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Africana Womanism and Empowering Narratives in the Films of Leila Djansi

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Abstract

African and African diaspora women's 'womanist cinema' relies heavily on refocusing the gaze to advance the interests of women and visualizing their experiences from their perspectives. This paper focuses on the Ghanaian American film director, writer, and producer Leila Djansi, who works transnationally to make films in Ghana and the United States. The study employs Africana womanism, which speaks to the realities of African and African diaspora women and offers fundamental perspectives on women's empowerment in films about Africana women in a unique way. The study provides a thematic analysis of two of Djansi's works – *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011), shot mainly in Ghana and partly in the United States, and *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013), shot entirely in the United States, in order to understand how the filmmaker visualizes womanhood and the

ways she defends women's empowerment in her home and host lands. The paper contends that the films' focus on Ghanaian and Afro-diasporic subjectivities aligns with a womanist worldview that values women's empowerment via motherhood, self-determination, self-respect, strength, sisterhood, and the mutual bond between men and women. Ultimately, Djansi demonstrates a deep sense of womanist consciousness associated with the works of Africana womanist cultural producers.

Keywords: *Africana womanist films, female empowered narratives, Ghanaian women, diaspora women, Leila Djansi*

Introduction

Africana women filmmakers have teased out their overlapping transnational identities in their films and defined themselves in the context of their lived experiences.[1] The two pioneering women of international repute, Sarah Maldoror and Safi Faye, worked transnationally since the beginning of their cinematic journey, traversed borders, and practiced diasporic filmmaking (Ellerson, 2000). Franco-Guadeloupian Sarah Maldoror was born in France and later traveled to Africa. In her iconic film *Sambizanga* (1972), Maldoror extended boundaries to explore the protagonist, Maria's journey toward a greater consciousness of the liberation struggles in Angola. Safi Faye migrated from Senegal to France. *La Passante (1972),* Faye's first film, attempted to frame the lead character's dual identity—African and French—while discussing her experiences. Cameroonian journalist Thérèse Sita-Bella in 1963 filmed her documentary, *Tam Tam à Paris*, in France. Efua Sutherland, too, navigated within a transnational context. Sutherland was married to an African American, and together, they expressed their diasporic imaginary in Ghana. She also collaborated with the U.S. network ABC on a film project, *Araba: The Village Story*, released in 1967 (Ellerson, 2015). These are early transnational actions by Africana women filmmakers.

There are similar examples of transnational portrayals in literary works, such as Ama Ata Aidoo's play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), in which a

[1] Africana, as used here, draws on Hudson-Weems' (2020) conception of the term, referring to Continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora. This study uses it interchangeably with African and African/Afro-diaspora. See Clenora Hudson-Weems (2020), *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429287374.

Ghanaian student returns home after her studies overseas, with an African-American wife he married while overseas. In Aidoo's novel *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), a young Ghanaian female student in Europe embarks on a journey of self-discovery. The Ghanaian British filmmaker Yaba Badoe's documentary, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (2014), highlights the trans-continental preoccupation of Aidoo's oeuvre. Badoe's work spans Europe and Africa, but her documentaries, such as *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010) and *Honorable Women* (2010), focus on significant issues in Ghana concerning women, told in their own voices and from their perspectives.

Without a doubt, primary areas of scholarly discussion of African and Afro-diaspora women filmmakers are the roles and evolution of women's filmmaking engagements, the politics of representation and under-representation, women's issues and cultural activism in women's filmic work, production, distribution, and exhibition, entrepreneurship, as well as festival organizing and participation (Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2020; Ellerson, 2000, 2019; Mistry & Schuhmann, 2015). Moreover, attention has been drawn to transnational and diasporic encounters demonstrating how women's experiences of migration and exile influence their storytelling and filmmaking practices (Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2020; Ellerson, 2017). While the overall discourse on women filmmakers points to the view that women display a heterogeneity of interests, those who make films outside their home and host nations often utilize transnational practices, themes, and aesthetics in their artistic output (Ellerson, 2017). Their films visualize the diverse realities of their societies, the African and African diaspora worlds, and their place as women within them (Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2020; Ellerson, 2017).

It is important to note that although most of the available studies are grounded in feminist, Black feminist, African feminist, transnational, and related theories, African and Afro-diasporic women's films have also been acknowledged as womanistic work (Ellerson, 2023). Previous studies have offered womanist readings of films made by African and Afro-diaspora men within whom representations of females respond to the tenets of womanism through male perspectives (Anderson, 2022; Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019, 2017; Orlando, 2006). Similarly, recent research on the womanist cinematic practice of African and African diaspora women, as conceptualized through interviews, critiques, and filmmakers' statements, highlights a womanist fight for social, political, ethnic, racial, and economic justice while also strengthening the practice of empowering, promoting, and supporting women from their perspectives (Ellerson, 2023).

This paper follows up on the discourse on the womanist cinema of African and African diaspora women by examining the cinema of Ghanaian American filmmaker Leila Djansi. The paper contributes to knowledge by analyzing two of Djansi's films, *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011), shot in Ghana, and *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013), filmed in the United States, to understand how the filmmaker treats the ways African and African diaspora women fight against various forms of oppression originating from their gender, ethnicity, and class. Several factors make Djansi's work interesting.[2] Her films are widely recognized for their ardent representations and strong thematic focus on women's issues, particularly in the cross-context of African and diaspora societies. Her feature films include *All the Men in My Life* (Djansi, 2021), *Like Cotton Twines* (Djansi, 2016), *Where Children Play* (Djansi, 2015), *A Northern Affair* (Djansi, 2014), *Sinking Sands* (Djansi, 2010), and *I Sing of a Well* (Djansi, 2009).[3] The narrative content of Djansi's work is marked by a commitment to illuminating the complexities of women's lives. Her films also often advocate women's rights and highlight the importance of creating a space for their underrepresented voices to be heard and their stories to be told, as demonstrated in womanist films by African and African diaspora women (Ellerson, 2023). Her films delve into the challenges women face, from domestic violence to the impact of oppressive socio-cultural and personal practices and the resilience women exhibit in the face of such adversities (Osei Owusu, 2022).

Furthermore, Djansi's work is situated within the independent film industries of Ghana and the United States, which allows her to explore diverse interests in women's issues in her films. It is important to mention that there has been a warning against the excessive focus on Western-based Afro-descendant filmmakers or films that could hegemonize crucial continental African voices and experiences (Ellerson, 2016).[4] Djansi's oeuvre speaks to what may be considered as identifiable African and diasporic realities. Consequently, the focus of this paper allows for analyzing balanced perspectives on the cross-cultural womanist nature of

[2] The Ghanaian diaspora women's cinema has been sporadic, but the last twenty years have seen an emerging trend of women filmmakers who have lived and worked in Ghana

[3] The film T*he Men in My Life* (Djansi, 2021) is also titled *Miss Havisham Effect* (Djansi, 2021).

[4] The caution against overemphasizing diaspora-focused films highlights the need to account for perspectives from both the home and host countries that Djansi's work offers.

Djansi's work. The paper employs Hudson-Weems's (2020) Africana womanist framework, which Thompson (2001) claims serves as the foundation for examining the work of Africana women in an original fashion. This framework is applied to provide a thematic analysis of Djansi's films *Ties That Bind* (2011) and *And Then There Was You* (2013). The analysis focuses on how these films address women's issues regarding motherhood in Ghana and the diaspora, highlighting female characters who exhibit Africana womanist traits while overcoming difficulties and liberating themselves. By drawing on our experiences in both Ghana and the diaspora, the analysis provides dual perspectives that deepen our understanding of women's burdens associated with motherhood in Djansi's work. The paper contends that in response to the unique plight of Africana women, Djansi utilizes womanist strategies to repress challenges and empower women through mothering, sisterhood, the bond between men and women, self-respect, strength, and self-determination.

Africana womanist framework

Clenora Hudson-Weems is credited with coining and theorizing Africana womanism, which highlights an ideology exclusive to continental African women and women of African descent. Indeed, African and Afro-descendant women embrace womanism to rethink Western feminism and define what is relevant to them. According to Hudson-Weems (2020), feminism in any form ignores other intersecting oppressions in favor of focusing on gendered oppression, which prevents it from adequately capturing the distinct experiences of African women. Africana women's experiences differ from those of women of other cultures. "Africana," according to Hudson-Weems (2024), connotes the ethnicity of the woman, her cultural identity, and connection to the ancestral land of Africa; and "womanism," which is derived from the word "woman," connotes the idea of the identity of the subject as a female of the human race. The theory is rooted in African history and culture, redefining Africana women's identities by reflecting their everyday realities. Moreover, it fosters insights into the "varied, rich, and complex experience of Africana women," emphasizing their struggles, needs, values, and aspirations (Hubbard, 2010, p. 33).

Africana womanism prioritizes struggles against discrimination and oppression that stem from racism, sexism, and classism. As Hudson-Weems (2020) and Steady (1981) underscore, race and class intersect with gender issues in the life of Africana women, considering the history of slavery, colonization, marginalization, and discrimination. Given that

Africana men and women share a racially oppressed history, they do not see the men in their world as their primary impediments or even adversaries (Hudson-Weems, 2020). This generalization may seem problematic (Mangena, 2013). While sharing many characteristics, women on the continent and in the diaspora live distinct lives, and race impacts them differently. Despite Africana womanists' affinity with race and men, they have real concerns about patriarchal dominance and male chauvinism (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Thompson, 2001). They believe that issues affecting women, such as sexual harassment, physical violence, subjugation of women, and unequal gender relations perpetrated both within and outside of the race, must be resolved collectively within the context of Africana culture. Moreover, they recognize that classism – a negative consequence of capitalism, is a problem that they fight in Africa, the United States, and other parts of the diasporic world (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Within this perspective, they also acknowledge that women have varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Ntiri, 2020).

To cater to Africana womanists' needs, values, and aspirations, Hudson-Weems (2020) identifies key principles and places significant importance on self-determination, family, motherhood and nurturing, genuine sisterhood, male compatibility, spirituality, respect for elders, authenticity, adaptability, strength, ambition, and recognition. Alexander-Floyd and Simien (2006) categorize these principles into agency, alliances, and attributes that are necessary for the emancipation of Africana women. The Africana woman's agency is identified through self-determination and connected to self-reliance and autonomy. Besides, she defines herself, her challenges, her realities, and her community in line with her cultural context. In addition, she relies on the alliances she forms and the political alignments she engages in (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). She is family and community-centered rather than individualistic (Barry & Grady, 2019). The Africana woman works together with her male counterpart to achieve equity (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Africana womanism insists that Africana men must be active in tackling gender inequalities and sexism because, as instruments of women's subjugation, men need to offset their faults and transform their ways. Indeed, the Africana woman realizes that her liberation is interconnected to her family, children, male counterpart, respect for older people, and interest in genuine sisterhood. Besides, Africana women support each other and show great responsibility for one another in their time of need (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Thompson, 2001), even though sisterhood may not always be achieved. Alexander-Floyd and

Simien (2006) contend that genuine sisterhood projected in Africana womanism remains an ideal that Africana womanists hope women would be motivated to embrace for their empowerment.

Furthermore, for their emancipation and survival, the Africana womanists' exhibit attributes like strength, authenticity, adaptability, ambition, recognition, spirituality, mothering, and nurturing (Hudson-Weems, 2020). They have a long tradition of physical and psychological strength and demonstrated incredible resilience to withstand and overcome slavery and colonization (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). In addition to their strength and resilience, they must develop genuine self-worth, self-esteem, and care for themselves, and only then will they be able to earn the respect of others (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Ntiri, 2001). Their authenticity and cultural consciousness define their wholeness as women of African descent. They are flexible and ambitious, often coming up with new ideas to reach their goals (Hudson-Weems, 2020). More importantly, they value childbearing and nurturing since they are essential to their existence within a family unit or the collective. Their devotion to ensuring the entire family's survival is based on a solid sense of harmony and security, and they delight in expressing their emancipation as mothers and nurturers (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Nnaemeka, 2005). In Ghanaian and diasporic cultural contexts, women significantly contribute to the fight for gender, racial, ethnic, social, political, and economic justice (Ellerson, 2023). The analysis of Djansi's *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2012) and *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013) highlights women's emancipation through these representations of self-determination, sisterhood, motherhood, mothering, nurturing, and related pleasures and burdens.

Summaries of selected films

Ties that Bind (Djansi, 2012) follows the journeys of three women from diverse backgrounds: Buki, a Ghanaian medical doctor; Adobea, a village housewife; and Theresa, an African American professor of anthropology who emigrated to Ghana to reconnect with her ancestorial roots, find employment, and muster the courage to address her past mistakes. The experience of losing a child or children unites them all. Together, they overcome gender-specific and sociocultural oppression and the traditional injustices related to childlessness. Through determination and sisterhood, they conquer their fears and embrace their vulnerabilities and victories. With their combined energy and resources, they are able to renovate a clinic that provides healthcare for the village community.

And Then There Was You (Djansi, 2013) follows the experiences of Natalie, an African American childcare professional in Los Angeles who

has been in a seemingly perfect marriage with her husband, Joshua. However, in an unfortunate change in her circumstances, Natalie prematurely loses her home and eleven years of marriage. This is after she discovers that Joshua has fathered two young sons out of wedlock, which compels him to abandon the marriage, leaving her with a large house they had acquired together and a high mortgage she cannot sustain. She subsequently sells the house and settles for a much smaller home. As a result of childlessness, insecurities, and the fear of living a lonely life, Natalie makes the mistake of rushing into another relationship, this time with a married man, Darrel. However, she redefines her priorities through self-realization, self-determination to move on, agency to reconfigure her life, and support from her White workmate Marisol. She finds true love in a third relationship with her former White neighbor, Corinth, which yields a stepdaughter.

Experiences of motherhood: Challenges and solutions

The Africana womanist worldview highlights the significance of motherhood in African and diaspora families (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Oyewùmí (2003) notes that women are central to family life and the foundation of African societies. Through motherhood, women ensure the continuity of the family and maintain connections between ancestors, the living, and the unborn (Steady, 1981). Mothers are revered as vital bearers of life and culture, holding a position of respect and responsibility (Dove, 1998). Moreover, when mothers assert their agency, they gain important privileges and prestige. Further, women across all social classes value motherhood and are dedicated to nurturing their children (Hudson-Weems, 2020). However, they recognize women's difficulties in fulfilling these responsibilities. The importance and challenges of motherhood in African and diaspora societies are reflected in the films *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011) and *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013), and to begin to address these, they employ Africana womanist strategies to support women in fulfilling their nurturing roles to advance family and society.

Ties that Bind (Djansi, 2011) examines women who want to be mothers or to remain so but are unable to because of child loss through death, stillbirths, miscarriages, infertility, postpartum depression, or child custody disputes. The film illustrates how societal expectations, medical conditions,

or legal disputes can impact African women's experiences of motherhood.[5] For instance, Adobea loses all her seven children to death at different stages of their lives, and then she is afflicted by lung cancer, which compounds her ability to take care of herself and nurture her children. While she is traumatized by these losses and struggles, she is abused by her mother-in-law, who accuses her of being a witch and for "eating all her children." This experience often instills fear in other women. As a physician, Buki understands that her miscarriages resulted from a blood type mismatch with that of Lucas and could be resolved with existing medical interventions. However, she fears that Lucas's family will label her a witch if she does not conceive after marriage. This mistreatment and anxiety stem from the unequal power dynamics between men and women and cultural assumptions in Ghana, where childless women are punished for allegedly having previously engaged in promiscuous behavior (Salm & Falola, 2002). The film's objective is to highlight the unfair treatment given to women struggling with infertility and to expose the practice of woman-to-woman subjugation through the capacity of motherhood. Given that Africana womanism promotes motherhood and sisterhood (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Thompson, 2001) and that womanists can express their responsibilities for caring through various roles (Hubbard, 2010), Djansi emphasizes the importance of women supporting each other in overcoming medical challenges to fulfill their roles as mothers effectively.

In addition to the sociocultural pressures faced by childless women, *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011) highlights the challenges of substance misuse and postpartum depression. These issues complicate Theresa's ability to embrace the role of a mother and care for her child, a reality she had observed in her own mother. As a child, she had witnessed her mother's substance use disorder and endured abuse first-hand. Drug usage among pregnant women and mothers has been noted as an issue in American society (Tivis, 2018). It is reported that some children in Black communities are placed in precarious conditions and suffer a range of adverse outcomes because of parental substance abuse, child maltreatment, and neglect (Dore et al., 1995). Due to substance abuse and postpartum depression, Theresa wanted to harm her baby. Consequently, she voluntarily signed off full custody of her daughter (Amanda) to Marcus, her ex-husband. Clearly, from her actions, she wanted the best for her daughter and herself. Henderson (2009) suggests that to protect her child or give her a better life than she could provide at a particular moment, an

[5] Djansi hinted that her mother's health-related experiences with delayed childbirth inspired the film (Osei Owusu, 2015).

Africana mother may choose to separate herself from her child owing to circumstances beyond her control.

The survival of mothers and children is a fundamental aspect of motherhood. Portraying a mother who takes the necessary steps to secure her own life and that of her child illustrates the Africana womanist worldview (Hudson-Weems, 2020). To prepare to regain custody of her daughter, Theresa takes significant steps to improve herself. She enrolls in college to pursue a master's degree. She relocates to Ghana to reclaim her identity, connect with her Afro-descendant ancestry (Timothy & Teye, 2004), and ultimately become an anthropology professor. An Africana womanist's agency is evident as Theresa redefines her identity and role as a mother (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). The portrayal of a professor who strives to reassume her mothering responsibilities suggests that it is possible to embody both identities simultaneously. Theresa courageously returns to the U.S. to fight for custody of her daughter despite a court injunction. In doing so, the filmmaker highlights the value of mothering and nurturing beyond biological ties. Dove (1998) argues that the survival of Africana people depends heavily on values like these. By employing these depictions, Djansi empowers Africana childless women in the diaspora and in Ghana to confront challenges and embrace diverse motherhood practices that will sustain the survival of mothers, children, and the Africana family.

Djansi's *Ties That Bind* (2011) and *And Then There Was You* (2013) provide insights into how medical conditions and treatment may disturb women's mothering experiences in Ghana and the diaspora. Thompson (2001) alludes that continental African and Afro-diaspora women share similar experiences. The films suggest that medical intervention, or the lack of it, can complicate a woman's chances to fulfill her responsibilities of motherhood. In *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011), it is evident that Buki's expertise as a doctor facilitates the safe delivery of a baby whose mother has experienced three stillbirths due to insufficient medical care in her community. In *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013), the filmmaker invites us to think about severe dysmenorrhea, which leads Natalie to undergo a hysterectomy that results in her inability to have children of her own. Like Theresa in *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011), Natalie prioritizes her health in *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013). The film engages Africana womanist principles as Natalie initiates self-care (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Joshua supports her to have surgery; however, she criticizes him when he secretly fathers two sons out of wedlock. These illustrate the mediating

effects of patriarchal dominance and wealth as women navigate health issues and childlessness.[6] Joshua could provide for two families because he was a man and made more money as a bank executive than Natalie, a childcare professional. Thompson's (2001) claim that Africana women are disproportionately marginalized due to their gender, race, and socioeconomic status is pertinent here. In addition to being childless, Natalie's circumstance is exacerbated by patriarchy and her financial status because her husband leaves her, and she struggles to maintain her lifestyle.

In response to the various challenges that prevent women from executing their mothering duties, Djansi emphasizes non-biological mothering and nurturing for women, which affirms its significance in Africana families. The selected films challenge the idea that motherhood is limited to biological mothering (Dove, 1998). *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011) presents child adoption as a viable alternative to childlessness. In the film, Buki comments, "This is Africa…We don't adopt children. Society demands that we make them." While Buki's assertion may contain a degree of truth, and it is important to acknowledge the conventional wisdom in the Akan proverb that states that "your child is the one you have birthed,"[7] the film suggests that child adoption is a feasible option for childless Africana women. Although Buki entertains fears because of social expectations, this understanding enables Theresa, the African American, to adopt Fauzia, the refugee and purported ghost who had taken refuge in the abandoned clinic. This representation brings into focus refugees, international child adoption, and the adoption of an African child by an African American woman (Perry, 1998). However, it aligns with Hudson-Weems' (2020) assertion that Africana women value their responsibility as mothers and nurturers to humanity, extending their care beyond just their offspring.

And Then There Was You (Djansi, 2013) presents another example of the relationship of African American women with non-biological mothering. Collins (2022) notes that non-biological mothering is typical in African American culture. Natalie struggles with the idea that she will never know

[6] It is worth noting that the film disapproves of childless husbands who father children outside of marriage to prove their manhood, avoid social ridicule, or secure the support of children in their old age. However, it could be said that patriarchy in this context may also be acting out of pressure. Joshua may be carrying the burden of having children because patriarchy expects a man to be able to father a child who will inherit his wealth and ensure the continuation of his legacy.

[7] The Akan proverb is "awoɔ ɛne wo yɛm." Akan is a language group spoken widely in Ghana and parts of Côte d'Ivoire.

what it feels like to have a child come out of her – neither the pain nor the pleasure since her infertility significantly impairs her sense of self and identity as a woman. It has been argued that "infertility is likely to affect women's sense of gender identity" and how they interact with others (Ceballo et al., 2015, p. 3). Nevertheless, as a childcare professional and an after-school child carer, Natalie nurtures and mothers Abigail, the White daughter of her neighbor, to earn an extra income. Collins (2022) claims that the stereotypical portrayals of the matriarch and the mammy [who looked after White children] in American films, together with the historical practices they support, are intended to suppress Black women. By using non-biological mothering as a means of self-expression, Djansi challenges that image and uses non-biological mothering as a means for Natalie to express herself and gain an understanding of the importance of self-definition and self-worth. Natalie's finances improved because of non-biological mothering, enabling her to generate additional income to pay her mortgage and increase her self-value. Given this, the paper argues that Djansi uses non-biological mothering to create a space for women to benefit economically, leading them to self-recovery and independence, which are compatible with the values of Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2020).

Empowerment through self-determination, strength, sisterhood, and male complementarity

The protagonists in *Ties that Bind* (Djansi, 2011) and *And Then There Was You* (Djansi, 2013) apply the principles of Africana womanism, including strength, genuine sisterhood, and male complementarity, to bring significant progress to their lives. Both films demonstrate that women's ability to execute their roles as biological mothers, non-biological mothers, and nurturers depends on their reliance on these Africana womanist traits. Moreover, the films show that as Africana womanists, women must not be encouraged to ignore their legitimate concerns about their anxieties and repressive experiences (Stewart & Mazama, 2020), particularly those surrounding motherhood. Djansi's Africana womanist stance is highlighted when she allows her protagonists to overcome their fears and celebrates their agency to reclaim motherhood through genuine sisterhood and male-female complementarity efforts.

Ties That Bind (Djansi, 2011) explores each female character's struggles, revealing their anxieties, frustrations, and occasional traumas to illustrate

how these women reinvent themselves. The film critiques Adobea's passive attitude, highlighting her initial inability to express her grief over the death of her children or communicate her health challenges to either her husband or Buki. She suffers in silence due to cultural constraints and gender norms that dictate her submission to her husband and in-laws (Davies, 1995). Buki, on the other hand, is troubled by the fact that she may not have a fruitful marriage – fears stemming from social and internalized expectations of her to become a mother despite having possible solutions to the miscarriages. Maa Dede's character represents the mother who protects her family at all costs (Hudson-Weems, 2020) and initially refrains from reporting her HIV-infected husband's abominable behavior to the authorities when he rapes their daughter. Theresa, meanwhile, blames herself for her inability to care for her child since her drug addiction and postpartum depression overwhelm her. The point is that although Adobea and Theresa are haunted by their own "ghosts" and entertain fears and frustrations, the film implies that they transition from powerlessness to self-determination. They realize that "change is the only thing that changes" as they take "a leap of faith." Theresa's efforts to confront the so-called "ghost" and Adobea's readiness and bravery are metaphors for overcoming their fears. Through their actions, they become their own persons, demonstrating the self-determination trait of Africana womanism to redefine them and reclaim their lives and families (Hudson-Weems, 2020).

In *Ties That Bind* (Djansi, 2011), the women's genuine sisterhood significantly impacts how they embrace courage and strength to overcome cultural barriers and/or personal "ghosts." In the context of the film, the bond between them must be understood as a system of support, motivation, and inspiration, which serves as a conduit for self-discovery and self-actualization (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2004). Challenging as their pains may be, the women support each other, demonstrating the genuine sisterhood of Africana womanists (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Even though Adobea all along thinks she is weak and voiceless, it is through her strength in enduring the loss of her seven children that Theresa is strengthened to go and find her daughter in Arizona. This becomes clear when she mentions that Adobea's bravery makes her feel reborn and prepared to find her daughter. Meanwhile, Adobea and Theresa's experiences inspire Buki to tell Lucas the truth about her miscarriages. In essence, each woman contributes in some way to the resilience and agency of the others. The fundamental argument is that the film employs genuine sisterhood to illustrate qualities that are firmly rooted in Africana womanism that

engender tolerance, respect, empowerment, and strength (Hudson-Weems, 2020).

Given these representations, the paper argues that by keeping strong cross-cultural bonds among the women who are inspired to aspire for new identities, Djansi draws attention to the fact that friendship among women can transform lives both physically and psychologically, as Steady (1981) observes. Adobea is psychologically redeemed when she finds her voice through learning from Buki, and her life is possibly going to be transformed as Buki pays for her lung cancer surgery. She wants to pursue nursing after the procedure to help Buki provide medical care to the community. From an Africana womanist perspective, Djansi depicts women's identities in Ghana and the diaspora— of women who tap into each other's strengths to heal and transform (hooks, 2015). Through the bonds between the women, their experiences become the sources of motivation, leading each to liberate herself from sociocultural and self-imposed suppressions and oppression. The diegetic African American spiritual chorus, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," which they sing, reinforces this liberation and self-respect. The physical and emotional transformation and support the women show each other reflect the filmmaker's notions of self-determination, strength, and genuine sisterhood in Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2020).

Djansi's *And Then There Was You* (2013) cannot be overlooked in its representation of self-determination and sisterhood in the African diaspora society. The film emphasizes a woman's strength and self-determination to transform her situation after she experiences various unfavorable incidents. Firstly, Natalie is disappointed with Joshua when he secretly fathers two sons and abandons her after eleven years of marriage. This situation traumatizes her because she has lost her parents and does not have any close family, which is significant considering the importance of family to Africana womanists (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Secondly, psychologically, she is traumatized by her childlessness. Thirdly, she struggles to keep up with her "perfectly … coordinated … lifestyle," which the film alludes to as exacerbating the pressures in her life. Indeed, the struggles lead her to channel her frustrations into unprogressive ventures by spending sleepless nights, burning her ex-husband's photos, and getting involved with Darrel, a sex-addicted married man. Despite these, Natalie's conscious determination drives her to take the first steps toward defying her situation, marking the beginning of her liberation and amplifying Africana

womanist principles in which the woman takes control of her situation (Alexander & Simien, 2006; Ntiri, 2001).

Natalie's self-determination to transform her situation is closely tied to the friendship and constant support she receives from her White friend, Marisol. This representation is significant, mainly because historically, White women and men are considered to have contributed to oppressing Africana men and women (Barry & Grady, 2019). Marisol epitomizes the family-centered woman with a husband and three children, countering the notion of individualism commonly associated with White ideology. Having redefined this notion, Djansi establishes a genuine sisterhood bond between Natalie and Marisol as they support each other. While they work together at the childcare center, their bond extends beyond the workplace. On the one hand, Natalie supports Marisol during the birth of her third baby and gifts her a baby crib. On the other hand, through Marisol, Natalie realizes that her "ego sometimes gets ahead of" her. She is the voice Djansi utilizes to inspire Natalie to take charge of her life and find the strength to change her circumstances. It is through their constant tête-á-tête moments that Natalie admits her shortfalls, removes the many walls she had built around herself, and takes the initiative to take another chance at love with Corinth, the widower whose daughter she already "mothers and nurtures" as a childcare professional and a supporting neighbor.

Furthermore, Djansi, in *Ties That Bind* (2011), weaves into her film the narrative of male-female complementarity to redefine women's sense of wholeness as expounded in Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Thompson, 2001). The film portrays strength and unity, and each partner has a significant role to play in complementing the other and strengthening their relationship. For example, Lucas takes bold initiatives to reassure Buki that alternative solutions can help them through their challenges. Indeed, in the end, neither Buki nor Lucas considers themselves whole. Hudson-Weems' (2020) explanation that true Africana womanists seek wholeness and do not resist male support is relevant here. For Buki and Lucas, complementarity is the key to their completeness. It is by recognizing how one's strengths compensate for the other's weaknesses that their relationship becomes possible. In this instance, the possibility of having a wholesome partnership becomes a reality after they accept each other. In the film, the closing montage sequence reinforces the significance of gender complementarity. Buki and Lucas get married, and Adobea is seen receiving her husband's full support in the hospital as he helps her to get through the lung cancer treatment. He had defended her earlier against his mother's insensitivity and maltreatment. Theresa, with Dan, her private investigator, is seen at the airport on her way to Arizona to take custody of

her daughter and be the mother she desires to be. These representations strongly support the African womanist ideal of male complementarity and show how it can alleviate the suffering women experience (Stewart & Mazama, 2020).

And Then There Was You (Djansi, 2013), like *Ties That Bind* (Djansi, 2011), highlights male-female compatibility, showing how it empowers women to subvert patriarchal dominance and gain respect, harmony, and acceptance. Natalie learns to renegotiate her relationship with Joshua. Through self-determination, she learns to confront her demons and acknowledges her role in their strained relationship, compelling Joshua to recognize his unfair treatment of her. Despite the tension between them, they realize that they are not enemies. Natalie acknowledges that she had pressured Joshua into keeping up with the Joneses but does not excuse his betrayal. By giving him half of the proceeds from the sale of their home, she shows her commitment to maintaining mutual respect. From an Africana womanist standpoint, it is suggested that having a negative self-image may result in disrespect and abuse (Hudson-Weems, 2020). Through Natalie's actions, Joshua demonstrates regret for fathering children outside of their 11-year marriage. Even though they do not reunite as husband and wife, they part ways with mutual respect. As Natalie earns the respect of her ex-husband, she gains Corinth's love. By finding love and a daughter in her new relationship, Natalie embodies the womanist view that women should not be compelled to settle for just any relationship in order to have a man or a child (Hudson-Weems, 2020). The film extends the sound principles of positive male-female relationships, breaking racial barriers and creating a racially sensitive Africana womanist film.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the womanist cinema of Ghanaian American filmmaker Leila Djansi, highlighting how her films, *Ties that Bind* (2011) and *And Then There Was You* (2013), reflect cross-cultural perspectives on issues relevant to the lives of African and African diaspora women. In these films, Djansi explores themes that emphasize the experiences and struggles of Ghanaian and African diaspora women while advocating for solutions. Djansi focuses on women navigating specific challenges related to motherhood and childlessness in both Ghana and the diaspora. As illustrated in this analysis, her perspectives reveal that Africana women in

Ghana and abroad are deeply concerned about motherhood and the survival of their children and families. However, they also confront various challenges, including the loss of children due to death, stillbirths, miscarriages, postpartum depression, and child custody disputes. Additionally, they face childlessness related to infertility and the complexities of medical intervention, or the lack thereof. Despite the stress caused by these difficulties, these women overcome their obstacles by employing distinctive strategies informed by African womanism. They recover through self-determination, strength, respect, sisterhood, and mutual support between men and women. Furthermore, they assert their identities through both biological and non-biological motherhood, and by embracing their roles as mothers, they liberate themselves to ensure the survival of their children and families—something that proper mothering and nurturing provide.

As a womanist, Djansi produces films that illustrate the fact that the challenges of motherhood can lead to positive outcomes when aligned with the principles of Africana womanism. The women in her films demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and refuse to be limited by obstacles that hinder them from nurturing themselves, their children, and their broader communities. These films serve as lessons in resistance by highlighting women's strength, autonomy, genuine sisterhood, and male complementarity within and across cultures. They awaken women's consciousness, encouraging them to leverage their agency, attributes, and alliances to overcome the difficulties of motherhood. In view of these, the films, ultimately, embody a profound sense of womanist consciousness that resonates with the works of Africana womanist cultural producers.

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