Watts Riot, but Johnson was not the only one with such suspicions. With continuous television coverage of the event, the public began to wonder about the rioters' political agenda, especially due to the phrase that eventually became the slogan of the Watts Riot: "Burn, baby, burn!"⁸² Governor Brown, once returned from his vacation, blamed the riot on a gang element, a sentiment Oscar Handlin, a social historian at Harvard, echoed.⁸³ Johnson, also convinced that the majority of the community did not participate in the uprising, ordered anti-poverty aid sent to the area. Johnson and civil rights leaders knew that meager gesture would not quell the rebellious spirit of the urban blacks or greatly improve their lives.⁸⁴ The President waited for the report from a commission he encouraged Governor Brown to arrange in the aftermath. He hoped its investigation would provide answers and easy solutions.

THE AFTERMATH: THE MCCONE COMMISSION

Four days after the disturbance, Governor Brown decided to form a Commission to investigate. He chose John McCone, former director of the CIA, to lead the Commission, which President Johnson approved. In total, McCone and Brown chose eight commissioners to lead the investigation, two of whom were black: Reverend James Jones and Judge Earl Broady. The Commission held sixty-four meetings in the one hundred days after its inception, gathering testimony and statements from administrators, law enforcement officers, state government,

⁸¹ Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction*, 182.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁴ Flamm, *Law and Order*, 61; Patterson, *Eve of Destruction*, 183.

business representatives, and residents in the area where the riots occurred. Ultimately, they identified no single circumstance as the sole reason for the riots, rather citing a few areas in need of improvement.

Flamm provided comment on the immediate reaction to the McCone Commission's report. Originally, it was mixed; white Californians found the conclusions favorable due to survey results that sixty-four percent of them believed the rioters were outside agitators or individuals with no respect for the law.⁸⁵ Most major publications cautioned against the Commission's conclusions, worried that the report itself could become a substitute for meaningful action. Later reactions were even more critical, especially from radicals who condemned the members of the Commission for upholding the status quo.⁸⁶

On law enforcement, the Commission found that the situation required the use of force and that Chief of Police Parker was a capable chief. Their solution to the schism between blacks and police was a greater understanding on both sides, adjustment of complaint policies, strengthening the Board of Police Commissioners, providing programs to encourage black youth's support of the police, and increasing the number of minority officers. Unemployment required the most attention: "The most serious immediate problem that faces the Negro in our community is employment. Unemployment and the consequent idleness are at the root of many of the problems we discuss in this report."⁸⁷ However, the Commission offered no solution to unemployment, but suggested that the government, the private business sector, organized labor, and the Negro community could all do more to find jobs and to train blacks.

⁸⁵ Flamm, *Law and Order*, 63.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ McCone Commission, "Violence in the City," 38.

On education, the Commission suggested reorganizing and strengthening the programs for schools in disadvantaged areas: “We reason, therefore, that raising the scholastic achievement might reverse the entire trend of de facto segregation.”⁸⁸ Overall, they recommended that the white and black communities work together to improve the problems of the city, and they also requested the press to report equally the good and the bad. Finally, the Commission singled out black leaders and asked them to work in the community to resolve extreme viewpoints, because, “[w]e firmly believe that progress toward ameliorating the current wrongs is difficult in an atmosphere pervaded by these extreme standards.”⁸⁹ According to the McCone Commission report, civil rights were never as large a controversy in Los Angeles as in the South, but situations had climaxed after Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The Commission hoped their report would dissolve tensions: “We make [these recommendations] because we are convinced the Negro can no longer exist, as he has, with the disadvantages which separate him from the rest of society, deprive him of employment, and cause him to drift aimlessly through life.”⁹⁰

The McCone Commission’s recommendations demonstrate the depth of the existing racial power structure in the sixties and seventies. First, the individuals involved with the commission and the way in which its mission was developed guaranteed an unfair assessment. As Jacobs mentioned in his essay, “The McCone Commission,” only two members of the eight-person commission had prior experience with race relations, “the rest of the commission members had no special qualifications in this field; they were selected to give the impression of a

⁸⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 82.

broad community spectrum of the kind associated with community chest drives or anti-polio campaigns.”⁹¹

McCone hand-selected his participants, insisted on veto power over the other members and outlined the mission. He was also responsible for the short amount of time allocated for the investigation and issuing of a report – three months. While some suggested this quick turnaround originated from the Governor’s desire to present immediate proposals for relief to the state legislature, McCone had other thoughts, “[...] this is a subject you can study forever and these were busy men; every one of them, including myself, had a full-time job, and we couldn’t be expected to set aside a year of our life.”⁹² However, even with a lengthier timeframe, it is unlikely that the McCone Commission would have arrived at different conclusions. As Robert Fogelson discussed just a few years later in his critique of the report, while the Commission’s work was less exhaustive than previous studies of the Chicago riots in 1919 or the Harlem riots of 1935, the members collected enough information to understand the underlying causes of the riot. They simply ignored or misinterpreted that information.⁹³

In particular, the Commission’s analysis and conclusions regarding police brutality in South Central Los Angeles was extremely disappointing for Watts’ black citizens. Skepticism toward police behavior was a central theme of the McCone Commission’s investigation, as it should have been considering the inciting incident revolved around allegations of misconduct. However, Chief of Police Parker and Mayor Yorty vehemently denied such accusations and McCone decided in their favor. Fogelson suggested that McCone had reached this conclusion even before the investigation began: “Questioning George Slaff of the ACLU, to whom he was

⁹¹ Jacobs, “The McCone Commission,” 292.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 293.

⁹³ Fogelson, “White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission Report,” in *The Politics of Riot Commissions, 1917-1970*, ed. Anthony Platt (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), 310.

inexcusably rude, McCone remarked that as CIA director he had found that in all recent domestic riots and overseas insurrections the issue of police brutality was raised in order to destroy effective law enforcement.”⁹⁴ His biases determined the Commission’s policy, despite objections from other commissioners, namely Reverend Jones.

In order to reach the conclusion that law enforcement acted appropriately during the Watts Riot and before, McCone and his fellow commissioners disregarded the testimony of many black citizens and affidavits submitted to them by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).⁹⁵ Between August 23, 1965 and September 11, 1965, investigators for the ACLU and the United Civil Rights Committee took twenty-five statements and declarations. Archie Lee Howard, a citizen of San Pedro Street, Los Angeles, stated:

On August 14, 1965, at approximately 8:10 p.m., I was riding in an automobile with three other people when we were stopped by both Los Angeles policemen and National Guardsmen at 68th and Hoover. They told us to pull off of Hoover onto 68th and park. We did as they ordered. Then they ordered us to get out of the car with our hands up. I was sitting in the right front or passenger seat of the car. I was the first to get out. As I opened the door and stepped out with my hands up, a police officer began hitting me across the top of the head with his billy-club. I had not said anything to him to make him angry with me nor had I made any threatening gestures towards him or anyone else. They made me lean spread-eagled against the wall and continued to hit me on the right shoulder and across the head. Although I was quite dizzy and weak, I know that there were three of them who hit me at the same time.⁹⁶

Each statement contained similar information regarding police brutality the individuals personally experienced or witnessed. These sentiments are equal to those the McCone Commission heard in person during their investigations. When representatives from the ACLU arrived to testify, McCone told the witnesses the Commission wanted only facts, not emotional or extreme statements. He argued the claim of police brutality was “a device of our adversaries,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 316.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ American Civil Liberties Union, “Watts: Police Malpractice and the Watts Riot,” Appendix A, 19.

those who would like to destroy the freedom that this country stands for.”⁹⁷ Reverend Jones did not agree with this sentiment; he was a persistent critic of the LAPD. His disagreement is not reflected in the Commission’s final report – a further indication of McCone’s dictatorship.

To ameliorate the tension between police and black citizens, the final report recommended establishing more programs for urban youths to connect with police officers in a trusting environment. Rustin dismissed this recommendation as a public-relation gimmick that would never improve relations. He argued that crime is a fact in the ghetto when unemployed blacks must sell drugs, gamble, or turn to prostitution to earn a living and a police officers’ occupation is in direct opposition to their livelihood.⁹⁸ In addition, the Commission’s neglect to form an independent review board for citizen grievances merely continued the cycle of white power. Horne cited this failure to improve complaint processes as a major catalyst for the 1992 South Central Los Angeles riot. Tensions between police and citizens in the ghetto continued to rise and by 1969, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported few changes in the citizen complaint process.⁹⁹ McCone squandered an important opportunity for improvement, which proved extremely detrimental to Watts’ citizens for decades following the 1965 riot.

In addition to ignoring the issue of police brutality, the McCone Commission blamed the victims and black leaders of the communities. First, the final report greatly undercounted the number of participants in the riots. Second, the Commission claimed there was no connection between the blacks’ grievances and their violence.¹⁰⁰ The report also accused blacks of being unprepared for the conditions of city life. Rustin illuminated: “There is not one word about the conditions, economic as well as social, that have pushed Negroes out of the rural areas; nor is

⁹⁷ Horne, *Fire this Time*, 342.

⁹⁸ Rustin, “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ & The McCone Report,” 32.

⁹⁹ Horne, *Fire this Time*, 353.

¹⁰⁰ Fogelson, “White on Black,” 309.

there one word about whether the cities have been willing and able to meet the demand for jobs, adequate housing, proper schools. After all, one could say that it is the *cities* which have been ‘totally unprepared’ to meet the conditions of *Negro* life, but the moralistic bias of the McCone Report [...] continually operates in the other direction.”¹⁰¹ For these reasons, in addition to the Commission’s inability to address social discrimination, the McCone Commission report was an inadequate investigation of the reality of black life in Watts.

One year after the riots, the Commission released a “Staff Report of Actions Taken to Implement the Recommendations in the Commission’s Report” which demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the Commission’s investigation and subsequent suggestions. This article reported that law enforcement were taking an interest in community relations and had taken steps to increase their efforts to improve community-police relationships, however no details were offered regarding what these steps entailed.¹⁰² Efforts to recruit a more racially diverse police force seemed futile: “Many qualified Negroes and Mexican-Americans are not attracted to law enforcement careers. As more members of the minority communities are promoted within such agencies, it is anticipated that law enforcement careers will become more appealing.”¹⁰³ Besides this lack of progress, other disappointments included a lack of construction to repair damaged buildings, job training centers only in early stages, funds to build new school facilities had not arrived, and standards for acceptance into military service were not revised.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Rustin, “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ & the McCone Report,” 30.

¹⁰² McCone Commission, “Staff Reports of Actions Taken to Implement the Recommendations in the Commission’s Report,” Mayor Tom Bradley Administration papers, Collection Number 293 (UCLA: Charles E. Young Research Library, 1965-1968), 19-23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-40.

Horne described these results as predictable; citizens found a few improvements from concessions but overall, nothing changed.¹⁰⁵ Between 1965 and 1992, transportation improved with highway updates and additional bus lines, a hospital was built, and plans for a new youth center in Watts materialized. Arts programs emerged throughout the neighborhood and a summer film festival in 1966 attracted celebrities and citizens alike.¹⁰⁶ Despite these minor advances, GM, Firestone, and Goodyear all moved out of the area. A Catholic high school found a new home in an old steel mill. With industries closing, blacks remained jobless, which left Watts in the same economic state as before. After touring Watts, Senator Robert Kennedy predicted a future riot.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, even the McCone Commission noted increased tension in their report one year after their investigation: “There have been recurring and persistent rumors of impending riots in Los Angeles during the past year, although the city has not experienced any activity even remotely comparable in size, duration, or destruction to the riots there in August 1965.”¹⁰⁸ Those rumors did not materialize immediately, but in 1992, the world witnessed another Watts eruption. If the McCone Commission had sought to make dramatic, lasting change, they could have prevented immeasurable damage, not only from the repeated riots, but also from decades of discrimination, poverty, and oppression.

MOYNIHAN AND MCCONE: THEIR CONCLUSIONS

These two documents indicate that the political treatise genre is ineffectual; the authors do not attempt to dialogue with the individuals most closely affected by the results and thus cannot truly understand or remedy the issues. Although they both directed their comments to

¹⁰⁵ Horne, *Fire this Time*, 349.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹⁰⁸ McCone Commission, “Staff Reports of Actions Taken to Implement the Recommendations in the Commission’s Report,” 46.

government officials, the Moynihan and McCone reports had distinct aims. Moynihan's intent was to convince said audience of the existence of a black cultural crisis while McCone attempted to evaluate a single violent event and determine its causes. In other words, Moynihan predicted the eventuality of an event like the Watts Riot, whereas McCone responded to it. Their approaches to solving such dilemmas vastly differed also. Moynihan utilized statistics to generate charts and facts that would persuade those in power to initiate policy changes whereas McCone and his commissioners identified key areas that needed improvement and allocated meager amounts of money toward generating change.

Despite those differences, the two reports drew similar conclusions. They focused on the same key aspects of civil society in the sixties that were in need of improvement: unemployment, poverty, education, and race relations. For Moynihan, strengthening the black family structure was the next step toward battling a cycle of unemployment, which in turn led to poverty and thus kept black educational standards below white society's standards. McCone and his commissioners acknowledged the serious problem of unemployment and encouraged the government, private sectors, and black leaders to work toward job training programs and increasing employment opportunities. While Moynihan refused to offer solutions, the McCone Commission discussed possible reforms and the necessity for greater funds. However, even those suggestions were insufficient. Bayard Rustin succinctly summarized the fundamental downfall of these two reports:

Like the much-discussed Moynihan Report, the McCone Report is a bold departure from the standard government paper on social problems. It goes beyond the mere recital of statistics to discuss, somewhat sympathetically, the real problems of the Watts community – problems like unemployment, inadequate schools, dilapidated housing – and it seems at first glance to be leading toward constructive programs. It never reaches them, however, for again like the Moynihan Report, it is ambivalent about the basic

reforms that are needed to solve these problems and therefore shies away from spelling them out too explicitly.¹⁰⁹

Rustin's statement draws attention to the McCone Commission's reluctance to initiate great societal changes. However, Moynihan urged for radical improvement. While he did not explicitly state possible solutions as Rustin charged, the tone of his report clearly argued the need for immediate and thorough change: "Being Americans, [Negroes] will now expect that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups. This is not going to happen. Nor will it happen for generations to come unless a new and special effort is made."¹¹⁰ Moynihan recognized what President Johnson failed to see – the civil rights political measures Johnson enacted were only the beginning of the battle against economic racism.

Indeed, the greatest dissimilarity is the authors' treatment of racism and future race relations. Moynihan acknowledged the devastating effect of slavery on black families and cited it as the major issue in the 1960s atmosphere: "What then is the problem? We feel the answer is clear enough. Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American."¹¹¹ On the other hand, the McCone commission sided with the white authority figures on the point of police brutality while chastising black leaders. Rustin wrote, "Mayor Yorty and Police Chief Parker might have headed off a full-scale riot had they refrained from denouncing the Negro leaders and agreed to meet with them early on. Over and over again [...] the rioters claimed that violence was the only way they could get these officials to listen to them."¹¹² Instead, the commissioners, and McCone in particular, viewed police

¹⁰⁹ Rustin, "The Watts 'Manifesto' & the McCone Report," 29.

¹¹⁰ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, i.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹² Rustin, "The Watts 'Manifesto' & the McCone Report," 32.

brutality as a ploy and instead of establishing an independent review board, created an Inspector General to handle the process, a position that reported to the Chief of Police. This decision, indeed all of the report's conclusions, missed the opportunity to address society's racism and move toward real changes. However, the most important point is not that the two reports failed, it is what that failure signified. The two reports indicated the existence of a government incapable of systematic and meaningful change. Thus, the deep-seated problems for urban blacks in Watts persisted throughout the seventies and eighties, a fact that three black independent films released in the mid-seventies displayed.

CHAPTER TWO: UCLA AND BLACK INDEPENDENT FILM

The piece missing from the Moynihan and McCone Commission reports as well as scholarship on the Watts Riot is an authentic community voice. Without testimony from those living in the environment of Watts leading up to, during, and after the riots, it is impossible to discern the forces behind the violence and any possible solutions to the causes of the uprising. The films that comprise the L.A. Rebellion collection at the UCLA Film and Television Archive provide that missing aspect. The collection contains filmic works from approximately twenty-five master's students; typically, each filmmaker completed three projects during their studies. Of this group of films, this chapter will focus on three: *Killer of Sheep* by Charles Burnett, *Bush Mama* by Haile Gerima, and *As Above, So Below* by Larry Clark. The author chose these films in order to represent the myriad viewpoints of filmmakers within the UCLA Film and Television School during the 1960s and 1970s; one focuses on family dynamics, another on the politics of resistance in black communities, and the third choice presents an argument for militant action. *Killer of Sheep* has received the most acclaim out of this group; the film received an award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981 and the Library of Congress placed it on the National Film Registry in 1990. Both *Killer of Sheep* and *Bush Mama* are widely available on DVD, but *As Above, So Below* is only available for viewing at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Regardless of their distribution, these three films not only identify the community voice of black urban citizens but also examine a broader national experience while discussing the same key factors presented in the Moynihan and McCone Commission documents.

Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark come from different backgrounds – Burnett was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, but he grew up in Watts; Gerima was born in Gondar, Ethiopia and arrived in the United States in 1967 to study drama in Chicago; and Clark

was born in Cleveland, Ohio before he moved to Los Angeles as a young boy. Despite their disparate origins, the three directors found commonalities while studying at UCLA. The UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television (TFT), originally called the Theater Arts Department in 1947, has a long history of innovation, diversity, and social responsibility.¹¹³ These values are evident throughout TFT's history, but perhaps most notably in the late 1960s when it began an "Ethno-Communications" initiative in response to the Watts Riot and Civil Rights Movement. The UCLA Film and Television Archive began documenting this group of African and African American students, now called the L.A. Rebellion, whose works responded to important issues in communities of color during the tumultuous sixties and seventies.¹¹⁴ When asked about being a part of the L.A. Rebellion, Clark provided important background about the group:

The LA Rebellion was a term that Clyde Taylor actually coined in that article. And it gave it a name just like neorealism. If you ask a neorealist filmmaker about the neorealist movement, they might be – they didn't coin that term; they just made films, you know [...] We were making films. And I think that it was important that Clyde Taylor coined it something, because then you can refer to it, not just some people at UCLA who one day made some films [...] We were making films and it just happened to be a good group of students there, not just African American students, Asian students, Chicano students, just a good group of people that were there all at the same time. That's part of it.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ "History of TFT," UCLA, <http://www.tft.ucla.edu/about/history/> (accessed May 29, 2013).

¹¹⁴ "The Story of L.A. Rebellion," UCLA Film and Television Archive, <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/story-la-rebellion> (accessed May 29, 2013).

¹¹⁵ UCLA Film and Television Archive, "L.A. Rebellion: Oral History Interviews: Larry Clark, June 2010," Pacific Standard Time Oral History Interviews with Artists, Filmmakers, Curators, Collectors, and Critics, 2008-2012. Getty Research Institute, Institutional Archives. Finding aid number IA40011 <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifaia40011>, 28. Clyde Taylor is an African American cultural historian and film scholar who is an emeritus professor at New York University. According to the article "What's in a Name? L.A. Rebellion" on the UCLA Film and Television Archive website (<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/blogs/archival-spaces/2011/10/28/what%E2%80%99s-name-la-rebellion>), Taylor witnessed the L.A. Rebellion movement as a professor, critic, and curator. He curated an exhibit about this movement at the Whitney Museum in New York in January 1986, calling it "The L.A. Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema." In spring 1986, he also coined the term in a piece in the *Black Film Review*.

Burnett, Gerima, and Clark were particularly influential because they were among the first wave of filmmakers to arrive at UCLA to participate in this new enterprise.¹¹⁶ Their films, while touching on similar post-Watts realities in urban ghettos, portray the atmosphere in distinct ways.

In *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett directed his socio-economic commentary at his neighbors in Watts while focusing on the politics of resistance within the family. Conversely, the Moynihan report intended to educate an elite, white audience and McCone's analysis tried to arm government officials with quick solutions.¹¹⁷ Burnett illustrated the covert effects of racism on the average urban family's social and economic existence through a thorough analysis of Stan's discordant relationships. Through themes of the importance of community, loss of innocence, and lack of social mobility, Burnett offered his audience a unique, often disturbing, portrayal of American society. These themes echoed Moynihan's observations of the necessity to strengthen black cultural identity, improve educational standards, and curb unemployment. However, the similarities between *Killer of Sheep* and the Moynihan report are superficial at best. Moynihan acknowledged the consequences of slavery and ongoing racism in American society, but his determination to allow those with more power to make policy suggestions created a document that merely criticized a group to which he was clearly an outsider.

On the other hand, Burnett had lived experience to formulate his evaluation of the black urban family environment. He presented visuals of a black community's stagnating existence in the hopes that it would gain recognition in the neighborhood and serve as a starting point for discussion.¹¹⁸ He involved the community in the making of the film – he filmed it in Watts and Watts citizens served as his actors. In an interview, Burnett illuminated his process: “One of the

¹¹⁶ Masilela, “The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers,” 107.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁸ Elena Oumano, *Cinema Today: A Conversation with Thirty-Nine Filmmakers from Around the World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 239.

reasons I made films in the community was to, in a sense, it sounds ridiculous, to demystify filmmaking [...] But it was to bring, to expose kids to that kind of idea that there's more to...I don't know, than playing basketball or whatever [...]"¹¹⁹ The act of making the film was just as vital as the end result. Burnett's efforts to connect with the neighborhood served to bring awareness through film – a method of delivery the average Watts citizen could understand and access much easier than a political treatise.

Gerima's *Bush Mama* has more political, militant themes than Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*. Gerima said his films always responded to racism: "It comes from being hurt [...] you know I'm responding to racism because it really tried me. It was a cultural shock for me [...] film is a medium of exorcism for me. All the toxic in me comes out in my expression."¹²⁰ Specifically, his inspiration for *Bush Mama* came from his personal experience of seeing a woman in Chicago evicted in winter and the film evolved from that impetus over time.¹²¹ This muse created a female-centered evaluation of the difficulties ghetto life presented for single mothers. Gerima's perspective directly contradicted Moynihan's summations that unemployment led to greater dependency on welfare. Rather, Gerima presented a welfare system unwilling to help urban blacks through depictions of government officials who were more interested in controlling black population growth. In addition, he argued that a singular focus on unemployment gained nothing

¹¹⁹UCLA Film and Television Archive, "L.A. Rebellion: Oral History Interviews: Charles Burnett, June 2010," Pacific Standard Time Oral History Interviews with Artists, Filmmakers, Curators, Collectors, and Critics, 2008-2012. Getty Research Institute, Institutional Archives. Finding aid number IA40011 <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifaia40011>, 68.

¹²⁰ UCLA Film and Television Archive. "L.A. Rebellion: Oral History Interviews: Haile Gerima, September 2010." Pacific Standard Time Oral History Interviews with Artists, Filmmakers, Curators, Collectors, and Critics, 2008-2012. Getty Research Institute, Institutional Archives. Finding aid number IA40011. <http://hdl.handle.net/10020/cifaia40011>, 9.

¹²¹ UCLA Film and Television Archive. "L.A. Rebellion: Oral History Interviews: Haile Gerima, September 2010," 10.

– when the main character, Dorothy, obtains a job, her absence at home leaves her young daughter vulnerable to white oppressors.

Without battling the forces of racism, government solutions, such as those suggested in McCone’s report, enacted little change. The key failure of the McCone report was the commission’s inability to recognize the devastating effects of police brutality. Gerima showed his viewers his firsthand experience with such police action throughout the film: white police officers stop and frisk black males, shoot them in the back, and exercise extreme force. These moments frequently interrupt the central storyline, placing the audience in a chaotic, violent atmosphere akin to the daily existence of urban blacks. Like Burnett, Gerima sought active audience participation during his films: “Mainstream cinema is now novocaine, helpless and dependent. I want the viewer to participate. We should believe in debate and find our errors and solutions there [...] What kind of structure equally combats the conventions, makes people grow, and makes Hollywood accountable to humans? All this is a part of independent filmmaking.”¹²² *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep* demonstrate a major departure from the discourse of the official reports; Burnett and Gerima attempted to acknowledge and evaluate the various types of racism and their effects on black society through community involvement and discussion.

Clark’s *As Above, So Below* is less well-known than Gerima’s and Burnett’s works, but the narrative takes an extremely radical approach that helps put the other two films in context while simultaneously showcasing the militant views of groups like the Black Panthers during the Civil Rights Movement. While *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep* illustrate black social struggles through the lens of a single family, *As Above, So Below* presents the audience with a restless,

¹²² Tony Safford and William Triplett, “Halie Gerima: Radical Departures to a New Black Cinema,” *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1983), 61.

oppressed community driven to action to improve their means. Clark provided extensive cultural context for his militant analysis; the film begins in 1945 and reminds the audience of Japanese concentration camps before a radio announcement immediately calls for the creation of black ghettos. Through his main character, Jita-Hadi, Clark also includes Third World unrest as an impetus for change and aggression against oppressive authority.

In addition to this cultural and political analysis, Clark displayed a divide in the black community between factions that acquiesce to white dominance such as religious leaders who believe prayer will change the environment and those, such as Jita-Hadi and his rebel organization who actively fight for equality. The tone of the film, satirical and harsh, demonstrates a sense of frustration. After the Moynihan report failed to suggest solutions and the McCone Commission's conclusions enacted little change as evidenced in the staff report issued one year after the initial investigation, Clark delivered an alternative to continued stagnation: organized rebellion.

Regardless of their approaches, these three directors and other L.A. Rebellion filmmakers provided cinematic representations that protested the ways in which sixties and seventies civil society was inaccessible for their black characters.¹²³ Gerima expounded upon this idea in an interview:

Therefore, whether it is *Hour Glass*, the first Super 8 film I made, or *Child of Resistance*, or *Bush Mama* – those three early films I did were like rage and anger that were coming into my life as a result of white betrayal, white racism. And because of the fact that, yes, the African descendants were badgered and brutalized by my people, it is almost like I was writing a letter to repent. Each film was like *Dear Friend* almost, but it had rage and anger in it.¹²⁴

¹²³ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 117.

¹²⁴ Alexander, *Why We Make Movies*, 198.

In this quote, Gerima introduced the idea of his films as violent, angry acts produced in direct opposition to black characters in Hollywood films as well as the segregation of American society. Gerima's films are not alone in this category – *Killer of Sheep* and *As Above, So Below* equally embody a revolutionary attitude. *As Above, So Below* captures the frustration evident in the passion of the August 1965 riot and presents a persuasive argument for continued, active rebellion against an unchanging environment. *Killer of Sheep* and *Bush Mama* encapsulate a quiet, consistent weariness that corroded black daily life – the former ending with a glimpse of hope and the latter awakening a sense of black political agency, strength, and violence. A closer analysis of each film will illuminate their respective remonstrations.

KILLER OF SHEEP

Killer of Sheep opens with the innocent tones of a woman and child singing a lullaby, which immediately fades away to a young boy whose father is yelling at him for allowing someone to beat up his brother. The father tells the son he is not a child anymore and he needs to start learning what life is about, yet to the viewers, he seems to be quite young. The screen fades to black after the mother hits the boy and Paul Robeson sings: “Do you want the stars to play with/ And the moon to run away with/ They’ll come if you don’t cry.”¹²⁵ The contrast of this soft melody with the parents’ harsh words and actions suggests the difficulty of growing up in a world that offers little support or love.¹²⁶ This scene is reminiscent of Moynihan’s report as well. While Moynihan focused on the necessity of strong parental role models, Burnett argued the impoverished, urban environment forced children to grow up too quickly. This opening sequence also shows Burnett’s technique of using music to support his argument and themes. Burnett’s choice of a Paul Robeson song is also telling due to Robeson’s political activism and

¹²⁵ Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (Milestone Film: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1977), DVD.

¹²⁶ Grant, “Innocence and Ambiguity,” 138.

outspokenness regarding treatment of blacks in the United States, which led to his blacklisting. In many instances, the song selections and lyrics in these scenes are just as important as the other components.

After Paul Robeson's song, Stan Jr. is introduced as he dodges rocks in an abandoned lot. He is playing with children in the neighborhood, and it seems to be an innocent game until one of the rocks smashes into a boy's forehead. This intermingling of purity and savagery occurs throughout the movie, as if to show the audience that the violence permeates every aspect of the community and normal family life. An extended, moving shot from a camera placed on a train shows that the children are playing in an abandoned rail yard, and this shot shows a devastated, empty space. The abandoned rail yard is indicative of previous economic activity, which Robert Conot illuminates:

In the 1960s, Alameda Ave., a complex of industry and railroad tracks beyond whose boundaries no Negro is allowed to set foot permanently, became known, in Negro argot, as "The Berlin Wall." When the Pacific Electric Railroad service, which ran through the heart of Watts and had been the artery that connected it to downtown Los Angeles, was leached to death by the freeways in the late 1950's, the people found themselves as isolated from the city as if they lived 100 miles away.¹²⁷

Burnett gave viewers images of this isolation, as well as the so-called "Berlin Wall," on which the children sit and play during the film, but they never cross over the structure. The railroad's inactivity and dilapidation shows in the children's next dangerous game, as the group attempts to push a stationary rail car while one boy places his head next to the wheels.

Next, as Stan Jr. goes home to get his BB gun, another violent toy, he witnesses two teenagers stealing a television. Stan Jr. watches as a next-door neighbor calls the police, an act

¹²⁷ Conot, *Rivers of Blood*, 203.

indicative of a supportive community, but Stan Jr. then proceeds to aid the robbers and warn them of the impending trouble. His decision hints to viewers that he is making wrong choices for his community and for himself, likely an effect of the nature of his environment and as the audience soon learns, the lack of cohesion at home.¹²⁸ Again, Burnett's commentary meshes with Moynihan's statistical analysis – the lack of parental supervision and a nurturing community has devastating effects on black youths.

The rural past and connections to folk wisdom also play an important role in the pervading idea of innocence.¹²⁹ Burnett included instances when characters use old folk phrases or speak with Southern, rural slang, which acknowledges the influence of African American history on the Watts community and comments on the fragments of language that survive major dislocations.¹³⁰ One of these moments occurs when Stan Jr. asks, "Mot Dear, can I have a dollar?" Stan immediately scolds him: "How many times you call your mother 'Mot Dear' we ain't in the country or something."¹³¹ Since Stan Jr. knows this term of endearment, it must be a prevalent phrase in the Watts neighborhood that remained after families relocated from the South. Another example of the resurgence of the past occurs at the end of the film after the family returns from their failed outing to the country. Angie asks what makes the rain and Stan recounts an old folk phrase: "Why it's the devil beating his wife."¹³² This phrase, while possibly reflecting old traditions, is a sinister answer to the daughter's innocent query. It reflects on the major, overarching question of the film – why is the world so violent – and provides a hopeless answer to blame the devil in worst-case scenarios. However, the female characters' responses to this statement overshadow the disturbing nature of Stan's answer. Both his wife and daughter

¹²⁸ Grant, "Innocence and Ambiguity," 139.

¹²⁹ Grant, "Innocence and Ambiguity," 136; Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions," 38.

¹³⁰ Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions," 27-28.

¹³¹ Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, DVD.

¹³² *Ibid.*

smile at him, and for the first time during the film, Stan returns his wife's affections and caresses her leg. This suggests that his reconnection to the community and remembrance of the past revives Stan from his distant state. The mood is still conflicting, though, because Burnett offered no solutions and viewers still wondered at the state of the family's future.¹³³ Stan's brief caress could signify lasting change or he could merely be content at that moment.

In this scene, Burnett portrayed the rural past as a positive and necessary aspect of black family culture. This differs greatly from the McCone Commission's interpretation of black migration from the South to urban areas. While McCone and his commissioners suggested life in the South caused blacks to be ill prepared for urban realities, which then led to their inability to find jobs, Burnett argued blacks needed to remember their past and embrace it in order to find happiness in their dilapidated urban settings. Burnett's argument echoed Rustin's statement that it was more likely that cities and white employers in the public and private sectors were unprepared for the influx of blacks and unwilling to hire them.

Despite Stan's best efforts, his family remains stuck in a dilapidated neighborhood and his children's futures are at risk because of it. The constant fight to make ends meet has left Stan unhappy and unable to enjoy what little pleasures his life provides. For example, Stan cannot engage in any kind of intimacy with his wife, despite her beauty. She continuously endeavors to please him, as viewers watch her examine her face in the lid of a pan and then proceed to apply makeup in the bathroom for just an ordinary family dinner. When her husband fails to acknowledge her efforts, she confronts him: "You never smile anymore. I used to think you was just tired. But I think deep down inside you worried, and you ain't happy. Don't nothing ever

¹³³ Grant, "Innocence and Ambiguity," 144.

wanna make you smile?”¹³⁴ Later in the film, Stan’s wife receives her answer when their daughter stands in between his legs, touches his face, and gets a smile in response. She commands his attention and playfulness, while his wife is unable to engage him sexually, and not for lack of trying.¹³⁵

As Stan’s relationship with his wife and family deteriorates, so does the community. Throughout the film, the children’s playtime gradually moves to increasingly more dangerous locales, such as jumping on rooftops and eagerly watching a domestic dispute involving a gun. Stan Jr. is rarely spending time with the family, with a few mealtime exceptions, and even then, he is angry and violent. In one scene, he yells at his sister, “I need money!” even though it is unclear that he engages in any activity except throwing rocks or dodging bullets.¹³⁶ This uncertainty about Stan Jr.’s whereabouts highlights the lack of security for young children. In this case, the audience seems to know more about Stan Jr.’s activities than his parents, which should concern viewers because Burnett provided various characterizations of unfit role models for the young members of the community, such as the two robbers in the beginning of the film, and adults like Smoke and Scooter.

It is immediately evident that Smoke and Scooter portray the stereotypical urban black males of mainstream Hollywood productions from their leather jackets, hats, and shades, which characterized pimps and dealers.¹³⁷ The dialogue confirms this judgment as Smoke and Scooter delineate their plot to murder a neighbor and request Stan’s help. They tell Stan: “Somebody recommended you. Now let me tell you, man. It’s a one-to-five proposition offhand. Me and him

¹³⁴ Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, DVD.

¹³⁵ Grant, “Innocence and Ambiguity,” 143.

¹³⁶ Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, DVD.

¹³⁷ Massood, “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions,” 31.

face a dark day if we ever go before the man.”¹³⁸ Clearly, the men who know Stan are not supportive, as at least one believes Stan is capable and willing to not only assist in a murder, but also take the fall for it if necessary and these two are suggesting the crime will make Stan more of a man. However, when Stan’s wife enters the scene, Burnett’s depiction of masculinity becomes ambiguous. The framing of the scene places Stan in the center of a triangle, with his wife and home behind him, and the temptation of violence in front of him. Essentially, he is trapped.

With little hope of securing a better job, how can Stan support his family? It is easy to see the temptation to turn to crime; if successful, criminal activity could secure a large payment and if unsuccessful, going to jail would barely affect the family’s daily income or existence. Burnett clearly showed the necessity for more job opportunities and greater pay – a problem both Moynihan and McCone recognized in their reports as well. In the aftermath of the Watts Riot, high unemployment and lack of job opportunities with hope for advancement curtailed social mobility, which left low-paying and disheartening jobs such as working in a slaughterhouse.¹³⁹

Certainly, the most graphically disturbing images in the film are of those at the slaughterhouse, namely when Burnett shows a sheep de-braining. These moments are disturbing not only because of their gore, but also because of the intermixed content suggesting that future generations of black men in Watts and the nation are like innocent sheep led to a slaughter in a world of random violence.¹⁴⁰ In addition, Vietnam War footage from the broader culture provided contemporary viewers with real-life comparisons to the sheep, as young Americans, both black and white, sacrificed their lives for a seemingly meaningless war. Without positive

¹³⁸ Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, DVD.

¹³⁹ Massood, “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions,” 38.

¹⁴⁰ Grant, “Innocence and Ambiguity,” 143.

moral guidance and strong community involvement, future generations are doomed to Stan Jr.'s suggested fate at the end of *Killer of Sheep*. He retreats from his family to the rooftops, the violence of the abandoned rail yards, and the temptation of crime.

Scholar Nathan Grant provides another possibility for the meaning behind the slaughterhouse, that the slaughter is a metaphor for Stan's vulnerability. Because the audience is unsure of the source of Stan's pain, just as the sheep do not realize their fate, a possible conclusion is that Stan's awakening at the end of the film is merely a short-term condition but his destruction is ever-present.¹⁴¹ This idea fits with the ambiguity of the ending. Can Stan ever feel fulfilled as a slaughterhouse worker – a man who works in mindless death of animals but must avoid contributing to the carnage occurring in his community? Perhaps the nature of his job led Smoke and Scooter to assume his willingness to engage in murdering a human being, as Scooter suggests there is little difference between animals and man in their natural, violent state: "That's the way nature is. I mean, an animal has its teeth and a man has his fists [...] You be a man if you can, Stan."¹⁴²

Indeed, the nature of Stan's job is violent – he systematically murders sheep, which are a symbol of his rural past. His moment of happiness in the film occurs when he embraces his background, whereas his mindless job forces him to murder his past on a daily basis. This commentary asked viewers to consider their strengths as a community – rather than allow their new, city location and lack of employment to define their lives, through a shared past, these families could come together and work toward fruitful solutions. As isolated, angry individuals,

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁴² Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, DVD.

the black community turned to violence, which caused the white community to solidify their view of blacks as animals, rather than people.

One of the only white characters in the film appears in a slaughterhouse scene. After seeing a few black youths lined up and sitting on a wall, Burnett cut to the slaughterhouse where the only white male in the film is cleaning meat hooks. After watching for a few seconds, the scene cuts to a group of sheep in a confined space, running into each other in a seemingly fearful state. Scholar Elizabeth Mermin suggests that these juxtapositions are inescapable: “The recurrent slaughterhouse metaphor provides the implication of white social oppression from without that is absent from most of the film [...]”¹⁴³ Indeed, Burnett avoided explicitly implicating whites in the film, which correlates with his desire to embody the multifaceted social problems of Watts. The issues displayed throughout the film cannot only be reduced to racial injustice, although that certainly plays a large part, just as any possible solutions cannot simply focus on curtailing poverty and unemployment, as McCone and his commissioners seemed to think.

In the end, the audience should feel confused and concerned. In such a claustrophobic environment, Stan and his wife have little hope for their children’s futures due to the unemployment, inadequate education, and poverty plaguing their neighborhood. Burnett’s analysis is comparable to Moynihan’s idea of a “tangle of pathology,” but the film’s exposition of these aspects of the black community is more acceptable because of Burnett’s inherent respect and understanding for Watts and its culture.¹⁴⁴ Burnett asks the audience to submit to introspection of both their individual behavior and society’s actions. *Killer of Sheep* is a

¹⁴³ Elizabeth Mermin, “‘Searing Portraits’: The Persistence of Realism in Black Urban Cinema.” *Third Text* 34 (Spring 1996), 10.

¹⁴⁴ United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, 30.

dramatic, political weapon fashioned during chaotic times and as such, retains its revolutionary motivations even for present-day viewers.

BUSH MAMA

Bush Mama, like *Killer of Sheep*, focuses on the story of one black family living in the ghetto. Unlike Burnett, Gerima chose a female lead and an untraditional family – Dorothy, an unemployed welfare-recipient tries to make ends meet for her daughter, Luann. Dorothy is also pregnant and the baby's father, T.C., is not Luann's father or Dorothy's husband. Viewers first meet Dorothy as she walks down the street, a scene repeated many times throughout the film. She seems to have no objective or motivation, but after a few moments, a young boy begins to follow her and steals her purse. Dorothy screams and chases him, pleading for help from those around her, but she receives none. In this manner, Gerima immediately introduced his audience to the dilapidated community. This is a place where black women must fear young, black boys in broad daylight and expect no assistance.

In truth, the scene described above is not the first hint at the problems viewers will witness. The film opens with chaotic documentary footage. The sound of helicopters, sirens, and police scanners overlap with recorded voices of welfare workers asking questions to potential recipients such as, “have you ever received non-cash gifts?”¹⁴⁵ While all this noise continues, footage plays of three white policemen who stop and frisk two black males. This is actual footage of the police questioning Gerima and his crew.¹⁴⁶ Viewers do not know the identity of the men or the reason the police frisked them. The lack of context speaks volumes, however, as

¹⁴⁵ Haile Gerima, *Bush Mama* (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1975), DVD.

¹⁴⁶ UCLA Film and Television Archive, “L.A. Rebellion: Oral History Interviews: Haile Gerima, September 2010,” 16.

viewers to realize the “why” is immaterial – these black men were stopped simply because they are black.

This opening scene immediately creates a different tone than *Killer of Sheep*. Gerima introduced a politicized, agitated environment without using dialogue or explanation of characters. The background noise simultaneously invokes footage of the Vietnam War and the Watts Riot, while the shaky, handheld camera causes the viewer to question the nature of the film – is this narrative or documentary? Is that distinction important? These two scenes set up the atmosphere of the ghetto, the reality Gerima chose to portray. This film is a call to action, one that depicts the failures of white government and a disconnected black society in an effort to awaken black individuals to the necessity for militarization.

Gerima displayed what he considers the failures of white government primarily through critique of the welfare system. After Dorothy’s purse is stolen, the audience meets her again sitting in a welfare office with two friends. The two women on either side of her engage in conversation: “Honey, what am I supposed to do with all these papers? I need money! That’s why I’m down here!” The friend replies: “You’re gonna get nothing!” Soon after this exchange, a black woman working in the office says, “that man is here again!”¹⁴⁷ The audience sees all the workers, including a black police officer, run to the window. Viewers hear the officer ask the man to come inside to talk about it and then the camera shows the man outside the office with an ax. A police car promptly arrives behind him and two white officers shoot the man immediately. This scene suggests blacks should only expect violence from those in authority, rather than hope to receive help.

¹⁴⁷ Gerima, *Bush Mama*, DVD.

Gerima's argument here focuses on welfare from a different lens than Moynihan did in his report. Moynihan argued that a crisis in black family culture led to greater dependency on welfare. Gerima showed that welfare dependency in this scene, but rather than allow his viewers to focus on asking why so many people need welfare, he portrayed a welfare system that barely helped those in need. Instead of wondering about a broken family, viewers question the legitimacy of the government's so-called solution to poverty and unemployment. Is it really helping black citizens? Gerima answers this question with a resounding "no" by the end of the film.

Over the course of the film, the audience discovers that Dorothy went to the welfare office because she is unemployed and pregnant again. She already has a school-age daughter, Luann, and the man she is with, T.C., is frequently unemployed and eventually imprisoned. Rather than offer her more money to support her growing family, the welfare agency sends a social worker to encourage Dorothy to get an abortion. The social worker provides Dorothy with the address for the abortion agency, but when Dorothy arrives at the office, she chooses not to undergo the procedure. Just before the end of the film, the police arrest Dorothy for killing a police officer who was attempting to rape Luann.¹⁴⁸ Gerima spliced the scene of Dorothy repeatedly hitting the officer with a scene of Dorothy's incarceration. In jail, Dorothy still refused an abortion, so the police beat her and she miscarries. Thomas discussed Gerima's film editing: "The jagged juxtaposition of these two climatic scenes reveals Dorothy and Luann, Black mother and Black child, to be violated by the same white racist state force, whether it is

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

embodied by some street cop, welfare case worker, clinical staff, medical doctor, or prison guard, in or out of uniform.”¹⁴⁹

In addition to this critique of the welfare system, Gerima also criticized the government’s involvement in the Vietnam War. T.C., the main male character in the film, is a Vietnam War veteran. The audience discovers this in an early scene during which T.C. experiences a nightmare. The sounds of gunfire and helicopters crescendo as T.C. flails and screams. Dorothy eventually wakes him up to comfort him and he tells her he needs help. She tells him to calm down and go back to sleep, ignoring his requests to talk. Even she refuses to address his trauma, a sign that his community has no support structure for the men who are lucky enough to return home from the war.

While Burnett avoided explicitly implicating whites in *Killer of Sheep*, Gerima directly addressed racial inequality in *Bush Mama*. The white characters in *Bush Mama* include police officers who stop, frisk, and occasionally shoot unarmed men, female workers at the abortion clinic, and a male doctor lecturing Dorothy in prison. These white characters all assume positions of power over the blacks in the film. In addition, Gerima showed scenes of whites abusing their authority to criticize the police state in America. The scenes with police officers shooting a black man in the back, and those that show the overwhelming number of blacks in prison with only white guards directly dispute the conclusions drawn in the McCone Commission’s report regarding police brutality. The implication here is obvious, but Gerima did not solely place blame on white society.

¹⁴⁹ Greg Thomas, “Close-Up: Dragons!: George Jackson in the Cinema with Haile Gerima – from the Watts Films to *Teza*.” *Black Camera, An International Film Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 66.

The first indication of his multifaceted approach toward the issues in the ghetto comes from Dorothy's friend, Molly: "Personally, I don't know no white folks. It's the niggers that's gone crazy. Bullshitting, fighting, and killing each other. Ain't no white folks harassing me [...]. Just the other day, I saw this nigger on television. He's up there loud-mouthing in front of all these dressed up white folks. A chance to get on the TV and he's acting like a damn ass."¹⁵⁰ In this dialogue, Gerima addressed the issue of a divided black community. From Molly's testimony, viewers discover that not only do blacks face racial persecution from whites, but they are also fighting amongst themselves instead of uniting. Next, Gerima examined an issue that Branch also mentioned in *At Canaan's Edge* – the civil rights movement's inability to reach the blacks in the ghettos. The black man Molly referred to may be Martin Luther King Jr., and her opinion tells us that this man does not represent her community at all, just as the Watts inhabitants told King when he visited in 1965.¹⁵¹

Molly complained that members of the black community spent too much time at odds, rather than helping one another. The lack of support for T.C. and other veterans evidenced part of that problem. Gerima further explored the community's deterioration in a scene with Dorothy and her friend, Simmi. The two women discuss the government's insistence that Dorothy abort her child and Simmi tells Dorothy to keep the baby because she and the whole neighborhood will help her raise it. Dorothy responds: "You ain't got nothing either. How you gonna help me? How I'm gonna bring a baby here? You see this place we live in? It's too bad for Luann." Simmi is not convinced: "We've got to have togetherness. If you let them talk you into killing your child, that's what you'll be doing, killing a black baby."¹⁵² The audience evaluates Dorothy's situation

¹⁵⁰ Gerima, *Bush Mama*, DVD.

¹⁵¹ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 298.

¹⁵² Gerima, *Bush Mama*, DVD.

and wonders what they would do in her place – bring a baby into an unsupportive environment with one parent in jail and the other unemployed, or abort the child? Is there a right answer?

Dorothy is not the only person whom Simmi tries to convince that the community has the potential to unite. In a later scene, Simmi is sitting in a bar talking to a young black man:

I wanna give you some advice. I had all the same things you had, but one thing we didn't have back then and that was calculation. And I bear witness to this for all my folks up there in that nigger graveyard. We were missing calculation. We were missing having a plan. We had all the things you got. We had blackness. We had justices. We had rights and wrongs. We had niggerness. We had all them things but the thing we didn't have was a plan, calculation. And to have that, you need togetherness. So what you need to do is get all your friends and have calculation and togetherness. That's the only way it's gonna work.¹⁵³

The language in this scene suggests Simmi is discussing the Watts Riot. She argues that those involved were unable to enact real change due to a lack of community. The inciting incident to the Watts Riot started six days of violence, but it was a spontaneous reaction to an event. Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to Watts in the aftermath alerted him to the realization that his peaceful protests did not incorporate the needs of urban black citizens. Gerima proposes a unified, aware community would have greater influence, and like Burnett's commentary, this scene generates that discussion. It is obvious the man Simmi is lecturing agrees with her assessment, but Dorothy overhears the conversation and thinks Simmi is crazy. This scene occurs after Dorothy chose to keep her child, so her reason for doing so was obviously not a belief in help from her neighbors. Then why did she choose to keep the child?

The answer is militancy and her belief in the possibility of change. Throughout the film, Dorothy slowly awakens to the realities of her surroundings. In the beginning of the film, Gerima included many short, abrupt sequences of Dorothy mindlessly walking the streets of the ghetto,

¹⁵³ Ibid.

usually drunk. She had no will to find a job or to survive. However, as the story progresses, she becomes increasingly convinced by the radical opinions of both Angie, her young militant neighbor, and T.C.

T.C. is imprisoned early in the movie. One morning, he leaves for work and in the next scene, viewers see a white guard escort him to a prison cell. Gerima provided no context for his arrest. In an interview, he provided a reason for this abruptness: “Now, one of the experiences of being a Black in America is not going where you want to go, being stopped. When I used to edit my films at night at UCLA, I was always stopped by police as I passed through Beverly Hills. It is a truthful representation to cut from him leaving for the job interview to a prison scene without justifying how he got in jail.”¹⁵⁴ From jail, T.C. wrote Dorothy letters. After the first few letters, Dorothy shares some of the thoughts with Molly: “[T.C.] said that the white man’s dollar ain’t worth nothing nowhere, Molly. After that happen, it’s gonna be better for everybody.” Molly responds: “Now I call that militant trash. I’ve heard it before. You don’t believe that bullshit?”¹⁵⁵ Dorothy’s conviction wavers and the conversation moves on. At this early point in the film, Dorothy is still uncertain about her beliefs. Angie is about to change that.

In the scene, *Angola Woman/Prison Letter #2*, Angie arrives at the apartment and hangs up a poster. She received the poster at a rally and it depicts a woman holding a small baby in one hand, and a child in another.¹⁵⁶ Angie tells Dorothy and Luann that the mother is in Africa and she stands up to white people. Gerima’s inclusion of a politically active young woman named Angie is likely an allusion to activist Angela Davis. Davis’ controversial arrest and trial occurred

¹⁵⁴ Safford and Triplett, “Halie Gerima,” 62.

¹⁵⁵ Gerima, *Bush Mama*, DVD.

¹⁵⁶ This poster was produced by the Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA), an organization formed in 1956. This group fought for the withdrawal of Portuguese troops from Angola. From Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 120-121.

in the early 1970s. In 1972, Gerima directed a short film titled *Child of Resistance* about a young woman imprisoned in response to her social activism. His inspiration from this film derived from the images of Angela Davis' televised arrest.¹⁵⁷ This scene is a pivotal moment in Dorothy's revival – she obsesses about the poster for the rest of the film. At one point, she paces in front of it, staring at the Angola woman, studying her, and trying to decide what path to take.

In the last moment of the final scene, “The Resurrection of Dorothy,” the camera frame freezes with Dorothy's silhouette in the forefront and the Angola Woman poster in the back. This final image of Dorothy and the Angola woman remains as the audience listens to Dorothy narrate a letter to T.C. Dorothy, now also in prison, is now fully politicized and ready to join T.C.'s militant ranks: “I have to get to know myself to read and to study. We all have to so we can change it, so we can know how to talk to each other. Talking to each other's not easy. I know you in jail, T.C., and angry. But most of the time, I don't understand your letters. Talk to me easy, T.C. cuz I want to understand. It's not easy to win over people like me. There's a lot of people like me. We have many things to fight for just to live. But the idea is to win over more of our people.”¹⁵⁸ This is a vastly different woman than the Dorothy from the beginning of the film. Thomas asserted: “Like ‘Angola Woman,’ Dorothy must be or become a soldier and a warrior in order to be a Black woman who is a Black mother to a Black child if she is to keep her child alive and out of the clutches of her enemies, colonizers, and enslavers.”¹⁵⁹ *Bush Mama* clearly argues that unity in the black community and resistance to white power will topple the structures of society and improve the basic standards of living in the ghetto.

¹⁵⁷ “Child of Resistance,” “The Story of L.A. Rebellion,” UCLA Film and Television Archive, <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/films/child-resistance> (accessed April 29, 2014).

¹⁵⁸ Gerima, *Bush Mama*, DVD.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas, “Close Up: Dragons!,” 67.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

While Gerima's film is a poignant, female-dominated, call to action, Clark's *As Above, So Below* is a militarized, male-dominated revolution. The film begins with bright red color over the introductory credits and then shows a black soldier running through snow-covered woods with a gun. The soldier is cautious and paranoid in his white surroundings. Abruptly, the scene changes to a young boy is sitting at the kitchen table, listening to the radio. It is 1945. The radio indicates that Japanese-Americans were released from concentration camps and then reports: "Negro enclaves make up our city. Overcrowding produces panic and they become aware that they need more land. This cannot be allowed to happen. Our wisest move is to put them in small ghettos. Thus creating self-containment. Our problems will be solved and the Negro will remain in this place forever."¹⁶⁰ Clark immediately sets the tone of the film by creating context and comparing wartime concentration camps to the everyday existence for blacks in ghettos. Also, his use of the radio blurs the lines of reality – the initial report seemed like a sound bite from history whereas the statement quoted above forms Clark's fictitious environment.

The radio continues to have an important presence throughout the film. A bomb erupts and the audience hears gunshots and air raid sirens while staring at a red screen. This transitions the film to the seventies. A car radio narrates the new political atmosphere and alerts viewers to unknown insurrectionists in the black community, an imposed curfew in the ghettos, and police patrols. The description of this scene is quite similar to the Watts Riot – there was an imposed curfew and an increased presence of police and National Guard. At this point in the scene, the audience meets Pee Wee, a black detective. He is in a diner, telling the waitress that he has faith in the white man, who gave him his suit, his education, and his job. He says: "These young ones

¹⁶⁰ Clark, *As Above, So Below*, UCLA Film and Television Archive, 16mm.

running around now talking this black stuff and when I was a child we didn't need no black stuff and we were proud and a credit to the Negro race."¹⁶¹ More people enter the establishment and begin to discuss their lives. These diner scenes are spliced with scenes from church – the waitress singing “Praise the Lord” and a pastor preaching that prayer changes everything. In these two situations, the audience observes one side of a divided black community – those who believe that prayer or waiting will change the current situation. The satirical tone suggests Clark did not agree with this faction.

After a few alternating scenes, the audience is finally introduced to the main character, the grown version of the young boy from the film's beginning– Jita-Hadi. Jita-Hadi is a military veteran who was sent to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Thailand to suppress social rebellions. He explains to his friend, Kim, that he shipped out before fighting in the Dominican Republic, but he would not have obeyed his orders anyway: “To kill. To put down a left-wing revolution. They told us we were only going to observe, but when I got there, we found out different. I refused.”¹⁶² Again, this scene is interrupted and the audience is back in the black church. The preacher says: “You have to have your wallet in order to get in the church to be blessed. I don't want to hear any coins fall in that basket, just dollars. Can someone give one hundred dollars? Now don't worry, if you don't have cash on you, we do accept Bank America and Master Charge.”¹⁶³ Thus far, the film ridicules religious institutions through satirical tone and the juxtaposition of church scenes with war images and the dialogue. Through these devices, Clark asked his audience whether it was feasible just to wait and pray for change.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Next, Clark presented his viewers with an alternative to waiting – organized rebellion. One night, while waiting at a bus stop, two men accost Jita-Hadi. They put him into the backseat of a car and explain they want to recruit him into their organization. Kim, the woman from the earlier scene, is a member of the resistance and her objective was to get close to Jita-Hadi to determine if he would fit in their group. His military training obviously convinced them of his worth; also, he served with the leader of the organization in Vietnam. Jita-Hadi's task is explosives, his expertise as a soldier, and for the next few scenes, the audience witnesses a series of training exercises and drills.

Finally, the group organizes a strike. The language in the film has now become very militaristic and the scenes are curt and tense. A blue Porsche speeds down the road, chased by a police car. Dispatch tells us the license on the car is untraceable and the officers should assume the occupants are members of the revolutionary faction. Somehow, the blue Porsche disappears – the occupants hid it behind a fence. A concerned, black member of the community flags the police down and tries to show them the hidden car. Without provocation, the police shoot him. The gunshots alert the members of the guerrilla organization and a female sniper shoots at them from their safe house's window. In this scene, Clark framed the militants as heroes. The cops were brutes who killed an unarmed man, and through their rebelliousness, they are saving the citizens and avenging their dead. On the other hand, blacks who try to help authority will die senselessly. Just as Gerima did, Clark presented his realization of a police state. The McCone Commission refused to acknowledge the realities of the racial bias of police officers before and during the Watts Riot, and their report recommended solutions that in effect changed nothing, so Clark argued the necessity of drastic measures. His message is simple – rise and fight or wait and

die. The film ends as it began, except now there are two soldiers maneuvering through the white wilderness. Another one has joined the cause.

CONCLUSION

Together with the rest of the L.A. Rebellion collection, these three films memorialize the local reaction to the Watts Riot through fictional narratives of individual struggles of Stan, Dorothy, and Jita-Hadi. The L.A. Rebellion collection preserves these works of art, which act as a mirror for communities to exhibit the realities of social dilemmas as well as compel viewers to submit to introspection of both their individual behavior and society's actions. The films elucidate black urban life in post-riot Watts through themes of the importance of community, lack of social mobility, and white power, topics that not only document African American difficulties in navigating a racial, unequal environment of 1965, but also are relevant issues in American society today. If these films embody the reality of the average black family existence in Watts, Los Angeles in the 1970s, what kind of outlook do *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama*, and *As Above, So Below* provide for the future of black society? Since these films take place after the Watts Riot in 1965, what has changed or improved in the ghetto? Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark asked their audiences to investigate the conditions of Watts as a microcosm of American society. Now, *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama*, and *As Above, So Below* hauntingly dare their viewers to determine how, if at all, the world has changed.

Overall, these three films draw similar conclusions to those of the Moynihan and McCone Commission reports. They all address the issues of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and race relations. However, the three films focus on a different angle of these problems than the reports include. While Moynihan relied on statistics to determine his argument and McCone utilized investigation results that focused on white individuals' reactions to the riot, Burnett, Gerima, and Clark provided a view of these problems based on personal experiences as black men and inhabitants of urban spaces during the sixties and seventies. The major departure

between the solutions they all offer is the aspect of a continued racial divide in American society and the effect of said racism on black existence. The divergence shown in the depictions of black society in these three films versus the conclusions from Moynihan and McCone indicates irreparable discrepancies between the two genres – the official reports illuminate a system incapable of change whereas the films are direct protests to the established status quo.

Due to the ongoing restoration works at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, there are an increasing number of L.A. Rebellion films available for research. However, *Killer of Sheep* and *Bush Mama* do not represent the norm; most of these pivotal pieces are not widely accessible outside of that institution. There is a potential for abundant scholarship in this area; a greater awareness of the L.A. Rebellion group, its filmmakers and filmic works, is necessary to retrieve the authentic community voice not only of those involved in the 1965 Watts Riot, but also of average black citizens enduring the racial environment of the late twentieth century. This paper focuses on only three of these projects in relation to a specific event in the mid-sixties but many of the films in the collection date in the eighties and nineties. An analysis of those films and of South Central Los Angeles leading up to the Rodney King riot in 1992 could also provide a more complete historical understanding of the changes, or lack thereof, in the area.

The community voice of Watts' citizens does exist, but it is difficult to access. Unlike government reports, experimental films are less widely circulated and thus are less influential to both the community and to those in authority with the means to enact change. The role of the media cannot be overlooked either; the controversial reactions of the Moynihan and McCone Commission reports reached headlines across the nation whereas independent film releases or accolades received little publicity if any. However, the legacy of the L.A. Rebellion films within the scholarly community and the UCLA Film and Television Archive's extensive restoration

work serve to ensure these films will continue to be accessible. The responsibility now falls to scholars, archivists, and concerned citizens alike to increase the collection's visibility and ensure the marginalized voices of average black citizens inform American historical understanding.

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context:the Watts Riots-1965 black filmmakers at UCLA â€ˆjazz style:improvisation and collaboration. Key Film:Killer Sheep(Charles Burnett,1967). â€ˆnot released in theaters .videos until 2007. Key Film:Daughters of the Dust(Julie Dash,1991). â€ˆLanguid look at the Gullah culture of the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia where African folk-ways were maintained well into the 20th Century and was one of the last bastions of these mores in America. Set in 1902. You might also like