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The Syncopation of Idrissou Mora-Kpai's America Street

Documentary Film: *America Street*, Director: Idrissou Mora-Kpai, USA | 2019 | 74 min.
Review Essay by: R.A. Judy, Professor of Critical and Cultural Studies, Department of English, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The title sequence of Idrissou Mora-Kpai's newest documentary film, *America Street*, opens with a black screen and the beginning phrase of a haunting piano piece played in a minor scale. This gives way rather quickly to an establishing long shot of the Arthur Ravenel Bridge, as seen from one of the residential streets in Charleston's Eastside Hampstead Village neighborhood. It then cuts away to a long shot looking southeast down the length of the Eastend thoroughfare, America Street, with the words, "Charleston, South Carolina" emerging in white in the lower right corner, the first word being slightly larger than the other two. The piano piece that has been playing uninterrupted is now spoken over by a male tenor voice declaring: "We've lived here on this corner in Charleston for fifty-seven years now;" at which point, there is a quick cut to a close up of a window featuring a calligraphic two-line sign, the first line of which reads in red, "**America Street**," and the second in black, "**Charleston, S.C.**" An empty street scene is reflected in the window—the kitty-corner stretch of sidewalk and street with a full view of an immaculate one-story white clapboard corner-house that has a utility pole in front of it, a well-manicured green lawn running to the corner on its left (in the reflection), and a two-story greyish clapboard to its right that is partially shaded by a tree. All of this is framed by the window in such a way as to appear as a long shot superimposed on the window sign, giving its words a remarkably deictic aspect, as if to say: "*This* is America Street, Charleston, SC." Then, in syncopated rhythm with the voice's narrating, we cut to a close up of its owner, who continues: "My mother opened up a restaurant here back in 1958." We are thus introduced to one of the film's principle protagonists, Joe Watson, who proceeds to tell the story of how, in 1968, his family converted the restaurant into the sweet shop and corner store it is today. Cutting to an extreme close up of a district survey map, we see Joe showing just where in Hampstead Village we now are, pointing out with a purple stick-on arrow the location of the house round the way where he was born. Still in syncopation with Joe's narrative rhythm, we cut to a closeup of a photo of him and his sister as toddlers while he recounts the circumstances of his birth: "It was just me and my mother. The doctor didn't get there. A midwife didn't come. Her words were . . ." We have a synchronized cut back to an extreme closeup of Joe still recounting uninterrupted: ". . . and her prayer: 'Lord, where can I go to take care of my three children,'" who are now shown to us in another tight closeup of a triptych of framed high school portrait photos of the sort often found in some prominent place in the family home, with Joe continuing his story of his mother's divine inspiration: "And He showed her, in a dream,

this building with new boards on the floor.” At this point, we cut to the closing scene of the title sequence, which is a long shot looking from the street at the aforementioned corner store, situate on the southwest corner of the America and Amherst intersection, with its business entrance facing the corner precisely. It is also at this point the film’s title, *American Street*, emerges in green on the screen directly in front of that entrance, followed by the production credits, as Joe continues: “And she knew then that this is where she must come. And so, we’ve been here *fifty-seven years*. Fifty-seven years on this corner.” With this, we then cut to a closer shot of Joe standing inside his shop. Its heavy black security door is open, as it always is when he’s open for business, and he is standing behind the heavy metal grated screen door looking out at the street. This shot establishes it is his perspective from this corner that frames how we see America Street and by extension, Hampstead Village.

The extension of that perspective is underscored by the montage of shots immediately following the title sequence, each of which is a scene from different locations in Hampstead Village. There are two shots of the clapboard houses running southward down America Street next to Joe’s corner store, one of which is a medium long shot of a group of men gathered together on the house stoops; the other is of the same houses in a wider shot showing the southernmost portion of Joe’s store along America. These are followed by a long shot of the boarded-up dilapidated building on the corner of Meeting and Line Streets, with its Anything Marine storefront sign still visible beneath the Twin Rivers Capital “Available” sign plastered on its Meeting side. Then, there is a medium long of two elders sitting on the stoop in front of the open black door of a white clapboard somewhere in the Eastside, staring nonchalantly at the camera as it passes, acknowledging being seen by seeing. After this, we cut to a medium closeup of the commemorative statue of Charleston’s most celebrated blacksmith, the Black man, Phillip Simmons, in Hampstead Mall Playground two blocks up the street from Joe’s store on America. Finally, we cut back to Joe’s store with him standing outside—coffee mug in hand, the red door of the Eastside Community Development Corporation immediately to his left on the opposite corner across Amherst—looking up and down America, watching the promenade of his neighbors. This corner store, known in the neighborhood as Mary’s Sweet Shop, after its original owner, Joe’s mother, Mary Watson, is the principal place of the film’s action. It is the place in which we encounter Joe most often, leaning across its counter, flanked by an always-open, well-used large black Bible, engaged in conversation with the community as he and they go about daily life. And that daily life is the film’s drama.

There is a distinctive rhythm to the daily life of the folks of Hampstead Village, reflected in the pattern of Joe’s speech. That pattern, which we encounter in the opening title sequence, is paratactic. I’m referring to the way in which he, in speaking, pieces recollections of events, and ideas together in a string, juxtaposing them without an overarching teleology, without what we might consider a logical order of predication, or predicative syntax. This rhythmic parataxis is characterized by the juxtaposition of parabolic and aphoristic fragments, the relationship between which is manifested in the entire arrangement. That is how Joe talks and tells stories. This is a form of expression demanding the active engagement of both speaker and his interlocutors, who in turn speak, at times in response, at others in their own tangential rhythmic paratactic elaborations on whatever is the subject at hand, achieving a collective rhythmic syncopation. As remarked

in analyzing the title sequence montage, it too is syncopated with this rhythm. That syncopation achieves the effect of the camera visualizations being in conversation with Joe, and through him, the community at large; in conversation as another of the interlocutions in response and tangent, and not as a superimposed resolving narrative commentary. This is established in the film's very first scene of interaction, when two enterprising young boys, who are looking for work washing cars, come up to Joe standing on the corner outside his shop in his role as advisor to the neighborhood youth. One of the boys looks directly into the camera and asks: "That's a video recorder?" To which Joe replies: "Yah, he's doin' a documentary on me." The boy then says: "On you? What you bout to do?" And Joe's says: "What I'm bout to do? The same things I been doin' for years, helping in my community." And that response, "helping in my community," is the through-line and definitive expression of inclusion of *America Street*.

This syncopation of verbal and cinematic rhythms, of word and image, is more than merely an artifact of editing. It is the expression of what Mora-Kpai refers to as his creative sensibility, according to which filmmaking is a way of being socially engaged in the world. And that engagement is very much a matter of formal composition. That is to say, Mora-Kpai's film *shows* us the day to day living of America Street—as opposed to the far too standard documentary form of *telling* a story through sequences of visualization with a superimposed off-camera narrative commentary explaining and clarifying the significance of what is being shown. His cinematography is an interactive interlocution in the moving rhythm of the world it represents. Here is the art of Mora-Kpai's documentary filmmaking. We encounter this syncopation across his oeuvre; for instance, in his powerfully personal 2002 film, *Si-Gueriki, la Reine-mère*, in which he explores, on his father's passing, the patriarchal system of his people, the Wassangari, through the challenging perspective of his mother. It is also at play in his highly celebrated 2005 documentary, *Arlit, deuxième Paris*, in which the farewell visit of Issa back to Arlit, Niger, where he had worked in the French owned and operated COMINAK uranium mines is the perspective through which the devastating socio-political and economic consequences of neocolonialism is presented through the words of Arlit's inhabitants reflecting on their dreams and frustration. So too, we find it in his 2011 work, *Indochine, sur les traces d'une mère*, which taking as its protagonist Christophe—one of the orphaned Afro-Vietnamese children resulting from the numerous relationships between Vietnamese women and the 60,000 African soldiers sent to Indochina between 1946 and 1954 to fight against the Viet Minh—presents the story of these orphans in their own words, exhibiting the complex and complicated relationship between colonized Africans and Vietnamese during the mid-twentieth-century wars for national independence. In each of these documentary films, cinematic montage is syncopated with not just the rhythms of speaking, but also those of living, of interaction, of moving through space. Mora-Kpai's documentary films are composed of confluent lines, the momentary conjunctions of which are punctuations reprised in a perpetual movement. In contemporary hip-hop discourse, we call this *flow*. Léopold Senghor called it, *rhythm* and *rhythmic attitude*. The invocation of Senghor is not merely opportunistic. Without sharing the philosopher of Negritude's biological-ethnography of Negro-African art, Mora-Kpai does share the ambition to articulate an aesthetic form adequate to the modern African experience as part of the overall human condition. In this, he joins the ranks of many outstanding African film makers, such as Ousmane Sembene, Alain Gomis, Gaston Kaboré, Abderrahmane Sissako, Mahamat-

Saleh Harounand, Haile Gerima, and Fanta Régina. Mora-Kpai's distinctive contribution to this body of work is in how he approaches his subject with what he expressly refers to as post-colonial African and migrant sensibilities. *America Street* is his first endeavor to bring those sensibilities and his experiment in aesthetic form into an engagement with the descendants of Africans enslaved in America.

Mora-Kpai is not the first African-born immigrant filmmaker to engage in cinematographic experiment with American themes. He is preceded in this by Haile Gerima—who was one of two African-born filmmakers studying at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television in the 1970s, and along with Charles Burnett, Jama Fanaka, and Julie Dash, was part of the movement known as the “Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers,” also referred to as the LA Rebellion. Gerima's oeuvre has been pronouncedly focused on the Black American struggle against racism, starting with his student first and second projects of 1972: *Hour Glass*, which visualizes through montage the process of coming to Black consciousness in America during the late 1960s early 1970s; and *Child of Resistance*, which explores the aspirations of a woman who has been imprisoned because of her struggle for social justice for Black people. This same focus on the American struggle for social justice carries over into his full-length dramas—most notably, his 1976 thesis film, *Bush Mama*, and his 1982, *Ashes and Embers*, both of which explore the travails of Black urban life through the perspective of Black Vietnam War era veterans while interrogating the then emergent ideology of Black nationalism; as well as his renowned 1993 work, *Sankofa*, which is centered on the Atlantic slave trade. Gerima has also made two documentary films: the 1978 *Wilmington 10 — U.S.A. 10,000*, about the nine men and one woman wrongfully convicted or arson and conspiracy in 1971 in Wilmington, North Carolina; and the 1985 documentary about the famous poet, Sterling Brown, *After Winter: Sterling Brown*. Yet, whereas Gerima's films, both dramas and documentaries exhibit deep familiarity with American sensibilities, reflecting his formation in the LA Rebellion, Mora-Kpai does indeed bring post-colonial African and migrant sensibilities to *America Street*, giving it an aspect of discovering the resonances between Black American and African rhythms, a discovery that imbues the documentary with its energy. And that formal energy is an element in the drama of *America Street*. It is the confluence of form and theme. We must not lose sight of the fact that Mora-Kpai filmed this documentary alone, without any crew; just him and his Sony Ex1 camcorder. This achieved a high degree of intimacy between him and his subject. At times, it becomes quite clear that his presence was so integrated into the daily rhythms of the community they take him to be part of it, sometimes disregarding his camera, and other times speaking directly into it; all unprompted.

The significance of *America Street* as the title of Mora-Kpai's documentary cannot be overstated. In the 1960s, when Hempstead Village became predominately Black, those Charlestonians fleeing to the suburbs started referring to it as the Eastside of downtown, or simply the Eastside. Throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the Eastside was thought of as that part of town rife with urban decay, poverty, and drug-trafficking with its attendant violent crime and high murder rate. The epicenter was America Street, where along the corridor between Reis and South streets, just one block south of the corner where Mary's Sweet Shop stood, the East Side Posse, Romney Street Killer, and B-Mob gangs ran an open-air drug market in heroin and cocaine. By the time Mora-Kpai started filming in 2015, the area was in the grips of a real estate revival—that is to say, the sort of urban

developer-driven gentrification involving displacement of the Black residents. Along with that gentrification, Charleston's police, starting in 2009, launched a sustained campaign against the most violent drug-trafficking gangs, arresting dozens of key gang members, who were successfully prosecuted in court and given lengthy federal prison sentences. The sweeping nature of the police campaign resulted, however, in the general criminalization of the neighborhood's young men, whether or not they were involved in drug-trafficking. The same year Mora-Kpai was filming, another, local filmmaker, Travis Pearson, released a feature-length drama, also entitled *America Street*, which, through its protagonist, Buck, depicts the struggles of young Eastside Black men getting out of prison, trying to do the right thing. Inspired by Charlie Chaplin's 1921 film, *The Kid*, and John Cassavetes' *cinéma vérité* style, Pearson's drama makes use of *America Street*, along with Gullah Geechee culture as local color and context. Mora-Kpai's *America Street* does something else altogether. By picking Joe Watson as his film's protagonist, and following those three months of his daily living in 2015, rather than depicting the Eastside and *America Street* as a crime ridden dangerous place where Black people reside, Mora-Kpai shows it to be a space of dynamic relations, whereby the remains of a community are striving to live vibrant lives as they contend with all the various forces aligned against them, from the poverty imposed on them through systemic economic discrimination, sustained by segregated unequal schools that assure Black students will not have the requisite education to thrive in the new high-tech service economy—the same segregation that fuels the crime as young Black men are left with few opportunities for financial success other than the underground economy of drug-trafficking—to the forces of gentrification that merely recalibrate the systemic structures of discrimination and segregation.

Mora-Kpai's *America Street* is the story of a contemporary Black community's consciousness in action; a consciousness consisting of a complex critical engagement with capitalism, on the one hand embracing and striving for full inclusion in the market's economic development as recognized stakeholders, and on the other, rallying against predatory capitalism with its mentality that Joe characterizes as, "the 'blue blood mentality . . . that thinks: 'As long as we can keep people down, keep poor people down, then we're doing well. As long as I can close my door and have all the comforts of life that's what I want.'" This community consciousness is exhibited in the film's myriad scenes of interaction, such as the one where Joe helps a woman from the neighborhood in arguing with a customer service representative of a box store over the phone about them having sold her a malfunctioning washing machine; an argument in which she and Joe breakdown for the representative the laws of consumer rights and the culpability of vendors. The astuteness of her and Joe's knowledge of how the system works is on display in their casual strategizing on how and when they will file formal complaint and charges with the appropriate authorities to ensure that her machine is repaired; an outcome they are certain of. This same understanding of the system is displayed in the numerous scenes of Joe, in his capacity as a board member of the Eastside Community Development Corporation (ECDC), in meetings where he argues the need to invest more resources in upgrading the neighborhood schools, and his participation in recruiting neighborhood youth for the tuition free Trident College polytechnical training that ECDC facilitated, which, along the same lines as the Urban Leagues job programs of the 1960s and 70s, aims at enabling the area youth to successfully participate in the new employment—from

Boeing Aircraft to IT firms—accompanying gentrification. In other words, we see that the strategies for achieving social justice honed during the civil rights movement are still very much at play in local community activism.

Mora-Kpai's *America Street* brings us inside this activism. We see how the community attends to Walter Scott's killing. While mourning the senseless killing of another young Black man by the police—of whom Joe says, referring to Walter Scott's killing as an execution: "It's like, now they've risen to a level where they can be the deadly force, and it's accepted"—what he and his neighbors home-in on is the legitimate reason, in their view, Scott had to run. We learn this in a rather poignant sequence that begins with a scene of one of Joe's neighborhood customers mentioning to him an upcoming gathering for Walter Scott, and him saying to her that Scott didn't deserve to die over child support. "Okay, they talkin' about child support," she says. "He ain't the first one that owed child support and he ain't goin be the last one to owe child support. So, that mean give up my life because I owe some child support. That's crazy." This prompts Joe into an analysis of the system, marking its antiquity by recounting how in the 60s, after the court locked up his father twice for child support, his mother went down and told them to leave him alone. As we cut to a long shot of a young father holding the store's grated screen door open for his two small boys as they exit with their scooters, and head up Amherst, Joe, then, tells his own story of being summoned by the court for missing two months of support. The lapse resulted from his employer miscalculating the court-ordered withholding so that he had been paying double what the court ordered for 18 months. He took the company accountant with him to court, who testified to those facts. As we cut to a medium closeup of three Black men gathered in front of the house next to Joe's store, he recounts what the judge said in response to the accountant's testimony: "'I understand. It was a simple mistake.' And then he turned to me and say: 'If you don't make those two months payment you goin' to jail.'" In an extreme close up of Joe looking into the camera, he says: "What did I do to go to jail?" Only thing is he saw my color and he wanted to punish me *for* it." Cutting to a long shot of three elder Black men standing in a doorway two houses down from Joe's store, we hear him continue: "So, I paid the two months payment, which they knew was wrong, but the court system was goin' to do wrong regardless, just to make sure that they made me suffer." What Joe says next is punctuated by another cut to a medium shot of the corner from within the store, framed by its grated screen door, in which a Black man with a cane is walking eastbound up Amherst, and a white uniformed police officer is crossing the intersection heading south on America: "That's South Carolina, that's the South, and that's the hatred for Black people. I'd rather be Black than to be white and to carry so much hatred. I'd rather be me and poor than to be a judge and I have to destroy someone's life. *Those* things way heavy on me. But the thing is, for all they took me through, *I win*. I win because I got my son who lived with me when he was thirteen. I raised him as a man. I *required* certain things of him. He applied hisself, and he has a good job. And he's getting married. And his goin' have a successful family. Because my plan for him, from the day he born was that he would be more educated than I was. That, I win. Through all the things the court system take me through *I win*. And *that* matters." Underscoring Joe's pronouncement of the endurance of family relations in the face of overwhelming systemic injustice, the closing scene in this sequence is a mother and her four small children playing with bicycles right across the street from Joe's store.

The syncopated rhythm of the montage and Joe's speech is at work here giving this sequence its poignancy, so that, rather than shifting the narrative focus to the spectacle of Scott's killing and the media sensationalizing of it, Mora-Kpai's *America Street* stays with the consciousness of its people. What that achieves is a seamless movement into the Scott affair. Still in the scene of mother and children playing, we hear the voice over of Black Lives Matter activist, Muhiyidin d'Baha, née Moye, whom we've already encountered in an earlier montage sequence of various scenes of protest around Scott's killing. Included in this sequence is the YWCA Requiem on Racism meeting held at Emanuel AME Church, in which the camera having followed Joe there and focused on him, in a pan of the room, shifts focus to Muhiyidin. At that shift, we cut to a montage of shots of him interacting with fellow activists at the Carolina Kutz Barber Shop, syncopated with his discussing the details of the inconsistencies in the initial report of Scott's killing and the subsequently released video. The closing scene in that sequence is an extremely tight close up of Muhiyidin sitting on a salon hair dryer with its hood raised looking into the camera and reflecting on the relation of word and image to truth, on the way the video confirms the truth of what Blacks have been saying about police violence.

In the later sequence in which we have the scene of mother and children playing with Muhiyidin's voice over, we hear him saying: "With Walter Scott's case, he had a nonviolent bench warrant." We then cut back the earlier scene with Muhiyidin sitting in the salon hair dryer. This time the shot is a medium closeup so that we see the raised hood surrounding his head like a halo—an eerie image given his being shot to death in New Orleans three years after this filming on February 6, 2018—and speaking into the camera, he reiterates nearly verbatim all of what Joe has just told us about why Scott ran, emphasizing the injustice of the law he was running from, which stipulates if you do not have the means to pay your child support then you must fear incarceration. Both Joe and Muhiyidin point out the absurdity—"contradiction" Muhiyidin calls it—of the situation. Having sufficient financial resources to afford the child support required by the courts is precisely what young Black men in Charleston are prevented from having through systemic discrimination, so they are effectively being incarcerated for being poor, but also for daring to sire children while being poor. This is Joe's point about the law's enforcement being driven by hatred for Black people.

The film's subsequent sequence on gentrification shows the extent to which that hatred also seems to be at play there. We jump from Joe's recounting the Baptist congregation that had its building bought out from under it by a developer, to the locally well-known activist, Jerome Small's critical analysis of the way Charleston went from sixty-seven percent Black at the start Joseph P. Riley's first term as mayor in 1975 to thirty-three percent by the end of his tenth term in 2015, and then to the Community Meeting on Urban Planning and Gentrification Joe attends, where the gulf between the developer's and the community's respective understanding of "diversity" could not be made plainer. All of which Joe sums it up for us nicely when he recounts his own story of a developer wanting to buy his store with cash out right, and being befuddled by Joe's response: "'It's more that I have that I want to give *to* the people in this community than getting dollars in my hand.' I say, 'there's a greater value in *that*, than wantin' money in my hand' The enjoyment of life and the value of life have very little to do with a building, a structure. It's the people that's in this world with you at that time, how you *treat* them how you *help* them how you *encourage*. That's success. And that person can

come back some years later and either tell you about it, or they pass it on to someone else.” Joe then spells out the nature of the conflict between these two systems of value: “you got people in America who’ve decided that, well, we’d rather see America *fail* as a country than for us to be fair with the Black peoples here. Aright. That’s the bottom line. They’d don’t want to be fair, and they’d rather see the country dissolve than that. But it’s gotta be us sayin, no! What we want to do will be inclusive, and we can show how it’s goin’ to help *every* segment of the community.”

Again, working syncopated montage punctuating Joe’s words, the film cuts to a close up of him sitting in a pew, listening to a deep male voice intoning: “Thank you for joining us here. We hope this program will help each of us . . .” Here, we cut to a medium shot of the man to whom this voice belongs standing at a pulpit, flanked on his left by a communion chalice, and to his right an American flag. As he continues to speak with a look of serenity and conviction, he is identified by a superimposed white text emerging at the bottom of the shot as Pastor and State Senator, Clementa C. Pinckney, saying in well-measured tones: “. . . to look deeply into our own hearts and minds and to inspire us to root out any forms of bias and bigotry in our own lives and that in our own family friends, and, of course, in the wider society at large.” With Pastor Pinckney’s voice in prayer, recalling that the name, Emanuel, derives from a Hebrew word meaning “God is with us,” we have a sequence of three medium long shots of the white church building, the third of which has superimposed in white letters, Emanuel AME Church., letting us know where we are. These words fade away just as Pastor Pinckney is heard saying, “And so we invite you and welcome you into this place . . .” They are replaced by the following statement, also in white letters: “On June 17, 2015, an armed white supremacist entered the Emanuel Church. He massacred nine church members . . . including Pastor Pinckney.” This is followed in sequence by a closeup shot of a black and white newspaper photo of Pastor Pinckney, then one in color of him and two other victims of the June 17 massacre—DePayne Middleton Doctor and Tywanza Sanders—then one of colored photos of all nine victims, adding to the list Cynthia Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Daniel Simmons Sr., Sharonda Singleton, and Myra Thompson. Further reflecting on the victims of the hatred Joe spoke of, the next scene is a medium closeup of Muhiyidin standing on the stairs of Emanuel Church waiting for an elderly woman, whom he escorts holding hands in front of the church as we read in the lower right of the shot, again in white: “On February 6, 2018 Muhiyidin was shot and killed in New Orleans.”

This cannot be the last word, or the last image of *America Street*, however. Those belong to Joe Watson, who we see in a closing montage sequence beginning with a long shot on some other, overcast Sunday afternoon of him dressed in his Sunday best, Bible in hand as he leaves his own church, Ebenezer AME, crosses between two houses from Nassau over to Amherst, which he walks down back to his shop. We cut to a medium closeup of him standing in front of the shop. He is now in his red windbreaker, watching the street, conversing with his neighbors, as he usually does.. We then cut to an extreme closeup of what appears to be the JD Douglas *New Bible Dictionary*, opened to the entry for Pekah, where Joe has placed a yellow Post-it Note filled with his annotation. His index finger is on that note pointing out its words: “He says right there, you distinctive. So, you can be better than just the average one out there. . . .” He is speaking to some young man, whose hand is in the shot next to Joe’s, and whom we hear responding, “Uhm,” to his continued explanation: “. . . Different . . .” Here, we pan up to a medium 2 shot of Joe

looking intensely at a younger Black man who, in turn, is looking intensely at the page and note being explained to him: “Special. *Particular*. So, I mean you do just choose everything everybody else do. You choose what is good what is gonna be. You refine your thoughts on what you gonna do. Art, curious. We you get and apply yourself to wanna learn, you got to be curious enough to go beyond they . . . expectations. Eccentric . . .” At this point, the rest of Joe’s Bible-study lesson is muted and we hear the voice over of this young man explaining his personal history with Joe, how when he was running wild and mischievous on the Eastside, Joe was “the older homeboy, the older male inside the community who always tried to lead us in the right direction.” The camera zooms out to a fuller shot of him and Joe as he continues, now speaking directly to Mora-Kpai’s camera: “During the time he was sayin it, I didn’t listen to him cause I knew everything. But I see what he was saying years ago; he was right. So, I felt that it was in my heart to come let him know.” Those words are in fulfillment of Joe’s earlier pronouncement that the measure of the success of his endeavor is when a person he has extended love and encouragement to comes back years later to either tell him about it or pass it on to others. We cut to a closeup 2 shot in which Joe reiterates his continuing care and encouragement for the young man wherever he goes, and they embrace expressing their mutual love for each other.

The last scene in the film is a full long shot of Joe’s corner store looking in from the street through the grated heavy screen door. It’s dusk, and we see Joe standing at his counter reading his Bible as the light from Mary’s Sweet Shop shines out on to the street. The last words are also his in a voiceover referring to the encounter we just witnessed: “That’s worth the millions, that worth the life journey . . .” We cut to a medium long shot focused on Joe turning the pages of the Bible as we hear his voice continue: “. . . that worth the struggle. To know that . . . yah, you didn’t know what you say was gonna stick with em, but it stick with em, and they come back and *tell* you. That’s why you come, and you get up and you open that door early in the morning and you stay late at night so you can help them, aright, help them. That you know, nah, it don’t matter what *they* think about me, cause what I know *he* thinks about me that matters.” Here, we cut to the final image in the film, which is also a full long shot from the street of Mary’s Sweet Shop with its open door. It is twilight now, and the shot is pulled back a bit so we see the full corner and the way the light of the shop’s door illuminates the intersection of America Street and Amherst like a beacon. Joe comes to the screen door, locks it, turns out the light and closes the inner door as the screen fades to black.

Idrissou Mora-Kpai has given us an exquisite film with *America Street*. The art of the film is in its syncopated rhythm and imbrication of form and theme, which is remarkably *African-American*. The hyphen here signals the confluence of the rhythms to which Mora-Kpai conceives himself to have been born, as well as formed by, and those of Hempstead Village, with which he has come to critically interact through filming. Through filming three months in the daily life of Joe Watson in 2015, against the backdrop of long-standing structural racism and more recent racist violence, from the killing of Walter Scott by a police officer to the Emanuel Church massacre by a young white supremacist, Mora-Kpai has given expression to an aesthetic form, a rhythmic attitude that by playing on resonances between his postcolonial African migrant sensibilities and those of the Blacks in Charleston’s Eastside allows for new perspectives of what and how we are.

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