

BLACK MEDIA MATTERS: REMEMBERING *THE BOMBING OF OSAGE AVENUE* (1987)

Karen Beckman

The year was 1987. Ronald Reagan was midway through his second term. W. Wilson Goode was serving his first term as the first black mayor of the city of Philadelphia. Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* had been released a year earlier; the first episode of *Eyes on the Prize*, a groundbreaking television series about the history of the civil rights movement, had premiered in January, and at 10 pm on February 24, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* was broadcast nationally on PBS.

This documentary represents a unique and collectively generated response to the city of Philadelphia's bombing of the home of the revolutionary organization MOVE in West Philadelphia on May 13, 1985, just over thirty years ago. Produced and directed by Louis Massiah, written and narrated by Toni Cade Bambara, the film refuses to present the police attack on the MOVE house as a singular, sensational event; nor does it attempt to provide a straightforward summary of what happened and who was to blame. Instead, this multivocal film explores the relationship between exceptional and everyday violence by juxtaposing archival images of sanctioned violence against African-Americans in Philadelphia with statements about the nature of community made in the wake of the bombing by ordinary West Philadelphians. Bambara's dense and poetic voice-over weaves these elements together.¹

A number of factors combine to make the contemporary moment an important time in which to refocus critical attention on *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*: the film's occlusion from recent critical discussions of the bombing and its media representations, in spite of the very significant contributions it made to the development of documentary film form; the recent deaths of Michael Moses Ward (formerly known as "Birdie Africa," the only child to escape the bombing of the MOVE house alive) in 2013 and Phil Africa (MOVE's First Minister of Defense, who died in prison) in early 2015; the

commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing on May 13, 2015, by leading cultural figures, including Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Cornell West; the expanding use of military airpower at home and abroad through US drone programs; and the renewed attention currently being given to state-sanctioned anti-black racism by the "Black Lives Matter" movement.²

The revolutionary black liberation organization MOVE was founded by John Africa in Philadelphia in 1972, and continues to exist today. Members of MOVE, self-described as a "deeply religious organization," adopt the surname "Africa" to signal the familial nature of the group, and they reject all aspects of "the System": man-made laws, the government, industry (including the food industry), and big business. MOVE had its first communal home in Powelton Village, but on August 8, 1978, after months of confrontation, a violent police siege on the house resulted in the shooting of police officer James J. Ramp, for which nine members of MOVE were each sentenced to 100 years in prison for third-degree murder. In 1981, MOVE relocated to 6221 Osage Avenue in Cobbs Creek, a primarily African-American middle-class community in West Philadelphia.³

The new location was not without problems, however. Trouble was caused by the MOVE members' construction of a fortified bunker on top of their home; their use of bull-horns around the clock to protest the incarceration of the MOVE 9; their alternative lifestyle, including a rejection of a hierarchical approach to life forms, leading to a tolerance of all creatures (such as vermin, insects, and large numbers of cats and dogs) and the recycling or composting of human, animal, and vegetable waste; their rejection of traditional schooling as part of "the System"; and occasional verbal and physical aggression toward some members of the community. In spite of persistent efforts on the part of local community mediators to gain support from the city in finding a civil solution to escalating tensions between the inhabitants of the MOVE house and their Cobbs Creek neighbors, the city failed to respond. Many of the local residents were sympathetic to the organization's beliefs, but they nevertheless

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The bunker atop the MOVE's communal home at 6221 Osage Avenue. Courtesy of E. W. Faircloth / *Philadelphia Daily News*.

needed help in negotiating their pressing differences with MOVE.⁴ When the city finally did intervene, however, it did so in a devastating way.

On May 13, 1985, Mayor W. Wilson Goode authorized a military-style assault on the MOVE house. The siege lasted approximately eighteen hours, during which 10,000 rounds of ammunition were fired on MOVE's home in less than ninety minutes, after which a bomb containing an improvised combination of Tovex and the powerful military explosive C-4 was dropped on a house that was clearly occupied by both children and adults. Police Commissioner George Sambor and Fire Commissioner William Richmond then used the fire caused by the bomb as a tactical weapon, deciding in consultation with each other to "let the bunker burn," even though they were aware that people were still in the house.⁵ The official record reports, "11 occupants of the house, including five children, were dead. Nearly two square blocks of a residential neighborhood lay wasted by fire. Sixty-one families, some 250 men, women and children, were homeless."⁶

Shortly after the bombing, Mayor Goode gave an executive order to establish an investigatory commission. As the commission's report states, "On May 22, 1985, the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission was formed as a board of inquiry. Its members were appointed by the Mayor and directed to conduct a thorough, independent and impartial examination of the events leading up to and culminating in the death and destruction of May 13th."⁷ Although the

mayor had appointed the commission's members, the group did include a number of community activists, pastors, and lawyers who were deeply sympathetic to the Osage Avenue residents. The commission met for seventeen executive sessions of three to eight hours each, examining the records of thirty-six government agencies and listening to numerous testimonies. After these closed sessions, on October 8, 1985, the commission then began a unique series of public hearings that were televised by WHYY public television and radio. As the report documents, "Over a five week period, 90 witnesses provided 144 hours of testimony which were public in the broadest possible sense."⁸

While the commission was certainly official in nature, it was not a whitewash. Throughout the process, members asked and pressed on critical questions that made government representatives squirm, and the final report was deeply critical of the government's actions. It condemned, for example, the "gross negligence" of the mayor, the police commissioner, and the managing director; criticized the government's flawed intelligence, inadequate plan, and poor communication; and judged the excessive use of force as well as the use of fire as a tactical weapon to be "unconscionable." In addition, it declared that the deaths of the five children appeared to be "unjustified homicides," recommending that they be investigated by a grand jury; and described the performance of the medical examiner's office as "unprofessional" and as having "violated generally accepted practices for pathologists."⁹

Finally, in the report's "Additional Comments" section, the commission went beyond "the factual standards which the Commission ha[d] applied in framing its findings and conclusions" in order to address the question of racism head-on. With only one dissenting opinion, the commission believed that "the decisions of various city officials to permit construction of the bunker, to allow the use of high explosives and, in a 90-minute period, the firing of at least 10,000 rounds of ammunition at the house, to sanction the dropping of a bomb on an occupied row house, and to let a fire burn in a row house occupied by children, would likely not have been made had the MOVE house and its occupants been situated in a comparable white neighborhood."¹⁰

The Making of *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*

Massiah, at that time on staff at the public television station, produced the hearings, and consequently, one can consider *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* in some ways as an outgrowth of this aspect of the commission.¹¹ Yet in other ways, this film represents a significant departure from the commission's



The Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission in a televised hearing, produced by Louis Massiah for WHYY public television.

attempt to establish and make sense of the facts; it deliberately attempts to do something quite different. As Massiah states, “We were trying to provide a framework for the viewers to develop a useful, empowering, dare I say emancipatory, analysis of what had sat in our collective psyches as a colossal tragedy and a failure. In the context of the production/broadcast environment, we were not trying to make an investigative doc or detective story, rather provide a framework for another kind of analysis.”¹²

The arrival of Bambara in Philadelphia shortly after the bombing played a key role in the development of this alternative analytic mode. Bambara, less optimistic about the possibilities of reforming “the System” than Massiah at that time, had been preparing to move to Philadelphia from Atlanta when the bombing occurred.¹³ She spoke out publicly and immediately against the attack on May 16, 1985, in Atlanta during her introduction of the writer John Oliver Killens at

a symposium, “Roots in Georgia,” sponsored by the *Georgia Review*.¹⁴ She met Massiah less than a year later, on March 8, 1986, and they began to discuss an Osage Avenue film project within two weeks of that meeting.¹⁵

WHYY associate producers Lillian Leak (Paulmiere) and Wynette Yao did research for the project, establishing chronologies and suggesting possible subjects. Massiah conducted all of the on-camera interviews with community members, while Bambara did extensive research at local libraries as well as with people in the community. “She was,” Massiah reports, “a sleuth.”¹⁶ Massiah would send Bambara transcripts or she would look at the footage, and much of her final narration was written in dialogue with what people had said on camera. At the beginning, the two would meet at Bambara’s home on Upsal Street—Bambara preferred not to meet at WHYY. But as the project developed, they mainly met in restaurants, and particularly in the Sang Kee Chinese

duck house at 9th and Winter Streets. Once editing began, they then convened in the offline edit room of WHYY.¹⁷

The process involved a deep and pleasurable collaboration, as Bambara records in a 1988 letter to Linda Janet Holmes:

We work well together and like each other and respect each other's ideas, etc. It's a good collaboration. . . . I don't doubt sometime that I can accomplish more (in terms of pages, heft, bulk, amount of typing per day) if I worked alone, but I know I couldn't accomplish half of what (insights, depth, etc) we are getting done, even when we "squander" half the day gossiping or reminiscing or gabbing about umpteen things.¹⁸

For Bambara, there were clearly some parallels, albeit with complex differences, between the Atlanta child murders (1979–81) she was investigating for her novel in progress, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, and the bombing of the MOVE house. In addition to exploring how the complex relationship between Atlanta's largely white police force and Mayor Maynard Holbrook Jackson Jr. (who, like Goode, was the city's first black mayor) negatively impacted black citizens' access to support from the justice system, the novel also models, through the figure of the "community sleuth," an alternative for black citizens to being "cast as passive spectators to the tug-of-war scenarios written by reporters." She models, by example, the importance of doing independent research using a variety of sources to question the form and content of the official version of things.¹⁹

In both the Atlanta and Philadelphia cases, the mainstream media had produced what James Baldwin described as "a kind of grotesque Disneyland" using a cast that included a major American city's first black mayor (he describes Atlanta's mayor as having been placed "in 'a trick bag,' attempting to defend and represent a people who do not, for the state, exist"); middle-class African-American communities reportedly terrorized by other African-Americans; and either segregated (Atlanta) or primarily white (Philadelphia) police forces.²⁰ For Baldwin, "The attention, the publicity, given to the slaughter becomes, itself, one more aspect of an unforgivable violation."²¹ *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* actively goes in search of an alternative way to respond, narratively and visually, to state-sanctioned violence against urban black communities.²²

The film was first broadcast as *The Burning of Osage* on July 2, 1986, on WHYY, after which video VHS copies for personal use were distributed to those members of the community who had taken part in the film.²³ A slightly revised version with a new title then had its national primetime

broadcast on PBS on February 24, 1987. It is now distributed on DVD by Scribe Video Center, a thriving community media center founded by Massiah in 1982 and still operating in West Philadelphia.²⁴ While *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* is not the sole documentary response to the events of May 13, it is the only one that critically engages with the incident and resists the bombing's potential to be cast as a media spectacle of African-American suffering, death, and leadership failure.²⁵

Early notes for the project reveal Massiah explicitly thinking about the mainstream media as one of the few beneficiaries of the disaster, as well as about the consequences of the event for black political leaders: "There were no winners except the media, the enemies of W. Wilson Goode, the enemies of MOVE, and the bigots who oppose black leadership."²⁶

The type of narrative Massiah and Bambara were attempting to avoid was exemplified by *Frontline's* PBS special, *The Bombing of West Philly* (produced, directed, and written by Martin Smith), which was presented by series host Judy Woodruff on May 5, 1987. In its opening minutes, Lary Lewman's voice-over promises impossible clarity: "This is the story of how it happened and who is to blame." By presenting the bombing as an isolated event without historical precedent, and relying heavily on sensational news footage shot at the height of the neighborhood's trauma, *The Bombing of West Philly* makes the entire city seem crazy.

Recently, Jason Osder's more measured "found-footage" documentary, *Let the Fire Burn* (2013), has returned attention to the bombing, which the filmmaker recalls from the perspective of a child growing up in Montgomery County.²⁷ He states, "I remember being truly scared. I was struck that the children killed in the house (burned alive) were my own age, living in my own town."²⁸ But Osder's version of events is problematic in its own way. In spite of the fact that *Let the Fire Burn* relies heavily on the commission footage that Massiah produced, and that *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* represents a significant structural and thematic predecessor to Osder's polyphonic approach, Massiah and Bambara's names, along with any reference to this earlier film, are absent not only from the film's credits, but also from reviews of *Let the Fire Burn* and interviews with Osder. While the DVD jacket claims the film brings to life "largely forgotten clashes," its release activates a cinematic amnesia through the repression of Massiah and Bambara's earlier film.

Massiah and Bambara had a pioneering approach to the event, significant, among other reasons, for its privileging of the various perspectives of Cobbs Creek's African-American and Jewish community members. As the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* recorded in 1989: "The film got 'quite a reception' when it was first broadcast on Philadelphia television in

July 1986, says the 49-year old writer [Bambara]. She recalls how a crowd of Philadelphians marched resolutely to the TV station after the broadcast. ‘They came to praise it,’ she says, because it was the first film on the bombing told from an ‘Afrocentric perspective, and it privileged the black voice.’”²⁹

The film consistently refuses to provide a “master narrative” in a coherent and singular voice. It does not explain what MOVE was for those unfamiliar with the organization, nor does it give a chronological account of what happened and why. Rather than framing the bombing as a sensational and exceptional disaster involving an irrational organization, their tragic neighbors, and an incompetent mayor, it offers instead a collage of voices and images from the past and present that address various aspects of the human experience in the Cobbs Creek neighborhood and beyond. Some of these directly engage the MOVE organization and the bombing of the MOVE house, but others detail ordinary experiences of community, frustration, or violence that would, by mainstream news standards, be deemed “irrelevant” to the May 13 event.

Community Media and Culture Workers

The Bombing of Osage Avenue was produced by WHYY-TV, where Massiah was working full-time in 1984–88, not by Scribe Video Center where he by then worked only evenings—yet the film is clearly shaped by the philosophy of community media practice that Massiah had been developing at Scribe since founding it in 1982. This philosophy includes, as Tamara A. Mhone points out in her master’s thesis on the organization, teaching ordinary people “the necessary skills to achieve a professional level of self-expression and self-representation through video,” and assisting them in finding a means of distribution.³⁰ In bringing professional skills and equipment to local communities, Scribe effectively disrupts the tendency for the concept of “the professional” to be aligned with an ideology that, as Patricia Zimmerman has argued, emphasizes national issues, at the cost of keeping familial, foreign, and minoritized communities at the margins of cultural history, often under the banner of the term “amateur.”³¹

To this, Bambara added her sense of herself as a “culture worker,” a standard term during the period for artists who refused to separate themselves from the worlds of work and community. As Massiah recalls, “Bambara stated that her primary role as a cultural worker was to serve the needs of those real communities of people, who share common histories, class positions, raise families together, protect each other, name each other, and also share a common destiny.”³² Bambara taught



Toni Cade Bambara and Louis Massiah at a 1989 screening of *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*.

Photo courtesy of and ©Sue Ross.

screenwriting at Scribe during her time in Philadelphia, and this outlook resonated strongly with the fledgling organization’s stated mission.

Bambara’s sense of the word “community” had been shaped by her involvement with black feminism and by her formative childhood experiences of Speakers’ Corner in Harlem. For her, a community was simply not viable without the existence of such a corner. “If we can’t hear black people speak,” she asserted, “we become captive to the media, and we disacknowledge Blackspeak.”³³ Bambara gradually developed the idea of an “authenticating audience,” and, Massiah explains, “[i]dentifying this audience allows the cultural worker to evaluate the success or failure of the artistic practice,” and enables a mutually empowering relationship between the culture worker and the audience she addresses.³⁴

Drawing on these distinct but overlapping cultural missions and traditions, Massiah and Bambara set about crafting an intense collaboration, not only with each other, but also with the members of the Cobbs Creek community who had been displaced. They went in search of alternative methods and modes of using the media to narrate, represent, and critically engage the practice and representation of legally sanctioned and governmentally enacted racial violence, resulting in an innovative and reflexive form of documentary filmmaking. Their methods included investigative and archival research; community engagement using an oral history methodology; and, in Bambara’s case, the writing of poetry and fiction to generate linguistic and visual approaches to representing black communities’ experiences of disaster that differed in positive ways from what Bambara called the “Official Version.”³⁵

Bambara’s archive illustrates the author’s various ways of actively interrogating and talking back to mainstream press

reports of the event throughout the production process. For example, when Bill Peterson of the *Washington Post* mentions in one article that “arrest warrants were outstanding” on five MOVE members, Bambara’s marginal notes ask, “When? Date? Charges? Signed by what Judge?”³⁶

Using a different approach, her typed manuscript “Setting the Record Straight” (undated and unpublished) illustrates how she employed fiction writing as a tool with which to engage and rewrite history, often from a black feminist point-of-view. This eight-page roman-à-clef-style story tells of a radical organization known as “The Alpha Family” (resonant with the “Africa” name adopted by MOVE members) from the perspective of a mother who has left the group while remaining sympathetic to the sense of community and support it fostered. The story seems to be loosely based on a *New York Times* article that appears alongside this manuscript in Bambara’s research papers and which discusses Louise James, the owner of the MOVE house on Osage Avenue and sister of MOVE’s leader, John Africa, as well as their sibling, LaVerne Sims, who was, like James, a former MOVE member. Bambara’s fictional character seems primarily to be based on Sims.³⁷

Like Bambara’s story, the *Times* article reflects the former members’ ongoing affection for MOVE.³⁸ Yet when the *Times* summarizes James’s still-sympathetic position after leaving the house, it does so by framing MOVE less as a positive experience in its own right than as a preferable alternative to vice—“a way off the streets, a way out of crime, prostitution and drug addiction.” Similarly, the *Times* article conflates the quite distinct positions of “the city and police officials, former residents of the devastated neighborhood and community activists” into a single “they” that offers a unified and negative counterpoint to any positive view of MOVE.³⁹

By contrast, Bambara’s short story, like the film, resists this type of concretization of opinion about the collective, largely through the creation of an intelligent protagonist who voices her own critiques of the “Alpha” family in a complex and compassionate way: “I’m noticing [*sic*] that the floor is sticky underfoot from spilled apple juice and I’m hearing some hammering on the roof, and I’m almost thinking that maybe this is no way to live except I don’t want to leave. I love the people here.”⁴⁰ Bambara’s fictional adaptation shifts the narrative out of the sphere of urban racial fantasy into one of feminist utopia. Her protagonist notes, “Going to the college at 29 is no joke. But at the house I got lots of encouragement and practical help like typing, child care, meals fixed for me during midterms and end terms.”⁴¹

Massiah’s own research files for *The Bombing* similarly contain stacks of articles that reference the assault on the

6200 block of Osage Avenue and MOVE and its aftermath. Both archives also contain extensive handwritten notes that respond directly to the bombing and the way it was being represented in the media, and these notes illuminate some of the problems with which Bambara and Massiah were wrestling as they made the film. Bambara, for example, repeatedly comes back to the meaning of the word “responsibility” (see insert) and works to elucidate the mental and linguistic paradigms that uphold the “Official Version,” such as “property vs. lives; victims vs. survivors; silence-amnesia; politics of rebuilding-Real Estate.”⁴²

Meanwhile, Massiah’s handwritten notes reveal him grappling with the political conditions that had created the space of possibility for the bombing in the first place:

The thought that the city felt the only recourse in dealing with a politically radical group was to drop a bomb and let the area burn suggests an extraordinary frailty. The frailty of our modern, urban, technological society in this becomes apparent: the inability of the city, community to deal with a politically radical group such as MOVE, inability to cope with variant lifestyles; our reliance on technological solutions and the existence of large arsenals of weapons make us vulnerable to this type of tragedy What are the rights of a radical group, even a potentially violent group, such as MOVE, in a pluralistic society?⁴³

By April 1986, Massiah and Bambara had established clear and deliberate goals for the film:

To convey that a community must not relinquish control over its destiny, no matter what the temptations, pressures, difficulties, or illusions may be; to emphasize . . . that the chain of command in the police department should include direct input from someone in the community; to demonstrate that the May 13th tragedy was not inevitable by focusing on the intermediaries and the process of mediation between MOVE, the neighbors, and the city; and to suggest that Louise James has a right to her house and that a solution to this question should come from the community.⁴⁴

The Bombing of Osage Avenue refuses the language of inevitability primarily by refusing to pathologize or homogenize the members of either MOVE or the Cobbs Creek community. Instead, the film particularizes all those it depicts by featuring a series of individuals with differing stories, histories, and religious beliefs. It also places the bombing of the MOVE house and the surrounding block in relation to a long history of local and national racist violence. Massiah’s files contain extensive materials about individual experiences of racism, about places associated with African-American protest, community, and freedom, as well as about official

military-style attacks on these spaces and the people who inhabited them.⁴⁵ This history of violence in which the film situates the 1985 bombing includes the occupation by white settlers of the Lenni Lenape territory that predated Philadelphia; the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall, the “Temple of Free Discussion” which opened on May 14, 1838, only to be set aflame by anti-abolitionists three days later; and the deadly assault on the economically thriving black community of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its architectural infrastructure, in 1921.⁴⁶

The film opens with a collage of archival lithographs and photographs, many of which are held in the Library Company of Philadelphia as well as the Free Library’s collection, accompanied by Bambara’s voice-over, which itself uses historical texts as source material while resisting any attempt to provide a comprehensive chronological narrative. In place of the mainstream media’s presentation of a supposedly inevitable spectacle of violent chaos in a black city run by a black mayor, the film offers a broader, lyrical, and historically charged collage of words and images, one that presumes a different kind of shared knowledge and experience, that of the film’s “authenticating audience.”

After beginning *in medias res* with a series of community members commenting on the neighborhood—“It’s not like downtown . . . We love the park”—Bambara’s voice begins: “When you’re part of a community, at home in the rhythms and rituals of a place, you don’t imagine that you’re living on the edge of hell.” The film constructs its audience here as one that does not need a blow-by-blow account of what happened, either because of having lived through the event in question, or because of a presumed familiarity with it. This strategy deprioritizes those audiences unfamiliar with the bombing and the historical patterns in which it participates.

As the film goes in search of words, images, and forms to express the complexity and diversity of experiences undergone by the people living in Cobbs Creek, the result is often elliptical, juxtaposing the official testimonies of neighbors at the commission hearings with an audiovisual fabric woven from intimate images and voices of the neighborhood and Bambara’s condensed language: “The dismemberment of a community, the relationship of people to a place ruptured.” Refusing to provide an oversimplified narrative, the form of this film instead functions as an invitation to listen, reflect, remember, learn, analyze, and connect.⁴⁷ People respond, usually in the humanizing context of their own homes, to questions that Massiah generated in a deliberate effort to frame their stories differently: “What makes a community strong? Can a community trust the city, what are the controls? How does a black mayor alter, affect the equation of

trust? How can a community protect itself from another May 13th attack? What kind of neighborhood was it for kids? Was the block tolerant, accept[ing] of other lifestyles?”⁴⁸ Unlike every other media depiction of the event, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* consistently refuses to disconnect MOVE from the black community, the black community from the city of Philadelphia, or the police from the black community.

Instead of including the police officers involved with the assault on the neighborhood, Massiah and Bambara prefer to focus on Officer Earlie Davis, a black officer who had begun patrolling the Cobbs Creek neighborhood area in 1967 and had worked over decades to establish strong relationships with gang members using a familial model of mutual respect.⁴⁹ In the course of the film, Davis recalls, “See, I had two sons and I tried to treat the guys out here like I would’ve wanted someone to treat my sons.” He also tells of an incident in 1984, when two of the gangs invited him to attend a reunion, recalling: “I didn’t know whether to go or not, but I went. I got in that place and they made me feel like I was twenty feet tall. . . . They made me feel like I did something right over the years.”

By contrast *Let the Fire Burn* ends with images of the white police officer, James Berghaier, who had saved the life of Birdie Africa after his escape from the MOVE conflagration. Because Berghaier was later harassed by his fellow officers for doing so, he emerges in his testimony as both victim and hero, and this is a strange landing place for a film about the death and displacement of large numbers of African-American citizens at the hands of the police.⁵⁰ Furthermore, by concluding with Berghaier, *Let the Fire Burn* also structurally mirrors the Philadelphia Special Investigation Report, where Berghaier’s actions are used as evidence to support the final and exceptional statement of Commissioner Bruce W. Kauffman, who “strongly dissents” from his fellow commissioners’ view that the police gunfire on the MOVE house was “clearly excessive and unreasonable,” and who does not “believe that race was a factor” in any of the decisions made by Mayor Goode or the police and fire commissioners.⁵¹

Local, National, and Transnational Intersubjectivity

According to Manthia Diawara:

[Massiah] does not challenge the fact that documentary films are capable of conveying verifiable information. But he redefines the documentary genre by presenting the evidence on a subjective grid. He places other artists or characters between himself and the evidence presented. By



Fig. 1. A hand drawn map marks the territories of The Native Inhabitants of Philadelphia.

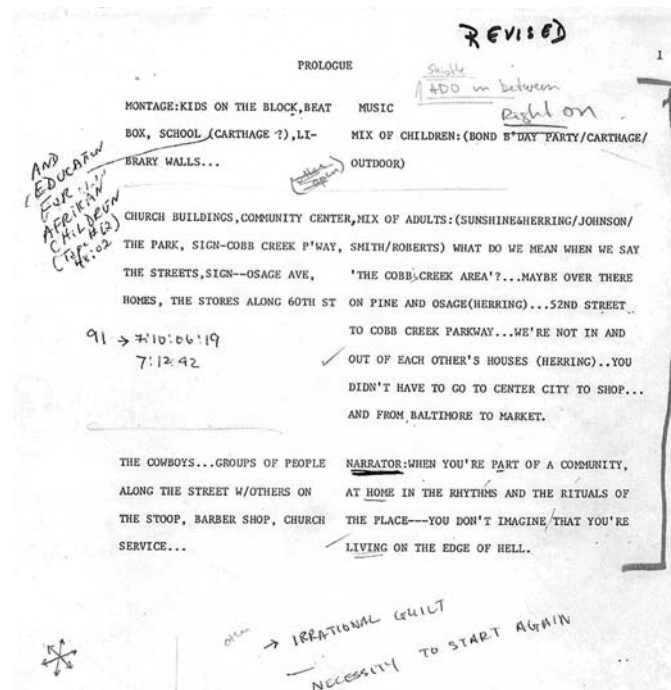


Fig. 2. Page one of the script of *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*, with Louis Massiah's handwritten notes.

effacing himself in this manner, Massiah is able to show the evidence from different points of view. In other words, in Massiah's films the evidence is built intersubjectively.⁵²

Diawara adds that Massiah "should be recognized for being, more than anyone else, the connecting thread" for a movement of international diasporic documentary films

about major black leaders, in which he includes Raoul Peck, Isaac Julien, St. Clair Bourne, and John Akomfrah.

Akomfrah, while confirming the radical newness and significance of *The Bombing of Osage Avenue's* narrative style, emphasizes the importance of Toni Cade Bambara: "Because it was Toni . . . we immediately paid attention to

COMMEMORATE THE MOVE BOMBING

**Murderers!
Murderers!
No More!**

**FREE RAMONA AFRICA!
PUT THE MURDERERS ON TRIAL!**

*** CANDLELIGHT VIGIL - MON, MAY 12, CLARK PARK**

Beginning 8:00 pm--bring candles--come prepared to stay--
this will be informative--starting Monday evening and con-
tinuing on into and throughout Tuesday, May 13:

*Airing of the testimony at the commission hearings of Mayor
Goode, former Police Commissioner Sambor, former Managing
Director Brooks and Fire Commissioner Richmond

*Airing of Birdie Africa's testimony before the commission

*Replaying of media broadcasts of May 13, 1985

*Footage of the police assault on MOVE Aug. 8, 1978

*** SPEAK OUT - TUES, MAY 13, 3:00 PM
CLARK PARK**

Gather together from all over the city--speakers--poetry--
statements--speak out against the bombing of MOVE

*** 5:27 PM - TUES, MAY 13**

A year to the moment when the bomb was dropped LET THE VOICES
OF OUTRAGE SPEAKOUT POWERFULLY!

**CLARK PARK - MAY 12-13
CHESTER AVE + 43RD ST
—West Philadelphia—**

Fig. 3. The front side of the flyer advertising the May 12-13, 1986 Speakout and Vigil.

COMMEMORATE THE MOVE BOMBING

On May 13, 1985, those who hold the reigns of power spoke with shocking clarity in Philadelphia. The MOVE house was bombed. At least 11 men, women and children were killed; the evidence of the horror of their deaths: charred and dismembered body parts. A Black neighborhood was burned to the ground. The first anniversary of May 13 fast approaches. How will we respond?

The Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, appointed by Mayor Goode, found the atrocities committed on Osage Ave. to have been "poorly planned." What plan would have been more suitable? The operation against MOVE could not have been more planned: a facsimile of MOVE's roof was built by the police who practiced blowing it up; aerial surveillance photos of MOVE's roof were studied for over a year by the Bomb Squad; meetings of city officials were held weeks, even months in advance; the FBI gave the Philadelphia police C-4, a military explosive that has no equal in destructive capabilities short of a nuclear bomb. Before the ashes had even cooled off the mayor declared, "I stand fully accountable" and that he would, "do it over and over again." Not planned? Not meant to kill?

Who has been made to pay but one of the intended victims, Ramona Africa, whose sole "crime" is that she survived. On May 13, 1986, Ramona Africa will be shut away in a state penitentiary while those with blood-stained hands are free to patrol the streets, free to speak at police conferences in Florida, free to run the city. With every step the authorities take they trample on the graves of 11 people.

"It makes me feel like I'm living in one of those countries where they just go in and bomb you out" exclaimed a woman from the Osage Ave. neighborhood in the days following May 13. Indeed, the message of terror delivered with bullets, bombs, and fire, was a familiar one to those with experience on how U.S. backed regimes have operated for decades in places like South Africa and Haiti. The historical oppression of Black people in this country reached a new level with the MOVE bombing. An unprecedented atrocity such as this cannot go unchallenged, nor can we allow voices of protest to be muffled or silenced because the head man in City Hall is Black.

The authorities have tried again and again to pronounce "Case Closed" while leaving the message of terror wholly intact and the murderers unscathed. And all the while the city prepares new attacks as with the recent attempted "inspections" of the home of MOVE supporters. Surely these same authorities will have their own way of marking May 13, laden with the kind of hypocrisy they are professional in espousing. These are serious times, times which demand that all those who see the MOVE massacre for what it is to develop varied and creative political ways to appropriately mark the anniversary of May 13. This is how we must respond.

We call upon all those who watched with horror at the bombing and burning on Osage Ave. and felt furious and helpless at the same time; all those whose stomachs have turned at the sickening attempts to excuse a slaughter by blaming the victims; all those who still seethe with outrage at such a horrendous act, to join together and join us in issuing this call. Let May 13, 1986 be a day of diverse activities throughout the city of opposition to the MOVE bombing with a coming together in Clark Park in West Philadelphia.

• **CANDLELIGHT VIGIL - MON. MAY 12 - 8 PM**
at **CLARK PARK**

activities continuing on into and all day Tuesday, May 13.
Clark Park, Chester Ave. and 43rd St. West Philadelphia

• **SPEAKOUT - TUES. MAY 13 - 3 PM** Clark Park
(for details see other side)

• **5:27 PM -** Let the voices of outrage speakout powerfully!

This Call To Act is endorsed by the Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the Revolutionary Communist Party, U.S.A., the Delaware Valley Citizens Organization and Citizens in Action.

Fig. 4. The back side of the flyer advertising the May 12-13, 1986 Speakout and Vigil.

Toni Cade Bambara
308 West Upsal Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19119
215-848-4257

April 17, 1986

Dear Louis,

What a crazy damn mad enterprise this proved to be. Narrating unassembled and non-existent footage of a script written in invisible ink, typed on a machine with a loose margin screw while the real typist is two-months early in the maternity ward. Certifiable.

At any rate.

To be sure the narration is unduly moufy. But I suppose at this juncture that's better than too stingy.

You'll note chunky blanks around pages 6,7. I've too many notes yet unscambled.

Do give a ring over the week-end if you've a mind to. I'll be back to the city Saturday night.

Has anyone identified so far the members of that 11th hour Ad Hoc Committee that seems to have formed itself right there at the police barrier, sat down in somebody's house, drafted a 6-Point Proposal and took it to Goode who said the matter was out of his hands, police action, too late, don't worry, cherry picker will remove bunker and then they'll blah blah? It's beginning to occur to me that whoever they are, they aren't part of Bond, Lee, Swans, Novella Wms, etc. Who are they? They're mentioned in one of Yoa's clipping (far right-hand column of a page maybe six pages into the pile in her hmmm fourth folder, I think.) There they seem like the on-going neighborhood negotiators. But looked over some notes I made in January while going through the RCB's Revolutionary Worker (is there footage of them anywhere inviting people to line up at some shopping market to talk into recorder?) and they clearly say "We started shouting 'murder murder' and knew chanting wasn't enough. We wondered where the neighborhood workers were " according to my notes.

More of that later. This gets more exciting by the minute. I may have to be se-dated.

See Ya,



Fig. 5. Toni Cade Bambara's 1986 letter to Louis Massiah.

what she was bringing in 'Osage' as different from the standard voice of documentary. Because the voice was Toni's, the film's new narrative style was more readily accepted as a model than it might have been if Toni were lesser known."⁵³

While it may be tempting to dismiss community-generated works as being only of local interest, Patricia Zimmerman has argued that the "microhistories" made available through amateur works—and to this I would

add community-generated professional media works—are "not simply local, but are crisscrossed hybrids between the local and the global, between the psychic and political terrains."⁵⁴ The West Philadelphia bombing certainly troubled the way residents understood and inhabited terms like "local," "national," "global," and "foreign," not least because of the way it made them, mostly long-term residents and community leaders, feel like enemies abroad. A political flyer (see insert) distributed



The Bombing of Osage Avenue consistently refuses to disconnect black voices.

on the eve of the first anniversary of the bombing at a candlelight vigil held at Clark Park in West Philadelphia makes this clear when it quotes one of the Osage Avenue residents: “It makes me feel like I’m living in one of those countries where they just go in and bomb you out.” And continues, “[T]he message of terror delivered with bullets, bombs and fire was a familiar one to those with experience of how U.S. backed regimes have operated for decades in places like South Africa and Haiti.”⁵⁵

Even as the bombing challenged the residents’ sense of civic and national identity, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* and Scribe Video Center helped to foster a growing sense of transnational solidarity among Philadelphia’s communities of color. The year of the film’s release, 1987, coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Panafrican Festival of Cinema in Ouagadougou (FESPACO), where *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* competed that year for the newly launched Prix Paul Robeson.⁵⁶ FESPACO’s program introduced the new “Cinema of the Diaspora” competition by citing the late Kwame Nkrumah’s statement, “[I]f you’re black, you are an African and as a result you belong to the African Nation.”⁵⁷

For Massiah and Bambara, the filmmaking process was both fraught and exciting. As Bambara writes to Massiah in the course of the process, “What a crazy damn mad enterprise this proved to be. Narrating unassembled and non-existent footage of a script written in invisible ink, typed on a machine with a loose margin screw . . . Certifiable . . . This gets more exciting by the minute. I may have to be sedated. See ya, T.”⁵⁸

After the broadcast, however, Massiah becomes somewhat melancholic regarding the film’s potential ephemerality: “There’s an emptiness that often comes after a broadcast—you work hard for months to create something, communicate an idea, and it all disappears over the airwaves.”⁵⁹

The innovations in black documentary filmmaking that developed around and in response to this collaboration between Bambara and Massiah illustrate the extent to which Massiah’s fears about the film’s disappearance at its moment of broadcast were unfounded. And yet the threat continues. Precisely because of the nature of the film’s innovations—its authorial self-effacement; collaborative methodology; resistance to a reductive, linear narrative style; embrace of poetic language as a radical tool; and foregrounding of the voices of ordinary black people—it remains in danger of being written out of film history anyway. Its potential marginalization in that history calls for a reflection on the systems of filmic memory and forgetting, as well as the systems of everyday violence that those criteria inadvertently support. This thirtieth anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the social structures and shared beliefs that made the 1985 bombing of the MOVE house possible, and to consider what, if anything, has changed.

Author’s Note

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The MOVE house and Osage Avenue burning. Courtesy of E. W. Faircloth // *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Notes

1. My thinking about the relationship between different kinds of violence is guided by Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
2. See Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2>.
3. Mayor Goode took office in January 1984. While MOVE continues to advocate for the release of the eight remaining members of the MOVE 9, who have been imprisoned since August 8, 1978, MOVE's primary work has always been "to demonstrate that people not only can fight this system, they must fight the system if they ever want to free themselves from endless suffering and oppression." For MOVE's beliefs, see <http://onamove.com/about/>.
4. Unlike their neighbors, MOVE members focused relentlessly on the release of family members from prison, following an earlier 1978 siege on the MOVE house in Powelton Village.
5. Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, *The Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission* (March 6, 1986), 7.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 1.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid., 9–10.
10. Ibid., 27.
11. *The MOVE Commission Hearings* (1985, 120 hours) were also "pool fed" to ABC, CBS, and NBC. During this period, Massiah also directed multiple broadcast-length and short documentaries for WHY.
12. Louis Massiah, e-mail messages to author, January 25, 2015.
13. Massiah, for example, asks questions in his early notes for the film that reveal an attempt to imagine the role of the city government differently, such as: "How does a city respond to a serious conflict of values, such as the conflict bet. the MOVE group, who recycled their sewage & waste in the backyard of their rowhouse." Louis Massiah, handwritten notes, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 1. It is worth noting that on the first anniversary of the bombing, Alice Walker sent a message in support of MOVE that ended thus: "And then to learn that the MOVE group practiced composting, which I thoroughly support!" "Message from Alice Walker," *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 21, "Background."
14. For a transcript of her introduction, see "Appendix: A Call to Action," in *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist*, ed. Linda Janet Holmes (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 206–8. Valerie Boyd reports that she was in the process of moving. See "'Osage Avenue' Docu Shoots for Truths of Bombing in the City of Brotherly Love," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 24, 1989, D05.
15. Louis Massiah, e-mail messages to author, January 12 and 25, 2015.
16. Louis Massiah, e-mail messages to author, February 19, 2015.
17. Ibid.
18. Linda Janet Holmes, "Poised for the Light," in *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*, ed. Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 7–26, on 22.
19. On November 16, 1981, the *New York Times* published excerpts from Bambara's novel in progress, that became *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, which Toni Morrison would publish posthumously in 1999, including the following passage: "Many a newly elected Black mayor has found him/herself embattled from day one by the reluctance, frequently bitter, oftentimes fierce, of the old-boy network to honor the voter's choice." See www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/bambara-bones.html.
20. James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, 1985, republished 1995), 39. Baldwin, interrogating the complex racial dynamics of the Atlanta case, writes: "In June 1981, after twenty-two months and twenty-eight corpses, Wayne Bertram Williams, then twenty-three, was arrested for murder. That he is Black is important, since the Administration of the city is Black, and all of the murdered children were Black" (4). He found the case against Williams "dubious" (11). Bambara credits Baldwin, whom she had known "for years," with helping her get "into the third draft" of her own project. See Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 673.
21. Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 10. Deborah E. McDowell, taking this passage as an epigraph, argues that the media's attention to spectacular black male death and black families in mourning "works to reinforce black social exclusion." See "Viewing the Remains: A Polemic on Death, Spectacle, and the [Black] Family," in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 1999), 153–77, on 153, 166.
22. It is unlikely that Baldwin would have seen the film as he died of stomach cancer in France on December 1, 1987. Massiah and Bambara attended his funeral together at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.
23. See Louis Massiah, letters to Cobbs Creek residents, July 1986, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 22, "Correspondence."
24. See <http://scribe.org/about/aboutscribe>. See also Ann Kolson, "Expressing Themselves: 'Video is a tool of modern-day scribes,' says a videomaker who puts cameras into the hands of everyday people—Interview with Louis Massiah," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 8, 1993, Features/Entertainment Section, C01. Although Bambara and Massiah experimented with a new narration track, they ultimately retained the original. Massiah reports, "[I]t was clear that the pacing and feel of the original made the piece much stronger." See Louis Massiah, letter to Gail Christian, Director, New and Special Projects, PBS, October 29, 1986, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 22, "Correspondence."
25. *Black and Blue* (Hugh King and Lamar Williams, 1987) offers another critically aware treatment of the police raids on MOVE and the bombing of the MOVE house from an African-American perspective, but this film focuses on the

- broader issue of Philadelphia police brutality, primarily under the earlier mayoral leadership of Frank Rizzo (1972–80).
26. Louis Massiah, handwritten notes, undated, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 1.
 27. *Let the Fire Burn* was sponsored by the Sundance Documentary Film Program and is distributed by Zeitgeist.
 28. DVD insert, n.p. Osder stresses his geographic proximity to the event, but economically, Montgomery County (and ranked by Forbes Magazine in 2008 as “the 9th best place to raise a family” and now the 51st wealthiest county in the country) is quite remote from Philadelphia city-county. Philadelphia is the poorest big city in America, with the nation’s highest deep poverty rate. This currently impacts about 60,000 children. See Alfred Lubrano, “Phila Rates Highest among Top Ten Cities for Deep Poverty,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 26, 2014, http://articles.philly.com/2014-09-26/news/54322611_1_deep-poverty-poverty-line-south-philadelphia. It is worth noting that Michael Moses Ward (formerly “Birdie Africa”) relocated to Montgomery County after having survived the bombing. See Kristina Dougherty and John McDevitt, “Michael Moses Ward ‘Birdie Africa’ Dead at 41,” <http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2013/09/25/michael-moses-ward-birdie-africa-dead-at-41/>.
 29. Valerie Boyd, “‘Osage Avenue’ Docu Shoots for Truths of Bombing in the City of Brotherly Love,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 24, 1989, D05. Part of this passage is quoted in Holmes, *Joyous Revolt*, 170. Holmes also stresses Bambara’s attempt to link the struggles of all people of color in the film, and to give voice to community elders.
 30. Tamara A. Mhone, “Taking Control of Video: A Study of Scribe Video Center’s Community Visions Videos” (MA thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 1–2. Mhone points out, “Many of the videos are shown publicly at the International House of Philadelphia in University City through the Neighborhood Film and Video Project, on various community access channels such as WHYY-TV in Philadelphia, and occasionally on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS),” 24.
 31. Patricia R. Zimmermann, “Morphing History into Histories: From Amateur Film to the Archive of the Future,” *Moving Image: Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 108–30, on 110.
 32. Louis Massiah, “The Authenticating Audience,” *Feminist Wire*, November 18, 2014. <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/11/authenticating-audience/>.
 33. Louis Massiah, “How She Came by Her Name” (1994), in *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara*, ed. Thabiti Lewis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 112–37, on 119.
 34. Louis Massiah, “The Authenticating Audience,” <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/11/authenticating-audience/>.
 35. The title of “Scribe Video Center” makes clear the proximity between writing and documentary film and video work. Similarly, Bambara states in one interview, “I’m a filmmaker. I have always been a filmmaker—to me.” See Akasha (Gloria) Hull, “A Conversation with Toni Cade Bambara” (1982), in Lewis, *Conversations*, 111.
 36. Toni Cade Bambara archive, Part 1, Box 7, *Washington Post* article, October 12, 1985.
 37. See Toni Cade Bambara, “Setting the Record Straight,” typed manuscript, no date, Toni Cade Bambara archive, “Research Notes.”
 38. See Lindsey Gruson, “The Philadelphia Siege: Ways of Life in Conflict,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1985, A10. The article also features Donald Glassey, a white graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania who helped to transcribe *The Guidelines*, a 300-page text outlining the teachings of John Africa, MOVE’s leader and Louise James’s brother. Bambara’s female protagonist has little respect for the Glassey stand-in, Irwin, who appears in her story: “I have never trusted Irwin . . . never trusted the fervor with which he wrote down damn near everything that tumbled out of the old man’s mouth and then change it up and try to feed it back to us as some guiding life principle . . . always commenting on things like an anthropologist among the natives, taking notes.” Bambara, “Setting the Record Straight,” 4–5.
 39. “They,” the article claims, “said members harassed and assaulted residents; dumped garbage in what had been a neat, flowering yard; attracted flies; fed rats like pets, and turned the two-story house into a fortress.” Gruson, “Philadelphia Siege,” A10.
 40. Bambara, “Setting the Record Straight,” 8.
 41. Ibid., 7.
 42. Toni Cade Bambara archive, “Research Notes.” Bambara’s research materials also contain extensive notes on the mental health needs of the black community, a long-term concern of hers, including a typed transcript of Harvard Psychiatry Professor Alvin F. Poussaint’s “Coping With Tragedy,” first published in *Ebony Magazine* (February 1977).
 43. Louis Massiah, handwritten notes, undated, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 1.
 44. “Purposes” memo (based on 4/14/86 meeting), *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 6, “Shooting Schedule.”
 45. Both archives contain a typed manuscript authored by Kenneth Finkel, Curator of Prints at the Library Company of Philadelphia, “History Speaks of Burning Cities.” This document is a source for much of the section of the film that deals with the history of military-style assault on people of color in America.
 46. Sonia Sanchez sent Massiah the article about the Tulsa race riot that Bambara adapts for her voice-over. See Irving Wallace, David Wallenchinsky, and Amy Wallace, “First U.S. City to be Bombed From the Air,” *Significa*, March 13, 1983, n.p., *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 21.
 47. Early drafts of the narrator’s text contain more chronological and factual information, but much of this disappears over the course of revision.
 48. Questions for Stanley Vaughan and Carrie Foskey, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 16.
 49. For a community-produced depiction of life in a Philadelphia gang when Officer Davis began, see *The Jungle* (Charlie “Brown” Davis, Jimmy “Country” Robinson, and David

- "Bat" Williams, under the guidance of Harold Haskins, 1967). This film, never theatrically released, was added to the National Film Registry in 2009.
50. James Berghaier rescued the thirteen-year old Birdie Africa from drowning after he fainted in a pool of water following his escape from the MOVE house.
 51. See Bruce W. Kauffman, "Dissenting Statement," *Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission* (March 6, 1986), 1–3.
 52. Manthia Diawara, "The 'I' Narrator in Black Diaspora Documentary," in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, ed. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 193–202, on 202.
 53. Quoted in Holmes, *Joyous Revolt*, 171.
 54. Zimmerman, "Morphing History into Histories," 109.
 55. "Statement of Outrage and a Call to Act," Political Flier for Candlelight Vigil, May 12, 1986, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, no file. *Black and Blue* also compares African-American Philadelphians with the Vietnamese and black South Africans. The US military's contemporary use of drones continues this pattern of US airborne terror.
 56. From 1966 until his death in 1976, Paul Robeson lived a mere two miles away from 6221 Osage Avenue at 4951 Walnut Street, also in West Philadelphia. Massiah had left Philadelphia to go to college, after which he worked in New York and then moved to Boston, only returning to Philadelphia full-time in 1982. He did not know Robeson, but people in his Philadelphia circle did.
 57. Madnodje Mounoubai, "Cinema de la Diaspora," 10^e. *FES-PACO* [Program] (1987), 71. ["Kwame N'Krumah disait que...si vous êtes noir, vous êtes un Africain et par conséquent vous appartenez à la Nation Africaine."] Nkrumah was also a former resident of West Philadelphia. Between 1935 and 1945, he was a student at Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania, and resided at 603 N. 39th Street, about three miles away from the MOVE house. See www.archives.upenn.edu/people/notables/nkrumah/nkrumah_exhibit.html.
 58. Toni Cade Bambara, letter to Louis Massiah, April 17, 1986, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 13, "Bomb."
 59. Louis Massiah, letter to Toni Cade Bambara, April 26, 1986, *Bombing of Osage Avenue* archive, Scribe Video Center, File 22, "Correspondence."