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From Gun Man to God Man: *Cheating Death*

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***Cheating Death*. Written and directed by Eric Geringas. Montreal, PQ: National Film Board of Canada, 2005. 25 minutes.**

The topic of guns, gangs, Black youth and violence has become an increasingly urgent matter in Canadian cities such as Toronto over the last decade. Negative media portrayals of so-called "at-risk" communities, which tend to be heavily populated by Caribbean, African, South Asian and Latino families, persist, while the members of these communities recount incidences of overpolicing, police harassment, and racial profiling. Debates rage in the media over the pros and cons of publicly funded Black-focused schools, while the murder rate of young Black males in the city continues to climb. In the midst of this comes Eric Geringas' 2005 documentary on Gyasi Ferdinand, former crack dealer, former gun man, who meets death twice on the operating table following an assassination attempt, and who in return gives his life to God. Although this is a provocative and insightful tale of one young man, (dubbed a "character study" by the National Film Board of Canada)

Gyasi's tale is only one snapshot among the thousands of boys/men who are "cheating death"—or not—every waking minute. Geringas' film leaves one with more questions than answers, particularly at a time when, for many in Toronto's Black and Caribbean communities, things have reached a crisis point.

The story opens with Gyasi's voiceover querying "what does it mean to be born again?" The reference here is not only to the young man's somewhat miraculous recovery from near-fatal injuries, but also to being "born again" in the Christian fundamentalist sense. Immediately, Geringas sets up a dichotomy between good/evil, Christianity versus street life, salvation versus damnation. From the time Gyasi's own mother and the "church sisters" begin to pray at his hospital bedside, the young man experiences an epiphany, the spiritual visitation which transforms his life. Throughout the film, Gyasi clearly delineates the differences between who he is now (Gyasi) and who he was in his life as a street hustler ("J-9"). Reflecting on his former life, Gyasi says "J-9 has to die cause J-9 want to be on the streets, looking for women, drinking, smoking." In this sense, *Cheating Death* is clearly a tale of rebirth, a literal shedding of one's former identity to be "born again" into a new way of life. It does, however, also position fundamentalist Christianity as a "safe haven" from the storm, without an analysis of some of the drawbacks of fundamentalism irrespective of its guise.

The strengths of *Cheating Death* are that it gives the audience a glimpse into the lives of innumerable young Black men in the Caribbean diaspora. An example of this is Gyasi's experience of being "child-shifted." A common pattern among many Caribbean youth is that they are born in the region but grow up without their parents, who migrate to North America in search of better job opportunities and education. Raised by Caribbean extended family, these children are usually reunited years later in the diaspora with what is often a re-structured, blended family (new stepparent and stepsiblings, for example). Such realities are extremely common in Caribbean transnational communities such as those in Toronto. The process of reunification is often traumatic and can be extremely damaging to the child in terms of educational performance, socialization and mental health (Williams 2000). In the film, we see Gyasi looking over a shoebox of photographs from his childhood days in Trinidad; these images are so painful for him that he rarely views them (he refers to his childhood self in the photos as "innocent me"). Clearly, remembering his days in the Caribbean evokes feelings of safety and security now lost forever, a time when he was surrounded by extended family, friends and community, important foundations in his life that he was forced to surrender at a vulnerable age. Gyasi's destiny was to come to Canada to live with his mother in a white suburb of Toronto,

where he was culturally dislocated from his homeland and his people, and forced into a new society that was both foreign and unwelcoming to Black people in general. As is often the case in a sole-support family, the mother must work long hours or more than one job to provide for her family, provisions which may include, as in Gyasi's case, the suburban house in the white (read "safe") neighbourhood. All the above are significant factors that may then affect the choices made by young Black males such as Gyasi and his friends. Geringas barely touches on these elements of Gyasi's life (his migration, reunification with family, subsequent experiences of racism and feelings of isolation in Canada); they are barely mentioned or not at all. The documentary lacks a historical or sociological context, which is unfortunate. There are many contributing factors to Gyasi's reality that need to be addressed in a more in-depth way. However, Geringas' video can act as a springboard for deeper discussions of issues such as childshifting, the feminization of poverty (particularly among racialized immigrant women), cultural alienation, migration and racism.

What does Gyasi turn to in his very impressionable adolescent years? Like so many others, he is lured into the world of drug dealing and "bling," a flashy lifestyle, easy money, guns, and a live-fast-die-young mentality. We hear in Gyasi's narrative the choices he made and a description of his former lifestyle ("you could make \$1200 - \$2000 a night dealing"), but Geringas leaves us with many unanswered questions. Why is this the path so many young men (particularly racialized ones) choose? What role did family structure, the school system, experiences with teachers/police/the society at large play here? To simply put a story such as Gyasi's out there as a moral tale (bad boy turned good) is to simplify what are really much deeper and more critical concerns affecting thousands of racialized youth in the diaspora. That Gyasi has apparently found redemption and stability in the Christian church may be an answer for some, but is it really *the* answer? There is something naive and simplistic about the way Geringas sets this premise up. At the same time, we see that Gyasi is also struggling with his new role as church pastor and youth educator. He admits that there are times when he is still tempted by "fleshy" things (i.e. his old life style). One moment in the film focuses on Gyasi revealing his deeply-scarred stomach to a classroom of primary schoolchildren; as they "eew!" and "aah!" he bluntly states: "You see what you have to do when you don't get an education?" An interesting point, but one that, again, is not to be followed up by Geringas.

The problematic with *Cheating Death* is that a story such as Gyasi's taken out of historical and sociological context could potentially do more harm than good. For example, one might assume that the church is really the only other option besides the streets for uneducated young Black

and Caribbean people. If this is so, it can positively reflect a legacy from slavery days in which the church served innumerable roles: community center, school, daycare, political cell. But the church has also played a role in maintaining the status quo of oppression and subservience for colonized peoples around the globe, particularly fundamentalist and evangelical sects which preach subservience to authority, rewards after death, rigid gender roles and an at-times fanatical devotion to the war against Evil. Fundamentalism does not encourage critical thought. Gyasi's new role in the church may be keeping him off the streets for the time being; he is also ministering to youth and doing community work, but can fundamentalism address the many complex issues faced by Black and Caribbean people in the diaspora such as a historical legacy of slavery/indentureship/brutality, the process of migration and resettlement, racism, alienation, lack of support systems, poverty, neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism? Fundamentalism, like Geringas' documentary, seems to provide easy simplistic answers, but reality is much more complex. One wonders had a documentary been produced by insiders from these same marginalized communities (i.e. Black youth), would different issues have been raised/addressed? That *Cheating Death* is produced by an outsider to the community it focuses on raises the old issue of who tells whose story, that is, when, how and where people will be able to tell their own stories in film and video rather than leave it to outsiders to define visual representations of Black and Caribbean communities. *Cheating Death* was co-produced and distributed by the National Film Board of Canada, a publicly-funded institution, which raises further issues regarding representation and access to media for marginalized communities in Canada. Although it may be significant that a story such as Gyasi's is documented and distributed, it is also significant that Black and Caribbean people, particularly youth, are still struggling for voice, equality and a chance to tell their stories from their own perspectives and experiences.

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