

FILM REVIEW:

*EARTH MAMA*¹

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Leaf, Savannah, director. *Earth Mama*. A24, 2023

Savanah Leaf's 2023 social drama film *Earth Mama* presents the tender and raw story of Gia (Tia Nomore), a young Black woman fighting to regain custody of her two children from the foster care system while also handling the physical and emotional hardships of being pregnant with a third. Produced by A24 and based on the documentary short *The Heart Still Hums*, with Taylor Russel, Leaf's directorial debut paints a gracious and touching portrait of motherhood framed by addiction and a lack of privilege.

Set in Oakland, California, the city is used as a backdrop to examine how the Black community navigates the hardships of the US's systemic challenges. The film's setting is not neutral but deliberately chosen. Oakland's deeply interwoven history with its Black population reflects the enduring socio-cultural struggles that have shaped their collective experience. Leaf presents Oakland as a realistic yet harsh backdrop, one in which the spectator can feel not only the day-to-day struggles of its female citizens, but also the strong sense of solidarity and sisterhood that binds the protagonists within their neighbourhoods.

Male characters play a minimal role in the film. Within the few scenes where Gia's male neighbours appear, we see them engaging in cat-calling and delivering rather offensive comments towards the female characters. Leaf therefore intentionally centres

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the film exclusively around the female experience of oppression, making it a deliberately female-led film in its storytelling, casting, direction, and overall vision. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains how “in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their socio-cultural fabric and heritage . . . gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity” (254). Gia’s lived experiences cannot be fully understood without combining her gender and racial identity. During a pivotal scene, Gia’s friend Trina – played by rapper Doechii – voices these struggles, declaring that “there is a lot of people expecting [them] to fail. [Her] whole life, [she’s] had [things] taken away from [her]. . . . They tried to take[their] culture, . . . [their] homes, . . . [their] freedom” (36:49 – 37:02). Trina’s statement perfectly encapsulates how systemic injustices impact the protagonists, highlighting their own personal struggles but simultaneously condemning the socio-political structures which actively seek to perpetuate segregationist practices against the Black community, focusing in this case on Black motherhood. Moreover, using the pronoun “they” deliberately points to the (white) dominant institutions and elites that have historically hoarded power and reinforced the cultural erasure of the other. Thus, Leaf aims to expose Gia’s personal story amid a wider landscape of institutional oppression towards Black motherhood.

While Trina’s words expose the collective issues brought by systemic oppression, Leaf specifically focuses on Gia’s private life, where her struggles are translated into emotional detachment. The different settings and spaces which Gia inhabits – such as the support programs or her workplace, even her home – are depicted as extremely individualistic and isolating for her. Gia’s eagerness towards her self-isolation is palpable throughout the film, even when she is accompanied by people of her own community. Despite being surrounded by women who are facing similar challenges, Gia always abstains from opening up and maintains an acute emotional distance from everyone, believing that she must rely solely on her own strength to get through. Leaf places the viewer exclusively within Gia’s internal emotional world, emphasizing that, regardless of external support, her story of motherhood and the challenges that surround it belong exclusively to her. Furthermore, Gia’s personal job at a photography studio creates a situation which strikingly contrasts with her reality. Often having to work with kids, couples, and families who celebrate their bond and togetherness, our protagonist faces the challenge of dealing with her loneliness and desire to piece her own family back together.

Leaf's film almost feels documentary-like, marked by extended and lingering takes, intimate close-ups and testimonial scenes with different characters. These different elements work together in order to reel the viewer into the character's emotional psyche. At the same time, the purposeful and restrained sound ambiance contributes to deepening a sense of intimacy with the storyline, creating a paradoxical sensation of both stillness and turmoil coexisting in the same space, allowing the spectator to really focus on Gia's emotional obstacles. Much of the film's message is communicated through its silences, rather than through what is explicitly shown to the audience. It is precisely the film's atmosphere of serenity and confinement that makes *Earth Mama* a quiet form of protest, almost evoking a "continuous thread of anxiety" (Bradshaw).

Building upon this choice of visceral portrayal, the film profoundly explores conflicting issues of parenting among the Black American community. Having previously lost custody of her two children to CPS and also battling addiction, Gia confronts not only an oppressive system which affects her community but also her own internal battles. Despite this, her deep love for her children motivates her to persist amidst her struggles. Gia's emotional withdrawal could also be read through the lens of Black girlhood, where expressions of vulnerability are often discouraged, and survival or social acceptance demand a harder exterior. The film omits any depiction of Gia's family life, thus offering little sense of domestic support and therefore protection that might have otherwise allowed a space for vulnerability. Coupled with her young age and her precarious socio-economic position – including financial instability and overall low-income conditions – this multiplicity of contexts suggests that her struggles are interlinked with an accelerated coming of age. Moulded by racialised poverty and structural neglect, Gia is prematurely forced into maturity, taking away her girlhood and thus laying a vulnerable foundation for her womanhood. In *Earth Mama*, the boundaries between girl and mother are intentionally blurred. Gia's premature responsibilities force her into a caregiver position in which her own girlhood is denied.

Yet, amid this pattern of pressures and burdens that deprive her of her girlhood, nature emerges as a rare space where Gia can experience vulnerability. There is a recurring motive that Leaf introduces throughout the film, closely linked to its title. Nature seems to be a constant in Gia's life: she daydreams of it, watches documentaries about it, even presenting certain scenes where she is positioned against a forest-like background at work. Some pivotal and emotional moments in Gia's storyline seem to

occur and be connected to nature: When she meets the potential family who will be adopting her unborn child, the meetup takes place in a diner near a forest. Moreover, while Gia remains emotionally guarded in her support programs, she grows to be vulnerable when taking a walk along a lake with a friend.

Within this film, nature is used as a reflection of Gia's longing for freedom and peace, set against the background of her own personal struggles and challenges. Her connection to natural spaces grants her what has been denied to her as a girl: moments of vulnerability and calmness. Moreover, Gia's pregnancy closely parallels nature itself. Just as nature generates and modifies life, Gia carries within her a potential for creation and change, whatever its destiny ends up being. Her own body, just like nature, has become a temple of creation. Leaf then presents pregnancy not only as an individual experience, but also as a communal one which binds all pregnant individuals together under the same bond of creation and, consequently, with nature as a whole. The title *Earth Mama* thus reflects how Leaf's film presents Gia not only as a Black girl facing the struggles imposed by a socio-political system, but also as the human embodiment of the earth's creational and healing power.

Ultimately, *Earth Mama* shows how Savanah Leaf is able to transform social critique into a deeply personal and intimate picture. Even when only focusing on a single woman's story, she sheds light on the collective struggles of many Black girls, stressing the ways in which girlhood can be restricted and adulthood hastened. Leaf approaches this with extreme empathy and tenderness. By using this approach, Leaf positions her own voice within the cinematic panorama, gifting us a deeply human and visceral yet dignified vision of Black girlhood and motherhood.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Marina Vega González is a PhD candidate in English Studies. She holds a BA in English Studies and an MA in Advanced English Studies. Her research centres on Black feminism, intersectionality, Black literature and history, and slavery studies.

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