

# **Mnemonic Aberrations: Black Feminism and the Counter-Poetics of Rhythm in Experimental Short Film and Video (1968-1998)**

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## Abstract

*Mnemonic Aberrations* both analyzes and narrates the history of the emergence, production, and distribution of Black feminist experimental film and video across the United States and the United Kingdom from 1968-1998. I construct my analytical approaches to reading film through the underexamined film scholarship of Afro-Jamaican Philosopher, Sylvia Wynter.

Mnemonic aberrations names the specific type of memory work these film and video works produce in their centering of Black womanhood as a fugitive to colonial temporality. Black feminist experimental film and video do not merely portray memory but rather strategically make and deploy it, bringing into our present being the temporal past of Black reinvented lives. The turn to experimentation in film and video, then, is expansively mobilized by these film and video makers for all the ways in which film generates affect and can disrupt our cognitive schema. Due to these patterns of experimental and cultural approach to film and video making, I employ a counter-poetics of rhythm as an ethic-aesthetic practice seen across this body of work.

A counter-poetics of rhythm is how Black feminist experimental film and video uses the cultural memory of alterity, understood here to be rhythm, as a way to open audiences up to a more heterogeneous engagement with time through film and video. Cultural memory of alterity describes the repeated use and interest of Black Southern and Caribbean folkloric spirituality, described in my study as conjure culture, that emerges in contemporary Black cultural production. I argue that these cultural practices of alterity and their memories are strategically enforced to challenge our normative consciousness and memory of coloniality, constituting a mnemonic aberration in the process. These film and video works aim to move audiences away from a value-system of time to a more human and life affirming practice of living time overall. The effect of this re-coding of time to a life process aids in the ongoing emancipation of Black womanhood from coloniality.

## En Français

Le concept des *Aberrations Mnémoniques* (*Mnemonic Aberrations*) analyse et raconte à la fois l'histoire de l'émergence, de la production et de la distribution de films et de vidéos expérimentaux féministes Noires aux États-Unis et au Royaume-Uni de 1968 à 1998. Je construis mon approche analytique de la lecture du film à travers la savior de cinéma de la philosophe Afro-Jamaïquaine Sylvia Wynter qui est sous-examinée.

Les aberrations mnémotechniques nomment le type spécifique de travail de mémoire que ces œuvres cinématographiques et vidéo produisent dans leur centrage sur la femme noire en tant que fugitive vers la temporalité coloniale. Les films et vidéos expérimentaux féministes Noires ne dépeignent pas simplement la mémoire, mais la créent et la déploient de manière stratégique, apportant dans notre être présent le passé temporel des vies réinventées par les Noir.e.s. Le virage vers l'expérimentation dans le cinéma et la vidéo est donc largement mobilisé par ces réalisatrices de films et de vidéos pour toutes les manières dont le film génère de l'affect et peut perturber notre schéma cognitif. En raison de ces modèles d'approche expérimentaux et culturels de la réalisation de films et de vidéos, j'emploie une contre-poétique du rythme comme pratique éthico-esthétique vue à travers ce corpus de travail.

La contre-poésie du rythme, c'est comment le film et la vidéo expérimentale féministe noire utilise la mémoire culturelle de l'altérité, comprise ici comme le rythme, comme un moyen d'ouvrir le public à un engagement plus hétérogène avec le temps à travers le film et la vidéo. La mémoire culturelle de l'altérité décrit l'utilisation répétée et l'intérêt de la spiritualité folklorique des Noires du Sud et des Caraïbes, ou conjure la culture qui émerge dans la production culturelle contemporaine des Noir.e.s. Je soutiens que ces pratiques culturelles d'altérité et leurs souvenirs, comme les rituels spirituels, sont stratégiquement appliqués pour remettre en question notre conscience normative et notre mémoire de la colonialité, constituant une aberration mnémotechnique dans le processus. Ces œuvres cinématographiques et vidéo visent à éloigner le public d'un système de valeurs du temps vers une pratique plus humaine et plus vivante du temps de vie en général. L'effet de ce recodage du temps en processus de vie contribue à l'émancipation continue de la femme Noire de la colonialité.

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## **Declaration**

I hereby certify that this material being submitted for assessment for the completion of a Doctorate in Philosophy is entirely my own research and written scholarship. No work is used without proper citation and acknowledgement within the text of this dissertation.

**Date:** August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020



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## Introduction

Let me begin with a brief film example of embodied remembrance. The character Nana Peazant in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) serves as her family's historian and through ritual performances of cultural memory becomes a living memory to others. Nana "exists outside" of the linearity of time in relation to her offspring. A former enslaved woman, Nana is the grandmother to a new generation of Black life born after the abolition of slavery who convene on Saint Simmons Island in Georgia one last time before many of them depart for the North as part of the Great Migration at the turn of the twentieth century. Nana's efforts to make memory a living history are aberrant and often deemed troubling—antiquated, even—by others. When she engages with a root work ritual, devout Christian, Viola shouts with indignation at the "pointlessness" and "demonic" nature of her grandmother in-law's labor. Viola's condemnation of Nana's root work lies in the disruptive power her labor of memory enacts, a mysterious and affective force that transmits time not as a linear concept, but as a multi-temporal life process. Dash underscores the significance of Nana's ritual through the film's aesthetics, which feature, among other things, fluctuating frame rates and the narration of an unborn child who tells the story of the past.<sup>1</sup> Nana's ritual is an act of communion with the dead, who deserve to be remembered and whose memories provide insight to and agency for the production of our lives. Nana poignantly states to her children, "We carry these memories inside us. They didn't keep good records of slavery. . . We had to hold records in our head." To be a living memory is to embody a place of alterity and heterogeneity, a literal passageway between life and death that aims to affectively restore, and recode, time for others. This aberrant memory work—be it physical or filmic—is what I call a mnemonic aberration.

Mnemonic aberration is a critique of how time is measured and recorded. The mnemonic device becomes a tactic for destabilizing linear or colonial temporalities. Black feminist experimental film is a key aesthetic archive by which we can recognize Black feminism's ability to unmake what we normally consider the quotidian experiences of time's movement. Black feminist experimental film and video utilize Black women's capacity for memory to unsettle the present (or what we consider the present) to recode normative orders of time and rebel against it. It achieves this rebellion through an ethic-aesthetic principle of rhythm, one that draws out time as a life process, which recodes time from our normative colonial structure as a measurement of financial value and labor: time is money.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, this shift, or "aberration," as I will discuss throughout this study, reveals time as the culprit of bodily control. As Denise Ferreira da Silva explains, can Blackness return the necessity of time to the subject, to recall "that the world and its categories thrive in the contingency of existence shared by the subject of whiteness and its racial others" (Da Silva 2014, 89).

I use the word *aberration* to signal difference from a normative temporal order, a disruption or jam in the machine of how things are and how they "should be." Understanding aberration as the return to time as a life process, rather than a power over life, requires freedom from colonial temporality. Colonial Temporality is the source of the market value structure by which we come to recognize and live time. A colonial time is a static one. As philosopher Alia Al-Saji (2016) notes, a "fixed" construction of the past sits firmly within the colonial fabrication of (white) History and bodies. She argues that racialized subjects are framed as possessing "delayed" bodies, ones that are situated to view time and their histories as unchanging pasts where change is only made possible through "progress" or a "building towards a future" for colonial subjects (2016, 1).<sup>3</sup> This conception of time, implemented through the horrors of

colonization, commodified Black life as the “for-profit object” that could facilitate colonial temporality’s movement, its linearity. Against these colonial structures of time, Black feminism has refused time’s petrification and marshaled memory as a living force, as a circuit of time that is embodied and restores time as something lived and embodied to individuals.

In this introduction, I define mnemonic aberrations as an expansive Black feminist critique of time in which a counter-poetics of rhythm becomes its ethic-aesthetic principle. As a Black feminist project, this study employs Black feminist methods to study, gather, analyze, and construct the history of Black feminist experimental film and video art in the United States and the United Kingdom between 1968 and 1998. In order to construct a robust analysis of these films and their histories, my approach to this body of work required the use of materials that are typically not drawn upon within the discipline of film studies. This expanded approach includes turning to Black feminist literary criticism and literature to aid my examination and interpretations of Black feminist film making. This enabled me to construct an analysis that attended to the numerous literary examples and authors present in Black feminist experimental film and video and situate their experimentation as part of a larger genealogical practice of Black narration from the oral tradition. I then survey the available scholarship on Black women’s film and video, produced largely by Black feminists, to outline how my approach to aesthetics draws upon and also differs from other texts on this body of work. Specifically, my own investment in studying these films and videos is to examine what they aesthetically *do* and *make possible*, rather than what they representationally *mean*. By shifting away from certain approaches to representation as that of “picturing” Black women’s lives, I analyze these films’ illocutionary force; that is, the procedures by which they do what they *do* (Wynter 1992a, 267). I then explain

my selection of films, the location and geographic position of this project, and the archival research, film programming and screening work I have developed over the course of the project.

From there, I construct my theoretical approach through a literature review of Sylvia Wynter's scholarship to more fully realize her undertheorized term, the "counter-poetics of rhythm." A counter-poetics of rhythm— first introduced in a passing sentence in her first of two articles on film analysis, "Re-thinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice" (1992a)—describes how aesthetics can affectively imbue a refusal of anti-Blackness in their *doing* rather than their representational meaning. One of the effects of this practice is to free time from its colonial fixity to a more mobile, affective register, where it can be shifted from its commodity value to a life process (Wynter 199).<sup>4</sup> I use the work of Katherine McKittrick and Alanna Thain to flesh out Wynter's proposition of rhythm as a recoding of time. I read time as life process from an affective framework and turn to McKittrick and Thain, who work with time and affect, to further expand on Wynter's concept.

Following my explanation of my theoretical approach, I provide my chapter outlines. The Black feminist politics and cultural production found within these films offer a rich theoretical legacy, and mode of inquiry in film experimentalism, against that of mainstream cinema studies and its conceptions of this field of work. Black cultural production signifies the practice of making culture that collectively speaks to spaces, subjects, and experiences that are racialized as Black. *Mnemonic Aberrations* itself is a form of experimental Black cultural production, one that is entangled with the alterities realized in filmic rituals, specters, and conjure culture. My focus on alterity enables me to attend to aberrant threads of Black feminist experimental film and video that, when marshalled, draw out the temporal dimensions of affect as it is produced and experienced in film. Each of my chapters has been organized to draw out a very specific figure or



concept as a conduit for mnemonic aberration, working against time through specific Black feminist cultural modes of remembrance.

Black feminist thought, historically, presents an ongoing critique of Eurocentrism that produces colonial thought, ownership, and practice as realized in the representational body of *Man*. Black feminist experimental cinema is not exclusive to Black women alone, although—as I will explain—this study has a specific interest in examining work by Black women. Many of the filmmakers included in this study acknowledge the role that Black feminism (or womanism) has played in their lives and filmmaking practices and how their films are often inspired by and are extensions of Black feminism as a practice. To further clarify my interest in Black feminist cinema as a genre, I find Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson’s principles to be a useful tool. She writes that Black feminist cinema does the following:

1. Acknowledges that Black women worldwide share a history of patriarchal oppression;
2. Validates Black women’s experiences as real and significant;
3. Investigates the cultural history of Black women, including the survival techniques Black women employ to resist oppression and (re) formulate concepts of womanself;
4. Acknowledges and respects alternative knowledge systems and the means by which Black women “recall and recollect.” (Gibson-Hudson 1998, 46)

All of the films that I analyze adhere to one, if not several, of the principles listed by Gibson-Hudson, albeit in different ways due to their experimental nature. Black feminist experimental cinema advances the aforementioned claims and propositions by inviting audiences to reorient their relationship to Black womanhood by *feeling* time. This ethical principle of care helps audiences to aesthetically shift their relationship with movement in order to name the origins of

their mythological structures and their kin relations and then free ourselves from that system. Inasmuch as this is a Black queer feminist project, not just for the queer lives that are discussed in my study but also for how queerness opens subjects to heterogenous ways of living, thinking, and relating with others in the world; ways of living that rebel against the stratification or singularity of *Man*. I fold in queer kinship relations into my articulation of Black feminist thought to address how Black feminism is articulated, and expanded, by Black queer women.<sup>5</sup>

Black feminist experimental film also poses a critical pedagogical challenge to what we as scholars, viewers, filmmakers, and critics—myself included—have inherited from Western Europe with regard to our aesthetic definitions of experimental film. Part of this study’s goal is to make more visible how the Black cultural production of alterity, like Nana’s performance of ritual, manifests very diverse and experimental forms, and yet is often denied the appropriate terminology and categorization in mainstream texts and film programs because of its distinctive expression of Black cultural production. I have identified the following filmmakers as the objects of my analyses precisely for the ways they do this work: Madeline Anderson, Camille Billops, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, Martina Attille, Leah Gilliam, Jamika Ajalon, among numerous others.<sup>6</sup>

I find the definition of eccentric proposed by Black cultural studies scholar Carla Peterson to be pertinent to this practice. In her forward “Eccentric Bodies” for the edited volume on Black women’s self-representations, *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representation by African American Women* (2000), Peterson delivers a brief historical account of how eccentricity both binds Black women to the visibility of their bodies—for the purpose of labor or for accusation of crime—as well as describes their cultural practice of using the body as a manifestation of the spirit by way in which culture articulates appearance. The tension of the

eccentricity that frames how Black women exist and produce art within is precisely the structure of alterity and liminality that I use to navigate experimentation for this body of work.

Experimentation marshals, what Peterson then describes as the empowering oddness that might lend itself to a freedom of mobility in the world for Black women.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, experimentation moves forward a creative practice that holds and centers the lives, labor, and bodies of Black women in culture. The denial of a cultural, creative practice for Black women is rooted in enslavement, where its effect was to render Black women's bodies as reproductive (in children and pleasure) and regurgitative (in labor) machines that render profits. Experimentation is critically the term and practice that more scholars should be attentive to when analyzing the lives, labor, and cultural production of Black women. Canonical approaches to film studies has not published rich scholarship on experimental films by Black women. What does this absence of Black women in this field tell us about our social imagination of experimentation or difference in the world?

Haunting this study and lurking in the shadows of each chapter is death. My pedagogical emphasis on alterity constructs the aberrations that exist within Black feminist experimental film and video, around the specter and rituals that involve engagement with the dead. What lies at the intersection of alterity is the unknown that often takes the representational form of death. For this study, I have had to embrace this dead body for its endings and possibilities and the living dead who exist on its threshold. The endings of lives that death carries and the possibilities of death not being a barrier for constructing communality with Black womanhood. My engagement with death is heavy work. I underscore the heaviness of this study to demonstrate the stakes of practicing anti-Black refusal for Black women in our current hegemonic social imaginary. I have had to learn how to methodologically use my experiences with death to honor those feelings and

lives in this work, beyond dismissing them as simply “feelings.” Death, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes, “reveals to me that all my archival obsession, all my research, all my poetics, all my ritual making is a Black refusal to be separate from Blackness, from the unknown and the unknowable” (Gumbs 2019, 20). Death, specter, ritual, conjure culture and the women filmmakers I study helped me to see myself as part of a larger and longer genealogy of Black women. This imbued my project with the urgency of anti-Black refusal, helping me to see how the tools of Black feminist experimentation aim to dismantle the linearity and petrification of colonial temporality. These themes additionally opened my eyes to the necessity of foregrounding Black women’s work and Black womanhood as a counter to the way in which we are socialized to be the epitome of alienation in reality.<sup>8</sup>

To contribute the first full study dedicated to Black feminist experimental cinema to the field is to work with and make sense of its absence in film and arts criticism. I detail below exactly how the placement of nationality and/or national allegiance in films by Black women is often utilized to undermine and contain their work within particular historical narratives that contribute to the over-representation of Western-focused scholarship. To use the term Black is to consider—as Wynter does—activities of cultural production that refute global anti-Blackness and white EuroAmerican categorizations of humanity and cultural production. “Black” describes the diasporic—and thus global—cultural relationships of bodies who descend from and around Africa that forged humanity and human relations within a global structure of racial violence. “Black” in this study attends to the cultural practices of adaptation and code-switching that Black individuals have practiced to work within systems that oppress and suppress all aspects of our bodies, hair, language, vernacular, cooking, among so many other parts of our lives. It also embodies a radical critique of white EuroAmerican culture and government.

Black feminist experimental film is a recuperative project, one that utilizes remembrance not to fully reconstruct what is missing but to speculatively point to what could be and what was. Black feminist experimentation opens tears in the filmic frame and allows those ruptures to be formalized for an audience to envision something beyond the histories presented within it; in other words, to create a new consciousness beyond *Man*. I now turn to my methods of approach to outline what has been written by Black feminists on Black women's cinema and to methodologically situate how my inquiry differs by foregrounding the experimentation and aesthetics of Black feminist film work rather than their representational meaning.

### **Methods: My Approach to Studying the Archives of Black Feminist Experimental Film and Video**

In this overview of my methodological approach, I conduct a literature review of available scholarship by feminist scholars on Black feminist experimental film and video work. *Mnemonic Aberrations* has two goals in its execution; the construction of a history of Black feminist film and video work from 1968 to 1998 in the United States and the United Kingdom, and the production of film and video analysis to accompany select pieces from this body of work, one that attends to its ethic-aesthetic principle of care rather than its representational "meaning". The timeline of this work was selected for matters of efficiency. I trace the contemporary emergence of Black feminist experimentation in film, beginning with my earliest film example of this practice, Madeline Anderson's *Just Like You* (1969). This starting point correlates late 1960s Civil Rights discourse (theoretical, political, and literary) in the United States that empowered Black women to forge a consciousness inspired by emergent and different decolonial and

feminist arguments. In linking these two emergent histories together, I consider how this discourse influenced Black feminist experimental film and video work.<sup>9</sup>

In the conclusion to my dissertation, I briefly examine the recent contemporary present of Black feminist experimentation in film and video in the last five years. However, the work analyzed in the individual chapters stops at 1998, a date that correlates with the gradual end of some of the film and video collectives in this dissertation and a shift in technology as analog video gave way to digital technology. This shift, which is not covered in the chapters of this study, created another demarcation of access to equipment as practitioners on the frontier of film and video art were using various types of digital workflow, rendering work outside of the digital mode as “amateur”.<sup>10</sup> A clear gap emerges in this body of work where for several years from the late 1990s through the early 2010s the output of Black feminist film and video work declined from its peak production in the early 1990s. The last ten years have brought a resurgence to the field through the work of filmmakers Madeline Hunt-Ehrlich, Onyeka Igwe, Ja’Tovia Gary, Akousa Adoma Owusu, amongst others. This renewal, alongside renewed scholarly and curatorial interests, is covered in my concluding thoughts to the dissertation.

My theoretical approach draws on Sylvia Wynter’s work to more thoroughly outline my use of a counter-poetics of rhythm in relation to how Black feminist experimental film and video work is agent-centered work that aesthetically produces a refusal of anti-Blackness. I use “agent-centered” following Hortense Spillers definition of the phrase as a type of narrative or artistic work that constantly draws attention to an ontological shift different from the histories in which it exists within (Spillers 1985, 154). Put another way, agent-centered defines work that raises our consciousness in opposition to the historical structures that produced us. This aesthetic production exploits cinema’s ability to generate affect in order to convey what liberatory

aesthetics and living *feels* like, shifting our attention to a reordering of our cognitive schema of living, thinking, and feeling in the world. To address this more concretely, productions of alterity—what I described above as mnemonic aberrations (rituals, specters, and conjurer women)—serve as the focus of my film analysis. These Black folkloric customs and figures not only relate to the film and video work, but open up and return film and video to its monstrous origins, a source of theoretical possibility in critiquing and moving beyond the memory of *Man*. Cultural productions of alterity emerge through a Black feminist praxis, and not without it. I use these aberrations to model what an analytical engagement might look like that reads film and video works for what they aesthetically do rather than what they representationally mean. Those specific aberrations and my methodological reasoning for each appears in their respective chapters and are not outlined in this chapter’s examination of my Black feminist methods.

The approach I employ in the dissertation includes interviews with filmmakers, formal and narrative analyses of the films, analysis of the historical materials that accompany many of the films in the archives, including production notes, newspaper announcements, letters, and photos, and analysis of how these films circulated and through what channels Black women’s filmmaking has been made public. In addition to the aforementioned materials, I work with literary criticism, film magazines, and rental pamphlets in order to construct a history and analysis of Black feminist experimental film and video as part of a larger movement of Black feminist experimentation over the period of this study. This material offsets the current paucity of available scholarship in film studies and cultural studies of this body of work. I use Black feminist literary criticism to help analyze some of the shared features between Black women’s literature and film production. Both resist singular interpretation and deploy reflexive formal methods. Black feminist methods are interdisciplinary, as they have to account for the hurdles

that Black women filmmakers encounter in order to produce, screen, and, distribute their work. These interdisciplinary methods also represent the studying feminist cultural work across media locations, and histories where an expanded approach is necessary to grasp the cross-cultural, temporal, and disciplinary work these film and video makers produce. <sup>11</sup>

I also used interviews to engage more fully with the filmmakers and their works. Through the interviews, filmmakers can “take up space” and speak about their work in their own terms. As Alexandra Juhasz reminds us, the method of the interview has a rich pedagogical practice and history within feminist methodologies, for the interview serves as tool to remember the past that institutionally has no “space.”

These critical-historical writings address the glaring lapses in the public memory of feminism while also manifesting a mode of history making that has itself been of central concern to feminist historians. This and other interview or memory-based feminist histories are structured through a contradiction: how to contribute to the struggles of feminism by validating the words that real women use to describe their experiences without creating yet another authoritative (even if personal or experiential) narrative that erases or constrains. (Juhasz 2001, 12)

The interviews conducted for this dissertation are cited throughout this work. I intend to publish the interviews in full in a future manuscript. I view my interviews as opportunities for a discussion and, at times, gossip, which I address more fully in “Chapter Two: Mothering Ourselves”.

Many of the filmmakers I analyze in this dissertation created their work in film collectives that center Black culture, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the late 1960s, the University of California Los Angeles Film and Television program increased



diversity in their curriculum and worked to better recruit and support students of color once they were there. The changes proved to be effective over a twenty-five-year period, giving numerous students of color the opportunity to learn filmmaking and create key films. This movement is commonly referred to as the Los Angeles School of Black Film Makers, the UCLA Rebellion, or for short, the L.A. Rebellion. The Sankofa Film and Video Collective, coming out of Great Britain in the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, is notable for its strong feminist, queer, and experimental focus. In addition, the Third World Newsreel production workshops, located in New York City, in the 1990s produced a commons of collective support around Black queer film and video makers. Like the L.A. Rebellion before them, the participants from the TWN workshops assisted with editing each other's work and provided each other with crucial support and feedback. The same can be said for contemporary filmmakers who pull their resources together to work in collectives, as is the case with the New Negress Film Society, a contemporary Black women's film collective in New York that will be discussed in the conclusion.<sup>12</sup> The commonality of individuals working in collectives or with communal support speaks to how Black women film makers responded to the disenfranchising structures in place that render film and video equipment inaccessible to them. Although these collectives are inspiring for the ways in which they facilitate and support the production of Black women's film and video, it is imperative that we read them against the backdrop of the institutional barriers and forms of alienation that target Black women. These collectives gave Black women filmmakers the knowledge and professional skills denied to them elsewhere.

My own research aims to construct a collective commons of Black feminist experimental film and video art, where I assemble multiple independent histories and collectives to be read within a larger genealogy of experimental film practices produced by Black women. I utilize the

term “collective commons” here to signal and retain the tension these filmmakers experienced between communal organizing and institutional alienation. I also examine what the politics and ethics of building a commons for Black women has been. In part, I question some of the contemporary discourse on the commons because it fails to interrogate the role of Black women in those spaces, as Saidiya Hartman astutely points out in “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labor” (2016). So much of the production of a commons hinges upon the thankless labor Black women do to sustain the collectively of an environment through spiritual tasks, food support, childcare, emotional care, and organizational labor (Davis 1981, 5). The “commons” is too frequently examined along its affective registers of communality, which can mask the hard labor so many women do in coming together; this is not a method I intend to mirror in my study.

Many of the artists whose interviews appear at various points in this study talk about the difficulty of collectivizing as Black women. In their precarious positions as laborers who are disproportionately disadvantaged with regards to pay equity and cruel forms of workplace abuse and violation, the work of commonsing is all the more difficult.<sup>13</sup> These labor issues do not evaporate away when working in a collective: they are often repeated by others working within a collective, or members may endure similar disadvantages in their primary jobs on top of their efforts to collectively organize and produce work film and video work with others – where building a collective becomes a kind of “second shift”. Many testimonials from the women of the L.A. Rebellion speak to this doubling of labor, where their independent artistic craft suffered as a result. To construct a collective commons is to maintain the dual effort of individual actors to realize a vision of their own work while reestablishing all the ways in which commons are displaced by institutional structures. This is to say that I recognize the collective support these

filmmakers received, but I firmly center their individual labor struggles and creative agency in the production and execution of their work. To restate, I am interested in building a genealogical tapestry by which Black feminist film and video makers can see their work as a part of and in dialogue with others, no matter the spatial, geographic, or temporal distance in the thirty-year time frame that is my focus.

In this next section, I examine the available scholarship on Black feminist experimental film and video via a literature review to map out the gaps in this body of work. The bulk of available scholarship on Black women's film and video centers linear narrative work, which tends to favor an analysis that foregrounds a film or video's representational qualities, rather than their formal aesthetics. My emphasis on reading this body of films for its non-representational aesthetics is due to the rich intersection between the cultural production of alterity and what we define to be "experimental" in film and video. In many ways, this body of work was and remains overlooked because of the misrecognition of Black feminist experimental film production and the general illiteracy in the field around how to read the cultural production of alterity, like conjure culture, as an aesthetic practice of manipulation.

### *Literature Review*

This literature review will demonstrate how film criticism and scholarship on experimental film needs to shift and expand beyond the limitations of the "Western masculine formalist dogma," that presently shrouds film, art, and cultural criticism (Petrolle and Wexman 2005, 3).<sup>14</sup> Rather than reviewing the overwhelming absence of Black women's experimental film and video work in experimental film and video canons, including feminist-centered canons, I give space here

instead to the ways their work *has* appeared in research for which they admittedly “had no name for” (O’Grady 1992, 24), and the ways artists have written about and for themselves.

I foreground the tension in Black film criticism around aesthetics, specifically the mobilization of an ethno-aesthetic mode that can be read in Black film.<sup>15</sup> Ethno-aesthetics refer to the argument that our cultural production is autonomously produced and can produce an inherent, essentialist, meaning within the film’s aesthetics around the fact of Blackness (Wynter 1992a, 241). My theoretical approach will clarify this specious claim around ethno-aesthetics in that I examine how Black activities of cultural production are anti-colonial acts imbued with and shaped Black cultural production that is rooted in alterity and a strident refusal of anti-Blackness. This work forges instead an ethic-aesthetic principle of care. Such a practice is not autonomously produced but is forged within the structure in which it seeks to resist. Although it may speak to many of the same ethno-organizing principles of nationality and race, their practices are not inherent to one’s identity. To label such works as an ethno-aesthetic is reductive, for it ignores the layers of activity and cultural production that come with such works. The principle of care I am describing is in opposition to oppressive structures and simply cannot be *uniformly* called a “Black aesthetic”. Rather it is an aesthetic of care that is uniquely featured in Black feminist work around the ways they re-articulate Black life and Black women’s relationality.<sup>16</sup> This tension within Black film studies has led many scholars to foreground representation *as* the film’s primary ethic-aesthetic principle (Yearwood 1982). Gladestone Yearwood argues in the introduction to *Black Cinema Aesthetics* that Black filmmaking is defined by its oppositional position and personhood in Hollywood film and it is that placement that ideologically, politically, and ethically informs the images produced by Black artists (1982, 9-10). While the representation against Hollywood images was a primary argument for navigating a film’s

aesthetics, it reaches some hurdles when recurrent use of memory in many Black feminist film and video works provides some interesting slippage in how scholars attempt to balance the tension of foregrounding the representational image when it is in fact the work's aesthetic *doing*, rather than its meaning, that shapes its frame and the experience of watching it.

To examine this body of scholarship, I group the material into three sections: ethno-aesthetics, spectatorship, and self-generated scholarship. I read across the paper trails left by then-contemporary prominent Black feminist film scholars to emerging Black feminist film and video, specifically via the popular reception of Camille Billops's work in the 1980s and early 1990s, and later with Julie Dash. I begin my literature analysis with Billops, for the time period in which her work emerged and the way in which her work occupied film and art criticism.<sup>17</sup> I then outline the tension of constructing a method of analyzing Black experimental film and video that does not fall into the trap of claiming an "ethno-aesthetic." From there, I examine the various strategies Black film critics and scholars have used to examine Black feminist experimental film and video, that include focusing on spectatorship and self-generated scholarship by the filmmakers themselves.

### *An Ethno-Aesthetic?*

Wynter's "Re-thinking 'Aesthetics'" is a direct response to an emergent "ethno-aesthetic" criticism that occupied Black film criticism in the late 1980s and '90s that argued for authenticity in the image (Wynter 1992a, 265). Such criticism became popular with films that centered Black masculinity with films like *Boys 'N' the Hood* [Dir. John Singleton, 1991]. Wynter's critique of both the representational argument that emerged out of Black film and cultural studies as well as the liberalist scholarship with SLAB, parodied by David Bordwell, is refreshing and unique, as it

is still one of the few texts to foreground aesthetics beyond their representational meaning for Black culture.<sup>18</sup> SLAB theory is the film criticism that builds upon the critical theory of popular deconstructionists, Charles de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Roland Barthes. Wynter's criticism of SLAB and other deconstructive approaches to film studies addresses how even the most arduous film criticism positioned under liberalism fails to free critics and artists from the "dealt" cards that maintain our hegemonic social imaginary of a racialized labor force of coloniality (Wynter 1992a, 264). "[T]his reveals that *it is the* disciplinary practice of criticism itself, not *what* is said or the approach taken, that functions to 'save' the premise of our present cultural Imaginary, the premise of its 'genetic system of justice' in whose context the bid for self-affirmation. . . must necessarily fail or turn to 'contraband and savage ways'" (Wynter 1992a, 264). In this passage, Wynter analogously situates the role of the critic in the same matrix of agency as the poet. Criticism repeats the code of subjugation in that the critical work analyzes poetics via its ethno-organizing principles of *Man* and its representational *Other*, rather than inventing with the work to analyze how it comes to be and how it might exist outside of *Man's* ethic-aesthetic principle of commodity-culture.

The "ethno-aesthetic" trap, as Wynter defines, is the "attempt to claim and identify an 'ethnic' and cultural-indigenous tradition inherent to these film texts and to repress, thereby, all awareness of the dialectical nature and socio-culturally 'counter' aspects of the signifying practices of the films themselves" (Wynter 1992a, 265-66). Wynter argues here that an ethno-aesthetic model declares a film's "authenticity" based on its representational images of cultural groups, which are inherently organized around that cultural group's origins and meanings. I agree with Wynter that the danger of an ethno-aesthetic criticism is that it encloses the aesthetic possibility of, in the case of this study, Black womanhood to be more no more than its

representational value, which is already contrived within a symbolic system that negates its existence. The aesthetic, in Wynter's argument, refers to both *why* and *how* social realities are expressed through cinematic practices. Aesthetics produce the "'visual and oneiric power' of the film's image to shape and control our human perception and, therefore, our behavioral responses" (Wynter 1992a, 239). She provides a deciphering method as a corrective measure to transform our film criticism that, sadly, has gone unheeded by many scholars working in film criticism.

I open with Wynter's essay for the way in which it foreshadows the tension around aesthetics and the methodological troubles film critics have engaging with Black film that is rooted in the Black cultural production of alterity. Similarly, bell hooks advocated against the emergent ethno-aesthetics in film criticism from the early 1990s. She writes, in "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional" (1990), that "the lack of critical theories about cultural production and aesthetics only serves to confine Black art" in that it limits the vocabulary around Black activity to be no more than its representational meaning (hooks 1990, 109). This criticism exhausts the representational image and delimits Black film to the categories of "reality" and "authenticity" (1990, 8). hooks argues for more film critics to unmake themselves by engaging with radical Black film and video art in order to work against the idea that Black art merely seeks to reproduce social reality (1990, 111). For hooks, the disavowal of realism in criticism would actually participate in the production of a radical imagination, which at every moment in time is seeking and performing liberation in an unfree world.<sup>19</sup>

hooks' essay is critical of the assertion that Black visual representation must stake a claim in the "overt demonstration" of the political. She explicitly criticizes Black art's emphasis on presenting "authentic representations" of Blackness that utilize (white) mainstream realist

aesthetic practices—practices that have negatively constructed Blackness. “The assumption that naturalism or realism was more accessible to a mass audience than abstraction was certainly not a revolutionary position. . . They stripped many artists of creative agency by dismissing and devaluing their work because it was either too abstract or did not overtly address a radical politic” (hooks [1990] 2015, 108). Moreover, hooks is skeptical of the role influential film critic Clyde Taylor (1988) played in his argument for a Black national or Afrocentric aesthetic to be at the forefront of film’s aesthetic decisions. Taylor suggests that the only way Black cinema can be progressive is if it takes on a political role that “represents” the Black experience and thus does not “dabble” in non-representational forms of image-making. Taylor’s argument unintentionally reduces the tradition of the radical Black imagination to solely being able to create images that “represent” Black experiences. hooks counters this logic by asserting that a Black “discourse on aesthetics need not begin with white Western traditions of image-making and it need not be prescriptive” (hooks [1990] 2015, 107).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to revitalize the creative spaces in criticism and scholarship that have closed down conversations on Black cinematic production and aesthetics to further expand what the political looks like, and can look like, in Black cultural production.<sup>21</sup>

As part of the ongoing work to expand aesthetic-centered analysis on Black cultural production, memory becomes a clear principle by which scholars make sense of Black feminist experiment film and video. Julie Dash emerges as a critical filmmaker who uses memory to contest and challenge history and how time is recorded. The use of memory in Black feminist experimental film and video provides scholars—myself included—a rich discourse in which we can interpret how memory invents social realities and challenges our prescribed social status as constituted by the memory of *Man*. Likewise, Sandra M. Grayson argues that memory



participates in the myth-making creation of the self through our ability to symbolize the past (2000, 40). Grayson examines *Daughters of the Dust* for its invocation of memory and Orishas, the deities spawning from the Yoruba mythos of West African tradition featured in a variety of Black folkloric Southern and Caribbean spiritual practices, to construct symbols through the aesthetics of the film, creating a reflexive process of experiencing cultural ritual practice while perceiving it onscreen (Grayson 2000, 41; 47). Grayson suggests that this is possible for Dash because of how she makes herself a living historian, not unlike Nana Peasant, becoming a *jelimuso*, “a term, used in Made traditions in West Africa, which refers to a female hereditary professional historian and musician who preserves and presents history through the oral tradition” (Grayson 2000, 39). The way Dash draws out memory via her film’s aesthetics provides the grounding for the work that I take up here, especially when Grayson turns her attention to some of the more ethereal and ephemeral elements in the film, as those “background” elements become central to my own analyses.

Furthermore, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s book *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze and Finding Subjectivity* is invaluable for the ways she gathers together Black experimental feminist filmmakers and dedicates sections and chapters to examining their film practices. Some filmmakers included in her book are Julie Dash, Zeinabu irene Davis, Ngozi Onwurah, Michelle Pakerson, and Ayoka Chenzira. Foster interviews and analyzes these artists’ feminist and experimental film and video for the way they center memory as a collective practice. In the process, they critique how history is marked and recorded. Similar to this study’s examination of memory as a construction of agency, Foster argues that memory is a shared sensuous process that carries survival over from one generation to the next (Foster 1997, 67). Foster argues that memory and embodiment are key factors in Black women’s filmmaking

practices, for they open the door for unprecedented and unexpected results that produce very distinct experimental work that carve a new subjectivity, name, and gaze in their own image (Foster 1997, 27). Foster's study is broad in her examination of diasporic filmmakers, and while she highlights the experimental bent of many of the filmmakers included in her study, her analysis favors narrative and representational work to draw out what the memory means rather than what it does (Foster 1997, 97).<sup>22</sup>

### *Spectatorship*

A focus on spectatorship occupies a bulk of the methodological approach for Black feminist experimental film and video work. Select pieces from that scholarship have contributed to the larger memory of early Black feminist film and video work as well as the development of a theoretical approach to the field. That development, while fruitful in the production of scholarship of the field, has occasionally prioritized the "difference" of the examined work, mainly through the director's identity, and has rarely engaged with what their aesthetics do beyond their identitarian difference.

In her critical essay "The Cave: Black Women Film Directors" (1992), Lorraine O'Grady heralds the horizon of Black women's film as the invention of new social realities, one in which aesthetics create a new viewing experience for the audience (1992, 23). O'Grady argues that we are socialized to accept our erasure Black women as natural. In turn, she says we fail to develop the tools to analytically read and watch Black women (1992, 23). O'Grady keenly recognizes the experimental work of filmmakers like Dash, Billops, Attille, and Euzhan Palcy for their difference and how that difference produces a new visual engagement that we, as viewers, might be ill-equipped to read critically. She defines this work as an abnormal discourse with

revolutionary potential, a “new thing that can happen when one is either unaware of or sets aside the rules” (1992, 24). O’Grady’s short essay highlights how the erasure of Black feminist experimental film and video at the time was, and is, normalized not just in distribution, but through criticism. It is only when we are confronted with the absence in a work where our invisibility is pierced and we become real.

hooks early on began to devote her film criticism to amplifying and contextualizing the work of Black feminist experimental film and video makers, as evident in her anthology of essays *Reel to Reel: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (1996). In hooks’ seminal “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women Spectators,” she lists several Black experimental filmmaker’s practices as the antidote for healing our colonized eyes. These include Billops, Dash, Ayoka Chenzira, and the Sankofa collective in Great Britain, all directors producing films that “critically intervene and transform conventional filmic practices, changing notions of spectatorship” and that “without providing ‘realistic’ positive representations that emerge only as a response to the totalizing nature of existing narratives. . . offer points of radical departure. . . [imagining] new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity” (hooks [1992] 2016, 130). hooks’s “oppositional gaze” speaks to how Black women spectators have an extensive history of resisting cinematic images insofar as mainstream cinema has often reduced their bodies to gross caricatures that built upon the stereotypes of Black women found in the New Americas during slavery (hooks [1992] 2016, 125; Collins 2004, 56). hooks argues that Black feminist film in the diaspora provides cinematic images that challenge the white heteropatriarchal gaze and provide rich visual encounters for Black women spectators.

hooks argues that as audiences, we are not passive in the consumption of moving images and we, in fact, may use the theater as a space to enact our fantasy of ownership over others

through the gaze.<sup>23</sup> The gaze, while produced by visions of white supremacy, can often be repeated in bodies divorced from that visible power. While hooks clearly recognizes the difference of these film and video works and praises their revolutionary power to alter audience's ways of thinking and seeing the world—critically, for Black women—she stops shy of labeling their work with the explicit moniker of experimentalism. This is a shame, as her brief analysis certainly attests to the non-normative practices being aesthetically deployed in these films and points to the filmmakers' non-normative practice as the critical opposition needed for the oppositional gaze. Elsewhere, hooks contributed to the edification of Dash's cultural aesthetic practice, again foregrounding the role of the spectator in several essays and interviews with the artist in the 1990, including the publication of *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992), a companion book to the film that provides valuable criticism from hooks and Toni Cade Bambara, alongside the script for the film. Bambara's introduction for this book similarly advocates for Dash's filmic power to heal our colonized eyes with her experimental aesthetics of non-linear time and narrative restraint (Dash 1992, xii). Bambara's introduction is one of the few pieces that begins to circle a film's spectral power back to a detailed analysis of its aesthetic action.

Much of the film criticism available on Black feminist film and video work centers Billops and Dash, with Ayoka Chenzira and Michelle Parkerson close behind. Jacqueline Bobo's book *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) devotes two chapters to *Daughters of the Dust*, one dedicated to film analysis and the other to spectatorship, examining Black women's response to and cultural reading of the film. Bobo's scholarship was a response to the negative mainstream film criticism of *Daughters of the Dust* and, to a lesser degree, *The Color Purple* (1985), the latter produced by non-Black women (Bobo 1995, 53). Bobo maps out a method of reading

*Daughters of the Dust* through the use of independent control groups of Black women watching the film. Bobo utilizes sense-making as an inherent process in which context, representation, and linear narrative are not essential attributes for interpreting a film (Bobo 1995, 186-87). The nuances of how she interprets these audience responses is, at times, lost. It is not my claim that Bobo needed to add further interpretation or scholarly contextualization to her analysis, as part of her goal in that book is to demonstrate the sense-making skillset that emerges in Black women as cultural readers. What I *am* arguing, though, is that the lack of a clear interpretation of film methodologies situates her critical examination of Black women in film as slightly outside of film studies' immediate scope .

Bobo's 1998 edited anthology *Black Women Film & Video* engages more thoroughly with film production, labor and analysis on Black women's filmmaking practices. The anthology then sketches a variety of methods available for reading Black women's film and video. Experimental film and video by Black women is highlighted in several of the chapters.<sup>24</sup> *Black Women Film & Video Artists* more thoroughly foregrounds spectatorship in its appendix, as Bobo incorporates material for a possible course design on the field at large, a syllabus, and a list of distributors (Bobo 1998, 207-227). Moreover, several of these essays are written by filmmakers in order to place their work in dialogue with a theoretical position or to explain the production or archival struggles they face. This is most evident in "Fired-Up!" by O. Funmilayo Makarah and "Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze" by C.A. Griffith. Griffith recounts her experience in the field and the difficult labor struggles she endured as a single Black mother working in film and trying to maintain her romantic, professional, and social relationships. The piece is unique not for its autobiographical style (which is, nevertheless, enriching) but for the way in which memory is used to recalibrate something not seen by others,

which she then links with her experimental film practice (Griffith 1998, 167-168). *Black Women Film & Video Artists* is one of the earliest anthologies in my study dedicated solely to examining film and video artwork by Black women.<sup>25</sup>

### *Self-Generated Scholarship*

In mapping out the selected writings on the films produced by these women, I became aware that from the 1980s through the 1990s many filmmakers were writing about their own work or writing about each other's practices. The practice of self-generated scholarship on feminist filmmaking serves as a key tool for critical examination of the films. If experimental feminist films already struggled with mainstream visibility, then Black feminist experimental film heavily relied on these lateral channels of communication and support to reach a larger audience. This final section examines several anthologies where Black women directors contributed to the field at large through their scholarship, interviews, and reviews.

Channels of communication and support are emphasized in the article "Black Women and Representation," by Martina Attille and Maureen Blackwood for Charlotte Brundson's edited anthology *Films for Women* (1986). Attille and Blackwood were members of the Sankofa film collective in Great Britain at the time. Their contribution to *Films for Women* consists of notes gathered from a 1984 British Film Institute-funded series of workshops the filmmakers were leading at the time. Attille and Blackwood's essay represents the only entry on Black women's film practices in Brundson's anthology and it was an entry that needed to come from the film directors themselves. Attille and Blackwood examine the pedagogical limitations on Black women's representation in front of and behind the camera. They pay specific attention to

Media studies and the limitations of theory around Black women's economic disadvantages that go unacknowledged. Attille and Blackwood write (in full):

The limited range of Media Studies programmes, and the very limited range of literature about women and film/film criticism, or Black people and film, has not been able to sustain a critique of images of Black women. The importance of such critical analysis is overdue, especially in the light of the body of work produced by Black women writers and the development of the Black independent film and video sector. The experience of Black Women and Representation shows that there are Black women in the UK with some resources, working in and around media, who can put forward some of our differing perspectives. We need a theory that takes into account the economic history of our (mis)representation and ensuing stereotyping, as well as the interaction between social realities (whole lives) and cinematic fictions (fragmentation), and we, Black women, need to give that theory its direction. (203)

In the above passage, Attille and Blackwood rightfully address the difficulties that face Black women filmmakers in both theoretical discourse and filmmaking practices. They, as filmmakers, point to the limitations of the field in order to name these hurdles while also sharing their experiences with other emerging filmmakers. Unfortunately, the paucity of representation of Black women described by Attille and Blackwood continues to plague the field of media studies.

Likewise, in the anthology for *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making* (2018), edited by Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, numerous Black feminist filmmakers write about their own and each other's work. Methodologically speaking, Welbon and Juhasz's anthology relies on interviews to trace the communal narratives

and histories that were forged amongst Black queer women filmmakers in the United States in the 1990s. As Juhasz explains, the interview format is a critical feminist methodological tool, for interviews attempt to “value the experiences of real women and also preserve the ambiguity of personal reflection” (Juhasz 2001, 12). A key example of the duality that the interview holds can be found in the chapter “Narrating Our History: Selections from a Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora” compiled by Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet and Thomas Allen Harris with Shari Frilot, Leah Gilliam, Dawn Suggs, Jocelyn Taylor, and Yvonne Welbon. This interview sees the aforementioned filmmakers describing their struggles with film production as well as the value of communal support that they received from one another. This includes not only emotional but also material support. The filmmakers labored together to screen films, host conferences, organize and speak at conference panels, and critique each other’s films over dinner (Welbon and Juhasz 2018, 36). The interview as a method appears countless times throughout my research, for it serves as a direct way to validate the words of the filmmaker who often see their words ignored or erased. The interview provides affirmation to their work and labor.

In addition to this self-generated and supportive scholarship on Black women’s experimental film, the screening pamphlet carries a critical weight in my study. Screening pamphlets produced by Pearl Bowser and Third World Newsreel to accompany curated film programs at specialty theaters have been essential in helping me recuperate the forgotten history around Black women’s experimentation. These pamphlets often feature essays in addition to a detailed list of films with specific keywords to help categorize films. I imagine they were essential in spreading visibility for the filmmakers at the time. Throughout this dissertation, I rely on such pamphlets that I found in the archives to reconstruct a history that has been erased and/or



ignored. This culminative style of gathering resources is, itself, part of an established feminist practice of assembling narratives from a variety of material, made invisible in other ways.<sup>26</sup>

I am adamant about the use of the term “experimental” here insofar as it helps gather resources and provides a through-line by which we can trace a history of Black feminist experimentation. Misrecognition and its relationship to the rediscovery of cinema made by Black women is a structural problem that exists in feminist film history. In her gathering of mid-to-late twentieth century women avant-garde directors *Women and Vision*, Juhasz argues that the acts of forgetting and institutional erasure plague feminist film practices, especially those that can be categorized as experimental (Juhasz 2001, 3). She describes the problem of constantly “starting anew” in feminist media history, with each generation not receiving the knowledge (be that scholarship, films, funding, etc.) of generations past. “Feminists exist and are forgotten, make their work and see it disappear, are remembered and get lost, are rediscovered, erased, and re-represented yet again” (Juhasz 2001, 2). I situate my work in relation to this discourse to highlight how the question of Black women’s experimental film and video has been asked and gathered before, but also how its present scholarly discourse is one that exists in fragments and is plagued by misrecognition. I intend for this body of work to provide a roadmap to those hidden and fragmented avenues by way of threading a genealogy of discourse on Black feminist experimental cinema.

My literature review of the available material on Black feminist experimental film and video works demonstrates the disparate and varied theoretical approaches utilized in film, art, and cultural studies scholarship. With the exception of a few texts, the majority of scholarship fails to label this body of work as experimental, thus making it incredibly difficult to find available material on the field for research and distribution. Part of my interest in this brief

examination is to create a structure for others to follow, in order to plainly state that I am not the first to write about some of these film and videos; but also to point out the useful and caring scholarship conducted by scholars and critics on a very maligned body of work in times far more contentious toward Black women's cultural production than they are today.<sup>27</sup> This outline of available scholarship speaks to the way Black feminist experimental film and video challenges criticism, and how critics needs to similarly decolonialize and rid themselves of the aesthetics of *Man*. This process is not something we can learn from the academy, meaning that the very spaces we seek to learn from cannot guarantee comprehension or even a way of reading Black cultural production work rooted in alterity. Thus, our methods must be pluri-conceptual and robust in their incorporation of alternative sources and engagements with material outside of the institution. Such work makes us active participants in the *activity* of Black cultural production. I will now provide my justifications for the film and video works I have selected, the archives I have chosen, the incorporation of screenings as part of my study, and the geographic scope of the project.

### ***The Selection***

The selection of specific films became one of the most taxing components to this dissertation. I originally had very few films to choose from; or rather, I was only aware of a few films that would make up this collective gathering of work. In fact, the initial paucity of information that I attributed to experimental films produced by Black women led me to switch my focus from feature films to short films, as there were more short films to analyze at the beginning of my research. As the years passed, the few short films that I encountered grew into an Excel document that catalogues over one-hundred entries. Despite my ambition for my dissertation to

be a comprehensive account of the question of Black feminist short films, I, myself, could not and did not have the time or space to analyze each film included in my research.

While there are more short films to analyze than feature films, archival resources for the former were by no means “easier” to access. Archivist and scholar Jan Christopher Horak provides some valuable insight on this problem. Until recently many film archives did not want to preserve or archive sixteen millimeter and eight millimeter films, outside of those produced by an already well-known director.<sup>28</sup> According to Horak, funders and major archives have been hesitant to collect and preserve such films because they have been perceived to be amateur, personal, and low in aesthetic quality. The institutional bias around eight-millimeter and sixteen-millimeter films is framed by socio-economic conditions, as such types of film and their respective cameras are relatively inexpensive compared to thirty-five millimeter film and cameras. The implication being that the low-cost signified amateur or unprofessional aesthetics or approach to filmmaking. The astronomical price difference between film formats is still an issue today, with Super 8 millimeter film costing roughly thirty-five dollars for fifty feet (three minutes’ worth), sixteen millimeter film for forty-five to fifty dollars for one hundred feet (three minutes’ worth), and thirty-five millimeter film selling around \$950.00 for 1000 feet (eleven minutes’ worth).<sup>29</sup>

Just who can afford to do this work? Accessibility to these means of production is of paramount importance in creating cinematic images and history. Occupational and economic autonomy that can enable the pursuit of cinematic production is still at stake for Black women in the present (Welbon and Juhasz 2018, 40).<sup>30</sup> These obstacles prevent Black women from producing feature films and thus render a greater output of short films. However, as Horak

mentions, that “short film” status is used against filmmakers, and archival practices have pushed their work out of our cultural memory until recently, as my examination of the archives details.

I have selected films that are conceptually connected to my theoretical approach of mnemonic aberration and its ethic-aesthetic of the counter-poetics of rhythm. In tandem with that theoretical framing is the discussed films’ use of Black cultural production rooted in alterity, and my own emphasis on narratives that attend to key mnemonic aberrations in a thorough fashion. Moreover, my analyses provide a sense of genealogy to Black women’s labor. I have chosen films that provide a “historical framework” to the greater body of work. I follow the history of Black feminist film and video from 1968 to 1998.

The hardest decisions emerged when I had to omit films from this project due to space constraints. I had to think critically about what my analysis would do for these films. Many of the films analyzed here have received very little scholarly attention, or have yet to be written into the historical framework of experimental film. Keeping that in mind, an analysis of the film *Remembering Wei Fang, Remembering Myself* (1995) by Yvonne Welborn is not included in this study. That film has consistently received acknowledgement and analysis as an experimental Black queer and feminist film. Therefore, I did not feel the need to add to the myriad and astute analyses that have been conducted thus far on the film (Marchetti 2012, 80; Heitner 2018, 92). My omission of this film, and others, should not suggest that I could not add to the existing dialogue, but rather reflects my intention to use my study to introduce films that have not been analyzed in the field.<sup>31</sup>

This study also does not foreground animation as part of my analysis. Animated films have a distinct formal history that is beyond the scope of the formal questions that I am attending to here. The consequences of this methodological omission are the absence of the experimental

films *A Film for Nappy-Headed People* (1984) and *Zajota and the Boogie Spirit* (1989) by Ayoka Chenzira, a director who has persistently emphasized her role as an experimental filmmaker. Due to Chenzira's self-framing as a Black feminist experimental filmmaker, scholarship around her animated short films exists in a variety of sources (Chenzira 1997; Redding & Brownworth 1997, 117; Foster 1997, 131). Her other, less experimental, non-animated short films, mainly *Syvilla: They Danced to Her Drum* (1979) and *The Sexual Abuse of Children* (1989), are only featured in passing here due to spatial constraints and the scope of this project's theoretical approach.<sup>32</sup> Another prominent experimental Black feminist not heavily featured in this study is Cheryl Dunye. This is because Dunye, like Welborn, has received substantial scholarly attention for her aesthetic experimentation in her short films, and more prominently in her stunning feature *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).

Finally, it pains me to have had to cut my analysis on Cauleen Smith and Kym Ragusa. Like Chenzira, Smith and Ragusa's work appears in passing throughout the following chapters, but I have not dedicated deep analysis to either director due to the size of this dissertation that left many written paragraphs, pages, analyses, histories, stories, theories, and much more on the cutting room floor. To paraphrase Camille Billops, a film is only a version of the truth, for there is truth in the editing booth and there is truth in undeveloped film. In the same way, there is truth in the many drafts and edits that are not reflected here (hooks 1996, 188).

Many of the films analyzed here tend to travel in both independent/experimental film and art circles. This convergence means that some of the films in this study that may lack attention or analysis in cinema studies scholarship may have an audience in the art world. This convergence is helpful in spreading awareness of the films and enabling them to circulate. The separation between art and film scholarship can be quite severe at times, subjecting both films and

filmmakers to misinterpretation and unchecked analysis, or blurring the distinction between experimental film and “artist’s film.” To clarify, “artist’s film” refers to a film that features the singular vision of an artist for the purpose of expressing artistic intent (Curtis 2006; Crawford 2007). The artist’s film differs from “traditional experimental” film, or even an “auteur film,” insofar as the artist’s film usually lacks a crew, and may even engage with film on an explicitly amateur level. Many artist films can be defined as experimental. However, few experimental films created outside of a strictly artistic context can be defined as artists’ film. Due to this uneven crossover and my interest in the production process, I dedicate my analysis to experimental films that follow and are aided by production support and omit artist films from this study. Thus, the works of Renée Green, Kara Walker, Zanele Muholi, Wangechi Mutu, and many others are unfortunately not analyzed here, as they fall outside of my methodological approach and theoretical interests (Brownlee and Cassel 2007).

I think it is important to note my personal bias in some capacity. I had to spend years with some of these films and create a living relationship with them. I created relationships with films that would continue to hold my attention. To be transparent about such decisions, I mention as many films as contextually possible within this study. The films that are analyzed in the following chapters only account for a small selection of a larger body of work that I watched and gathered for this dissertation. As “Chapter One: Kinship with the Dead” will detail, I wanted to document and discuss my labor in undertaking this project because I feel that the question of labor is constitutive to both the work and erasure of the personhood of Black women filmmakers, scholars, critics, and archivists before me. In showing my labor, I also hope that scholars, filmmakers, critics, and archivists after me will be able to have this template to follow by way of

forging space for further inquiry into the rich body of Black feminist experimental film and video work created by Black women.

### *Screenings*

Film screenings have proved to be an invaluable source and place of knowledge production for this project. Over the past five years, I have had an opportunity to take a position as a film curator and have witnessed the steadily increasing number of screenings dedicated to Black women's filmmaking in recent years in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Film programs like the Black Radical Imagination, curated by Erin Christovale and Amir George—a contemporary film series that screens experimental films that challenge the imaginative futures around Black life—has recently gained visibility due to its rich engagement across these three countries. Christovale, who is currently a curator of film and performance at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, has also used her position to host an exhibition and screenings in 2017 that highlighted the women of Sankofa. Additionally, she served as a guest co-curator alongside Vivian Crockett for the Visual AIDS's A Day With(out) Art program, *Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings* for World AIDS Day in 2017. This program debuted across several institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, nationwide and featured a series of commissioned shorts by Christovale and Crockett, like Tourmaline's *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*.

Filmmaker and scholar Michelle Materre currently curates a film series, *Creatively Speaking*, that screens in New York-based theaters like Metrograph and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Rose Cinema. Since 2015, *Creatively Speaking*'s mission has been to foreground feminist narrative and documentary films, paying close attention to Black women filmmakers.

Materre's series has had perhaps the most profound effect on me as a scholar and theater attendee. *Creatively Speaking*'s screenings include critical post-screening discussions. These discussions, and the social gatherings that followed, gave me the opportunity to hear and meet legendary filmmaker and activist Madeline Anderson and Pearl Bowser respectively. In addition, BAM Rose Cinema's film programmers Ashley Clark and Gina Duncan have also curated film series including experimental films made by Black women. Duncan and Clark use their roles as programmers to invite guest curators and to host film screenings that adhere to a margins-to-center approach in rethinking the film canon and the theater's role in perpetuating that canon. In Canada and London, feminist film journals like *cléo* and *Another Gaze* have not only served to amplify emerging voices around feminist film criticism, but have also regularly partnered with larger film festivals or museums to host film screenings.<sup>33</sup>

While it has been a joy to see more representations of Black womanhood onscreen, I am critical of this uptake when deployed without an accompanying discursive framework. The majority of recent theatrical film screenings around and/or including Black feminist experimental film, specifically in the New York area, tend to lack a pedagogical interest in speaking about the political aesthetics deployed in those films, and rather act as opportunities to extrapolate value from the representational image of Black womanhood. Of course, this practice of extrapolating value from Black women's labor while alienating them from that labor is not new, as it is birthed from the history of enslavement. Black cultural studies scholar Carla Peterson succinctly states that "the Black body was made to perform as a laboring body, as a working machine" that is disarticulated from the fruits of its labor (Peterson 2000, xii). I frame the dynamics of the theater—with regards to the ways in which it profits from the images produced by Black women while not centering them as an audience—as part of a structural critique of institutions around



film production and exhibition at large. Therefore, the phrase “representation matters” is not sufficient for the argument and discussion that will unfold here, as it reduces the structural system of cinematic inequality to the mere representation of the on-screen image without critiquing the spaces where it appears, its audience, the value produced around it, and its production. When I discuss the space of the screening of some of these works, I take great care to analyze the audience dynamics and the organization of the screening in order to see how and where the “value” of this representation is being defined and profited from.

### *Archives*

I entered the archives and watched with anger as filmmaker after filmmaker who could have had more visibility was institutionally sidelined again and again. I am grateful that so much of this dissertation has been filled with jubilant encounters; however, I cannot let go of the feeling of injustice that plagues many of these filmmakers’ careers. Many of the directors listed here no longer actively work in film. If they do, recent activity has come at the cost of an extended hiatus. I have had the pleasure to analyze some of the most profoundly moving films of my cinematic viewing history only to know that many of these women had to give up on their passion due to the structural inequalities that plague Black women and their labor.

I use fabulation as a critical practice, for it describes the framework that was needed from me as a researcher and scholar in order to make sense of the tensions that are presented in these films. In her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman methodologically queries what the official archives of slavery make available for us to know, what they render unknown to us beyond speculation or fabulation, and how we might aesthetically and representationally redress the afterlife of slavery in our social imaginary in the present. (Hartman 2008, 9) Fabulation has

been a fruitful channel for me to deal with the tension of possibility and ultimate disappointment in film creation that frame a great deal of Black women filmmaker's lives.

I conducted archival research at the L.A. Rebellion archive at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, the Sankofa collective collection at the British Film Institute Archives, the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at Emory University's Rose Library, the Whitney Museum Archives in New York, the Schomburg Center in Harlem, New York, Third World Newsreel in New York City, and the Center for Performing and Visual Arts at the New York Public Library. These archives have been instrumental in gathering and assessing films for this project. The majority of Black women's cinema exists outside of funding systems that would enable its digitization. And while distribution services like TWN and WMM serve an integral role in servicing institutional libraries, their non-exclusive rights ownership over the work, in addition to the lack of funding, hinders opportunities for streaming or preservation of these films until another platform facilitates a digital "roll out." In addition, many of the films that I researched exist in their original state as sixteen-millimeter film or on a poorly recorded VHS tapes. Only a portion of the films that I watched were available to view on DVD.

In my archival research, I analyzed photos, newspapers, production documents, and promotional materials. I analyze these documents in relation to the corresponding films or collectives that appear in each chapter. As I have discussed above, the screening pamphlets and ephemera around the films or a film series have proved to be instrumental in helping me track down filmmakers and works to include in this study. These pamphlets are also testaments to the way the films' supporters were actively trying to spread awareness about specific films, distribution companies, collectives, and filmmakers.

Archives are not just a store of past events, ephemera, art, and so on, but are rather what novelist Toni Morrison describes as the intersection of two lanes: the actual and the possible (Morrison [1990] 2019, 241). We free archives from the petrification of time when we allow them to lead us to what could be possible in time, in the past, the present, and the future. For Morrison, archives already denote a relationship to time and space. In this way, then, archives could best be understood as sites of memory. When we understand archives in this way, we are able to see their potential as sites of activation. For this study, my goal was to offer a critical response to not only the unequal conditions of writing, storing, and remembering Black women's work that occurs across North America and the United Kingdom due to systemic racialized sexism, but to think of the affective or emotional response that is produced as part of that scholarly work. As artists, archivists, and researchers we should take such a response critically, and ask why some classes of individuals are forgotten in the very spaces in which they should be remembered. We should use these inquiries and feelings as a reminder that we are accountable to not just the work, but to the lives—present, future, and past—who have been betrayed by institutional ways of remembering; the archive in the pursuit of *Man*.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Location***

I began this research by examining film archives that were accessible to me and that were easily searchable. My archives are primarily located in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. This study, however, is by no means a “Eurocentric” project. Yes, Eurocentrism haunts and shrouds how these filmmakers live and produce work, as well as the work itself, but I wish to frame this as a firmly Black queer feminist project. In “Chapter One: Kinship with the Dead” I address archives in the West around racialized and queer bodies that are not only embedded in an

archive of pain, but historically exist within a dynamic of “ownership” around Black women’s bodies, labors, and lives. The chapter expands upon my emphasis on the need for the archive for Black women, particularly one that is connected to an institution, if only for the financing purposes, while recognizing the archive’s “ownership status.”

I encountered a multiplicity of Black diasporic filmmakers with cultural ties to films, screenings, and archives in Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Caribbean and other territories through my research. This pattern of circulation suggests that when it comes to Black filmmaking practices, the Black diaspora is inevitably interwoven with the narrative of film and filmmaker alike. Because these filmmakers take the demand of Black cultural production seriously, it is evident that a dialogue exists with filmmakers, critics, and curators around the distribution of the work (as my own research methods detail above). These artists form bonds as they write, publish, and share each other’s work. In these methodologies, labor is a felt practice. The threat that if these films will remain underexamined if such work is not completed solidifies the cultural circuits in which these films travel. Critically, this labor demonstrates—what I will expand upon via Sylvia Wynter’s work—the activity of Black cultural production in the diaspora.

When discussing the viewing and teaching practices around early Black diasporic films in the United States, Black film critic and theorist Clyde Taylor notes that although he would write about Black American independent cinema, he was also keen to draw out the connections between those film practices and then-contemporary African cinema, in addition to foregrounding artists who travel to and from the continent. In this vein, Taylor and his wife Marti Wilson-Taylor, along with several other writers and artists, started The African Film Society in 1976 to plan and organize “film screenings based on improvised research into African

filmmaking,”<sup>35</sup> through which the organization traced connections between African and Black independent cinema in the United States.

Our crusade had a limited reach, with audiences sometimes as small as forty people. But it also stretched to different ends. We learned a great deal more about Africa, which we put to use in our individual ways. . . We soon discovered drives advancing the new screen imagery, like Oliver Franklin’s film series at the African American museum in Philadelphia. . . Pearl Bowser was a one-person film institute in herself, programming film series around the country and in Europe. Her dedicated revival of interest in Oscar Micheaux and early “race” movies helped the independent scene recognize that the trail had been blazed before. (Taylor 2016, x-xi)

My inclusion of this anecdote by Taylor is to demonstrate that the collective environment in which Black independent cinema has circulated—a category that includes experimental film—has often consisted of the writings and screenings of other Black filmmakers and writers. Furthermore, Taylor’s anecdote does three things. First, it demonstrates that by sharing these films via their own Black film journals or self-created African film societies, they were able to learn, as well teach others, that this trail had been traveled before, even if it was not documented. Second, it informs us of the critical role that archives play into forming a documented and accessible collection of these films. Third, it highlights how instrumental the labor of Black women like Pearl Bowser has been to the circulation of these films. Journals, film societies, film communities, and academics encountering these films help advance the “spread-ability” of Black feminist experimental cinema. It has therefore been imperative to my methodology to publish in accessible feminist film journals like *cléo* and *Another Gaze*, in addition to organizing film

screenings, conferences, and discussions around Black feminist experimental short films alongside the larger dissertation project.

Moreover, how might the relationship between Western distribution services like Third Newsreel and Women Make Movies keep an international record of Black women's work that is searchable and identifiable to a global audience (even if the prices to rent are not)? These databases have been instrumental in helping me produce a comprehensive research document in that they provided valuable metadata on format, actor's names, and production support when neither IMDB nor film anthologies could. The ability to search a database in order to write down the metadata of these films was essential in helping me conduct the following: renting films for exhibition viewing, requesting films for acquisition for the McGill Library collection, analyzing the format of the film, and finding "neighboring" libraries containing editions of the films for loan; I use this term loosely, as I have had to request delivery of films from libraries in other countries to Montréal, Québec. While these databases have been fundamentally important to my research, they have been less so for the actual distribution of the films, as the rights of some of this work tend to be non-exclusive and lie dormant with their distribution companies.<sup>36</sup>

I aim to create a dialogue that structures my project as a diasporic one and not one that largely reproduces the Western canon. Of late, film scholars have been over-eager to suggest that film scholarship of works produced or housed in the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom does not progress the field. To echo Lorraine O'Grady's arguments—written in her seminal Black feminist text "Olympia's Maid"—in the wake of popular methodologies arising in the 1990s to do away with identity at the very same time that Black women were creating a critical gaze, I, too, am frustrated. I am frustrated with popular film and art criticism that suggests that all work coming from the West exists in service of a white Eurocentric position,

specifically when this argument is to deter examination of Black feminist film production. Rather than name the overrepresentation of *Man*, popular criticism often seeks to pivot arguments on race to a national focus, facilitating the erasure of Black activities that work to refuse white supremacy and its nationalist articulations. I turn now to a review of Sylvia Wynter's work on Black feminism and film which shapes my overall approach to the study of this crucial work of Black feminist experimentalism.

### **Theoretical Approach: Sylvia Wynter, Blackness, and Constructing a Counter-Poetics of Rhythm**

Sylvia Wynter conceives of a counter-poetics of rhythm as the social imaginary of a global popular culture whose insistent challenge to the hegemonic social imaginary of *Man* lies within the “new video-like Black popular music forms” (Wynter 1992a, 260). While Wynter never returned to the term in her scholarship, she further elucidates in a footnote that rhythm, as carried out in Black music, constructs a rebellious thrust in the performer and audience. This thrust can be described affectively as the motion flowing through rhythm that links bodies with the beat. Wynter's turn to music video-like productions to explain the counter poetics of rhythm uses the metaphor of sound to examine how film aesthetics can draw that thrust out with images to its audience (Wynter 1992a, 260n37). I build upon Wynter's term to further flesh out the way the Black feminist experimental film and video works in this study by similarly using rhythm as an affective cultural movement that imbues their film and video aesthetics with the affirmation of Blackness—that is Black life, Black culture, and specifically here, Black womanhood. This aesthetic strategy exploits cinema's ability to generate affect to usher forth a rhythm of suppressed Black culture. I foreground this strategy in this study through Black folkloric

Southern and Caribbean spirituality (“conjure culture”), an ethical orientation in which kin relations are named and altered in the aesthetic “doing” of the film, rather than its meaning. Like the brief example of Dash’s film above, the commitment to alterity in cultural memory is for the well-being of the community. As Nana states, “It’s up to the living to keep the dead alive.” This is an ethic-aesthetic practice of rhythm—a counter-poetics of rhythm—wherein rhythm is affectively embedded into the work, transcending the soundtrack and background noise. Rhythm exists within the matrix of memory and can be understood of the associative practices of Black life that correspond and are linked temporally in a film’s aesthetics.

Wynter centers rhythm in Black culture for its “aesthetic/ethic principle of the gestalt”: its form itself is the production of aesthetic doing, and thus transmits an affective economy of senses and sense-making attributes in its production (Wynter 1992a, 245). Rhythm as the ethic-principle of gestalt shifts our attention to overall code of the cultural practice as well as the individual agents of the code within a cultural practice that carry associative meanings in their placement. This shifts interrogates Black life, memory, and its history for its struggles and resistance to colonial temporality through living and cultural practice. *Mnemonic Aberrations* constructs and mobilizes a counter-poetics of rhythm through Sylvia Wynter’s available scholarship on aesthetics, poetics, and *Man*.<sup>37</sup>

The counter-poetics of rhythm is a critique of Western aesthetic and mythological ordering of *Man* forged through the anti-colonial, liberatory practices of Black cultural production. I define *Man* and its memory as forces opposed to the fashioning of our global social imaginary in film and video art through its aesthetic reproduction. *Man*’s kin relations are mobilized through the ethno-class relations of commodity culture, where we aesthetically code ‘quality of life’ through material and commodity-based redemption. Anti-Blackness is embedded



within our present normative cultural hegemony, in which individuals are socialized as active participants in perpetuating anti-Blackness within every fraction of their being—intellectually, biologically, and socially. In McKittrick’s astute synthesis of Wynter’s unpublished manuscript “Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World” in “Rebellion/Invention/Groove” (2016) she argues that Black cultural production—specifically music—participates in the activity of rebellious reinvention of Black life. In so doing, I name my approach to Blackness as an activity fashioned through cultural production. This turn to foregrounding Blackness through its rebellious activities best conveys how global Black life emerges through various racial categorizations and differences following the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, in which the activities of cultural production—like ritual, spirituality, art-making, and more—enabled generations of enslaved and/or colonized subjects to name themselves outside of the “biocentric categories of being that cosmically anticipate Black dyselection” (McKittrick 2016, 89). My use of Blackness *as* an activity of existence that names itself through the refusal of anti-Blackness shifts my study’s attention onto the specific cultural practices and customs, like ritual and spectral conjuring, that are practiced in the films and video texts I analyze. <sup>38</sup>

This section first examines the origins of counter poetics of rhythm in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” before unpacking Wynter’s argument of poetics as enforcer of kin relations. I then turn to rhythm the affective cultural production of Black activity that facilitates rebellious inventions against colonial structures and time. I utilize Wynter’s argument on social labor to explain why a Marxist analysis is ill-suited for my study, due to its monoconceptual argument regarding labor and for the ways in which it fails to consider how the social imaginary also determines value and labor (Wynter 1992b, 75). Following Wynter’s argument, I outline the need for a pluri-conceptual model of labor that, in my analysis, allows me to attend to film and

cultural production's affective registers. I conclude with Wynter's argument that Black cultural production, as an activity, recodes time from a market-placed system to a sensorial one; time as a life process. To expand upon the idea of time as a life process, which can also be read as affect's temporal dimension, I then turn to a separate body of scholarship to explain my use of time's affective registers in film and video art through the work of McKittrick and Alanna Thain.

In "Rethinking 'Aesthetics'" Wynter builds upon her previous scholarship on *Man* and poetics to examine how cinema affects audiences corporeally and temporally. Here, Wynter makes an invaluable contribution to film studies at large through the assertion that cinema not only drives how our kin-relations are determined through the reproduction of our hegemonic social imaginary, but also how cinema can serve as the best medium for recoding those structures and producing a rhythmic refusal of anti-Blackness within its aesthetics (Wynter 1992a, 260). Cinema's hurdle—and one that I wholeheartedly understand—is its totalizing focus on representational value and meaning, which becomes particularly troublesome when ethnic principles of race are at the fore.<sup>39</sup> I read Wynter's turn toward a deciphering method as a shift to a more affective analysis of film: alternative methods must be utilized to make sense of audiences' corporeal and biological response to cinematic images beyond their representational meaning (Wynter 1992a, 258-59). She argues that principles of life and death are symbolically embedded in film's form, where its appearance triggers our senses to respond in kind; symbolic life principles being associated with *Man*, and symbolic principles of death with its *Other* (Wynter 1992a, 256). This is to say that the body's affective registers need to be biologically transformed in order for a refusal to anti-Blackness to be physically and intellectually practiced, and that cinema provides our best defense at carrying out this work (Wynter 1992a, 247). Representation alone, then, is not sufficient for conducting this work, and, in fact, representation

can actually work *against* its very aim by aesthetically constructing images of *Man*—that is, the reproduction of *Man*'s ethic principle of commodity culture—that come with the negation of Blackness, reducing it to a 'thing': commodity object.

I would like to further clarify the commodity-object position of Black life, which situates its alienated status in cultural production and relations with others. Within our normative consciousness, Black life is the negation of being, and is alienated to the pits of abstraction in which an ethic principle of relation to and with Black life does not exist. In this totalizing system, the alienated position of Black biocentrally indoctrinates everyone, including other Black individuals producing what Saidiya Hartman describes as the “natal alienation of Black familial bonds.”<sup>40</sup> Hartman describes that we are ‘constructed’ to alienate Black life as we have inherited kin relations and labor roles forged through enslavement where natal alienation, as a physical practice of removing infants from their parents, was a key organizing financial principle of that machinery of slavery. Blackness was constructed to be biocentrally, symbolically, and socially cut off from itself; birthed within a system where it could be stolen, uprooted, and alienated at any moment in time from its community. Enfolded in Hartman’s analysis here is to state that biocentrally our bodies respond to Black life through negation. Wynter examines this biocentric negation through biological terms like internal reward system (IRS) and genetically induced modes of kin-related altruism (AGKR [Wynter 1992a, 244-45]). Such language marries the corporeal and the intellectual—which are useful for her argument in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” but less helpful here. In my work, I turn to affect to expand and marry the intellectual and corporeal responses we have to Blackness.

This symbolic negation of Blackness, where a profit system of accumulation is constructed for Black personhood as commodified ‘objects,’ was made possible by the forcible

collision of the West with the New World. This collision solidified *Man* and its *Other*'s symbolic status through the unimaginable horrors of plantation slavery and the forcible removal and detention of indigenous individuals that created a calculable system of profit where *Man* understood itself through its *accumulation as study* (Wynter 1984, 25). *Man* via accumulation as study describes the quantification of *things* as value; in the academy this change coincides with the sixteenth-century discourse of discovery, where knowledge is a consumptive habit of being. Wynter links this change with the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade where *Man* is not only understood for its rationality but its rationality produced through commerce—the ability to buy/sell/trade cargo, which includes human lives.

Because the enslaved were planted in the New World as a mechanized labor force—not as buyers and sellers, but as commodities that were bought and sold—Black humanity was constructed as the source of alienation, as “non-beings/nonconsumers/mechanized labor.” (McKittrick 2016, 82) The profit system of capitalism became the initiation ritual in which individuals take on the representational body of *Man* through their ability to subjugate a labor force.<sup>41</sup> In this way, plantation beatings, lynchings, and police killings of Black life can be understood as rituals of *Man* that constitute its sense of self through its ability to subjugate others. McKittrick's “Rebellion/Invention/Groove” sheds some valuable insight on the question of Blackness and settler colonialism that I use, briefly here. She argues that the negation of Black humanity in relation to settlers and the violent theft of indigenous life in the New World as the construction of an alienated reality. The inhabitation of alienated status shifts our attention toward the activities of a people as geopolitical responses that work to unmake anti-Blackness (McKittrick 2016, 85).

These activities are the diasporic cultural productions that disarticulate *Man* as accumulation status and move toward a more human mode of relations, or being human being as praxis (McKittrick 2016, 85).<sup>42</sup> Being human praxis constructs human as not a noun but a verb situated in cultural activity of humanness and living (McKittrick 2015, 3-4). Human as praxis shifts our engagement with the human from a static being, that is fixed to its colonial meanings, to those who rebel against that petrification through creation where new cultural activity reinvents itself within this totalizing system of oppression. As stated, *Man* is not the human, but is the representational body of the human as dominator. Our social imaginary, which makes no aesthetic image possible for the human beyond a past-project that evolved into *Man*—specifically, through its accumulation as study—enables this image to take hold. This is to say that we are socialized to think of the human as something that is not possible in our imagination, but rather as a building block toward refinement. Human being as praxis disrupts the fixed representational status of the human and opens it up to heterogeneity that moves beyond singularities and sameness models of kin relations, beyond *Man*.

In her 1976 essay “Ethnic or Socio Poetics,” Wynter conceives of the Western Culture that emerged during the Enlightenment as a relational field of sameness—our hegemonic social imaginary—where a “we” is needed to construct the representational body of *Man* for the human (Wynter 1976, 78). The construction of *Man* was not defined first but rather came after is construction of an *Other*, with both *Man* and *Other* “bound in a *concrete* relation, a hierarchical global relation” where *Man* was everything the *Other* was not. In that relation, *Man* is understood as accumulative commodity culture, and its *Other* as “*cheap labor far away*” that makes possible *Man*’s rise as an ethno ruling class over others globally (Wynter 1976, 79-80). Of course, the *Other* was subsequently racialized and symbolically coded with the negative

principles of death, in relation to the sixteenth century mutation of *Man* from Christianity to rationality (Wynter 1976, 79). *Man*'s mythology and main organizing principle is that of commodity culture, whereas its *Other* is determined by its condition as a commodified object within our normative consciousness. This symbolic restructuring of *Man* follows the mutation in Christian divinity where all things 'good' carried the same symbolic weight of being blessed or ordained by GOD, and all things *Other* to that construction were damned and bore the symbolic weight of damnation and monstrosity (Wynter 1989, 642).

Put another way, the symbolic principles that govern our intellectual, affective, and biological relations and categorizations of humanity are based on the economic valuing of bodies and labor produced in the sixteenth century. Our notions of being and temporality (that is how we conceive and relate to time), as Wynter later argued, are fundamentally entangled with the construction of market-place value.<sup>43</sup> The biocentric and symbolic construction of kinship is temporal as we inherit relations of past kin relations and their organizing principles of sameness. Additionally kinship is *also* a temporal structure where relations to pastness and futurity are normalized and made legible to us based on sameness of temporal placement and associated value. Wynter asserts, then, that the aesthetics we inherit are not constructed for the purpose of human relations, but rather are capitalistically determined (Wynter 1992a, 252-53). It literally takes a biological recoding at every level of ourselves to resist these "sameness" structures and to find a new method to relate with—but most importantly, to make kin with—Black life in *time*. Rhythm, then, is mobilized in this argument for its heterogeneity in that a variety of different principles are associated with its form—this difference is what is needed to welcome otherness for we affectively, intellectually, and socially respond to rhythm—thus producing an opening of difference to reinvent ourselves and kin relations within a system of racial violence.

Rhythm in *Mnemonic Aberrations* is the activity of Black refusal of anti-Blackness that is structured into every aspect of our social imagination and normative consciousness, temporality, and memory. The deployment of a counter-poetics of rhythm is an expression of mnemonic aberration by Black feminists. In a footnote for her 1976 essay on poetics, Wynter describes rhythm in relation to cultural activity: “[i]n religious ceremonies in the Caribbean each particular god is codified by his own rhythm which summons him to the ceremony. Rhythm, music, in the [B]lack oral tradition in the New World, embodies and still embody the writing of that society. But this ‘writing’ is concrete, not abstract. It is learnt *only through* living” (Wynter 1976, 93n43). Rhythm is a life process, something that imbues life and affect into the body that can be further embodied and felt by others. Rhythm operates as part of the matrix of memory. Its difference from memory resides in rhythm’s abstraction. Some rhythmic beats can be named while others cannot; some waveforms have a referent and others do not. The ambiguity of rhythm opens up audiences to affect, a way that audiences can relate to movement and thereby relate to others: a way of finding and making “kin”.

This is to say that the rebellious practice of Black life does not reside only in the naming of anti-Black principles in the world, but rather in the creation of an alternative structure that reinvents the people against the totalizing structures within which Black personhood was produced. Rhythm becomes the ethic-principle of Black activity that, when foregrounded, asserts that our opposition to anti-Blackness must exist on a muscular level of embodiment in order to wage an assault against the hegemonic intellectual social imaginary of our existence. We must first feel and enact refusal to anti-Blackness before we can argue against it in the field of thought. This is human being as praxis. I now want to focus on a key aspect of Wynter’s scholarship that is not as often taken up by others: her critique of Marx and her subsequent move toward alterity

through affective registers, where we can return thought *to* feeling in our criticism and affirmation of Blackness. Where do we produce joy or rebellion under the system Wynter describes? It is my argument that marshalling the rhythm of Black activity through cultural production, and specifically through the counter-poetics of rhythm, allows us to do so. But I want to unpack more thoroughly the affective registers of anti-Blackness that constitute our normative poetics.

Following her rich assessment of poetics in “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” Wynter expands on her theory of poetics and builds an argument for a counter-poetic structure with C.L.R. James in her piece “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis” (1992b). This text uses literary analysis to examine how James’s work aesthetically works against the poetics of *Man* to narrate Black life beyond what can be represented alone (Wynter 1992b, 67). She turns her attention to the aesthetics of social labor as the symbolic ordering that shapes representation, arguing that our focus on the representation of labor alone—that is, a monoconceptual analysis of labor—fails to interpret how lives are socialized symbolically into an alienated status (Wynter 1992b, 68-69). Rather than engaging with James’s more representational political texts like the *Black Jacobins*, Wynter shifts her focus to *Beyond a Boundary*, James’s semi-autobiography and cultural study on cricket, to demonstrate the way James constructs a counter-doctrine in his poiesis (Wynter 1992b, 72-3).<sup>44</sup> I use “The Counterdoctrine of Jamesian Poiesis” to fill in the gap around Wynter’s construction of the counter-poetic in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’.” Moreover, her essay addresses the weight of poetics as doctrine in that the production of such work often indoctrinates a people into a dominant social imaginary. Poetics convey the code of being to others. To be effective, “systems of power must be discursively legitimated” and, because of this cultural aspect, “[serve] as a



code for the other's development. It is from these elementary cultural conceptions that complex legitimating discourses are constructed" (Wynter 1992b, 65).<sup>45</sup>

The very construction of a counter-poetics of rhythm necessitates a pluri-conceptual, rather than monoconceptual, model of labor that can attend to forms of embodiment within a system of racial violence in order to constitute a feeling of rebellious living. As part of the code of power that Wynter describes, the separation of mind from body was necessary in order to have Black humanity not question their enforced labor, but instead, critically, to believe that they could not learn from their labor, nor from their embodiment. That horrible crimes against the flesh had no form of 'knowledge' to them, divorcing physical actions from meaning and 'value' (Wynter 1968, 345; Wynter 1992b, 81-2). A counter-poetics of rhythm calls into question the structure of our social reality and labor that marks Black humanity with the position of negation—its alienated status in the world—and not only refuses those structures but affirms Black personhood within a structure of racial violence (Wynter 1992b, 67).

In her 1982 lecture on Marxist-Leninist feminism, Wynter delivers a rousing critique of the use and determination of value in Marxist thought. For Wynter, this conception produces a classarchy that erases bodies, largely racialized, outside of the position of the "laborer." Because these lives are socialized into positions of labor and our monoconceptual analysis of labor prioritizes the financial measure of value, little is said about the ways in which these lives produce a surplus of social value that constitutes financial currency. This conception of the laborer then produces a classarchy that ends up reproducing the continual exploitation of those outside of the "labor" status: "The issue here is the entire logic of classarchy's discourse of justification; and of the related mode of calculation and laws of distribution which enable the replication and reproduction of the global domination of the middle classes" (Wynter 1982, 19).

Again, I am less interested in honing in on one “meaning” of the films I will discuss than in how they disrupt, through their pluralities of aesthetic doing, the dialogical production of colonial meaning altogether.<sup>46</sup>

Wynter turns to alterity in Black cultural production as the key principle for rewriting humanity beyond cultural hegemonic ethno-organizing principles (and aesthetics) that work in the negation of Black life. Alterity is produced in cultural practice in order to assault colonial time, so that the subversive quality of Black cultural production’s rhythm “has been primarily its assault on this sense of time, its freeing of time from a market process, its insistence on time as a life process”(Wynter 199). Thus, rhythm becomes the underlying aesthetic principles emerging from plantation life, where we shift our ethics as aesthetics from pure, sight-oriented structures to ones of feeling. This shift represents a new emergence of counter-poetic work. Rhythm is the radical corporeal and affective sense-making as knowing that can alter our normative kin-relations and the structures by which they exist in the world. Rhythm imbues an alterity of rebellion through its sensorial practices.

To deploy rhythm in this study is to rely on cultural customs and rituals of remembrance where new forms of humanity are constructed in the face of opposition that not only manifest a new human relation but carry past generations to our present acts of cultural production (Wynter 1976, 92n43). These acts of cultural remembrance, in my analysis, open audiences to all sorts of strange and liminal positions of being. When that door of alterity is opened, death is no longer a barrier to the imagination but opens space to possibility and invites otherness within. In alterity’s connection to otherness, we may be able to achieve what I find to be an incredibly moving and beautiful goal: *agency and liberation for the lives lost to colonial violence, just as they aide and*

*help with determining our consciousness and refusal to anti-Blackness in the present; an expression of an ethic-aesthetics of care.*

Alterity in cultural production is a shift toward more radical assemblages of being than have previously been experienced. I extend Wynter's counter-poetics of rhythm to describe the use of mnemonic aberrations that undergird Black feminist experimental film. In the works I will describe, memory is taken as a key target of disruption by critiquing cinema's submission of memory of *Man* to its audience. This is agent-centered work that permeates a new consciousness for a people; it is, as McKittrick writes, rebellious invention for reinvented lives. As she argues, insofar as:

*reinvention* is the process through which enslaved and postslavery black communities in the New World came to live and construct black humanity within the context of racial violence—a range of rebellious acts that affirmed black humanity and black life were and are imperative to reinvention. *Invention* is meant to signal those cultural practices and texts—marronages, mutinies, funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music making and listening, revolts—that emerged alongside reinvented black lives. I want to point out, too, the relational workings of reinvention and invention: the reinvention of black life *and* attendant cultural inventions were engendered by the Middle Passage and plantation systems dynamically and simultaneously. One cannot reinvent the human without rebellious inventions, and rebellious inventions require reinvented lives. (McKittrick 2016, 81n6)

Rhythm in Black culture is the leading surviving reservoir of diasporic cultural memory. Rhythm is not only a cultural production but a form of knowledge production—an activity—that carries

and reanimates generations of suppressed cultures each time it emerges, be that as the beat of a drum, a twist in the hips, an oratory rhyme, or even a blues song. This is not to suggest that rhythm is inherently present in Black life, but rather to address how it *is* a learned communicative structure that can be deployed as a pedagogical tool for remembering cultures, bodies, and customs long lost or still practiced in racialized communities.<sup>47</sup>

A counter-poetics of rhythm aesthetically writes the aforementioned enacting of remembrance that is agent-centered in film and video work. Black feminist experimental film and video shows us ethics as aesthetics, but this is, critically, an ethics of care that affirms Black womanhood against the totalizing ethic principle of *Man* and its commodity culture. Although only mentioned in one sentence in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’,” a counter-poetics of rhythm has plagued my imagination as a way to define a very specific filmic practice and body of work where rhythm is the ethic-principle of aesthetic construction. Rhythm then resists the aesthetics of *Man* and produces a different representational image and understanding of Black womanhood beyond our normative symbolic and cultural hegemony. This is an image of Black womanhood freed from the memory of *Man*. It is for these reasons that I mobilize the term in this study, and for others to possibly utilize in future scholarship on Black feminist film and video work more broadly.

This section detailed my expansion of counter-poetics of rhythm through Sylvia Wynter’s available scholarship on the term. As I concluded there, rhythm, as part of a matrix of memory, recodes time as a life process and frees it from its market value structure that regulates bodies and critically requires the alienation of Black life to normalize this value-time in our colonial social imaginary and material practice. In this next section, I turn my attention to drawing out time as a life process what is better understood perhaps as time as affect by folding in several

other scholar's arguments that intersect with time and affect, notably Katherine McKittrick and Alanna Thain.

### *Time as a Life Process*

*That* we live in a society where we must recode time as a life process demonstrates the severity in which coloniality has stripped our capacity to *feel* time and in turn *feel for* and *with* one another. To recode time as a life process in our rhythmic work exhibits how we must breach intellectual structures of memory and embodiment to refuse their affective and economic anti-Black practices and recode them to a meaning that affirms Black humanity. Human being is praxis. McKittrick puts it this way: "Rebelling against this heaviness calls into question the preordained, profitable, and reflexively felt (as if bioinstinctually) workings of antiblackness" (McKittrick 2016, 86). Anti-colonial rebellions require a deep engagement with affect and cannot mobilize against colonial systems without with this awareness and engagement for, as Wynter and McKittrick argue, colonialization succeeds beyond the intellectual question and has affectively recoded our body's capacity to interpret affect through a lens of anti-Blackness. This rebellion recodes time and in the process pulls us out (either imaginatively or physically) of following an aesthetics of commodity-culture that rests upon the horrors and terrors committed against life. While corporeality is entwined with affect and time, I minimize its role in this section of the chapter because I take it up more substantially in my other chapters, most concerted in drawing upon Spillers's body/flesh spilt in "Chapter One: Kinship with the Dead" in relation the figure of the specter and Black women.

My working definition of affect is the labor the body commits to making sense of itself. Affection describes the beneath the skin knowing of that labor and, for me, often signals

interaction with another in that something affected me or caused affection. In his work on affect's intensity, encounters, and the social, Brian Massumi explains that:

The affect and the feeling of the transition are not two different things. They're two sides of the same coin, just like affecting and being affected. That's the first sense in which affect is about intensity—every affect is a doubling. The experience of a change, an affecting-being-affect, is redoubled by an experience of the experience. This gives the body's movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transition—accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency. Emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment. (Massumi 2015, 4)

Massumi's quote here conveys the doubling that affect produces in the body's interpretation and registration of affective intensity (through memory, habit, reflex, and desire). Affect is a reflexive, fecund force that in it each collision generates a new force but also several channels in which it attempts to stabilize or make sense of itself through oneself and others. In our normative consciousness, the fecundity of affect is minimized in the production of knowledge. This minimization keeps us from questioning how we affectively participate in systems of anti-Blackness—making it difficult to assess what Massumi describes as that outside/inside function of affect's doubling properties. That is, we interpret our experiences of being affected through emotions and feelings and it is this perception of being affected that makes affect personal to us. In our colonially shaped reality, affect is generated and facilitated through anti-Blackness. We feel this and interpret this anti-Blackness in every aspect of living thus, my turn to rhythm and drawing out its circuit with affect is a breach to what we know and *how* we feel in the world.

Rhythm breeches this system by reminding us of time's function as a life process and does so through its inherent ability to repeat time alongside an associated practice of cultural alterity.

The associated practice of alterity communicated through rhythm may be myths, specters, rituals, and experiences. These associated practices of cultural alterity emerge as a shock to our repetition of feeling in time that can temporarily (not completely) dispossess the body by reminding it of the “deep psychic levels, of a potential return to humanity” (Wynter 114). This return to humanity in time keeps that feeling alive for when must enact a “heretical (nonmarket) time” in order to sustain it against colonial temporality (McKittrick 2016, 88). A counter-poetics of rhythm as an ethic-aesthetic, commits what McKittrick writes as a practice “generated out of time and place, were also collaborative inventions because they were anchored to associative sounds, lyrics, myths, rituals, song, and experiences—associative because they are familiar waveforms, stories, and tunes that the [artist], the listener, the dance, the audience, come to know jointly” (McKittrick 2016, 88). Time as a life process is the heterogeneity of feeling time and all those who pass through its matrix in a moment. To feel time as a life force invites new collaborative engagements to emerge with others, for we experience a fundamental break in the immaterial/material spilt of being. Death and Gods become possible collaborators in this process and invites otherness within.

Alanna Thain's *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect* (2017) explains the body's affective capacity as a direct result of its sense-making of itself in time. Thinking and feeling for Thain emerge as “thinking-feeling,” a duplicitous sensation in which our perception is triggered by an event and that perception is immediately doubled by our sensory-motor schemata (Thain 2017, 14). Thain marshals this doubling to mount an argument about the body's natural mode of becoming another, or otherness, which defines the “heterogeneity of the self in time that

attends to its creative and compositional qualities,” as a way to welcome otherness within ourselves rather than separate from us (Thain 2017, 9). The separate other is evident in the more obvious tropes of cinematic otherness onscreen as seen with the zombie, ghost, and vampire (2017, 15). Thus, Thain shifts our attention to the body’s suspended modes of being in time, the process of becoming another as an, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ethological imperative that imbues different states of being of “thinking-feeling” that run counter to our normative consciousness (2017, 17). She foregrounds affect’s temporal dimension to accomplish this goal of imbuing a creative charge of indeterminacy of being made available to us throughout cinema’s unique ability to transmit images and bodies to an audience, to *do* something that in turn reveals our agential power of *doing* something (2017, 16).

Thain’s argument similarly advocates for an embrace of alterity put forth by myself and Wynter, albeit with a different methodological approach and inquiry. While I appreciate the move to suspense as a recognizable state of otherness that the body readily inhabits, I do not mobilize that element of Thain’s thesis in this study. Rather, I utilize the linking of otherness to the cinematic body in my work that allows us to foreground affect’s temporal dimension. For, “[a]ttention to otherness shifts focus from the sense that have dominated corporeal cinema theory to addressing the immediately relational quality of cinematic events” (2017, 27). I use this to construct an argument that moves us toward alterity not as an exhaustive site of the *Other*, as prescribed by our hegemonic cultural imaginary, but one that opens audiences up to time as a field of relations with movement, time as a life force. This process not only names the act of rhythm as a labor of cultural remembrance, but also critically designates a complete reorientation of our cognitive schema. We must name the origins of our mythological beings to move beyond them and alter our biocentric structures in open rebellion to what we *think* we know and *feel* in



the world. Such work is necessary to imbue a new cognitive schema of a refusal to anti-Blackness in our existence.

In order for such a change to our cognitive schema to emerge we must reconceptualize the materiality of the body through affective terms. This turn to the body as affect allows us to see the body not as a position but in passage, a deforming production of figures (Thain 2017, 37). To feel time as life process is to organize one's sense of self alongside repetition and here we might think of rhythm more concretely as the repetition of time through associated practice of cultural alterity in that we become displaced in time toward immaterial properties with material effects. This process allows us to reorganize kin relations, it is the affective construction of the body in passage where figures of otherness, like the specter, become possible.

This study welcomes otherness and recognizes otherness within ourselves as Black women. To paraphrase Hortense Spillers here, rather than disavow otherness how might the land in which that otherness was forged in the New World serve as an insurgent ground for unmaking the constraints of the body that 'gets' in the way of alterity, of inhabiting cultural remembrance? For Thain, her construction of the suspended body, and its knack for doubling, reorients our engagement with otherness in that through suspense, we can recognize our body's capacity for difference. I construct my use of cultural alterity in dialogue with Thain's definition of the suspended body. At the same time, I recognize a key difference between suspension and endurance, in which the latter shapes the rhythms I engage with in this study. Rhythm draws out the embodied practice of cultural remembrance that inhabits, welcomes, and performs otherness for a communal purpose of well-being (Spillers 1985, 167). This experience of feeling rhythm via Black feminist production might overwhelm us and reassemble our relationality to others in fields of knowing and feeling for one another. In her essay on ritual, Hortense Spillers calls this

process compassion; it mirrors my understanding of the counter-poetics of rhythm (Spillers 1985, 171). To feel time for its matrix of life is an ethic-principle of care for it combats our organizing socialized status of knowing time for its market-value structure of time is money.

*Mnemonic Aberrations* designates the embodied inhibition of cultural remembrance through alterity. Like Nana Peazant's act of ritual discussed at the start of this chapter, it is the use of the body to draw out otherness to others by way of making a living memory available that constitutes time as a life process. Again, as Black life was symbolically socialized as an alienated status of 'objecthood' and utilized to constitute time as money, unmaking that alienation to exist with others, to care for others and to be cared for is a central concern for these aesthetics.<sup>48</sup> My construction of mnemonic aberrations and the deployment of counter-poetics of rhythm *is* my contribution to a cultural studies of time and affect.

## **Chapter Outlines**

To accommodate the scope of this project, *Mnemonic Aberrations* is organized into two parts: the first on histories and the second on analysis. Part one foregrounds the intersecting histories of the emergence of the field of Black feminist experimental film from the late 1960s through 1998. I draw on interviews, anecdotes, gossip, and film criticism to construct a narrative of the collective commons of Black feminist experimental film and video artists working independently, alongside one another, and collectively during that period. Across three chapters, I locate the emergence of this field as corresponding to and influenced by the shift in consciousness crafted by global decolonial and feminist movements. Such shifts, I argue in "Chapter One: Kinship with the Dead," produced an environment where public opposition to oppressive structures opened up new possibilities of organizing and mobilizing in defense of

one's personhood. This emergent consciousness crafted an image of freedom from *Man* and used experimental aesthetics to convey what that freedom might look and *feel* like in the world, foregrounding the experience of Black womanhood. I trace the history of the pioneers in the field to examine the opposition they encountered and the strategies they utilized to craft experimental film and video work.

Part two foregrounds aesthetics and analysis through my construction of a counter-poetics of rhythm. I open this section with an expanded engagement with ritual in Black cultural production as a key ethic-aesthetic principle of care that filmmakers marshal to shift our relational engagement with film. This shift moves audiences towards movement—time as a life process—in order to unmake our socialized kin-relations and steer us into a different relational aesthetics. I conclude this section and this study with a focus on several film analyses, through which we see how Black feminist film and video construct a mnemonic aberration in their production of freedom from the memory of *Man*. These film analyses show how Black feminist video is not representative of a theory, but rather is demonstrative of the theory in action.

*Chapter One Kinship with the Dead: Agency and The Spectral Power of Affection in Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives and Suzanne, Suzanne (1979)*

I open the history of *Mnemonic Aberrations* with an analysis of the archival and film practice of Camille Billops. Billops's biography is a key example of how the decolonial politics of the late 1960s led to political and artistic emancipation for many Black women. In her experimental short film *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982), constructed through what I call an affective-archival aesthetic, we witness and *feel* Billops's obsession with the dead. This death-driven lens shapes her filmic hand as she constructs a spectral documentary of her niece's childhood trauma

and rehabilitation from drug abuse. Billops's film aesthetics mirror and expand the film's archival source material and screen the affective power of engaging with unorthodox materials and the various affects they carry with them. In *Suzanne, Suzanne*, Billops creates an experience where an ethic-aesthetic principle is delivered through the possibility of making kin with the dead. This very consideration invites a re-coding of social status and the way kin-relations are crafted through that status. I analyze my experience at the Billops-Hatch archives at Emory University and work through the specters that haunt that archive and Billops's filmography to argue that the specter's affection pushes memory beyond our hegemonic social imaginary to aide us in the construction of our agency in the present.

*Chapter Two Mothering Ourselves: I Am Somebody (1970) and Madeline Anderson's Early Film Beginnings*

Chapter Two consists of a narrative biography of filmmaker Madeline Anderson. I open this study with Anderson's early filmography by using her labor history as a filmmaker to examine the difficulty that Black women experienced in film production in the mid twentieth century. I strategically discuss accounts of theft of her labor to paint a picture as to how and why the records of film history do not account for the work produced by Black women at the time. I analyze Anderson's most recognizable film, *I Am Somebody* (1970), as an experimental documentary, which has yet to be analyzed as such in any other scholarship. Most importantly, I read Anderson's life through the lens of fabulation in order to correct for the numerous omissions of her aesthetic work and labor from the film canon. These corrections include highlighting how her first film, *Integration Report One* (1957), was instrumental to the development of the Direct Cinema Movement in the United States and attributing the

experimental film *Just Like You* (1969)—wrongfully credited to Osburne Smith for fifty years—back to Anderson. I start with Anderson’s work in order to question the genre of experimental cinema and to fabricate—both in the speculative and the literal, constructive use of the term—a genealogy of Black feminist experimentation that aesthetically moves the viewer to fabulate histories and temporalities around Black women’s labor. Through Anderson’s life, chapter two delivers a narrative of labor and critically focuses on what is at stake for Black women in film history, with erasure being the ultimate cost.

*Chapter Three Written in Ephemerality: The Intersecting Narratives of Black Feminist Experimental Film/Video Artists and Distribution (1970–1998)*

My third chapter traces the intersecting histories and narratives of several key Black film and video collectives that featured and supported Black feminist film and video work from 1970 through 1998. The collectives that I examine include the L.A. Rebellion (1968–1989), Sankofa (1983–1992), and Third World Newsreel Production Workshops (late 1980s to 1998). In this chapter I construct the collective commons more fully to retain the independence and creative agency of these women, who were working alongside and against numerous hardships in the production, support, and distribution of their work. I draw upon numerous interviews and film and video pamphlets to construct a narrative that centers Black women’s contributions to experimental film and video history, against a backdrop of white feminist scholarship and Black film scholarship that erases these contributions. This is specifically evident in the case of the L.A. Rebellion, where the majority of the available scholarship centers the rebellious activity of Black male filmmakers. This collective commons-ing work also demonstrates the rich communality Black queer women constructed in their environments as well as in their film and

video aesthetics, where mnemonic aberration is not only queered but is put to use in service of destabilizing the singularity of *Man* and the gaze. In addition, I examine the role played by queer women in the video art scene around TWN, who contributed heavily to the feminist video art scene but are rarely discussed.

*Chapter 4 Conjuring Caliban's Woman: The Ritual Body in Four Women and Praise House by Julie Dash*

I open the dissertation's second part with an extended examination of ritual, conjure culture, and women in Black feminist experimental film and video in the interest of constructing the ritual body. In Chapter 4, I use two films by Julie Dash, *Four Women* (1975) and *Praise House* (1991), to accomplish this goal. I analyze *Four Women* for its ritual-as-form method, grounding the viewer's engagement with ritual, and then turn to *Praise House* to mobilize my construction of the ritual body. By embodying compassion in the act of ritual, the ritual body enables us to interpret the affective power of ritual within ourselves. This act restores an alternative way of feeling, thinking, and being in the world and pulls consciousness from the "space" of what Sylvia Wynter describes as that of Caliban's woman. Ritual pulls lives into a zone of relationality that transcends the representational image in film. The ritual body steers audiences into the creative agency of Caliban's woman to create *something else* beyond time's colonial market value structure; an ethic-aesthetics of care.

*Chapter 5 Freedom from the Memory of Man: The Aesthetics and Analysis of the Counter-Poetics of Rhythm In Black Feminist Film and Video Art*

Chapter Five examines how filmmakers manufacture consciousness through their aesthetics; that is, their ethic-principle of care through rhythm. I select three Black feminist film and video works that foreground memory in different aesthetic ways for analysis and read them through their counter-poetics of rhythm. Martina Attille's *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) uses the memories of a dying West Indian migrant woman in Great Britain to exhibit her lived, embodied experience affectively through the film's aesthetics. In this portrayal, Attille combats the negation of Miss T's agency as expressed by her children, who struggle to fathom the history of their mother. I then turn to Leah Gilliam's formidable queer experimental video *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* (1995) to draw out how Gilliam imbues the frame with a queer surplus of memories as a way of jamming the cogs of the gaze. This jam seeks to create a new consciousness for Black queer women in time, as Gilliam distorts the archival images of the past to free stereotypes pertaining to Black women, like the Sapphire, from their petrification in time. Lastly, *Memory Tracks* (1997) returns me to my opening analysis of the specter in film to examine how Jamika Ajalon conjures the revolutionary past to aide her present, chaotic mental state. The desire to make kin with the dead is a stern rebuke by Ajalon of the alienated status of Black queer womanhood. With the video camera, Ajalon searches for the forgotten or mad women of the past, living and dead to create a commons of Black refusal.

I conclude my study with an examination of Black feminist experimental film and video work from the past few years. I survey the field through an analysis of the inaugural Black Women's Film Conference hosted by the Black feminist filmmaking collective, New Negress Society in 2019. To restate my central argument, mnemonic aberrations are the invention of memory from alterity by Black feminists. The film and video examples I discuss throughout this study are examined for how they aesthetically convey a mnemonic aberration—that is, their

counter-poetics of rhythm. A counter-poetics of rhythm refuses anti-Blackness in its aesthetics to affectively transmit that refusal as a feeling to its audience.

This dissertation is filled with stories. In conducting research on these lives, I have had to converse with scholars, attend film Q&A's, view films, and collect gossip. I have already delivered several stories that have aided my inquiry because they matter and need to be retold in this space. They are retold to not only paint a picture of what this project is and what is to come, but also to illustrate how I arrived at my current comprehension of this body of work. There are numerous lives, theorists, filmmakers who have, even in passing, shaped my project. Delivering these accounts here re-animates these memories for me. This study represents five years of my life, after all, and makes a witness of you ("the reader") to their lives and labor, as well as my own. While each chapter will not take the framework of a narrative biography, each chapter builds upon the others to examine what it means to reconstruct what is missing in the histories of Black women's film experimentation, and what role stories play in aiding that monumental task.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Bobo writes in her book, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) that the experimental or challenging filmic approach *Daughters of the Dust* did not hinder nor interfere with Black women's responses nor their interpretation of the film. Many felt that the aesthetic poetic license was necessary to convey temporality, bodies (reflected in both the unborn child and the ancestors), and change that cannot always be visualize before us (Bobo 1995, 183). *Daughters of the Dust* was not only a milestone for Black women's cinema but also for the question of Black feminist experimental cinema that I take up here. Unfortunately, Julie Dash was locked out of Hollywood for many years before mainstream audiences turned their attention back to her work and the question of Black feminist experimental film again (Martin 2007, 7; Buckley 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Experimental cinema is usually defined as cinema that "typically features nonlinear structures, nonnaturalistic performance styles, challenging subject matter, obtrusive camera work, and unconventional editing patterns" (Petrolle and Wexman 2005, 3). Feminist experimental cinema describes films largely produced by women who critique and challenge the "masculinist avant-garde aesthetic dogmas by juxtaposing narrativity and non-narrativity, deploying narrative pleasure alongside narrative disruption, providing viewers with identification as well as critical distance" (Petrolle and Wexman 2005, 3). Numerous scholars and filmmakers are quick to assert that women inherently creating experimental



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film does not make their work a feminist experimental piece, especially when so many white women experimental filmmakers in the mid to late twentieth century were adverse to the term feminist (Blaetz 2007, 10; Rabinovitz 1991). However, as other scholars have argued, if a film has a strong political critique of an aesthetic order then filmmaker intent is not sufficient to avow a film from the category of feminist experimental cinema (Rich 1998, 70-71).

<sup>3</sup> Al-Saji re-examines Henri Bergson's cone of memory as an effective demonstration of how, ideally, the past is filtered out for present encounters.<sup>3</sup> Bergson's "useful aide" of taking just enough of the past to inform the present is not applicable when dealing with racialized subjects, specifically Black bodies. Racialized subjects' bodily schemas have been over-determined by colonization so that each encounter pulls from the visual and ideological colonial temporality of existence. This is to say that history and the present is *in time* with colonialism and its fabrications (see Fanon [1952] 2008, 2). Al-Saji places one's racialized and marginalized past as a *present* problem. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* reminds us that the past and memory lives on through the bodies of racialized subjects and is in fact open for change (2008, 201). Thus we should move out of step with this colonial tempo that views the future and progress as *the site* for change and find (with the case of Blackness utilize) our own tempo/rhythm where possibility and change can happen at any moment; a tempo where the past is always open for re-animation and discussion. She writes,

The privilege of a racializing past owes, then, not only to dominance but to a form of temporal exclusion or 'othering': delays that are at work in both present and past. Other pasts, while not erased, are marginalized and reconfigured through this delay, unfolded and relocated as backdrops to a white world. Extrapolated from stereotyped identities, reactions taken out of context, protective rigidity, and temporality lived under oppression, this racialized past troublingly remains my own, while being at once that of imperial fragmentation and compartmentalization. (2016, 19-20)

<sup>4</sup> In this work, I occasionally cite directly from Sylvia Wynter's unpublished manuscript, "Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World." These citations feature the her name and the page directly in text.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am thinking of the insightful opening paragraph by Yvonne Welbon for the introduction to her edited anthology on Black out-lesbian women media makers where she notes that a significant portion of Black women's media making (30%) is produced by this minority population (Juhasz and Welbon 2018, 1).

<sup>6</sup> In the research that I have conducted thus far, I have found that Black women filmmakers create more short experimental films rather than feature length experimental films. One reason may be that, as short films require fewer resources to produce and finance, Black women have had greater access in making them. They also do not have to recuperate as much in the way of production costs for short films and they enable directors to experiment more with the medium. As a result, there may be a lower stake in regards to audience reception insofar as these film makers are not dependent on audience box office returns to be funded.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson writes "the first evokes a circle not concentric with another, an axis not centrally placed (according to the dominant system), whereas the second extends the notion of off-centeredness to suggest freedom of movement stemming from the lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference conceived as empowering oddness" (Peterson 2000, xii).

<sup>8</sup> My emphasis on Black women as a cultural group is informed by how Black women's bodies and labor bear, as Daphne Brooks argues, the "gross insult and burden of spectacular exploitation in transatlantic culture," while subsequently rendered by "hegemonic hermeneutics" as known, simplistic sites of inquiry

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(Brooks 2006, 7). To be clear, my interest in Black women is not to suggest they are political because they exist in a body that is at odds with a colonial structural order but, rather, that they are political because they utilize that position in order to shape their social and political practices and engagements in the world.

<sup>9</sup> “Chapter One: Kinship with the Dead” further expands upon this correlation, see “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism, Part One,” *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4(1968): 23-32.

<sup>10</sup> See “Cauleen Smith by Leslie Hewitt” *Bomb*, no. 116 (2011): 88-95.

<sup>11</sup> As such, I have seen my own role in this project multiply from scholar/researcher to curator, to interviewer, to archivist, to lecturer, to writer, to filmmaker. With the exception of my filmmaking practice, I incorporate the multiple roles that I have procured along the way as each one provided an opportunity for knowledge production on the topic as well as furthered insight and practice of the field itself.

<sup>12</sup> Third (World) Cinema aesthetics also had an influence on these artists’ practices/hold significance in understanding the experimental cinema. Third Cinema is a movement that came out of the 1960s in Latin America that specifically spoke to the conditions of “third world” countries and their resistance to neocolonial practices. The films from the Black Independent Film Movement of the 1970s through 1990s in the U.S. and U.K were influenced by Third Cinema filmmakers from Africa (Taylor 2016). Moreover, the collection of films I analyze also influenced films created in the past twenty years, after the peak of Black independent filmmaking in the 1990s. In this way, Black filmmaking from Third Cinema and in the Black Independent Film Movement continues to influence filmmakers and artists in the present.

<sup>13</sup> Here, I am thinking of Claudia Springer’s 1984 interview with Black women filmmakers from the L.A. Rebellion where she writes, “Financial difficulties continue after students earn their degrees. Some of the women I talked to work at clerical jobs, sometimes with temporary agencies that allow for flexibility when filming or researching a project. Other women use their film and video production skills in freelance work or to work for community centers. Still others work in the film industry, at jobs that do not fulfill their goals but may lead to advancement. They also pursue grants as a way to fund films; some women have received grants that contributed significantly to the production of their films. Others look for sponsors to provide money to complete a film” (Springer 1984).

<sup>14</sup> The centering of cultural/traditional customs as an aesthetic practice necessitated my shift toward an expanded study of reading these film and video work.

<sup>15</sup> Here, I take after Michael Gillespie’s argument of Black film as a question rather than an inherent attribute to a film’s form. I use Black film merely as a general descriptor in this section but do not mobilize any claims nor argument behind its use. See Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (2016).

<sup>16</sup> One can make the argument that a Black aesthetic exists from the position of cultural production insofar as Black is understood from the matrix of symbolic alienated status that constitutes the exploited labor force and erasure of Black/Native life globally. Such stipulations need to be clarified for Black must be disarticulated from its blanket use of referring to all racialized people as part of a system of Black disenfranchisement. This is to say, that in film and image production, scholars must be more attentive to how some Black media makers contribute to the memory of Man via an aesthetic reproduction of commodity-culture where freedom for Black life is conceived of through material (wealth) redemption. To be clear, I am not critiquing the marshaling of material ‘things’ to gain visibility by a lower-class

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people as evident is certain forms of cultural production around *bling* and ice, for example. I am rather critiquing larger instruments of media making that representationally ‘free’ Black life through the ability to participate in a for profit system of labor exploitation like *Black is King* (2020). See Krista Thompson’s *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Billops’s *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982) and *Finding Christa* (1991) both premiered to considerable acclaim and shifted the dialogue on feminist filmmaking and experimentation in mainstream art journals like *Artforum*.

<sup>18</sup> Wynter writes,

The point of my ongoing rethinking of aesthetics is to propose a practice of decipherment as a progression on, and extension of, Taylor’s “post-aesthetic critical practice” within the context of an imperatively needed “rewriting” of the human. Such an approach, I shall argue, necessarily negates not only the “specious autonomy” of cultural production but also, even more centrally, the represented autonomously determinant roles of social and material production. Because our present conceptual system of aesthetics and the models of analysis of literary and film criticism are themselves based on the premise of the “specious autonomy” of “cultural production” (as indeed of “social and material production”), a deciphering approach must necessarily move beyond the *limits* of even the most radical forms of literary criticism and theory—that of deconstruction as well as that of the “critical theory” frontier that David Bordwell recently parodied as SLAB theory, i.e., film criticism based on the scriptural theories of Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes. (Wynter 1992a, 241)

<sup>19</sup> bell hooks argues that this problem of being authentic is at times being synonymous with having to be “overtly political” in one’s film creation, thus establishing form as an afterthought (hooks [1990] 2015, 108-109).

<sup>20</sup> Afrocentric and Black nationalist aesthetics are different from what we now define and use as a Black aesthetic or Black cultural tradition. hooks defines their problematics as, “The Black aesthetic movement was fundamentally essentialist. Characterized by an inversion of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, it inverted conventional ways of thinking about otherness in ways that suggested that everything Black was good and everything white bad ... dismissing work by Black artists which did not emerge from Black power movement” ([1990] 2015, 107). Disavowing reality is a strategic tool for Black filmmaking as cinema has always been used as a tool to represent the reality of Black life. As Gillespie (2016) writes in *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, “And Black filmmakers are burdened with the rope chain of ‘reality’ in ways white people simply aren’t” and further that “the Black film must correspond to reality itself” (3-4). Blackness troubles the realm of make-believe for audiences, *even Black audiences*. The cinematic eye is trained to suggest that the visibility of Blackness presents an authentic portrayal of the Black life and nothing more. This has subsequently always proved to be a problem for Black filmmakers as in order to “fully cooperate” one would have to reproduce and follow the cinematic practices that construct, shape, and add to the white racist image of Blackness.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Clyde Taylor’s numerous articles on Black cinematic production does a formidable job at describing the whiteness of aesthetics (formal or otherwise) in film and discourse (Taylor 2003, 401; see also 1988, 1989, 1998). Even though he has reworked his Afrocentric positions discussed in “We Don’t Need Another Hero,” Taylor’s work does not fill in that gap of how we might enact an evaluation of Black aesthetics that takes formal and narrative aesthetics into consideration with the socio-political and cultural environment the film was created in.

<sup>22</sup> I also appreciate the numerous interviews that appear in film journals and anthologies by repeat reviewers such as Jacqueline Bobo, Janet K. Cutler, Valerie Smith, Michael T. Martin, and Phyllis R.

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Klotman for they heavily contributed to the production of a narrative on Black women's film and video to exist. See *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* edited by Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Culter (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> The space of the theater has always been a contested site for the image of Black women insofar as the theater was an opportunity to have white audiences gaze lecherously at the Black body. Thus, distribution and programming are also sites for infecting an affective feeling to instill new engagements with cinematic viewing, ones that allows us to unpack the social value of culture consumption and knowledge production through the act of watching. In her historical account of Chicago's theater scene during the Great Migration, *Migrating to the Movies*, Jacqueline Stewart argues that in addition to structural system of discrimination and segregation that demarcated public spaces along the color line, the theater was in service of deploying racist images for white eyes for their pleasure. Moreover, this dynamic has also been theorized by other scholars as a model of training white immigrants in the early twentieth century on socializing them through "American" values of "racial ideologies necessary to assimilate into mainstream American life" (Stewart 2005, 5).

To foreground the space of the movie theater along its racial history and affectivity produced around race is to foreground the political dimensions and possibilities that exist within the theater for the viewer. Stewart frames the movie theater and its audience as exemplar of the colloquial phrase of a "nigger in a woodpile" frequently used in the mid nineteenth century American culture to express that "something or someone" was amiss, suspicious, or hiding something. The phrase the phrase was most commonly used to suggest that there was some "Black" in someone's family history and was also notably used for one of America's cinema's earliest short films in 1904. Stewart deploys the phrase to argue that "racial difference has function as something like the proverbial 'nigger in a woodpile' of early film history and theories of film-viewer relation, including those developed by revisionist film scholarship. That is, "Blackness has been an ever-present but strangely inconspicuous, and therefore insufficiently theorized, element of the cinematic institution" (Stewart 2005, 5). I synthesize Stewart's argument here to expand how the theater generates and harnesses affect by way of constituting one's subjectivity in opposition to the image of Blackness onscreen.

<sup>24</sup> These pieces include, "Women Directors of the Los Angeles School" by Ntongela Masilela, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops" by Monique Guillory, "Fired-Up!" by O. Funmilayo Makarah, "Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze" by C.A. Griffith and "Michelle Parkerson: A Visionary Risktaker" by Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson.

<sup>25</sup> Black feminist experimental exists in tandem with Bobo's rich description of Black women's cinema. Although I am hesitant to use the unifying moniker of Black women to suggest a field of practice, Bobo clarifies that Black women's cinema addresses and validates the concerns that Black women face globally without essentializing nor collapsing any of the filmmaker's identities. In this vein, Black feminist experimental cinema expands upon this framework in that these filmmaker's utilize experimentation to raise critical arguments about the composition of the cinematic image and its relationship to time, space, and memory. I am amazed and frustrated by the depth and nuance that Black women filmmakers deploy in articulating their work as their male colleagues (of any race) are afforded the opportunity to not discuss nor frame their work in a critical manner. Men's cinema often travels through the labor of others without much intervention on their part. For most of the earlier history that this dissertation examines, Black women filmmakers were doing this labor with often only the assurance and support of other Black women in the field. This dissertation seeks to excavate the unequal distribution of labor that Black women produce in and around the production and distribution of filmmaking.

Bobo's introductory essay is dedicated to providing a genealogy of the practice of Black women's cinema. She details the unfortunate uniqueness of Black women's cinema is that Black women carry the work with them, meaning that the visibility of Black women's cinematic work is largely attributed to the labor by Black women which includes; screening, distributing, reviewing, and curating films. Bobo assess

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how she encountered Black women's cinema for it came from alternative institutional and distributional services. Bobo recounts the conferences she attended on Black women's cinema and how meeting scholars, filmmakers, archivists, and critics help expand her awareness of the field (Bobo 1998, 3-5).

<sup>26</sup> Special curated journals have also aided in the production of assembling film titles and directors for this project. Here I am thinking of 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue *Black Film Review* (1984-1995), edited by Leasa Farrar-Frazer, dedicated to African American women in film and video in 1994. Repeated scholars like Janet K. Culter, Phyllis R. Klotman, and Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson appear in interviews and scholarship on Black women film and video makers like Cauleen Smith and Melodie McDaniel. I found this issue to be extremely useful for its article "Seeing Through Our Own Eyes," by Shari Parks which gives an overview on Black women directors working in the field. Other issues of *Black Film Review* have been instrumental in assessing responses to select Black feminist experimental work when they premiered during the magazine's tenure.

<sup>27</sup> See "Eating the Other" by bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* where she recounts the opposition to her scholarship and is accused of 'essentialist' discourse due to her centering Black womanhood in cultural and film studies ([1992] 2015, 30).

<sup>28</sup> In a 2017 keynote address delivered at the Undine Twenty-Fifth International Film Forum at Gorizia, Italy, Horak outlined the dismal state of archival collection and why (and how) many marginalized filmmaker's work are excluded from collective practices (not including personal collections). He states that the aesthetics of a film not only affects what is exhibited but also what films are preserved and archived and thus remembered as having a genealogy or history to them (Horak 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the format of these models also set it outside of the range for theatrical screening as 35mm motion picture film matches the standardized 1:85 ratio of the theater while Super 8mm and 16mm were often deemed incompatible for screening purposes.

<sup>30</sup> In a conversation with Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet, Thomas Allen Harris, Shari Frilot, Leah Gilliam, Dawn Suggs, Jocelyn Taylor, and Yvonne Welbon entitled "Narrating Our History: Selections from a Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora," in *Sisters in the Life: A History of Our African American Lesbian Media-Making*, Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet makes a poignant remark about the constant struggles Black queer filmmakers have with funding,

Production value is a hard topic among us. Let's face it. How many of us have gotten enough money to produce what we want or need? I produced because I have a network of friends who are constantly helping me to produce the work, and because I teach to get access to postproduction—not the best, but it helps. The grants I have gotten have been very small. Technology is an issue since a lot of us don't have the time, the money, and the space to be trained in new technologies. (2018, 40)

<sup>31</sup> I selected films that were under discussed in the framework of film studies and Black film studies at large or films that had yet to have their work discussed as experimental (which was the case with Madeline Anderson's *I Am Somebody* [1969]).

<sup>32</sup> Chenzira was part of the New York Black Independent Documentary scene in the 1970s alongside Julie Dash and Kathleen Collins. See "Controlling the World Within the Frame: Julie Dash and Ayoka Chenzira Reflect on New York and Filmmaking" by Michele Prettyman in *Black Camera* 10, no. 2(2019): 69-79.

<sup>33</sup> *cléo* unfortunately ceased their publication in the summer of 2019 due to Ontario government slashing arts grants funding which cut a key grant they utilized to sustain their publication.

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<sup>34</sup> Eusong Kim brilliantly calls for scholars to question their relationship to memory when conducting archival research in her poetic essay, “Found, Found, Found: Lived, Lived, Lived.” Kim details the legal problems that artist Carrie Mae Weems faced with her photographic series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, which appropriated Louis Agassiz’s “ethnographic” photographs of Africans. Agassiz, a nineteenth century zoologist, believed that photography had the potential to prove the racial inferiority of Black individuals” and thus strived to photograph them in a manner where the specific phenotype features of the Black body would exaggerated to white eyes. After sitting in a box in a zoology department at Harvard University, “Agassiz’s son donated his father’s research to the university and the archive remained in the zoology department until 1975, when they were “discovered’ and quickly moved to the museum and exhibited in 1986. They remain the property of Harvard University: “this is the provenance of their ownership” (2016, 54).

Weems’ *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* utilizes text to emphasize the colonial framework by which these images were created under and to allude to their ghastly after lives that still persist in the present. “You became a scientific profile,” one such caption reads overlaid onto a profile image of a Black bared-chested woman. According to Harvard, the photo series was a misuse of their archives and the images belonging to them and they threatened to sue. Weems stated that “I think I maybe don’t have a legal case, but maybe I have a moral case that could be made that might be really useful to carry out in public,” and, as Kim summarizes, Harvard flexed their monetary and legal power to hold both the original and the appropriated daguerreotypes by purchasing *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. I detail Kim’s article insofar as I believe it succinctly summarizes institutional power, dispossession of history and Black lives that exists in the archive and as such speaks to the haunting qualities of the lives who exists in and gather around the archive.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor writes, “The African Film Society (AFS) began in 1976 as a small group of Bay Area media and PR savvy cultural activists and artists. The original core included my wife, Marti Wilson-Taylor, and Valerie Jo Bradley, Edsel Matthews, Iris Harvey, and Sandra and Fasil Demissie, with other generous spirits like Juma Santos and Ed Guerrero pitching in. We planned and organized film screenings based on improvised research into African filmmaking. We focused on African film from the jump, thinking it the newest and neediest scene then commanding attention. But we always included Black Independent Cinema and diaspora films in our brief, even though we hadn’t fully grasped the ferment taking place on the Westwood campus. Still, the trail was due to lead back to Los Angeles” (2016, x).

<sup>36</sup> Sentient.Art.Film, founder and directed by Keisha N. Knight works with distributors with ‘dormant’ titles to make arrangements for streaming licenses via such platforms like Kanopy, Alexander Street Press, Mubi and others.

<sup>37</sup> Assembling the bulk of Wynter’s scholarship was itself a special archival challenge as the majority of her earlier (prior to 2000) journal and chapter articles have not been digitized. This separate, but related, endeavor to my archival research took me two years to acquire and scan the chapters out of print books, journals, and plays that I have used to build my scholarship upon in *Mnemonic Aberrations*. This research is reflected in my References.

<sup>38</sup> I am indebted to McKittrick astute synthesis on Wynter’s 900 page unpublished manuscript and have included it here,

“Black Metamorphosis” traces the ways the Middle Passage and plantation systems produced the conditions to reinvent new forms of human life. Rebellions, uprisings, and cultural production, Wynter writes, disclose black intellectual strategies that “operated by a different principle of thought from that of the rational mind related to that of the plantation” (109). She continues, “Revolts were, at one and the same time, a form of praxis and an abstract theoretical activity.

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Neither could be separated from the other. Theory existed only in praxis; praxis was inseparable from theory” (139). Part of Wynter’s underlying claim in this text is that black rebellion is an intellectual breach. It is worth repeating that what is being breached (a dominant order of consciousness and its attendant initiation system that rests on entwining biocentric and economic antiblack practices) is heavy: it is a naturalized and normalized teleological belief system that preordains a racial economy of antiblackness and black objecthood; it is narrated as a commonsense cosmogony and “destiny” (444). Rebelling against this heaviness calls into question the preordained, profitable, and reflexly felt (as if bioinstinctually) workings of antiblackness. (McKittrick 2016, 86)

<sup>39</sup> See bell hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, [1992] 2015).

<sup>40</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1(2016): 166-173.

<sup>41</sup> As McKittrick writes, “These same processes ... humanized white colonial geographies as productive sites of settlement, belonging, and capital accumulation. Belonging and settlement and accumulation ere thus entangled with dispossess black labor united and entrenched, extrahumanly and not , the ‘nothing’ of the enslaved and the ‘being’ of the settler” (McKittrick 2016, 89).

<sup>42</sup> I appreciate McKittrick’s further clarification of the alienated status of Black life in the New World for the way that she situates it in relation to the status of the settler, and how arguments that suggest otherwise negate indigenization from the construction of global Blackness. She asserts that indigenization should not be considered in the spatial claims as defined by our hegemonic social imaginary, which defines land and history in absolute claims, but rather, that “indigenization is rebellion.”

Indigenizations are *ongoing* rebellions that demand we think outside our normalized order of consciousness (an order that sites the consumer-driven-accumulating-property-owning-always-wealthy-noun—place human as a finished, settled, thrived-for figure that is seemingly unmitigated by the messy consequences of interhuman exchanges that were [and are] engendered by our collective plantation histories and futures) and uncover the potentially of rehumanized liberation and joy. (McKittrick 2016, 86)

McKittrick masterfully coalesces multiple points from Wynter’s body of work into this passage, specifically Wynter’s ongoing move toward the human.

<sup>43</sup> Wynter argues that, “[t]he really fundamental spilt between the *we* and the OTHER, between Western and the non-Western cultures, began in the sixteenth century, when the world-market economy was first established, and a world economic system, global in reach, because a reality” (Wynter 1976, 79).

<sup>44</sup> Wynter asserts,

The national question was also to form part of an even more fundamental question—that of the autonomy of the body category. As such, it initiated a calling in question of the abduction system on the basis of whose analysis the entire polis rested. If, as Cornelius Castoriadis tells us, his *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group was to base its theoretical evolution on the fact that, at a certain moment, they pulled the right string, that of “bureaucratization, and ... simply and ruthlessly kept pulling,” the string that the Jamesian poiesis pulled was the centrally related question of autonomy, the autonomy of the body categories. Pulling this string, James called into question the entire “socially legitimated collective representations,” the social imaginarie (Castoriadis) on the basis of which both the mode of social relations (i.e., *bourgeoisism*) and its economic expressions private property capitalism and nationalized property socialism, are legitimated. The question of autonomy once posited, James would stand in its truth. It is here that the doctrine that emerges

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from *Beyond a Boundary* puts into free play the great heresy of the Jamesian poiesis. (Wynter 1992b, 72-73)

<sup>45</sup> This spilt carried over into the Marxist critique against capital, where the form-representation of *Man* as accumulation, or *homo economicus*, is fleshed out and the position of the laborer becomes the default, in opposition to *Man* (Wynter 1992b, 75). Wynter argues that the ‘ethno-class’ construction of *Man* carried the symbolics of blood, where kin-relations are facilitated through the power to purchase and where the human earns their freedom (to become *Man*) through material redemption (Wynter 1992b, 66-68). *Man*, then, becomes defined not by its poetic ability to name things, but rather by material objects’ ability to name *Man* (Wynter 1976, 87). That is *Man* is defined by how many objects they own. Our poetics then, cannot simply be the opposite of *Man*. “Chapter Four: Conjuring Caliban’s Woman” examines this dynamic more concretely via the push for Caliban’s woman as a model of conjuring meaning beyond coloniality, which moves us past the position of seeing ourselves as *Man*’s eternal opposite to battle for eternity, like Caliban and Prospero.

<sup>46</sup> Wynter writes, “[s]uch changes must therefore call into question both the structure of social reality and the structure of its analogical epistemology; they must involve ‘shifting our whole system of abductions. [To do this] we must pass through the threat of that chaos where thought becomes impossible’” (Wynter 1992b, 67).

<sup>47</sup> Amiri Baraka argued that rhythm’s nonmaterial cultural—“music, dance, religion [that] do not have artifacts as their end product”—were the ones to have the strongest chance of survival in face of mass suppression (James 2016, 156).

<sup>48</sup> See Seven Beckret’s *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2014). Beckret makes the argument that the clock and the construction of standardized time was modeled after plantation slave labor through the cotton trade emergent in the New Americas and later in the Global South.



# **Part One: Histories**

## Chapter One

### Kinship with the Dead: Agency and the Spectral Power of Affection in Camille

#### Billops and James V. Hatch Archives and *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982)

“Why are you crying?, Because I remember.” Suzanne to Billie, *Suzanne, Suzanne*

“Anything dead coming back to life, hurts.” Amy Denver, *Beloved*

“The times of the village, from 14<sup>th</sup> Street to Christopher Street. The memories. People should never forget where they come from.” Egyptt LaBeija, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*

### Introduction

In all of the above three passages we encounter how specters force the living to remember. The specter of memory or the dead ushers forth an overwhelming, if not radical, archive of affect to be experienced and points to agential powers beyond representation and language. The specter is the liminal body in between life and death (the living dead) who lacks both the power to communicate through speech and a representational image of itself and yet finds a way to communicate to us all the same. The specter constructs its existence through its ability to affect others, its power of affection. The specter of memory, then, is when a memory (not necessarily something or someone that is dead) gains an ambiguous bodily presence to affect, literally becoming an embodied *thing* rather than an affective past event. Following the above, I argue that Black women are uniquely cast into a position of liminality, not unlike the specter, where our normative symbolic codes construct our bodies as the passage between the living and the

dead. Black women's liminal placement reveals how one is materially abstracted while subjugated by the material effects of that abstraction; we are not just the passage of liminality but the articulation of that passage (Holland 2000, 43). If liminality is the zone that defines the precarity of Black women's bodies in the world, how do audiences accept and interpret meaning beyond speech or representation in Black cultural production? As anti-Blackness biocentrically determines our capacity to feel for others, specifically Black women, how might Black women, living and dead, marshal a spectral power of affection to construct agency and alter others' relational— affective, psychological, and biocentric— engagement with others and *time*? The Black woman specter is productive for this project's goal at navigating the forms and affections produced by Black women's mnemonic aberrations in their experimental film practices. What examples are available for us to follow, and what do they reveal about reading affect in relation to Black women? I turn to affect— specifically, affection via the specter here and the spectral power of archives— in cinema as a key analytical tool in interpreting agency and new models of kinship crafted by Black women in experimental cinema.

Making kin with the dead is necessary work. In her book on Black subjectivity and death, entitled *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity* (2000), Sharon Holland argues that the specter of *Beloved*, from the Toni Morrison novel of the same name (1987), “literally embodies the experience of being Black and female, an experience that remains consistent regardless of changing times and discourses.” She continues, “If the liminal *Beloved* is the discourse and body that ‘allows *and* ‘enables’ us to speak, then Black women in contemporary America are surely in trouble” (Holland 2000, 43). Holland is rightfully concerned by this impossibility for it situates Black womanhood as a reflexive state of liminality in that we are not the margins of humanity but lie at the core in which humanity must come to understand

themselves, this is as Spillers describes her position as a marked woman (a “Sapphire”) for if she did not exist she would have to be invented (Spillers 1987, 65). I argue that it is precisely this dichotomy of the ambiguous body of specters living in the shadow world and communicating through affection (that is finding a language outside of property rights) that makes self-actualization possible. For Black women exist in troubling times (at any time) where autonomy requires inventive, if not foreign, measures that exceed what we know and inherit about Black women’s bodies in colonial episteme and time. Moreover, the Black woman specter folds in the psychological power of kinship, in that in order to make sense of her affection we have to enter a mode of relations with her, and in this relational engagement we are provided opportunities to amend her abjection in the world through care. A film, like *Suzanne, Suzanne* redresses Black womanhood’s alienated status through Camille Billops’s affective archival aesthetics for this style of filmmaking mandates an ethic-principle of compassion into its frame where specters can freely affect others.

In this chapter, I analyze the work of black feminist scholars as both theorists and literary authors to define the agential, creative power of the mnemonic as manifested through the figure of the specter and the production of archival remembrance. Billops mobilizes the archive’s radical wealth of affect, due the eccentric material present, as an filmic aesthetic practice—crafting an affective archival aesthetic. This affective archival aesthetic takes on the ethic-aesthetics of a counter-poetics of rhythm. While largely focused on the labor of Camille Billops in both her role as an archivist and pioneer in Black feminist experimental filmmaking, I use the spectral bodies of Morrison’s *Beloved* and Fatima Jamal from Tourmaline’s 2017 experimental film, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, to frame the specter as a type of mnemonic aberration that deploys a power of affection in pursuit of crafting their self-actualization in the world. I turn to

the writings of Sylvia Wynter and her analysis of kinship and the agency of Black women against the backdrop of decolonization and various women's rights movements to articulate how they shape Black feminist arts and criticism. Wynter's 1968 essay, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism," works through the complicated, and nearly impossible structures for Black cultural survival and empowerment in an anti-Black world. In a separate essay, "Ethno or Socio-Poetics," Wynter argues that kinship is not organically defined but rather is produced through poetics. Through that poetics, communities come to learn how to relate and care for one another (1976, 78). I attend to the transformative potential of such a poetics in regards to the alienated status of Black womanhood. The specter and Black feminist spectral power are modes for disrupting poetics of *Man* and rewriting our kinship with other Black women. In so doing, we come to recognize aberrant sense-making processes, like a specter's power of affection (to make themselves known by getting beneath our skin), that may additionally help us alter how we define agency for Black women. This is to say that the creative ambition of Black women writing themselves into existence is a force beyond what we know in the world and stands on insurgent ground of our very abjection that works against us. To be clear, I do not view Black womanhood as a unified position and welcome disruption to that representational power. It is for these reasons why experimentation becomes a key tactic in not only helping Black women achieve self-actualization but, also, in destabilizing the representational power of the massification of Black women. Moreover, my use of *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* in dialogue with *Beloved* and Billops's practice is an attempt to redress the erasure of Black trans women from how we culturally remember Black women.

I turn to the specter and the space of death to examine how both embrace zones of liminality, what Hortense Spillers would describe as the ability to fall between the cracks of language and the grammar that constitutes the human body (Spillers 1987, 78). Within these zones of liminality lies the agential power for us to speak in new, restorative ways through affection, for it culls memory on insurgent ground that is both damned by our social imaginary but simultaneously out of reach from its interpretation. In this way, the figure of the specter in film and in the archive's spectral power aims to redress the violence against Black womanhood and break through the everyday obfuscation of the racialized death of, and violence, against Black women.<sup>1</sup> The specter can alter a director's poetics of the memory of *Man* to a form that recodes time as a life force and constitutes the freedom from the memory of *Man*. This poetic transforms the very relation of kinship; it not only acts as a measure to see the poetics of *Man* for *what it is* but acts *as* its counter-poetics.

I use the term specter over the more common ghost, or even the more culturally-specific haint, for its ambiguity around the 'body,' or housing, of a phantom.<sup>2</sup> Although specters and ghosts can be used interchangeably, specter is not solely interpreted to be the spirit of the dead but rather refers to the appearance of a haunting and ancestral kindred. Black feminist spiritualist Leisha Teish distinguishes between spirits—which I view in line with my use of specter—from the generic ghost as being in search of ancestors “to get their guidance, protection, and healing, so that we may be better able to create a better world” (Teish 1985, 80). The specter then can take on the form of a dead person or an event, for it ‘represents’ the kindred ‘bodies’ of the living dead. To extend this further, I situate my use of specter in dialogue with what Michael Taussig refers to as the “space of death,” as a site “where the social imagination has populated its metamorphosing images of evil and the underworld” in the colonial tradition (Taussig 1984,

468). *With, through, and after* colonialization, the space of death blends and binds colonizers to the areas they colonized and are thus areas of violent transformation around the self in relation to life and death. In this way, the space of death situates the colonial parameters of land and the violence to create those borders in which those spaces and their aftermaths anticipate the appearance of the specter and spectral power.

Moreover, specters can also be a thought or feeling that haunts you. This latter definition situates the haunt as inherent to the meaning of the specter, whereas with ghosts it is supplemental to their existence; while all specters are a form of ghost not all ghosts haunt whereas all specters do. The specter's ability to haunt opens a critical engagement with memory and the past making itself known in the present; it is an engagement that does not feed into modes of nostalgia, which can stifle and fixate the past as an idealized space in time.<sup>3</sup> Haunting is the specter's ability to wield affection and it is this power, a feeling of a presence beneath our skin, that causes the living to react in a distinctively embodied way: one that recognizes the transformative power of affection. Haunting is also what helps the specter and their memory resist what performance studies scholar Joseph Roach describes as how genealogies of performance of the dead become absorbed by national/dominant structures (Roach 1996, 25-26). Put another way, the specter's indexation of a haunt inculcates the necessary alterity to dislodge us from repeating the memories of *Man*. Roach's scholarship allows us to read *how* cultural rituals are absorbed by the Nation and dislodged from their position of alterity. Haunting prevents the casual consumption of a culture's ritual by the image of a nation-state for it affectively communicates memory outside of the realm of what is considered permissible in coloniality. By working through this deeply affective register, haunting transfers a different feeling of possibility to its audience and the world, a model by which we recognize spectral

agency, including within ourselves. The specter's power of affection also transforms kinship from an ethno or familial organized structure to one of relationality, one that enables us to care for dead. The specter of the Black woman in this chapter is the product of colonial erasure and misogynoir, thus their appearance and power of affection is itself a violent rupture to make the silenced past live in the present.<sup>4</sup> Such violence has no language available to it within our normative consciousness, for our normative consciousness constructs itself through that violence, but can communicate through sheer affection.<sup>5</sup>

Like film, archives can be described as haunted machines that enact the mobility and stage the manifestation of the specter—to give access to the shadow world, the invisible (Breton 2015, 114). Archives carry the image of the dead in their belongings; they stir new forms of enactment and new affections with each engagement. I use affection here following Kara Keeling's distinction of affect and affection in *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, where affection, following the work of Henri Bergson, describes the "moment in which one's perception ceases to measure an object's potential action upon one's body and begins to sketch out the object's actual action" (Keeling 2007, 13). In this way, Keeling situates the skin as the barrier between affection and its degree of difference with perception. Affection remains an immaterial flow of forces that is often understood through the channels of affect in which it is perceived to others like feeling and emotion. Affection in cinema then defines the zone or time between perception and action where the immaterial constructs itself in relation to bodies where desires, wants, emotions, and needs can be made visible through their appearance or embodiment onscreen (Deleuze 1986, 90). Affection determines the type of movements and sensations experienced as part of that contingency of affect that is always already ongoing in and out of the body.



Although I am not drawing upon the same body of literature (save for Deleuze), I extend Elena del Rio's 'power of affection' here to define the experience of the specter as possessing the same affective performance that a body does in that an affective performance is *any* body's pursuit of ontological being (Del Rio 2009, 3). For it is the "actualization of the body's potential through specific thoughts, actions, displacements, combinations, realignments—all of which can be seen as different degrees of intensity, distinct relations of movement and rest" (Del Rio 2008, 9). To gain a body in this chapter can be understood through two key definitions. The first, Gilles Deleuze's understanding of the body as "an assemblage of forces or affects that enter into composition with a multiplicity of other forces or affects restores to the body the dimension of intensity lost in the representational paradigm" (Del Rio 2008, 3). The other, specific to Black womanhood, lies with Spillers's formulation of the body as situated by the flesh, the zero degree of social conceptualization, its pure affective zone that is violently ripped from the entity of a discrete body. Here, the body represents something that can maintain and channel that affection with protection (Spillers 1987, 67). I construct the body in this chapter rather ambiguously for I am not piecing together a corpse for reanimation. As Spillers describes bodies are reflexive of the abstraction in which they are socially and discursively condemned. The specter's ambiguous body reveals and models to us all the ways in which Black women have used their bodies and its liminality to write themselves into existence. This agential power is a reinvention of their self within a system of patriarchal racialized violence that fashions new kin relations with others as a result.

The specter's power of affection in my work relating to Black womanhood enacts an ontological and agential power of assemblage of affection. They, like living Black women, reside in the shadow realm, risking exposure each time they pursue communion with the living. To

‘body’ forth a specter in discourse is to deliver an ambiguous body to the affection we feel from that otherworldly power and entity—be that through their appearance in the archives, in memory, and in film. The specter’s power of affection and the spectral power of the archives and experimental film invents a new mode of agency for us to follow. The poetic crafting of that power not only aggressively works against the present legal, dominant discourse on Black womanhood that defines our bodies as expendable laborers, but also crafts a counter-poetics of rhythm in its production.

The work of Black feminist literature and experimental film provides a template of this counter-poetics of rhythm in action to demonstrate the disruptive power of memory. I propose we read the specter and spectral power as a type of mnemonic aberration. In its aberrant form, we witness the agency of the specter and a model of crafting new political consciousness—one that is accountable to the dead—for the specter is a body out of time: the dead [past] living [present]. Such power and ontogenic possibilities are suppressed within our colonial episteme; the specter cannot communicate through this language that we have inherited in this world. In his essay “New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall reminds us that white ethnocentric theory does not have the vocabulary to think critically about black divergent and counter-poetic work. Black artists and critics invent a language for us to speak from (Hall [1988] 1996, 443-444). Moreover, Wynter argues that this lack of language was necessary for the mobilization of the super myth of *Man* to spread. Ethnocentric work hinges upon the oppressed lacking words to define their conditions, embodied and structural. To lack the ability to name yourself then places you outside of poetics and its aesthetic principles (Wynter 1968, 351). It is this writing from the self, that is using our labor and embodied experience as thought, where agency emerges, shifting our understanding of

agency away from the repetition of powerful signs and individuals but towards a more affective means of knowing outside of it.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter first examines, in a broad sketch, the Billops-Hatch archives at Emory University to narrate how the exclusionary practices of institutional erasure of Black feminist experimental work happened alongside the ongoing developments of a new decolonial consciousness in the 1970s. The affective-archival aesthetics of Black feminist work, in both archives and film, gives room for specters to enact their affection, disrupting their exclusions and asserting their presence. This section grapples with what do we do when we feel that affection that we cannot name, and what modes of resources might be available to us to interpret the affection of the specter in our archival encounters? I use my personal experience with the specter's affection as a model of what this work might look like. Following my examination of the Billops-Hatch archives, I situate archives and the affective methods necessary to read them as bridging the gap of the incorporation of more radical affective scholarship, like Black folkloric spirituality. Radical affective means are needed to respond to living in the wake of the ordinary violence and terror that makes up Black womanhood; the archival materials I examine, and the archive itself, provide tools for doing this work. Wynter would call this declaration of Black folkloric spirituality or conjure culture, by another name, a re-enchantment of our knowledge of the human.<sup>7</sup>

Following my call for a “dose of the spiritual world” in our scholarly methods, I examine the Black embodied specter as seen in *Beloved* and *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* to see how this power of affection makes self-actualization possible for Black women. The specters of *Beloved* and Fatima possess a transitory status of existing between two worlds in that they are both understood in deeply incorporeal and corporeal ways by others. This liminal zone in which Black

women are condemned may help us remake our bodily agency and our manifestations of consciousness to and for others. I conclude with an analysis of Billops's *Suzanne, Suzanne* to examine how, by focusing on spectral power of affection, we are able to analyze how Black women's experimental films redress Black womanhood through the production of a counter-poetics of rhythm which moves us from the poetics of *Man*.<sup>8</sup>

I view Billops's work as feminist, not only because her identification as a feminist but also for the affective, generative way her films redress the violence of Black women's bodies.<sup>9</sup> Billops's attempt to move the abuse of Black women out of silence in the film is not through representative means but rather through the film's affective qualities, intensified through the use of experimental aesthetics—not unlike the work already pursued by Billops in her archives. I frame Billops's aesthetics as practice that 'screens the archive,' thereby amplifying the archive's spectral power of affection through the film's capacity to generate affect (Cvetkovich 2002, 109). Other Black feminist experimental film and video mirror in their poetic structure, I argue, an affective-archival aesthetic that was pioneered in *Suzanne, Suzanne*. The power to resituate the dead through this agential work situates the director and archivist (sometimes one and the same person, as with Camille Billops) firmly as a conjurer, a concept I will expand upon in "Chapter Four: Conjuring Caliban's Woman." Their work is a testament to the overwhelming amount of labor one must do to write themselves into the world of mythology against coloniality. Black feminist's creative power to cull meaning from beyond our social imaginary creates an aberration to our socialized subjectivity of negation. The specter's affection and our acceptance of its power refuses anti-Blackness and makes available alternative kin relations for Black women. This aforementioned practice is useful for assessing the ways in which Black feminist

filmmakers reestablish communality with one another not through collectives alone but through *time* and in their film and video work.

It is for those reasons why I pursue experimentation in film as necessary for the building of emancipatory consciousness. Experimentation enables the director to move Black narratives beyond the poetic structure of whiteness and the temporality of colonialism and move them into ambiguous zones of affection instead, like conjure culture. Thinking through spectral power enables us to embrace affect for reading archives more comprehensively and to analyze how archives themselves offer an arsenal of materials (often lacking a clear representative focus) that require modes of alternative analytic and investigative engagement. Experimental film, similarly, is more expansive when read for its spectral power, critically when the power of affection is delivered by a Black woman. My turn to the archives in the following two sections, my experience studying the Billops-Hatch Archives and my methodological approach to archival study with affect, is experimentally constructed in that I work with the affective gaps and tensions of archival work not just within the study themselves but how they emerge within the researcher, specifically through my body. In recounting the physical toll archival research took upon me, I situate a demand to turn elsewhere to make sense of this effect, which is in this study conjure culture. Turning to alternative sense-making discourse like conjure culture provides a vocabulary for me to make sense of archives affective aesthetics and how a filmmaker like Billops turns that topology into an affective-archival aesthetic in *Suzanne, Suzanne*.

### **The Camille Billops & James V. Hatch Archives at Emory University**

Camille Billops was born in 1933 and died on June 1st, 2019. An archivist, artist, and experimental filmmaker, she was instrumental to the archiving of Black American culture where

she paid close attention to family narratives, works of theatre and film history. Death is only the beginning for this project, and it was often the genesis for Billops's work as well. For Billops, death catalyzed the excavation of what *was* and *is* known about the world. Billops, along with her husband and collaborative partner James V. Hatch, created and collected work that built Black futures, fracturing our engagement with colonial time in the process.<sup>10</sup> For decades, their archives were available for viewing by appointment in their SoHo loft. In 2002 they donated the bulk of their collection to The Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University, where, fifteen years after their donation, I was the first applicant and recipient of the Billops-Hatch Fellowship in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

I experienced *something* while conducting my brief residency at the Rose Library for the Billops-Hatch archives. I cannot say that I was haunted by a single specter but rather that I endured an ongoing haunting from specters I encountered there, both of the dead and those of the tragedies and forms of neglect that become apparent in and around the materials themselves. I felt a deep affection from these specters; they helped me alter the trajectory of my dissertation and my methods of analysis, but they also made me physically ill. My encounters with the Billops-Hatch archives did not manifest itself in an *image* of a specter, as other scholars have experienced, like Avery Gordon's accounts in her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* ([1997] 2008).<sup>12</sup> In that work, Gordon argues that interactions with ghosts *does* something to us and our bodies. She writes, "It is the precarious but motivated transition from being troubled, often inexplicably or by repetitively stuck explanations, to doing something else that [the specter] charts with exquisite fidelity. It is the necessarily experiential and embodied quality of the transformation upon which they insist" (Gordon [1997] 2008, 202). The specter's power of affection can be transformative in helping us care for them and enact

change for them and, in return, ourselves. But, critically, if Black women's bodies exist in a liminal state of existence, then recognizing the specter's power of affection positions us not only to learn and strive for affective modes of relationality in the world but also to understand that type of work as agential, and a powerful challenge to our colonial temporal structure.

My body was starved when I conducted my residency at the Billops-Hatch archives at Rose Library in the fall of 2017. It is not that Atlanta has a shortage of decent food; quite the contrary. It was rather just that my placement in a hotel in Druid Hills, alone and depressed, made me extremely nauseous, eating no more than a Panera Bread meal once every other day, if that at all. Compounded with this perpetual state of hunger was the task I had of committing to a week-long residency at the Rose Library as part of my ten-day stay in Atlanta.

I suppose my hunger was a product of an unintentional fast of some sorts, for it made me more vulnerable and sensitive to the energies and affects available in the archives. Zora Neale Hurston situated fasting as a preparatory action that makes access to the spiritual world or communion with specters possible, in her study on conjure culture in the American South, *Mules and Men* ([1935] 1990). Speaking of her own experience for her Voodoo apprenticeship, Hurston writes that fasting moves the body into a more liminal space akin to meeting it on the same spiritual plane of existence as the dead. "Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must that seek answers never given to men as men" (Hurston [1935] 1990, 199). Hurston suggests that our conscious body cannot fully feel and work with the specters. While they may be able to haunt regardless, the fasting body opens us up to a fuller transformative experience of encounter. There are different energies during states of hunger; it invites engagements with a fuller affective register, including sensorial ones that may normally

be suppressed otherwise. Subconsciously, I might have known what my body needed to commit to this work in order to open up to the spectral power of the Billops-Hatch Archives.

My unintentional fast foregrounded the intensity of the spectral power of affection. I was physically sick multiple times during my archival experience. My body let out a wash of material effects to communicate that I needed to slow down, that I needed to feel what was not only present in the physical materials in that space, but also what was available in the room. I needed to (re)turn to my own spiritual upbringing and training as a conjurer, something I deeply resented and resisted when I was a child. Tears, vomit, and snot were the evidence of the emotional toll that experience had on me, drawing a sharp contrast to the pristine archival facilities of the Rose Library. The Rose Library is located on the top floor of the Robert A. Woodruff Library at Emory University. Like most institutional archives, one can only enter by permission and by prior reservation. The study and research area is framed by floor to ceiling windows, bracketing the space off from the public, which, inadvertently, is a clear analogy of the tension with institutional archival research as a visible source of inaccessible materials and histories. Inside the research area there are several deep, thick mahogany desks measuring around sixty by forty inches for researchers to use, each one placed an “acceptable” distance from one another. My affections expressed in response to the Billops-Hatch archives were, in many ways, intrusive to this space.

Like the varied material present in the Billops-Hatch archives, I was “too much.” I was *too* snotty (I used all of their tissues), *too* weepy (I am certain I made enemies with the other researchers who became irate at my wailing), and I was *too* nauseous, which required *too* frequent bathroom breaks to vomit, and meant I had to clear through security to exit and re-enter the collection each time (I do not recommend this). I was spilling over with emotion and



heartbreak during my stay and left the experience feeling more exhausted and confused than when I entered. The Billops-Hatch archives is expansive in its collection on Black American culture but it is also deeply personal in the way Billops uses the collection to incorporate the lives of her family and her artistic practice. In the archives you will find a cornucopia of material; dissertations on nineteenth and early twentieth century Black theatre; the constitution and meeting notes from the American Negro theater; publicity film stills of Black actors from the 1920s-1980s; the *Artist and Influence: The Journal of Black American Culture* series, with the recordings and transcripts of their interviews; Billops's filmography, posters and press flyers for her films, and her art prints; and an assortment of books, including Billops's *Harlem Book of the Dead*.

The Billops-Hatch archives are a living record of Black existence and Black contributions to the arts that refuses nineteenth and twentieth century colonial canonical recordings that omit Black lives from their findings. The Hollywood star images of Black actors best reflect this tension of erasure. Few of them convey Black actors in a leading role but rather show them as extras, supporting players, and playing cameo parts. The care Billops put into naming them, regardless of their role, is evident through her handwritten annotations on the back of each image. She names their existence when all other records stress their absence. In this way, the collection points to various forms of Black self-determination under difficult conditions of targeted erasure. We see this in the American Negro Theatre's constitution, productions, meeting notes, and ephemera, where they used these documents and recordings to name the value of their experimentation to the theatrical form, as ways of crafting a new mythic theatre that is attendant to the pain and experiences of Black people. Experimentation for the American Negro Theatre afforded them the opportunity to go against popular, racist performances of Black life (Figures

1.1, 1.2, & 1.3).<sup>13</sup> There was also a healthy dose of spirituality present in these archives in the form of doctoral dissertations, supervised by Hatch, on Hoodoo/Voodoo in early Black theater. These dissertations reminded me of conjure culture's power to transform notions of being and meaning in the world that we see taken up in this study.

I found Samuel Christian's doctoral dissertation, *Four African American Female Playwrights, 1910-50: The Narratives of Their Historical, Genteel, and Black Folk Voodoo Plays* (1995) to be especially moving. He situates the autonomy of Black womanhood against the backdrop of the misogynoir that shaped Black familial relations at the turn of the twentieth century. Christian argues that, through the work of playwrights May Miller Sullivan, Eulalie Spence, Thelma Myrtle Duncan, and Shirley Graham Du Bois, performance and conjure culture enabled Black women to exercise different, freeing forms of embodiment that were not permitted to them elsewhere. Christian's dissertation provided me with a useful model for understanding why Black women turn to conjure culture to heal rupture between the then and now of Black life, but also a model of how, though not the same approach as taken here, to incorporate that work into one's scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

In the same way as I saw my work in dialogue with Christian's dissertation, the Billops-Hatch archives provided material examples where such separate lives and scholarship were culled together through film screenings, programs, and journals. This ephemera shows Billops in a community of other Black women directors, including her peers, like Crystal Griffith, Dianne Houston, Cauleen Smith, and Michelle Parkerson. This can be seen in a flier for a Black Women Filmmakers Series held at the "Ethnic Studies Dialogue: A Critical Issue for Twentieth-First Century America" that was organized by Claudine Michel and Jacqueline Bobo.<sup>15</sup> They organized the screening around Bobo's Women's Studies course and through grant and

departmental funds at UC-Santa Barbara (Figures 1.4 & 1.5). Documents like this of an academically organized program speak to what Terri Francis describes as the “delicate relationship between donor and archive director, the publicity strategy of a growing academic enterprise, and the mutuality between multiple cultural organizations” (Francis 2019). The power of collection for Black culture is never ‘personal’ for it demonstrates the far-reaching extent in which individuals have had to fight to preserve the history and value of Black culture in the West. These personal collections demonstrate the collector’s active pursuit of memory that then is absorbed into the institution as a way to ‘repair’ the stressed absences that appear outside of the archival holdings elsewhere within the institution.<sup>16</sup>

The bulk of my affective-archival engagement was dedicated to the memories that emerged in the oral histories for the *Artist and Influence* series. *Artist and Influence* was a journal of interviews conducted with contemporary Black artists at the Billops-Hatch SoHo loft from the 1970s until Billops’s death in 2019; Hatch passed away shortly after Billops in February of 2020. The transcripts from these interviews were printed as a journal bearing the same name. Outside of the published transcripts, each interview was filmed for their archives and is available to view at the Rose Library. The series itself was born out of several exclusionary exhibitions in the art world in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A key inciting exclusionary exhibition lies with, of all places, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1968 *Painting and Sculpture* exhibition of art in the 1930s in which no Black artists were included.<sup>17</sup> Billops, who was part of the Black Emergency Culture Coalition (the BECC), as well as several Ad Hoc committees focusing on women artists, staged demonstrations in front of the museum for the duration of the exhibition to demand that the Whitney acknowledge its racist, sexist curatorial and administrative actions (Figures 1.6 & 1.7).<sup>18</sup> Although the Whitney did not change

the exhibition, several years later they dedicated their lobby floor gallery to the curation of solo exhibitions by Black contemporary artists over a period of several years. A recent contemporary exhibition at the Whitney museum, *An Incomplete History of Protest (1968-2017)* confirmed the BECC's actions as the cause for this type of "reparative" work through the display of internal administrative notes and documentation. The BECC also protested the 1969 Metropolitan exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* which featured hardly any Black artist's work on Harlem.<sup>19</sup> Despite itself the exhibition included the largest offering of James Van der Zee's photography but only as 'anthropological' materials and not as art objects.<sup>20</sup> What we can take away from these actions are how the need to defend the dead—in the form of Black artists and their work—transforms their personhood. Billops is emblematic of this change as she began to crash artist openings at the Whitney Museum in the 1970s and take slide photographs of the guests and fellow-party goers; she affectively called these artist openings "Negro Nights" (Billops Hatch 2015).

These events stirred Billops and Hatch to create an oral history series as a way to document who was there, and begin a record that would refuse the erasure of Black humanity. In her interview about the genesis of the Billops-Hatch collection, Billops had this to say:

Also what we did, was a very important thing was to get stories before the stories changed. Like who started the Studio Museum of Harlem. You know there's a lot of people up there saying 'well I did this and I did that,' so Betty Taylor was one of the early founders. At the time she was working with the museum of modern art with the children's program. And through that they were able to get grant money to start something in Harlem. As if they don't want you to stay downtown; go uptown. But all the people involved who were in the early board knew that we did it. When Mary Campbell

[one of the Studio Museum founders] took over, I said baby get it done cause people are going to change the story. So we got the beginnings of things: who was there, who was not there, when somebody died, what were the audiences at that time, what was the art that they were showing, cause it was doing the whole militant time. Where everything was defined by black this or whatever it was at the time. But the artist who initially starred in the first show was an abstract artist. And the studio museum was beginning to develop that whole question about what was black what was not and who was in and who was not and this and that. But we did that. And it was so important. People come here now to look at well when did that start, when was this, who was there, and that became a very important part of who did what when and it continues, people still come to the files to go back to the 70s. (Billops and Hatch 2015)

Billops's attends to 'history' in the present from the perspective of the future historian. Critically, she recognizes the immediate need to document the story before it changes or before someone else changed it for them. The *Artist and Influence* series was Billops's way of demystifying the institutions of remembrance, where Black women exist as essential laborers who sustain these places, but without acknowledgement, becoming unspeakable 'bodies' and workers in the art world.

*Artist and Influence* is the most comprehensive gathering of Black feminist experimental directors' interviews that I was able to draw upon when piecing together the counter-history of Black experimental filmmakers for this study. I was also able to find direction because of the work Billops did to collect works by filmmakers Howardena Pindell, Julie Dash, Madeline Anderson, Ada Gay Griffin, Linda Bryant, Yvonne Welbon, Michele Parkerson, and Pearl Bowser. These hour- to two-hour long oral histories paint a tapestry of communal networks

across geographic boundaries as to how Black feminist experimental film was produced, distributed, and who it influenced. I draw on these oral histories throughout the dissertation and in particular in the following chapter on Madeline Anderson. The series gave me the opportunity to create a genealogy of what Billops describes as “when did that start, when was this, who was there ... who did what when” (Billops and Hatch 2015)? It was viewing the oral histories where I felt my body was most wrecked and vulnerable, for it is also the largest collection in which I experienced these artist’s dreams ‘fail’ in the archive, in that they were denied the possibility of expression due to structural oppression. I became ill viewing interview after interview where the conditions and treatment surrounding these Black women remained the same. I was further disheartened when the archivists pointed out to me the similarities my own work shares with Billops, piecing together the threads of a forgotten—nay erased—history through the lens of remembrance. I am still working through my experience and am not interested in giving it a specific name. Rather, I want to acknowledge the deep, psychological weight these women’s lives and their stories have on me and my work. The severity of the abuse they faced was communicated to me in part through my own physical deterioration over the course of my residency, and the psychological pain I still bear when recalling that experience to others, even here.

Abstract artist Howardena Pindell’s *Artist and Influence* (Billops Hatch 1989) interview speaks to the racism and sexism in communities and movements in the New York art scene of the 1970s and 1980s with great specificity and turmoil. She describes feeling yanked back and forth between racism and sexism throughout her artistic career, often finding her Blackness placed her outside of the affective bonds of ‘sisterhood’ experienced with white women. Pindell is largely an abstract painter but has found herself in various educational and curatorial positions

throughout her career, which included serving as an Associate Curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1970s. Despite Pindell's success, she stated, with brute frankness, that she was treated like "the help" in the feminist, largely, white art circles. Her extensive resume was used not only to tokenize Pindell as an exceptional Black woman but was also used as a deterrent to other Black women, "If you can't be superwoman, we don't want you," echoed Pindell in her interview.<sup>21</sup>

The toxicity of white feminism bled into Pindell's artistic practice and shaped her first experimental video work *Free, White, and 21* (1980). In that experimental short, Pindell stages a faux interview with a young, white woman reporter (played by the artist) inquiring about her experiences as a Black woman in the arts. The video becomes increasingly more experimental and more hostile as the interview continues with Pindell wrapping her face in bandage at the end and the interviewer dismissing Pindell's account of racism in the arts as nothing more than an overreaction, stating "but then again, I'm free, white, and 21!" What this video (which sadly is not analyzed in depth in this study) reveals are the ways in which Black women are marginalized and subjected to labor exploitation in white feminist spaces as well as outside of them. *Free, White, and 21* goes even further to label the overwhelming whiteness of the feminist video art movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. The experimental short is a living record of the erasure and silencing of Black women inflicted by white women, challenging feminist video discourse that suggests Black women were not interested in video or that the style was a more inclusive medium for others.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, experimental documentarist Yvonne Welbon's *Artist and Influence* (Billops Hatch 2002) interview resonated with me for the difficulties and barriers she encountered, not only as a filmmaker but also as a PhD student researching Black women directors in the 1990s.

In Welbon's oral history she situates her scholarship as indebted to the archival work of Billops and Pearl Bowser, especially when major institutions were rejecting or losing archives/donations on Black experimentation and Black independent film history. Billops provides an anecdote during Welbon's interview on a major donation of Black experimental work in the 1970s that was mysteriously "lost" at Oberlin College by the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Welbon's anecdotes possess valuable information on distribution in that many distributors were unwilling to "take a risk" on Black experimental film and video. Welbon approached this barrier by becoming an independent distributor and marshaling visibility through the then-nascent Amazon.com, and selling her work to institutional libraries by approaching librarians or scholars to request them to acquire her work for their institution's collections.<sup>24</sup> Welbon's interview speaks to the larger, structural inequalities that situate the erasure of Black women's cultural production, especially queer Black women, not as the result of ignorance of Black women directors but often as a result of malicious, racist interference.

As painful and nauseating as it was to encounter, I appreciate the failure that resides in the archives for they speak to, as Wynter writes, "the impossible odds against which they were pitted ... the heroic failures are only matched by the squalid and innumerable failures of the many" (Wynter 1968, 350). Thus, the documentation of failure informs others of the violence that ensures that Black women do not receive recognition or gain autonomy in the world. As Holland reminds us, the overwhelming question presiding over Black lives is: how do people of color gain a sense of empowerment in an anti-black world (Holland 2000, 16)? My turn to the specter and spectral power is an attempt to recognize and transform the aesthetics and conditions of misogynoir that has pushed Black women's bodies to the liminal thresholds of what is human and non-human. It is paramount that we learn to speak from that liminality and make sense of



modes of communication that exceed speech. It is in that creation where new models of existing become possible for others to follow, performing a type of daily revolution against time.

I am still deciphering my affective physical reaction to the Billops-Hatch archives, for there is much left to make sense of. But what I can resolutely grasp from my experience is the need to foreground conjure culture in my life and scholarship. As someone far removed from my familial relations and upbringing with conjure culture, it is my interpretation that part of the spectral power that I felt was to remind me of that power and the sense-making skills long situated and available to us through these means, and to interpret that power to others while seeing myself as not alienated but existing as part of a larger genealogical space with other Black women in time. As Morrison states, a dose of the spiritual world is needed to help recognize the incredible power of existence, erasure, and the politics that define both (Holland 2000, 52). The following section unpacks spectral power and the case for the analysis of conjure culture, which will be further examined in “Conjuring Caliban’s Woman.”

### **A Dose of the Spiritual World in the Archives**

The incorporation of affect as a methodological approach to studying archive opens the body and mind to consider the liminal state “prior to the distinction between activity and passivity” over the last decade (Massumi 2002, 32). That liminal state refers to the assemblages one responds to while being affected, which historian Emily Robinson labels as the practice of sense-making perfectly suited to archival research (Robinson 2010, 505). In her essay on the absence of affective archival methods, “Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible,” Robinson decries the scholarly hesitation to embrace a fully affective method of archival research, a hesitation based in the idea that doing so will leave the “material” and materiality of

the archives behind (Robinson 2010, 517).<sup>25</sup> While Robinson laments this as a myth meant to deter scholars from affective methodological tactics, I accept it and advocate for affectively-oriented engagement with archival research. Material historical analysis often falls short of capturing the breadth of Black life by focusing on the representational claims and appearances made available within the archives. This is not an expansive enough method for my study. In my work, what falls outside of representation, and what lacks representation, are my primary concerns. I therefore pursue methods that do not stigmatize, nor foreclose, the value of work that attends to the more spectral matter of the archives. It is for those reasons why I turn to conjure culture methods to unpack the work ahead, including analyzing the role of the specter and spectral powers of affection.

I foreground spiritualist Luisah Teish's work in my methodological interpretation of the 'spiritual'. The spiritual, here, is conjure culture, which exists as part of the matrix of interpolating and producing affect. As stated in my introduction, I situate such practices as part of a larger activity of Black cultural production rooted in alterity, such activity possess valuable tools for us to free ourselves from the memory of *Man*. Affect and affection are not individualized processes but are deeply indicative of larger social formations and communities vying for remembrance. In this way, my affective readings are not a persona's interpretation of the archives that takes liberties with the histories of the material present. Quite the contrary, my affective readings and the speculations or risks taken with fabulation in the archives are evident of the mass exclusion and injustice history has enacted upon marginalized bodies—forcing my hand in the deployment of alternative methods out of necessity.

My turn to conjure culture is a key maneuver to demonstrate to my reader how the structures of oppression require extraordinary measures beyond what the colonial order knows in

order to combat it. Teish's work in her book, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book* (1985), provides useful definitions of terms, narratives, and rituals for understanding conjure culture in the New Americas, specifically as practiced by Black women. Teish defines Voudou as an open-ended system that incorporates new cultural and scientific information, which has a special appeal to women because of its recognition of spiritual kinship, encouragement of personal growth, and respect of the earth (Teish 1985, x-xi). Voudou differs from Voodoo as it is the New Orleans interpretation of Voodoo, that expands and fills in the gaps of Voodoo rituals with Black cultural practices specific to the region and Creole culture. Hoodoo, as related to Voudou but separate from it, defines the specificity of this Afro-centric practice emerging from enslaved women in the South and the transformation of former public rituals into more intimate, domestic spiritual rituals.<sup>26</sup>

Scholar and root worker Katrina Hazzard-Gordon provides a detailed and in-depth history of Hoodoo culture in the United States in her book, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2012). In her book, Hazzard-Gordon examines how the spiritual practice of Hoodoo acts as a form of smuggling in the banned practices of Caribbean Voodoo and West African ancestral worship and is thus a necessary link when learning to commune with the dead: specters. Hoodoo practices take a variety of forms but include ritual, ancestral worship, herbal healing, prayer, and spiritual manifestation through conjuring and are housed under the umbrella term of conjure culture—which will be explored at greater length in “Conjuring Caliban's Woman.” Spiritualists who practice and develop a mastery of the above methods to the point of teaching others are called root workers, conjurers or conjure women.<sup>27</sup> These conjure culture practices “employs the subconscious mind and stimulates the right brain but does not rest solely on psychological interpretations of power” (Teish 1985, xi). In Teish's interpretation of

the spiritual she essentially provides a useful engagement with affect, suggesting that affective interpretative work available in conjure culture foregrounds thought and action as an embodied interpolation of consciousness and unconscious material available around and within the individual for any given moment or encounter (Teish 1985, 79).

To turn our attention toward unpacking spectral power of affection in archives and film is not a new phenomenon. We know that researchers have long discussed the physical responses that archives have on their bodies, even to the point of fetishization in some cases.<sup>28</sup> As Carolyn Steedman (2001) explains via critique, the dust of the archive has been turned into a material substrate that enable scholars to literally inhale the dead and, by extension, their knowledge. Furthermore, Ann Cvetkovich (2002) discusses how the site of the archive affectively grounds a sense of communal belonging. She analyzes the assemblage of emotions housed in the materials found in queer archives, in that the materials gathered there carry the burden of oppression, silence, and the closeting of lesbian life (Cvetkovich 2002, 119). For Cvetkovich, a radical deployment of emotions aide in assessing how this material conjures up difficult, painful and repressed emotions within those who care for those records, and those who encounter them, knowing that the only separation between the record and the archivist is time (Cvetkovich 2002, 110). In this way, archives become our cemeteries, our spaces to enact “rituals for collective memory and history” (Cvetkovich 2002, 109).

Archives like cemeteries provide spaces to enact rituals of memory. Thus, the aberrant sensations available in cemeteries, like a specter’s haunt, are similarly found in the archive. Affective methods enable us to tap into that deep psychic power of conjure culture and affection that has always existed in the world. Critically, conjure culture in the form of root workers and conjure women has been a zone in Black communities in which Black women’s power often lays

unbridled by others, in spite of the misogynoir that situates our ongoing abuse in Black communities.<sup>29</sup> In response to this power, the larger structures of white cismale capitalist patriarchal oppression have made great efforts to silence Black women's practices coming from conjure culture, framing their practice as outside of the realm of thought and reason, and thereby delegitimizing their ways of knowing.<sup>30</sup>

It was colonizer's goal to cut this power off or to deny such methods of sense-making to Black lives. Wynter writes that the colonial myth of *Man* needs Black life to separate their physical labor from their mental and spiritual work in order for Black labor to maintain the culture of *Man* (Wynter 1968, 351). So long as poor Black lives are continually subjugated by our social imaginary to treat their bodily labor as existing on a separate register from thought, the myth of *Man* will continue to thrive. Teish similarly writes that "anthropology, a pseudoscience, born out of colonialism, has concentrated on the rites and secret societies of African men, superficially; and labeled the matrifocality of African culture as 'the mark of savagery'" (Teish 1985, ix). In this manner, the spiritual, sensorial practices of Black diasporic women sustained communal relations and provided a meaningful link between healing and knowledge production. Teish connects the sensorial process before thought, one that when trusted also becomes the same sense-making needed to commune with specters, which is a necessary connection here as to why conjure culture is essential for making sense of spectral power and its affection.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, we see the importance of affective spiritual work on display in the novels of twentieth century Black feminists writers who fold in the figure of the conjure woman as an instrumental character in healing the wounds of slavery and its spirits while at the same time providing an alternative model of independence for Black women. This can be found with the lead character conjure woman Minnie in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) as well as

in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987). Furthermore, Hurston reminds us of the critical that role conjure women play in the labor of black communities and situates that labor as possessing the same effect and weight as material labor (Hurston [1935] 1990, 165).<sup>32</sup> In this manner then, reclaiming the spiritual link of the sensorial and the form of knowledge it produces can help us understand how this power of affection possess the ability to re-write one's image in the world toward self-actualization. This is why we as scholars should be deeply invested in restoring that power to our work.

In her critical poetic essay "Found, Found, Found: Lived, Lived, Lived," Eunsong Kim describes the archives as "bodily apparitions" (Kim 2016, 55). She approaches "memories not as storage but as the ancestral, bodily apparitions that link some to witnesses. And those with such memories have access to an archive as the process of thievery. The process that might say: you have always belonged with us ... If these are your records, where are your stories? Where are your ghosts?" (Kim 2016, 55). The apparition, ghost, phantom, haint, reverence, or specter's appearance in the archives situates the close relationship that archives share, alongside film, with the cemetery in that they all possess the same spatial power of housing the dead (at times against their will). Michael Taussig reminds us that colonial powers pursued meaning through the mystical discourse of death while committing mass death around them. We can see how the poetic construction of narrative discourse, like film or the novel, plays a key role in structuring the impenetrable, yet, hallucinatory veil where Western Colonial poetics work tirelessly to obfuscate the everydayness of racialized death and violence (Taussig 1984, 496). Taussig's turn to poetics foregrounds, through Michel Foucault, how discourses—that is truth making and culture making—are aesthetically crafted to reproduce dominant epistemes that silence and turn death into a voided feeling rather than the tangible material/immaterial experience that is.

Moreover, Taussig asserts that the challenge lies in seeing the ability of the fascist poetics of colonialism to block access to affective forms of meaning (Taussig 1984, 471). The same practice of recalibrating our sight to these systems produces an ability to craft counter-poetics that begin to excavate the blockades in colonial episteme.<sup>33</sup>

Describing archives, specifically racialized, as a space of death points to the banality of racialized death in West. As Christina Sharpe writes, sidewalks, playing with toy guns, and driving are weaponized against Black life to become sites that mark the routine occurrence of Black death (Sharpe 2016, 15). In this manner, my archival research lives in the wake of death, what Sharpe describes as recognizing “the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only* known to ourselves and to each other *by* that force” (Sharpe 2016, 16). This force is both the material effect of death and the immaterial properties of discourse that leads constitutes that materiality. It is through this connection that we can recognize the *very* material effects of the spiritual.

In her study on Black life, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe constructs “wake work” as an analytic to imagine new ways of living in the wake of slavery. “To be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (Sharpe 2016, 18). The “wake” mutates in her study as it encompasses various meanings of the term in relation to their passage between life and death *and* Black life; thus, the wake is a social gathering associated with death, the path behind a ship, coming to coming consciousness, and more (Sharpe 2016, 17). The wake is the impossible reality of Black life living within a system by which they are the containers of terror and death. What I am drawn to in Sharpe’s work for this chapter, is how then that proximity of death while living enables us to bring the dead back to life. That is how our very living inspires inventive ways to reorient what it means *to*

*live* in the world. Sharpe turns to a heartbreaking passage by the poet Dionne Brand on specters, spirituality, and conjuring from *Verso* to use as an example of what wake work entails.

... Our guide said, this was the prison cell for the men, this was the prison cell for the women. I wanted to strangle the guide as if he were the original guide. It took all my will. Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant, the gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection and love; they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive we said. And we had returned to thank them. You are still alive, they said. Yes we are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces. We were pilgrims, they were gods. We sewed the rim of their skins with cotton. This is what we had. They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen. We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep, but that is nothing in comparison. (Sharpe 2016, 17)

In this passage we see not only narrative used to intervene on colonial time's ruthless alienation of Black life, but we see the spirit world where our ancestors are treated as gods and are lovingly adorned as we make the impossible return back to them. In Brand's passage and Sharpe's analysis of it, we witness the power of affection that specters have to reduce the living to tears, and to open us to larger matrix of knowledge through their sheer presence alone. The wake may be the exposure to death, but one tactic to disrupt that trail lies in the power of affection, beyond language, that may even elude full comprehension. Such encounters, mythical or real, are transformative to our cognitive schema in that the tears in the above passage materially mark the



presence of our ancestors, but critically become a felt memory; we become a changed people carrying the memory of the dead within us.

I situate this study as a type of wake work is to ground the analytical moves made here as an attempt to heal the impossible rupture of time and death committed against Black life, specifically Black women. In order to do this work, a healthy dose of the spiritual world is needed. It is for these reasons that I consider my study as participating in a form of wake work, even if I am not mainly filtering the scholarship here through the specific theories defined by Sharpe. By doing so though, I provide an umbrella for the type of scholarly rubric in which my work is located.

What is at stake here is a shift in how we think about archives, the “ownership” of doing work with the dead, and the need to restore and recognize the deep materiality of the affectual power of the specter. Eunsong Kim’s essay offers a productive intervention into the coloniality that governs most racialized archives by calling upon scholars to name the ghosts that haunt them in the work they do (Kim 2016, 54). I agree and extend Kim’s argument further to assert that it is not up to the scholar to determine where their ghosts are, but rather that the specter knows precisely whom to haunt and when. As Holland recounts through Morrison’s stunning lecture “Unspeakable Things, Unspoken” (1988), certain absences are so present, so stressed that we must realize how this absence of ‘livingness’ came to pass (Holland 2000, 3): how did those who survived, *survive*? And in their survival what did they learn? What forms of agency were offered to them from the dead? My examination of the Black woman specter in the arts seeks to resolve those questions.

### **The Specter’s Power of Affection in *Beloved* and *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones***

I return here to a proposition raised in my introduction: if liminality is the zone that defines the precarity of Black women's bodies, a zone that is un-representable, how might we begin to make ourselves available to meaning beyond speech or representation in Black cultural production? What examples are available for us to follow? And what do they reveal about reading affect in relation to Black women and understanding the liminality of Black women's experimental film moving forward? It is with these propositions in mind that I turn to two seminal examples of Black women specters, *Beloved* in the novel of the same name and Fatima Jamal from *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*. I turn to the specter not only as a representative of Black women's existence but as a model for producing and analyzing the work of Black women's cultural production, specifically in experimental film.<sup>34</sup> I think of the specter as a form of mnemonic aberration that introduces new ways to write the body through affect, but also to rupture colonial time with its ever pressing use of memory. Moreover, the Black woman specter provides new ruptures with what Hartman describes as the natal alienation of Black women's existence in that learning to feel with and from the specter provides a model of learning to care for that liminal body and by extension Black women.<sup>35</sup> This is to say that formally, experimentation or the hybridity of thought and embodiment (which has long structured Black women's way of sense-making) are integral to addressing the formal poetics that confine Black life while pursuing the creation of a counter-poetic model to challenge hegemonic discourse.

*Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* is a seven-minute experimental video biopic about trans activist and performer Egyptt LaBeija. The film was produced by curators Vivian Crockett and Erin Chrisotvale for their programmed series on Black women living with HIV/AIDS for Worlds AIDS Day in 2017.<sup>36</sup> Tourmaline is a formidable trans activist and artist who works with archives through fabulation, it is a model that I follow in my own research praxis. *Atlantic is a*

*Sea of Bones* is one of several experimental short films by the filmmaker examining the lives of Black trans women in time. Her practice involves deep archival study that takes on and deploys—what Hartman writes—a critical fabulation to reconstruct the personhood with records that do not, could not, and would not account for such personhood as existing. Her experimental short, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018) co-directed with Sasha Wortzel utilizes years of research on Marsha P. Johnson to fabulate her “birthday” party, the night of the Stonewall riots in 1969, where the Johnson’s inventive birthday party at Stonewall is the central narrative and celebrated rather than the riots.<sup>37</sup> The memory of the Stonewall riots, as perpetuated by white queer cis men, erases her role as a lead instigator of the riots where she asserted her personhood against police brutality that evening and inspiringly made a spectacular scene when she fought back.<sup>38</sup> Experimentation across her larger body of work demonstrates the way in which her filmic aesthetics must similarly refuse the negation of Black transwomanhood and constructs a different way of feeling the lived experience of Black trans women *within* the larger matrix of Black womanhood.

Like Morrison’s *Beloved*, the use of experimentation by Tourmaline throws the audience into the life lived by LaBeija rather than attempting to represent it. In this way, the experimentation, as we will see more fully with *Suzanne, Suzanne*, opens the film’s capacity to capture moments, sequences of being, and—paramount to LaBeija’s life—specters. The specters in LaBeija’s life possesses extraordinary force in helping her realize her agency (that affective work of sense-making) in the face of daily transphobic misogynoir and how such sense-making can be utilized to combat it. Such incredible force is necessary for the continual survival of LaBeija’s life, but also is a testament to the stressed absence of violence by which LaBeija’s sisters were and are forcibly removed from this plane of existence. This approach to narrating

LaBeija's life was partially influenced by Tourmaline's own activism and work with LaBeija in that the director embeds a mode of relationality in the film's aesthetics, as we will see through her use of the specter.<sup>39</sup>

To push for more ambiguous forms of embodiment outside of the corporeal is to be attentive to the demand that we care for the dead as a model of care for the living. To restate, the analytical move here for an ambiguous body in relation to the cinematic is to argue that specters can take on a body, even if it is not corporeal. It is my intention here to situate care for these ambiguous bodies (corporeal and incorporeal) as providing a model of tenderness to follow for enacting care for Black bodies, specifically Black women. Saidiya Hartman reminds us that Black bodies have been stripped from care in the discourse in that "The Black body is both insensate and content, indifferent to pain and induced to work by threats of corporal punishment ... [I]n this regard, pain is essential to the making of productive slave laborers" (Hartman 1997, 51). Hartman's statement here describes how Blackness, as an essentialized negative trait, morphs and negates any modes of redress available to viewing Black women as capable of experiencing pain and frames them as thus undeserving of care. My use of the term body (especially in latter chapters, the ritual body) does not feed into that abstraction of a Black body but rather points to how Black women, including the dead, have long used their bodies as a critical intervention into what we know to be possible in the world, and to challenge our modes of relationality to one another.

The cinematic as articulated by Gilles Deleuze may be useful here to bridge the connection between ambiguous bodies taken on by specters in film and archives. If the cinematic defines the social formations around cinema that exceed the production of the image onscreen, then we may want to "body" those relations (Deleuze 1986, 8). When Steven Shaviro "bodied"

the cinematic, it was an expansion and restoration of what he felt was the negation of the body and forms of embodiment in cinema studies in his book *The Cinematic Body* (1993). The cinematic body speaks to the ways in which the cinematic functions as a representational double of one's reality as an imagined body or through the appearance of a literal body to double time and sensation (Shaviro 1993, 27). Critically, the cinematic body is a catalyst for transferring affection onto others through sensation and expression. Thinking through the cinematic body allows the viewer to take in and make possible another response to the cinematic beyond what is represented, a key part of my argument on shifting our attention to experimental film. In this same way then, gaining a "body" in all its ambiguity for the specter is for the purpose of conveying affection onto others; this affection enables a response, as felt and experienced, that aims to reconcile the past through care, a transformation on the very coding of kinship in aesthetics even. I return to the cinematic body in "Conjuring Caliban's Woman."

In Morrison's novel, *Beloved* has two beginnings after her death. *Beloved's* death is not the end and is the beginning of her mother tale in which she must grapple with murdering her *Beloved* as a babe to prevent her from living a life enslaved. *Beloved's* first emergence opens the novel and sets the reader in an otherworldly swirl of affective forces where *Beloved*, as a body-less phantom, makes imprints around the home in search of a body; she grabs cake, the dog, and household objects in attempts at consumption or possession. The fantastical, experimental opening for Morrison snatches and yanks the reader into the realm of the affective. Morrison states:

I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another ... without preparation and without defense ... the fully realized presence of the

haunting is both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of the hand. One of its purposes is to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while supplied a controlled direct of the incredible political world. (quoted in Holland 2000, 64)

This snatching pulls the reader into a zone of affective forces sustained by time, in that the specter of Beloved is the past tearing its way through the threshold of the present to *become*. The chaotic scene of the novel's opening is mirrored by the chaotic structure of Morrison's poetics to place the reader in the same affective zone as the characters. In so doing, we are given two options: to flee or to stay with the difficult task of remembrance. The first option is committed by Sethe's eldest sons, Howard and Buglar, who flee from the home because of Beloved's frightful presence at the age of thirteen. The second option mirrors the characters of Sethe and her daughter Denver who stay to encounter Beloved again.

Beloved's second appearance occurs years later where she emerges from the shadow world to wreck the chaos of affection onto the community of 124 and Sethe. My analysis of Beloved and the Black woman specter is deeply indebted to Sharon Holland's extensive work on the dead and Beloved's body/flesh in *Raising the Dead*. However, where I differ from Holland is my focus on the specter's power of affection. I analyze the specter's power of affection through Beloved and Fatima Jamal to define how and what this power looks and *feels* like to others. Holland points to Beloved's affective register of speech as a space where self-actualization is possible, while I pursue the transformative modes of agency that emerge from that space made possible by the specter.

When Beloved gains a body she communicates, mainly, through affection to others, largely by causing the community of 124 to remember. But Beloved's body—like the ongoing

rupture of the body/flesh that structures Black women—and her language of affection are not legitimate in the system. This is evident in key scenes where Beloved struggles to communicate through language and property rights.<sup>40</sup> Holland argues that it is this tension of the ambiguous body of Beloved living, coming from the shadow world and communicating through affection, that finds a language outside of property rights as former property that makes self-actualization possible (Holland 2000, 58). Spillers argues in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” that embracing the liminality of this existence, which is the ability to fall within the cracks of language and the grammar that constitutes the human body, may also be a source of agency for us to speak in new, inventive, and restorative ways (Spillers 1987, 68-69). This agency lies with affection. In this way, we can comprehend how the specter enacts Spillers’s declaration for a new way of being for Black womanhood, in that a new mode of empowerment is crafted through the power to name and gain the insurgent ground of Black women’s denied humanity (Spillers 1987, 80). The specter is one model to follow and respond to in that her very existence outside of the living human permits her the ground of insurgency to counter our language codes of the human that is *Man*.

Similarly, the body of Fatima Jamal in *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* not only demonstrates the power of affection to others but situates the liminality of how, expanding on the work of Spillers, Black women’s bodies are the passages in which discourse and bodies pass through; that is, between finding and enacting meaning of the human and the non-human. Fatima’s body as a Black trans woman materializes in this film the absence of her presence in other film and literature work on and of Black womanhood. Fatima’s presence in the film labors tirelessly in pursuit of materializing herself but also to aid the self-actualization of Egypt LaBeija. Fatima does not speak through speech, but rather communicates to the audience and LaBeija through

affective forces that conjure forth memories, feelings, and experiences from LaBeija's life to her and others. Fatima's power of affection is so powerful that it throws the film's aesthetics into a whirl of movement, sending LaBeija swirling through time. In this manner, LaBeija is able to re-experience not specific narratives, but feelings from her life, moments with others, embraces, and fear.

Luisah Teish states that specters communicate with the living through emotion. They have the capacity to get beneath our skin and alter our internal sense-making processes. "Sometimes the ancestors deem certain information so important that they send it to the subconscious mind without being consciously asked. They we have prophetic dreams, rich in symbolism and unforgettable! They linger with us until we recognize their importance, analyze their symbolism and act on their content, *do* something about their meaning" (Teish 1985, 80). Further along in that passage Teish writes that specters teach us how to live through their powers and are warriors with valuable survival lessons available to us. Although coming from a different background, Avery Gordon similarly contends that hauntings are transformative experiences meant to teach us about the past as well as impacting our present and futures (Gordon [1997] 2008, 196-197). We see with Fatima all of the above in her presence as well as the deep recognition from LaBeija that when the specter appears, linear time is no longer a barrier for her existence.

Fatima's tears through the throes of liminality are evident in the use of water, music, movement, and her power of affection. Fatima fully embodies this role and brings her varied practice as a performance artist, documentary filmmaker, model, and activist to the specter, allowing her experience and skillset to drive the body of the specter.<sup>41</sup> Writing on the film, scholar Che Gossett contends that this experience of swirling in and through time mirrors



Harriett Jacobs's loophole of retreat, in that the film uses its aesthetics to craft wormholes in which the characters transgress through time and material planes in states of fugitivity (Gossett 2018). This is particularly evident with the usage of water as a portal where LaBeija and Fatima traverse through to come in and out of time. The short begins with LaBeija overlooking the piers speaking to a person offscreen about her memories. Then a synth-backing drum beat comes into play before the title card pops up. LaBeija's hands rhythmically move with the beat before the camera pans out and we see a more glammed up LaBeija wearing an exquisite red sequined strapless gown with her hair now in a light-brown Diana Ross-esque mane dancing on top the foremost roof of the Whitney Museum.<sup>42</sup>

From there, sound again signals to the spectator another dynamic shift in sequence as we hear water rustling then cut to LaBeija in a bathtub immersed in technicolor water. Tourmaline uses water as a passage for specters and the unknown to cross over. LaBeija moves through her life via water from the Hudson to the tub. LaBeija is able to pull specters with her as she passes through the liminal space of time via water. It is here, from that same passage of water where Fatima emerges and triggers LaBeija's memories to haunt. Fatima's spectral power of affection causes LaBeija to re-experience her memories in the film. The specter of Fatima performs a type of mnemonic aberration: her very bodily presence speaks to the specter's ability to use memory in that they exist outside of linear, specifically colonial, time (in inventive and disruptive ways to pull us out of time as well).

Tourmaline's film takes its title from Lucille Clifton's poem, "Atlantic is Sea of Bones" (1989). The poem ruminates on the souls and graveyard that haunts the Atlantic Ocean from the atrocities committed during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and seeks wisdom from them in the form of communion. While the Atlantic Ocean is not visibly present in Tourmaline's film, the

Atlantic nonetheless haunts the film, conveying its own spectral power as LaBeija gazes upon the piers and the Hudson River (which drains into the Atlantic Ocean) from the Whitney's roof. By crafting the specter of Fatima in the film, Tourmaline opens her aesthetics to other forms of sense-making that not only relate to Black cultural affective forces, as discussed above largely located in conjure culture, but forges these forces as ones that craft self-actualization for the lives involved.<sup>43</sup> This is not unlike the purpose of Beloved in that her reappearance as a specter is the memory needed for Sethe and the community to re-experience in order to repair that broken link in their consciousness from colonialization. Sethe must restore justice for herself and Beloved first before she can pursue a new life with Paul D, her suitor.

Knowing the specter wields memory as their conduit for affection, I want to examine two critical instances in which we see this affection take hold with Beloved and Fatima in order to understand the necessity of these specters gaining a body. To recall, Holland names the specter of a Black woman, specifically Beloved, as the literal embodiment of Black women's existence. It is here where unpacking that body further through the specters of Beloved and Fatima may be useful to analyzing how Billops houses and generates bodies for specters in *Suzanne, Suzanne* (in addition to the examination of what powers of affection lie there).

Beloved's lack of communicative tongue mirrors the speech of the child who *had* something to say but could not speak. This possession of speech without the ability to speak allows us to understand why and how the specter turns to affective forces to communicate itself clearly. With Beloved's limited or distorted speech, Morrison has to write her presence through Beloved's affection. An example lies in her troubling sexual relationship with Paul D, where upon her emergence from the shadow world she corners Paul in his shack where her first action is to approach him sexually. Beloved states to Paul D, "I want you to touch me on the inside part

... And you have to call me my name” (Morrison [1987] 2004, 137). During their sexual encounter, Paul D relives horrific memories of his enslavement.<sup>44</sup> In this statement, she underscores the power of affection in that one can be affected and affect—to be touched and in return to touch him—while manifesting her existence by naming herself through her corporeality.<sup>45</sup>

If Beloved’s body foregrounds affective measures of relation/communication with others in the community, then her sexual or, rather, sexually stressed relationship with Paul begins to materialize several liminal constructs on the embodiment of Black women, that of kinship and agency. The first is that Beloved’s body inhabits the place of daughter, lover, friend, enemy, and mother, even, to Sethe and Denver, aiding them in their self-actualization through remembrance. We see a similar liminality emerge with Fatima’s body in *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*. Fatima in some scenes is portrayed as a mentee to LaBeija where LaBeija affectionally helps with her makeup. In other scenes, Fatima takes on a motherly role where she is there to assist in the self-actualization of LaBeija’s life as a trans woman remembering her homelessness, her activism, and her performance labor as an entertainer. Through Fatima’s spectral powers, she portrays and slips into affective kin relations with others. In this process, Fatima transforms our socialized alienated kin relations that situate Black womanhood in society. Spillers writes that the very construction of familial kinship lies at the destruction of Black women’s bodies, rendering them only as flesh to be consumed and outside of relations of care with others (Spillers 1987, 66).

The specter’s ambiguous body is what enables it to destroy the socialized values of negation on Black womanhood and are useful in reminding us of the agential power we have in doing something similar. Fatima demonstrates what level of agency is possible once the body removes itself from the discourse of *Man*. Fatima implements an Orisha-like power in that she is

able to shift the flow of the film, the memories of LaBeija, and the bodies of others through her labor power, specifically in the form of dance. The Orishas originate from the West-African Yoruba Gods that make up the larger pantheon of the Santeria gods, possessing transcendental energy and transformative power at altering the lives and movement of others around them (Teish 1985, 56). In this way, Fatima's spectral presence is akin to possessing similar transcendental 'Orisha' power to affect others that are made possible by her spectrality. Moreover, these changing demarcations of kinship enforced by the specter also attend to the violence committed toward Black women's sexuality. Spectrality converses with desire in a field of affect, and since a specter possesses bodily autonomy their engagement with desire and sexuality also produces an interesting model for agency for Black women to follow.<sup>46</sup>

Fatima's main power of affection lies in her use of dance. Fatima's dance not only works in sync with the soundtrack but drives the sequential engagement of the music with the image. The labor-power of Fatima ignites "narrative" progression; this can be seen after one of her appearances quite literally sets off the climatic dance floor encounter near the end of the film. It is a scene where bodies swirl against one another and the aesthetics blur their visibility within the frame. Rhythmic hybridity and cinematic fluidity are productive ways to convey the destabilizing function of spatial hauntings in the body of the film. Her voguing becomes a constant movement in support of keeping LaBeija's memories, labor, and body alive.<sup>47</sup> Dance is a propelling force. It brings about an outburst of emotions that guide LaBeija through her journey.

Dance in film is an affective encounter that signals "something is happening" to the audience (Thain 2016). Furthermore, as dance theorist José Gil argues, corporeal movements onscreen possess the ability to break the flow of the spectator's engagement with the piece. He

writes, “A leap, a figure, may not constitute an event if they are coming from the same regime of energy. On the other hand, a gesture as simple as a turn of the head, or the lifting of an elbow, may testify to the irruption of divisive events on the choreographic path” (Gil 2006, 29). For Gil, dance constitutes an affective interruption and shift of power in narrative practices that *charges the scene with renewed energy*. In the swirling climax the spectator’s identification is broken and instead moves through the movement and blurs of the bodies, the breaths, the sweat, and the sex on the dance floor. The fluidity of the scene aesthetically mirrors water but also the liquidity of memory, in that it is never stable but remains and is often the only reservoir to tap into when the space and bodies that make up events/experiences are long past. The body becomes the vehicle by which strange, cultural, and spiritual spaces and time zones can be made legible. The body not only provides responses to these diasporic structures of feelings, it allows us to reconcile affectively charged spaces of the past that still haunt us.

It is in this manner that we can comprehend how Morrison and Tourmaline use the specter to materially transform other characters within the work as well as the audience’s relationship with Black women and their bodies. If Black women’s bodies are the transitory mark between human and non-human, the denial of their agency and kinship with each other are the two liminal passages that designate this ongoing transgression of our bodily autonomy emerging from slavery that continues into the present. The ongoing denial of Black women’s labor and the affective registers in the body works to, as Wynter writes, have the colonized not recognize themselves through their senses and their physical labor (Wynter 1968, 340). This negation of ourselves, made possible by our dominant social imaginary, renders the question of Black women’s agency impossible within the construct of colonial time and knowledge, for it

works against the spiritual and conjure culture that Black women have used to assert themselves under impossible conditions of bodily theft and psychological abuse.

The bodily theft and psychological abuse of Black women becomes the foundation by which all other modes of kinship are built on as well as the primary mode of relationality that others are taught how to engage with Black women (including other Black women as *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* will examine). Slavery transformed the grammar of the human in which Black women are passages for others to cross through—thus, the cannibalization of Black women provides transformative patriarchal value for others but leaves Black women fundamentally outside of the protection of “patriarchalized female gender” (Spillers 1987, 73). Slavery completely destroyed gendered difference for Black life; this destruction is only compounded by the fact that during Reconstruction, patriarchal alliance was made possible for Black men insofar as it came at the complete negation of Black women’s autonomy and queer difference (Williams 1997, 139).<sup>48</sup>

This is to say that the forms of relational autonomy available to other women in the roles of daughter, lover, mother, sister, and friend, disintegrates when placed in dialogue with Black women. Thus, recognizing our agency by other means has always been an act of survival. We articulate care and modes of sense-making denied to us and our bodies within a system that exists off our flesh.<sup>49</sup> bell hooks astutely contends that consumption is the act of a commodified object, thus when we place Black women as objects to be consumed we not only strip them of their agency and autonomy but we strip them from possessing any real political resistance and efficacy for change (hooks [1992] 2015, 33). Overcoming the flesh, and the discourse that makes it possible, as Black women requires supernatural work to intervene on this type of situated violence by which others gain glimpses of *Man* through the consumption (in every way possible) of our bodies.<sup>50</sup>

The counter-poetics of Morrison and Tourmaline in the bodying of the specter via *Beloved* and *Fatima* enables us to encounter new ways of communication forged through affection. In this spectral power, we recognize our agency and we see our bodies redressed to a public, and critically so with *Fatima's* body as she makes tangible our trans sisters erased and silenced in time. We see new modes of kinship on display that move it away from bloodlines and situates it in the realm of the affective, around our chosen relationships. In this redress of Black women's bodies, care for Black women's bodies becomes a possibility.

### *Suzanne, Suzanne*

It is here that I want to address how the specter emerges in film through the same affective situatedness of the archives and examine how film mobilizes a spectral power of affection to its audiences. I use spectral here not only in relation to the specter's ephemeral presence but also in relation to cinema's ability to transmit *things* to an audience. The specificity of Black feminist experimental film lies in its counter-poetic structures and its relationship repairing the fractures of time that is its mnemonic aberrant nature, where this type of specter and reading is especially present and fruitful for the new forms of meaning it introduces. In "Conjuring Caliban's Woman," such work will be named as the manifestation of Caliban's woman—which defines a philosophical rupture to what we know in the world. In this section I examine Camille Billops's *Suzanne, Suzanne*, as part of her family trilogy for how the central character, Suzanne, enacts a spectral power of affection. I first analyze *Suzanne, Suzanne* as part of Billops's family trilogy before foregrounding her use of affective-archival aesthetics in the film and how that practice draws out a tension around respectability politics and Black middle class values of virtue in mid-

twentieth century culture. I then examine how such tension of respectability and colorism emerges in the film itself through analysis, paying close attention to Suzanne's spectral power.

Billops has long cited her family's archives as a primary source of inspiration for her filmic work and is expressed in her trilogy of films on her family across a near twenty-year period (*Suzanne*, *Suzanne* [1982], *Finding Christa* [1991], and *A String of Pearls* [2000]). In her 1996 interview with bell hooks, she names the power of turning the camera onto your loved ones as a form of remembrance, an act akin to writing a novel on their lives and one's own. "Don't let anybody call it a vanity press. You just do this, this magnificent thing, and you put it on the best paper you can find. Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, and do a lot of them so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together" (hooks 1996, 185). Billops situated her films as possessing the same restorative power as her archival collection in that all of the filmed footage constitutes its own history of the family that is available for further engagement with them after her death (hooks 1996, 186; Alexander 2007, 316). Similarly, Cvetkovich asserts that film puts the archive on display:

incorporating a wide range of traditional and unorthodox materials, including personal photographs, videotapes from oral history archives, innovate forms of autodocumentary, and 'archival footage' ... Film and video can extend the reach of the traditional archive, collating and making accessible documents that might otherwise remain obscure, concluding that "archival" films in this manner transform our perception on what an archive is and must include in its housing. (Cvetkovich 2002,109-110)

She critically underscores that, through the collection of unorthodox material, archives produce not only knowledge but also feelings that are useful in helping us recalibrate our affective relations with others.



The first film of the trilogy, *Suzanne, Suzanne*, follows Suzanne (Billops's niece) as she rebuilds her life in the wake of her father's, Brownie, death. Brownie openly and severely beat Suzanne when she was a child. The trauma endured by childhood abuse coupled with low self-esteem, partially produced by Black middle-class respectability values of beauty, led Suzanne to drug abuse as a coping mechanism.<sup>51</sup> The film finds Suzanne in recovery as she embarks upon the process of painful remembrance. Billops's most acclaimed and well-known film from the trilogy is the feature-length experimental documentary *Finding Christa*. The feature was filmed over ten years and documents Billops's decision to abandon her daughter, Christa, at a foster home when she was four as well as their attempt to reconnect twenty years later.<sup>52</sup> *Finding Christa* has been praised and condemned for Billops's rejection of motherhood to pursue her career as an artist and for Billops's decision to revisit Christa's heartbreak through film.<sup>53</sup> The final film of the trilogy is *A String of Pearls*, which focuses on the male members of Billops's family at the dawn of the twentieth first century. *A String of Pearls* loops in commentary and interviews on gun violence and police brutality against Black men, specifically drawing upon the phantom wounds and trauma developed after an individual has been shot or beaten. The film is impactful for its examination of the Black men in her family but what it fails to pursue further is the harm perpetuated by some of the men towards other family members.

The family trilogy uses affective-archival aesthetics to play with time, history, narrative, and representation. Billops constructs a cinematic discourse of archival screening that transmits the hybridity of what these multiple representational discourses mean to the family and an audience, ultimately suggesting that all materials carry some access to truth. Valerie Smith's "Photography, Narrative, and Ideology in *Suzanne, Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* by Camille Billops and James V. Hatch" asserts the archival power of the photograph (present in all three

films) possesses its own cinematic power to alter and define how the characters and audiences respond to the image (Smith 1999, 87-88). Smith argues that ultimately the audience pays for the attempt to construct narrative closure around these images that it seeks so desperately to disrupt through memory in that the images nor the final confrontation do not change the violence that Suzanne and Billie experienced (Smith 1999, 93). I agree with Smith's argument but push for further consideration around the archival-affective aesthetics of the film that exceed its narrative assault on the viewer through its attempt at closure. These images and alongside the other documents serve as a critical representation of Black middle class aspirations of cleanliness that would be the photographic proof of Black value and respectability and carry with them the archive of violence against Black womanhood needed to obtain that representation. The pain in these images is that they mask the severity of abuse, suppression, and silence of Black womanhood that emerge in their pursuit of that proof of respectability.

To speak out or to hold men accountable is not only met with violence but is considered the threshold that makes us traitors or "Sapphires" to the race (Spillers 1987, 65).<sup>54</sup> bell hooks suggest that full autonomy or independence for Black women is only possible when we hold men accountable for the harm they have inflicted upon us and that caring, or uplifting images of the Black family and home are not adequate ways to reconcile and heal trauma (hooks 2016).<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, if the demand for accountability is not given space, Black women can voice their hurt but the "reality of men inflicting emotional" and physical pain will still continue (hooks 2016). Affective viewing methods engage and move beyond the representational image of Black life because, even in the work of Billops, those representational images can collapse the work of interrogating and making sense of pain. *Suzanne, Suzanne* almost falls into this representational trap. The film was edited to paint Brownie in a better light by the family and to capture the

family at their most presentable moments. However, Suzanne's memories and the film's affective-archival aesthetics enable it to break free from that representational trap to offer another engagement instead. Such an alternative engagement moves beyond Black women voicing their pain for the consumption of others and instead excavates the modes of autonomy and kinship that are available for these women, and for the audience. In turn, Billops avoids exploiting the pain of others in the film (Guillory 1998, 72).

In *Suzanne, Suzanne*, film's spectral power of affection moves the discourse of the abuse of Black women out of its zone of silence. While other scholars have written on *Suzanne, Suzanne*, most focus (with good reason) on the way Black motherhood is framed through the maternal and familial characters in the film (Lekatsas 1991; Smith 1994; Guillory 1998; Smith 1999; Cutler 2009; Lesage 2013). My analysis foregrounds the flesh, understood via Spillers's definition, as the specter haunting Billops's family. The distinction of the Black body, emergent under the systems of slavery and the numerous colonial carceral systems thereafter, as flesh rendered it permissible to emotional and physical violence. Mary Prince's autobiography on her enslavement effectively describes the affection delivered at her when presented on the auction block: "I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts" (Prince [1831] 2001, 11).<sup>56</sup> In this passage we can recognize how the designation of flesh situates bodies outside of the space of the human into a zone of otherness where they can be treated as meat, as property to be gouged on and consumed in every material and immaterial way possible. Spillers draws out the thread that the flesh gained a representational body in the image of Black womanhood and all of its displacements via stereotypes (Spillers 1987, 67). Therefore,

as part of our social imaginary there lies the image of Black womanhood as flesh who is physically constructed with features that fall outside of white Eurocentric beauty values (Spillers 1987, 66). For those within Black communities, we know all the ways in which our adherence of respectable values come at a disavowal of this image of Black womanhood. It is she who haunts *Suzanne, Suzanne* and demands to be redressed. This is a point that will be picked up in the next chapter but what I am arguing is that anti-Blackness alienates Black women from one another and as Lorde constructs in her concept of “mothering ourselves” there is a need to alter the image of Black women that we encounter who do not bear the face of the black women we know, which includes the image of ourselves: “[w]e maintain a discreet distance between each other also because that distance between us make me less you, makes you less me” (Lorde [1984] 2007, 168).

Suzanne literally embodies the specter as she annexed from familial care because of proximity to the flesh. By foregrounding the flesh, the raw principle of Blackness (its, to be colloquial, un-respectable features, nappy hair, dark skin, and lower class position), we see that despite Billops’s family best intentions to refine their flesh through the adoption of respectability politics, the wounds of that existence must be confronted and cannot be hidden away through a change of appearance and location. Billops admits this in her interview with bell hooks where she tensely states the injury of color and class on Black life that socializes the natal alienation of Black humanity from itself. When speaking of how this injury affected Brownie that in turn affected Billie and Suzanne, she states,

I do not want to demonize him, I would love to go and find his remaining relatives and find out what happened. How did he end up so violent, so injured by color and class? His father looked like an old white man, and he married a dark woman. That seemed to have

been a problem in his family in Florida. When one marries dark, it is like white people talking about niggers, you have married *dark*. I do not know how he got injured. I just know that he was. (hooks 1996, 180)

I appreciate Billops's candor here on speaking so frankly on colorism and the injuries it carries in our kin relations with one another. However, I must admonish the blame being placed (even if it is inadvertent) upon Brownie's mother for not only "raising" him better, which seems to be the implication, but for being a dark skin Black woman and how that proximity to the flesh *injured him*. Brownie, of course, married outside of the image of the flesh will Billie, a fair skin Black woman, but could not escape that conception of Blackness with his daughter, Suzanne.

Suzanne's presence not only reminds the family of that *other* existence of Black life but also *lives* and *endures* it partially because of their inability to reconcile with their past. Suzanne is the literal spectral embodiment of intergenerational trauma. The film is her opportunity to redress her family's dismissal, burial, and negation of the flesh.

The first wound in Suzanne's life comes not from her father or mother but from her grandmother Alma Dotson (mother to Camille and Billie). Speaking with hooks, Billops discusses the generational effect The Great Migration had on her parent's life and their children, moving from South Carolina to Los Angeles. She describes a scene in *Suzanne, Suzanne* where Billie is getting Alma ready for her fashion show while Suzanne presses the clothes (Figure 1.8). This scene reveals the mother's concerns with respectability and her pursuit of leaving the properties of the flesh behind through the alteration of their appearance. Black women bore the burden of the mark of that transformation from flesh to body for it is Black womanhood that situates the liminality of the body/flesh demarcation. Billops recounts,

And she is dressing Suzanne, putting the makeup on her. There were also the fashion shows. This was my mother's dream. When you leave South Carolina, then you leave nappy hair. You get a curl. You clean. You wear nice clothes. You are coming from a tradition where women freed themselves by being dressmakers. The fathers were cooks on railroads, so maybe in a sense that was the early setting for wanting to be bourgeois. You knew the dream; you just didn't have it. So you went north to get it. This is all shown in *Suzanne, Suzanne*. (quoted in hooks 1996, 179)

In this quote, Billops effectively defines the Black middle-class respectability of her parents that would become a living hell for Billie in her pursuit of that clean lifestyle. We can visualize how Suzanne, then, embodies all that Alma Dotson attempted to move away from and implement into her children's lives. Suzanne reminds others of the pain of being excised in the world: the literal abjection of her existence. Billops notes in a separate interview that her parents took few photos of their life in the South but began to cement their family history to both still and motion picture film (eight millimeter, Super 8, and sixteen millimeter film) once they began to obtain respectable appearances. The documentation of family life continued and increased after Billops' father passed and Alma remarried Walter Dotson. It is Dotson's archive that makes up the bulk of archival footage in *Suzanne, Suzanne*. Billops uses this archive to "dramatize the commodification of women and children ... under the proprietary, controlling gaze of the male—the absent father—behind the camera" (Smith 1999, 90).<sup>57</sup> The images of women rising to the status of respectability further structures the film's critique against these images, in that the burden of Black humanity's representation is configured through the bodies of Black women.

The film provides another instance in which the family attempts to model this adoption of value and is reflected both representationally and affectively through Billie's adoption and

reflection of white Eurocentric beauty values and Suzanne's more Afro-centric features.

Suzanne's mother, Billie, is very beautiful; her beauty appears to be the only quality Billie has according to other family members.<sup>58</sup> When we first meet her in the film, it is through her recent win of the 1976 Mrs. America pageant (likely in her mid-fifties).<sup>59</sup> Billie fits the model of mid-twentieth century Black middle class respectability beauty; she has light skin, fine hair, a petite figure, and more Eurocentric facial features. Both Janet K. Cutler and Valerie Smith address how the film sets up Billie in competition with Suzanne. Suzanne's more Afro-centric features and tightly curled hair placed her outside of her family's capacity for care (Smith 1999, 89; Cutler 2009, 221). The constant dismissal of Suzanne is affectively rooted in Black middle-class respectable attitudes toward refinement of racialized features of the body. They demonstrate to the audience how familial bonds, and I will be colloquial here to emphasize my point, don't mean shit at preventing the negation of Black women if they remind the family of where their roots are, the flesh. Suzanne asks her mother during the climatic confrontation whether or not she thinks she's beautiful, and whether she loves her. Suzanne's lack of proximity to white Eurocentric Beauty standards was meter of determining the distribution of care in Brownie's home.

We feel the tension between Billie and Suzanne repeatedly when Billops uses images of Billie winning the Mrs. America Pageant alongside other similarly framed women all wearing one piece bathing suits, posed against childhood images of Suzanne or current interview shots of her (Figures 1.9 & 1.10). The image draws up for the audience the affective relations of desire around work that proves beauty to others. Billie's beauty is affirmed by such images that additionally legitimate Suzanne's low self-esteem. The affective display shows how kinship loses meaning in the relationality of Black women's representational value. Here, proximity to

the power of Eurocentric beauty shapes visibility, desirability, and value for Black women. It is something Billie leverages to gain access to some form of body integrity that distances her from the representational image of the flesh. Billie is affectively placed outside of the role of the Black mother; she is not affectively viewed as a bad object but as victim too as she is too beautiful to bear the same representational negation as a Black mother in America. Her body gains some form of protection, rendering it less fungible to the full liminality of Black womanhood that besets it (Hartman 2016, 168). Clearly, Billie's body was rendered fungible in the space of her home against her partner Brownie. What I am arguing is that Billie is able to grasp some social proximities to Eurocentric white beauty standards in ways that Suzanne cannot. This does not negate neither Billie nor Suzanne's positions as abused women, but rather complicates the structures of abuse based on their differential proximity to whiteness. It defines how Suzanne carries that spectral power of the wounds of the flesh in her family (hooks 1996, 181-82).<sup>60</sup>

Wynter's essay, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," allows us to further break down how proximity to whiteness is affectively tendered in the aesthetics and counter-poetic construction of the work. Wynter describes aesthetics that manufactures kin relations in its form of address. Who that address is to and who is included within that address, "we," is essential to understanding the poetic ground by which that aesthetic is in service to (1976, 83-84). In this way, she establishes that the ethno ruling class of Eurocentric culture re-wrote itself as a commodity culture fracturing the discourse of race and class to situate itself as the aesthetic principle of good in the poetic in the image of *Man*. The kinship formations around the poetics of *Man*, for Wynter, foregrounds material objects and their ability to name you. This is to say that what you own defines your body (Wynter 1976, 87). We may want to read Spillers here and suggest the ultimate sign of property lies with the possession of a body or even the familial



structure, which is precisely what the family photographs in *Suzanne, Suzanne* reveal about Brownie and Billie's aspiration of middle class respectability, a pursuit of cleanliness that is paved with the degradation of Black women's bodies and personhood. Furthermore, Wynter argues that Black women, then, name a class of individuals who have not needed to produce a mythological nor material *Other/object* in order to frame our existence (Wynter 1976, 85). This is to say that the abjection of our existence is a useful starting point in pursuing a new poetic structure that can break the ethno poetics of the West and its need for an *Other*.

That is, the presence of the OTHER made possible the existence of an internal WE which bound all classes of the Western world in a *temporary* relation. Bu it is a WE that is no longer as was the Christian WE, autonomous. The Western *self* existed, and could only exist as defined, and posited, with the non-self of the non-Western world. The WE of the West could only be defined by the Negation that the OTHER constituted (1976, 84).

To create from this abjection/negation is to make kin with the dead who are similarly exiled from the living and to take seriously their power to affect. As we see in *Suzanne, Suzanne*, this is the manifestation of the wounds of the flesh haunting a family that sought to annex that life from its existence. Such work would bring us into the realm of a socio poetics or a poetic of relations according to Wynter, what I call in this study a counter-poetics of rhythm (1976, 89).

In *Suzanne, Suzanne* we see Billops working toward that counter-poetic aesthetics by showing us how kinship and relationality is made possible for Billie because of her social proximity to White Eurocentric beauty, while at the same time producing a counter-discourse in showing us how Suzanne is positioned outside of that structure. What this aesthetic framing demonstrates is that while all Black women exist in the liminal state of flesh—specters, the totality of the flesh as, what Hartman writes as fungible existence, do not affect Black women

equally (Hartman 2016, 168). In seeing this difference and reading the film affectively we are able to shift our response to the film to consider for the most vulnerable position within the larger umbrella of Black womanhood. Wynter writes in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice” that film’s aesthetics, more so than narrative literary works, psychologically determine and affectively enforce the ethno enclosure of relation to its audiences (Wynter 1991, 271). Wynter states that Blackness carries a negative mark in its aesthetic crafting in Western, White Eurocentric film, where audiences are influenced and encouraged to break their kinship bonds with the culture, bodies, and lives onscreen (Wynter 1991, 242-243). For Billops to draw out the spectral power of the flesh here through her aesthetics of screening the archive is to begin that labor toward the recalibration of a more permanent mode of relation with Black women, both living and dead.

In centering Suzanne’s status as flesh, and her alienation from her family and society, it is not my intention to suggest that we do not care nor feel for Billie: quite the contrary. We are able to respond to the larger structure of feeling that positioned Billie in an environment where she leveraged the abuse of her Black daughter to pacify the abuse brought against her body. In so doing, Billie fulfills the natal alienation of Black womanhood against her daughter, which is being brought into a world without kinship as a consumable object that can be leveraged without care at any moment (Hartman 2016, 171). At the same time though, Billie gains some affective kinship with others because of the particular position of her Black womanhood. Again, Billops’s affective-archival aesthetics is what allows me to read the work in this manner in that we are able to see the structure and see its opposition in how Billops wants to move the audience’s relational experience away from Billie to Suzanne as her family is unable to do that work. By giving Suzanne’s life an ambiguous body through film she develops a spectral power of affection to

transmit memory to others. Others break down around Suzanne when they remember but she remains unmoved; filmically, Suzanne draws out her liminality and bring others around her to fore of remembrance, not unlike the work of *Beloved* or *Fatima*.<sup>61</sup>

Billops's juxtaposes image and voice in *Suzanne, Suzanne* to draw attention to the power of memory in manifesting what is not present but rather what is stressed as an absence in the family photograph. It matters that we hear Billie voice her relief at her abusive husband's death shortly before seeing a photograph of the "happy" family, which Valerie Smith claims in *Suzanne, Suzanne* demonstrates the inadequacy of domestic photographs as "authentic" representation. The images instead reveal the extreme artifice and effort to maintain respectable images of a Black middle class family (Smith 1999, 88). By focusing on what Suzanne and Billie remember, Billops foreground memory as a device, the mnemonic, to drive sequential movement in the film and to uncover what is not represented. This is what we see in *Suzanne, Suzanne* in that the "memory" cannot be found in the family's photographic documentation but must be activated in space through performance, through a culling of affection. "Why are you crying?" Suzanne critically asks her mother Billie, "Because, I remember." Memory, like a specter is only possible, not through images, but through the power of affection to cause others to remember. To restate a passage from my introduction, memory conveys the affect of a past event whereas in this film, we see how Billops fashions spectral power of affection with the dead and with memory, giving it a body to cause affection.

The aforementioned passage comes from the climax of the film, where Suzanne interrogates her mother about her complicity with the abuse she suffered. Suzanne starts by asking simple questions about her mother ("Mom, Do you love me?"), and Billie responds ("Yes, Suzanne. I love you very much."). This goes on for a few rounds before the clinical nature

of the interaction, heightened by Suzanne's monotone voice coupled with the fact that they are not staring at each other nor the camera (directly), begins to wear on both the viewer and Billie. This impersonal clinical staging of their encounter and the lack of physical intimacy they show to each other allows the emotions to flow between Billie and Suzanne. The moment approaches when Suzanne asks her mother if she could empathize with what it was like to wait for death row, to put her mother in a place of remembrance rather than responding to a question ("Do you think I'm beautiful?"). Death row was the name Suzanne and her siblings gave to their physical abuse. Before Brownie would abuse Suzanne, he would make her wait outside the room while he prepared for her beatings, purposefully placing her body in state of suspense to draw out the psychological terror of being abused.

A flash of realization comes across Billie's face as she connects that waiting to her habit of getting in the shower as a tactic of "buying time" before Brownie would beat her after a night of drinking. In this moment, Billie begins to come undone; Suzanne is either unaware or perhaps is aware but uses the fact that she cannot physically see her mother's grief to continue asking questions about waiting and if she could relate. As James Hatch explained, while the questions were written in advance of the filming, halfway through the questioning, Suzanne begins to ask questions of her own accord (Cutler 2009, 221-222). This includes the pivotal question delivered by Suzanne, "Would you like to know what it was like, waiting?" Billie, terrified of this realization, begins to speak in broken stammers as she talks about getting in the shower when she heard that car door slam. Suzanne presses on. "Would you like to know what it was like, waiting?," only for Billie to say, "I would, I would, I would get in the shower. I would get in the shower." This scene is affectively arresting because of how Suzanne wields memory in the encounter, as a body condemned to her flesh by her family and as spectral power in that she

reminds Billie of her own proximity to flesh that she and the rest of her family fight so tirelessly to repress. Like a specter, she brings the buried past to the fore.<sup>62</sup>

Although Billie reaches a cathartic moment in the scene that is felt by the audience and Suzanne, she *appears* reserved and un-affected. Billops describes that Suzanne went rogue in the scene as a way to get her mother to remember her abuse in a meaningful way (hooks 1996, 182-83). Billie's response ends up shifting the focus from Suzanne's abuse to Billie's declaration of "victimhood" as well, turning their encounter into a competitive act. Billops states,

Yes. She is also having a bad time justifying why she did not take care of her daughter.

Moms are supposed to protect. So what she does is say, "I was not protected myself". We are all watching this knowing the history of competition between Suzanne and Billie.

Suzanne felt that she was always competing with the mother in realm of beauty and glamour. When this happens there is the sense that Billie has upstaged her once again.

(quoted in hooks 1996, 182)

After a period, Suzanne finally embraces her sobbing mother, but the scene lacks any framing of healing and resolution. And it is here that my analysis greatly differs from some of the other scholarship written about the film that suggest, as Valerie Smith argues, the ending satisfies "viewers' desire for closure and healing" through "narrative closure and the sentimentalization of the family" (Smith 1999, 93). The embrace between Suzanne and Billie, if anything, signals the start of a reconciliation that has yet to come. It is a testament to the affective arsenal of emotions that memory brings in trying to live in the present. The affects of the scene allows audiences to witness how care is not automatically available for either Billie nor Suzanne based on their relation to one another as mother and daughter. In fact, in order for care to be presented, Suzanne needs to step outside of her position as *wounded* daughter to *mother* Billie. While a

representational read would situate this as powerful, an affective read reveals to its audiences how uncared for Suzanne is in the world. Even in this moment of resolution she has to mother herself through it. The spectral power shifts our focus not from Billie per se but rather to a more comprehensive structure of the various degrees of liminality hovering over Black womanhood, where some Black women are rendered more vulnerable than others. In recognizing this, we can begin to respond to the power of affection in ways that enact care for Black women's bodies, specifically those who exist toward the social margins for their lack of proximity to whiteness (Figure 1.11).

There is a brief memory that Suzanne delivers that demonstrates that tension of the flesh of Black women in the larger social structure (while also abused in the home). In this memory, Suzanne recounts having to steal to support her drug habit and being caught by the police on one occasion with her child in the car. What is, partially, framed as an account of a personal rock bottom for Suzanne actually reveals how unprotected she is as a Black woman not granted legitimacy through patriarchalized female gender. In her memory, Suzanne recalls the police pulling her over and commanding her to get on the ground. She remembers not wanting to fully face the ground because of the dirt, here linking herself to traditional modes of femininity at wanting to protect one's appearance. The officers responded to Suzanne's 'feminine' hesitation by shoving a gun to her head and telling her to get on the ground, "Bitch!," in front of her child. Suzanne's status as a mother could not protect her for it does not move Black women any closer to achieving the ground of humanity. Moreover, this incredibly brief memory also highlights the continual representational absence around Black women as victims of police brutality and the way in which that brutality is sexualized.

Coming from a middle-class background, Billops' documentation of her family life paints a painful picture of how the respectability politics of Black middle class visibility—as articulated through the nuclear family—is used to mask and hide abuse and the traumas of Black women in order to uplift the family and, in turn, the race. The use of the photographs in *Suzanne, Suzanne* is precisely what happens when the project of identification takes over; in their representation of trying to model respectability they fail to document—and reckon with—the abuse and contradictions in the home (Figures 1.12 & 1.13). As an audience we are discouraged from identifying with these images, but instead asked to see them for the contradictions they reveal and the pain they leave in their wake. Billops's excavation of family memory demonstrates how the family photograph participates in its own form of discourse that situates meaning and culture making and how that discourse has been weaponized to obfuscate Black women's abuse. For Black life, the space of death breaks down the personal/political structure of relations that govern other non-Black life in that, as Christina Sharpe writes, death is weaponized against you at any moment regardless of your relationship with property (Sharpe 2016, 6). The space of death here speaks to not only the dimensions of physical terror and death but also the psyche loss of living in as a social death. My goal in placing the space of death in *Suzanne, Suzanne* is to unveil how this film as archive, made possible through its experimentation, is a critical assessment of kinship and agency for black women through the type of violations committed against them in the space of the home. This is an interrogation of lives that are harmed within our own communities but are not registered in the public.

The film ends on a non-resolution. Suzanne remains ambivalent about her abuse and her efforts towards remaining clean: she is literally framed in darkness (Figure 1.14). The ambiguity of the ending is the resting place for this film. We were told a story about a Black woman's

memories that relied on a variety of material, directing, and editing decisions to imbue the same affective feeling available within archives and transferred to the screen. It is for those reasons why the spectral power of affection is so critical to *Suzanne, Suzanne*, for we are positioned to take serious Suzanne's ability to haunt from her position as flesh. Thus, she is able to pull meaning, guidance even, from the specters of the flesh in her actions. Teish reminds us that specters, ancestors and spirits imprint charged emotions upon our subconscious minds, affecting how we act but also how we may transmit that affection to others (Teish 1985, 79). The power of affection allows us to recalibrate kinship to open ourselves to be moved and to care for others beyond our familial and biological bonds, which as Spillers asserts are the very principles that cast Black women into abjection the passageway between human and non-human for others. Kinship with the dead provides a model to redress care to Black women in that it alters how we think and come to act in the world. Specters foreground the need for alternative sense-making properties not of our social imaginary nor the material world in which it governs, but rather from some place of alterity, like conjure culture.

## **Conclusion**

The archival and filmic work of Billops' collection is a practice of caring for the dead, akin to the work of undertaking. In her book on the photographer James Van der Zee's photography on wakes of Black death in Harlem produced between 1920-1940 she writes,

[The images] reveal the history of a time in Harlem, now past, when society cared for both the living and the dead, the belief that we must preserve a standard of pride representing order high in spiritual and temporal values. There is a purging of sorrow in



the very pageantry of funerals. Carelessness about death might reflect a carelessness about life. (Billops 1978, back cover).

Here, Billops speaks to her fascination with death but transcends notions of the macabre. This fascination with death is the idea of the impossibility of continuing Black life in the wake of constant death. Moreover, an obsession with death leads us engage with the insight that the specters in Black culture possess—their memories. Billops’s life work was in service of bodying specters, tending to their ambivalent bodies in her archives and film work.

The spectral power of affection present in *Suzanne, Suzanne* is what enables us to examine and feel how the dead rupture familial kinship, to move us into a zone where the living can begin to redress the harm committed to the ongoing destruction of Black womanhood beyond language. On some level Billops must have been attentive to film’s restorative power to affect others, in that it can body forth affection that exceeds the director’s hand: this is the spectral power of film. Taking this into account, Billops committing her family narrative to screen offered others a way to feel their affection and respond with care in ways that were limited in their lives; we as an audience are given the opportunity to care for the dead through this film even if Billops and her family herself could not. Billops’s use of feminist experimental tactics divorce narratives of family life as mere “home movies” and intervenes on the larger structure of time itself. Billops achieves this hybridity; these films are stitched together through a variety of tactics that enable them to defy categorization and concepts of narrative linearity, mirroring the multiplus structures of the archive in their accumulation and display of materials. Through a blend of the familiar via family photos, performance, vignettes, interviews, and documentation, Billops weaves biography with narrative to experiment with form while challenging representations of “authenticity” onscreen. Through this creative work, various

modes of redressing Black womanhood are simultaneously made available through various spectral powers that, in turn, cause us to defend the specter of the Black woman and the living as well.

I center ambiguous bodies here because I am not literally assembling a corpse in my analysis or use of the specter, but rather I am thinking through that passageway of liminality that defines the flesh and renders it both as consumptive material and immaterial property of designation. Sharon Holland describes this as *how* both the pen and the lash carries the same effect on the writing of Black womanhood in the world (Holland 2000, 46). To give new bodies to specters restores a dynamic affective engagement with the dead that also multiplies them. I view my research as spawning new enactments of the dead in their haunts as well as new spatial terrains for them to inhabit. The ambiguity of the body in this work is meant to stress that tension of sitting with the unknown, unspeakable presences that affect allows us to become more attuned to communicating with that which is outside of legibility. In that space we might amend the crimes committed against Black womanhood and disrupt the discursive order that defines and thrives off our abjection.

The following chapter continues this effort of redress through a narrative biography on filmmaker Madeline Anderson. I navigate the difficulties Black women directors had in pursuing experimental aesthetics in the mid-twentieth century. A symmetry exists between Anderson and Billops's work in that I was able to find Anderson's stolen experimental film, *Just Like You* (1968), because of the gossip spoken in her *Artist & Influence* interview at the Billops-Hatch SoHo loft. This gossip was critical in allowing me to re-write Anderson's experimental film history and thus reminds us of the ways in which Black women's labor often exceeds written records and must be searched for through alternative discourses, like gossip.

Additionally, I also examine the burden of representation for Black women once they pick up a camera and how experimental aesthetics often render their work inaccessible due to the strict limitations we place on Black women's vision. Anderson pushes through these barriers to produce two critical experimental shorts in the 1960s, which came at a great cost to her. I argue that Anderson's practice of working with archival footage, in the form of newsreel, alongside staged encounters led her to pursue fabulation, rather than representation, as a practice of telling the history of Black womanhood and their labor. I return to conjure culture in full in chapter four as a foundation for building upon Sylvia Wynter's concept of "Caliban's woman," where I situate Black feminist experimental film as fulfilling that new philosophical and mythological break needed to rupture colonial time and its episteme; the work gives us models by which we can become aberrant to the enclosures of colonial time. We saw that model with the specter in this chapter who ultimately reminds us in their presence that carelessness for the dead reflects a carelessness for the living.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The experimental filmography of Ja'Tovia Gary does this exceptional well. See, *The Giverny Document* (2019).

<sup>2</sup> The term haint is specific to hoodoo culture and describes the 'ghosts' that torment the living, often driving them to madness. The color "haint blue," popular on homes in Louisiana, was used to protect one's home from a haint as they would confuse the color for sky and refuse entry (Hazzard-Donald 2017, 207).

<sup>3</sup> I am not interested in any conversations that aim to reclaim nostalgia and thus disagree with Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering's argument in *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (2012), where nostalgia is defined as an obsession with the past that aims to carry over that idealized fixation of a moment to the present (10-11). Again, if time names the enemy to Black womanhood, there has and is no moment where such idealization of time could exist and such an argument, in many ways, is antithetical to Black womanhood's existence.

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<sup>4</sup> See Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4(2018): 762-768.

<sup>5</sup> I am fully aware that affect can be utilized to bond relations around whiteness, Sara Ahmed’s “A Phenomenology of Whiteness” (2007) and “Affective Economies” (2004) both speak to the affective work of hate. However, my use of affect/affection as an opposition to whiteness’s power lies in its use by the specter to redress our modes of kinship relations with Black women outside of biological/racial sameness.

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am thinking of Judith Butler’s work on agency where it is placed in terms of signification and becomes a performative act in which thought does not precede action and thus, agency is only available through action and either the normative or non-normative legitimization of the act one commits. I appreciate Stephanie Clare’s reading on missed opportunities in Butler’s work to link embodiment and temporality as key determining factors that shape agency in an individuals in their essay, “Agency, Signification, and Temporality” (2009). What is missing in Clare’s argument and what I label to continue to be the key gap in all of Butler’s work is a through engagement with race and kinship in her arguments. Thus, her presumption of agency is largely focusing on the conditions of white ciswomen (largely middle-class) and is utilized as a totalizing argument. Even when racial difference emerges in her arguments it is filtered through a psychoanalytic structure that inevitably situates the default ‘We’ to largely be the Western Eurocentric, white body that is in need of learning to ‘relate’ to others although she rarely names this body as such. Vivian Namaste’s robust critique of Butler is especially useful in addressing the undertheorized use and mark of difference in Butler’s work beyond her continual centering of white, ciswomanhood that, for her, defines all body’s ability to name the world and create archives of subversion to marginalization. We see this clearly in her egregious use of Octavia St. Laurent’s body in *Bodies that Matters* where she suggest that the agency of St. Laurent’s womanhood lies not in St. Laurent naming her womanhood through her embodiment as a trans woman but rather through Livingston’s desire (as a ciswoman who has power in her speech act) for St. Laurent that declares St. Laurent’s womanhood for others (Buter [1993] 2011, 92-95). It is for those reasons why this chapter relies on the work of Wynter and Black feminists to examine how agency has long been situates in affective embodied means for Black women.

<sup>7</sup> “The ceremonies cannot be found for the doctors of philosophy to wed the Earth to the Moon, for Othello to remain wedded to Desdemona, for Bon to marry a ‘negro’, since the group Subjects to which they belong are bonded by a system of meaning or semantic charter which determines the meaning of their meaning on the basis of these oppositions” (Wynter 1984, 27-28). In this passage, Wynter works through the enchantments of the affective poetics of sameness in the creation of Man. The ceremonies needed to undo Man’s affective power cannot lie in the same poetic structure of aesthetics that Man has used to define itself and thus a complete poetic break is needed to move away and imbue some magical, enchanting property into Man instead that becomes more responsive to humanness in the world.

<sup>8</sup> I emphasis Billops in her film work because it was Billops, not Hatch, who conceived of the film projects and executed them. Hatch aided in the production, editing, and workshopping of Billops’s ideas and thus is credited as a co-director. My centering of Billops is not to remove nor reduce his labor on the film projects but rather to think through the work of the director as related but separate from production work and, in that way, Billops bears the brunt of that labor. Moreover, it was Billops not Hatch who executed press for their films and spoke often in the singular “I” when discussing any directorial decisions and the plural “we” when speaking on production-related labor.

<sup>9</sup> In her seminal essay, “The Cave: Black Women Directors” (1992) for *Artforum*, Lorraine O’Grady describes Billops’s work as an aesthetically new film genre unlike any mode of film practice we are used

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to experiencing (O'Grady 1992, 24). Also, bell hooks labels the film as feminist and powerful for the way it shows the wounds of Black womanhood (hooks 1996, 183).

<sup>10</sup> James V. Hatch was a professor of Black Studies and Theatre and playwright. Hatch and Billops were co-conspirators in many ways and collaborated on many projects together including their archives and Billops's films.

<sup>11</sup> The Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library grants fellowships for any of their archival holdings through a competitive application. I was the first scholar to apply in 2017 (and win) the fellowship to study the Billops-Hatch Archives since their inception in 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Avery Gordon was haunted by the ghost of Sabrina Spielrein at a conference. The encounter troubled Gordon so much that it led her to recalibrate Spielrein's life and death while conveying to others that Freud's "death drive" was, in fact, plagiarized from Spielrein's work and affective labor by both Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud (Gordon [1997] 2008, 40).

<sup>13</sup> American Negro Theater, "Constitution," 1940, Box 74, Folder 5, The Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at The Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University. The American Negro Theatre declare the following,

Experimentation is conceived by this organization to mean testing the untried. In doing this, various styles of direction and interpretation will be sought by the group in the hope that out of this experimentation will evolve a technique or identification which derives from a basic 'something inherent in the Negro's native qualities. As yet, it is not known what all these qualities are. However, it is known that an accent on rhythm and a naturalness in acting have been evidence for a long time. Someday out of experimentation an essence will be recognized which will be explored and built into a technique. This technique, once it is achieved will be propagated and passed on to the world theater. This, the mission of the American Negro Theatre heralds the awakening of the dormant dramatic gifts of the Negro folk temperament and the rise of the Negro drama, and the Negro theatre, the significance of which is if anything more international rather than national or racial.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Christian, "Four African American Female Playwrights, 1910-1950: The Narratives of Their Historical, Genteel, and Black Folk Voodoo Plays", City University of New York, 1995, Box 68, Folder 1, The Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at The Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University.

<sup>15</sup> Jacqueline Bobo's edited book *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (1998) has been instrumental to my study.

<sup>16</sup> The Billops-Hatch archives speaks to how Black culture houses and brings in the survival of Black existence suppressed by time (Wynter 1968, 350).

<sup>17</sup> In 2017, The Whitney Museum of American Art held a permanent exhibition on their contemporary collection, entitled *An Incomplete History of Protest* where internal museum correspondence and well as the BECC's letter of demands to the museum were on display.

<sup>18</sup> Faith Ringgold's *Hate is a Sin Flag* (2007) was inspired by her actions demonstrating with the BECC in 1968 where, while protesting, she was called a racial epithet for the first time. The anecdote makes up the border of the artwork where she links racism to slavery and places the discrimination against Black life as a 'timeless' experience (in that it exists in any moment in time).

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<sup>19</sup> See Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018) and Bridgit R. Crooks's *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> The *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition was the genesis for Billops's *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (New York: Morgan & Morgan; Dobbs Ferry, 1978), which marked her first published work.

<sup>21</sup> Note that these narratives and analysis speak to the long history of exclusion Black experimental artists have endured in the art world where the museum/gallery has been a consistent part of the narrative of the exhibition and distribution of Black feminist experimental film.

<sup>22</sup> See Robin Blaetz *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Welbon who spent time studying at Oberlin for her doctoral dissertation in the 1990s confirmed to Billops that no such records of experimentation existed at the time of study.

<sup>24</sup> Welbon's interview is a critical document of the multiple hats Black women wear to produce work. She talks about her low self-esteem much to the shock of Bryant, but mentions that being excellent is the entry point to be a Black woman creative. Welbon's decision to pursue the Ph.D. was inspired by two points; one, the Ph.D. provides funding for the student, which she needed after completing her MFA; two, as a Black woman director, she was tired of being programmed or written about in singular terms, absent of a larger genealogical history, and thus saw it as her task to write the history of her sisters. At the time of her interview, Welbon had four book projects in the works. Only *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African-American Lesbian Media-Making* would be published.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson writes,

Such reticence is (if anything) even more marked in the historical profession. As Jonathan Walker has said: 'No respectable academic historian would ever describe their task in terms of learning to love the dead (even I wouldn't, and I'm far from respectable)' (2002, 187). If more historians were willing to cross the line of respectability, we might begin, as Nicholas Watson suggests, the work of 'systematizing the role that desire plays in historical scholarship' (1999, 60–1). Such desire does not have to be regressive, nostalgic, empiricist. (Robinson 2010, 517)

<sup>26</sup> Teish writes, "Voodoo was nurtured by a 'servant class', its magic is practices as household acts. Because it survived uprooted from its motherland, it teaches adaptability ... its truth is found in the oral tradition, it teaches respect for elders. Because its goal is to counteract the savagery created by slavery, cleanliness is its watchword, courage its greatest virtue" (1985, xi).

<sup>27</sup> In one way, we might want to connect conjure women as a form of feminist pedagogical practice for it embeds the distribution of knowledge and teaching others as part of its ongoing ritual work. Access to the spirit world is never "singular" but is meant to be distributed. This is why root workers/conjure women frequently take on apprentices to share their practices in hopes of building/sharing that skillset with others.

<sup>28</sup> See Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Hazzard-Donald argues midwives descended from root workers in the South, where the healing properties of conjure culture provided viable, material effects for others but also created financial and mobility opportunities for Black women. She writes,

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Revered for their knowledge, ability, skill, and power, midwives were women held in high social esteem in the rural African American communities of the black belt South. This high esteem could possibly be another reason that so many Black women claimed that title. Because she encountered medical personnel such as physicians and nurses and because she also attended birthing white women, the Black midwife sometimes stood between two racial worlds, one black, one white, and forged a link by forcing open a door in mainstream society unknown to many African Americans of the period. (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 142)

<sup>30</sup> In this manner we can see how Taussig's analysis on colonial terror and the space of death not only situates the real violence enacted in the New Americas but also the discourse that makes that violence possible and ordinary in that the negro takes on supernatural and 'ungodly' power in their spiritual practices and thus exist outside of the human, *Man* (Taussig 1984, 477).

<sup>31</sup> Teish writes,

But we have a conditioned fear of the nonmaterial. We fear it will get out of control. This is true; but suppression is not control ... The real question becomes 'How do we get access to an maintain a balanced relationship with these layers of consciousness?' Here, the ancestors act as intermediaries." Teish further argues that our ancestors provide the link between our conscious mind and unconscious mind; they aide in our survival. She writes, "The ancestor hands [an idea] to the subconscious mind as an idea charged with e-motion, highly desirous of birth. That package is handed to the conscious mind in a burst of inspiration (to *in-spire* is to breathe life into, to *ex-pire* is to die), and the conscious mind causes the hands to draw a blueprint and weld layers of metal together. (Teish 1985, 79-80)

<sup>32</sup> Hurston recounts in her authoethnographic study on conjure culture the following,

"You throw salt behind her, every time she go out of her gate. Do dat nine times and Ah Bet she'll move so fast she won't even know where she's going. Somebody salted a woman over in Georgetown and she done move so much she done wore out her furniture on de movin' wagon. But looka here, Zora, whut you want wid a two-headed doctor? Is somebody done throwed a old shoe at *you*? ... Me and Rachel both knows somebody that could teach you if they will. Dis woman ain't lak some of these hoodoo doctor. She don't do nothin' but good. You couldn't pay her to be rottin' people's teeths out, and filln' folks wid snakes and lizards and spiders and things like dat." (Hurston [1935] 1990, 187)

What this exchange between Hurston and Mrs. Viney demonstrates is the belief and anecdotal evidence to conjure culture's immaterial and material effects in the world and how seamlessly rituals transverse between the two dimensions.

<sup>33</sup> To Taussig's latter point, this project's culmination to the reclamation of Wynter's counter-poetics of rhythm names this trouble and does this work as will be discussed in "Chapter Five: Freedom from the Memory of Man."

<sup>34</sup> The specificity of using an experimental film for this example is also an attempt to draw out the experimentation present in many of our Black feminist literary writers like Morrison, Bambara, Octavia Butler, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and others that Karla F. C. Holloway describes as plurisignation in "Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African-American Women Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no.4 (1990): 617-631.

<sup>35</sup> Hartman defines natal alienation as the following,

Depending on the angle of vision or critical lexicon, the harnessing of the body as an instrument for social and physical reproduction unmakes the slave as gendered subject or reveals the primacy of gender and sexual differentiation in the making of the slave. Natal alienation is one of the

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central attributes of the social death of the slave and gendered and sexual violence are central to the processes that render the black child as by-product of the relations of production. At the same time, the lines of division between the market and the household which distinguished the public and the domestic and divided productive and reproductive labor for propertied whites does not hold when describing the enslaved and the carceral landscape of plantation. (Hartman 2016, 168)

<sup>36</sup> “Black folks are 44% of those newly diagnosed with HIV in this nation, yet there is little discourse and conversation around the urgency of this matter. We witnessed the critiques of whitewashing that were happening around the exhibition Art AIDS America. As curators of a program like this, it’s absolutely our responsibility to intervene in that conversation, which remains very much dominated by white men. Our varied histories are not being sufficiently honored, historicized and remembered. In spite of these exclusions and the fact that this program somewhat responds to that reality, it is very much centered on telling our stories without needing affirmation from mainstream, normative systems and structures. We are asserting that these artists have been doing this work and that these histories have existed, whether or not they are recognized. *Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings* is a reclamation and affirmation of what has always been here” (Cristovale and Crockett 2017, 7).

<sup>37</sup> Johnson’s birthday was August 24<sup>th</sup> and not June 29<sup>th</sup>, the night of the riots. The film alludes to this disconnect suggesting that Johnson was celebrating an inventive birthday or was just hosting a party in which she wanted to be the central figure. Unfortunately, much of Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel’s intellectual labor and archival research on the Marsha P. Johnson “inspired” filmmaker David France’s documentary *the Death of Marsha P. Johnson*. Tourmaline and Wortzel’s accusations of theft are revolutionary for the way in which they reveal how often queer women’s labor inspire the works of white cis men to create and it reveals the unequal distribution of funding available and biases that can enable France to direct a documentary on Marsha P. Johnson without having done any of the archival research and an overall unawareness of Johnson’s life beyond the ‘idea’ for a film. See “‘The Death of Marsha P. Johnson’ Creator Accused of Stealing Work from Filmmaker Tourmaline,” *Teen Vogue*, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/marsha-p-johnson-documentary-david-france-reina-gossett-stealing-accusations>.

<sup>38</sup> “Interviews: Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel,” *Artforum*, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/tourmaline-and-sasha-wortzel-talk-about-their-film-happy-birthday-marsha-74735>.

<sup>39</sup> Tourmaline recounts to Vivian the following as the inception for the project, The idea for the Day With(out) Art video came about when I was working at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and as part of Audre Lorde Project’s TransJustice. At the time we were doing this organizing campaign around transgender and gender nonconforming people of color, low-income people and their access to welfare, because in this moment access to welfare is a survival issue. A lot of folks in our community are getting harassed at the welfare and HIV/AIDS Service Administration offices, being told, “No, we’re not going to give you your benefits. Come back when you look like a man, or a woman.” Egyptt LaBeija was the coordinator of TransJustice and we did a lot of “study,” meaning imagining strategies about how to make things better. One day, she came in with this coffee table book that featured her and others in the ‘90s in the West Village. She was talking about how every single person in the book other than her was dead, and how no one who made the book asked for her permission to be photographed. We were talking a lot about the extraction of Black life, Black trans life, Black poor life that happens by artists who get public recognition and the feelings that surround that. We were also talking about loss, what it means to lose so much, and how that can haunt a place. Loss has happened through gentrification and HIV criminalization and really intense ‘quality of life’ policing on Christopher Street, in the Meatpacking District, in Chelsea, and in the West Village. Egyptt is an incredible performer and



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an icon and I said, “I really want to work with you to figure out how we can share that story.” (Cristovale and Crockett 2017, 25)

<sup>40</sup> When *Beloved* first arrives in 124 her speech is cumbersome, gradually loosening over time. This is seen in arrival where she struggles to communicate her name to Sethe and Denver (Morrison 1987, 52).

<sup>41</sup> Fatima Jamal is currently completing a documentary on her experience and calling as a Black trans woman who exists at various intersections of annexation of patriarchalized female gender in the world entitled *No Fats, No Femmes* (2021).

<sup>42</sup> Tourmaline’s producing partner Sasha Wortzel worked at the Whitney as head of programming and events at the time of the film’s production. Wortzel was able to provide access to LaBeija and Tourmaline to the Building’s staff rooms and spaces, which included access to the eighth floor Trustee’s Lounge and the roof. Wortzel recalled in an interview that Tourmaline and cinematographer Jessica Benett were having drinks at Top of The Standard bar, which is on the top floor of the Standard in the Meatpacking District adjacent to the Whitney Museum. That evening they noticed the particular view they had of the Whitney Museum and the Hudson and created a plan to steal this view from the Standard. In order for this shot to be achieved, Wortzel and Tourmaline had to make a deal with one of the electricians because the roof has restricted access even for upper-level staff members. Once they achieved this goal, Benett had to smuggle her film camera into the bar, in addition to getting into the bar which can be notoriously difficult to gain admission. When Benett achieved this feat, they had to hurry LaBeija onto the roof and leverage the time of the electrician who was doing them a favor, all before losing the natural light of the setting sun.

<sup>43</sup> Conjure culture is frequently foregrounded in Tourmaline’s work and can recently be seen in her 2019 short film, *Salacia*, which is an experimental short that fabulates the life of Mary Jones who lived in Seneca Village in 1836 before she was imprisoned for stealing a white man’s wallet. Jones, a trans woman who partook in sex work, gained visibility for her crime when the authorities drafted and distributed an image of her with the label “Man Monster” to local communities in the New York City area. Tourmaline features Jones as a conjure woman who uses ritual to free her spirit from imprisonment. See Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> The implication here is that for Black folk our sexual relations are haunted by the terrors of rape and brute subjugation from enslavement.

<sup>45</sup> Wynter writes the power to name lies not only as an agential force but is the role of the poet in “Ethno or Socio-Poetics” (1976, 87).

<sup>46</sup> See bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, [1992] 2015). Space does not permit me to delve into this area further but I would like to highlight how the designation of Black women as flesh has made sexual kinship difficult to receive and pursue, for the complete negation of Black women’s autonomy renders her body as consumable flesh for all. bell hooks’ analysis on consumption, Black women, and sex in “Eating the Other” is a useful starting point to understanding the difficulty ‘modern’ bodies have with Black women’s sexuality in that, I would argue, to approach Black women sexually one must alter their psychological perspectives of kinship and foreground equity and care in their relational bond. [e.g. away from a relationship of domination over]

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<sup>47</sup> Tourmaline's film is a prime example of how the counter-poetics of rhythm are used to create a doubling effect that simultaneously destabilizes us from normative poetics in the world and urges us to invent new truths around bodies, representation, and their history instead.

<sup>48</sup> bell hooks further argues that the discourse of negation is precisely what makes the consumption of Black women's bodies possible in that it does not exist in 'speech' in her piece "Eating the Other," (hooks [1992] 2008, 34-35).

<sup>49</sup> Wynter's "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together ..." reminds us that the break of writing from the body, writing from one's labor or seeing one's labor as part of the same sense-making process of feeling and "reason." She writes through the "angry" work of E.R. Braithwaite's *To Sir With Love*, "Since the enslavement rested on a system which divided mental and physical work, body and brain, Braithwaite's hero, black but educated, was a Prospero representative to the Caliban East End children. His refusal to accept that these children should be excluded from all the props of Prospero's humanity; his struggle against the colonial circumstances imposed on these Easter Enders, comes from his own memory and still present experience (through his black skin) of the Caliban torment" (Wynter 1968, 351).

<sup>50</sup> If all other modes of kinship are structured on the negation of Black women's bodies then this fracture frames how, in intracommunal spaces of Blackness, Black women's abuses are sacrificed for non-Black lives to form a patriarchal bond over the fight against racism rendering the domestic violence against Black women as a form of inherited 'property' right for Black cismen. The autobiography of Janet Mock is disturbingly clear on this but also highlights an absence of trans girls/women to our conversations on the Black girlhood and domestic abuse, with her accounts of being targeted for abuse because of her femininity as a child and how the silence around trans womanhood renders mass exploitation and enables abuse to happen without the possibility of a speech or dialogue to resist that abuse. See Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* (Toronto; New York, Atria Books, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> See Ayanna Dozier, "Wayward Travels: Racial Uplift, Black Women, and the Pursuit of Love and Travel in Torchy in Heartbeats by Jackie Ormes," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 3(2018): 12-29. For a separate article I wrote on mid-twentieth century Black respectability, I conducted research at the Schomburg Center where I went through their collections of Black newspapers from the time to examine how their editorials targeted Black women's bodies as the barometer for racial uplift. The editorials and adverts produce a maddening connection of misogynoir and aspirations to whiteness, where Black women began to 'learn' to hate their features through the same eyes of the world and work and spend tirelessly to unmake themselves for jobs and romantic advancement.

<sup>52</sup> See Sasha Bonét, "The Artist Who Gave Her Daughter Up," *Topic*, no. 23 (2019). After a period of tense engagement following the film's release in 1991, Billops removed her daughter from her life again in 2013. In fact the seeds of their lack of attachment were already in place when Billops accepted Christa's request in 1980. In her final interview she admits that the reasoning behind it was artistic in hopes that something could come out of this reunion; she greeted Christa at the airport with her partner Hatch and his son Dion with camera in hand.

<sup>53</sup> Billops states to hooks that while she was willing to paint her image as the 'bad' mother to fulfill the 'narrative arc', Billops refused to allow Christa to 'expose her' onscreen, to be fully held accountable for her actions by her daughter in front of a larger audience (hooks 1996, 182-183). When I conducted research at the Third World Newsreel archives in 2019, the distributor of Billops's films (which I will discuss in chapter three), Roselly, director of Distribution and Marketing, mentioned how even in her later years, Billops was frustrated that *Finding Christa* took center stage and was not programmed with the other films, namely *A String of Pearls*. At the time of this confession, I was unaware of key personal

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matters that would be published mere weeks later in Billops's last interview before her death (Bonét 2019). Her family trilogy is an archive in itself of buried pain, heartbreak and unresolved issues. The family trilogy is its own space of death.

<sup>54</sup> Audre Lorde similarly addresses this in her essay, "Learning From the Sixties" where she writes that Black women's autonomy, be that through financial means, outspokenness, or sexuality, has been painted as an alliance to white supremacy (Lorde [1984] 2007, 139).

<sup>55</sup> bell hooks here is critiquing Beyoncé's *Lemonade* where she argues that Beyoncé's pursuit of representational reconciliation avoids the critical work of holding men accountable for the harm they have inflicted upon Black women. Until accountability happens, the pain will only exist as a representational image. hooks critically asks her readers, "can we really trust the caring image of Jay Z?" (hooks 2016)

<sup>56</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince* (New York: Penguin Press, [1831] 2001), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Billops notes that the photographs and films were the 'missing link' to the film for they "gave the family a history" (Smith 1999, 88).

<sup>58</sup> Suzanne's brother, Michael 'takes after their mother' in that he too has light skin, finer hair texture, and possesses a slimmer figure. For his appearance in the film, Michael is not featured via talking head interview, but rather in a sort of reframing of the Narcissus myth—longingly grooming his (near absurd) handlebar moustache in the mirror. Billops remarks to the camera how handsome he is. There are no such unprompted remarks on Suzanne's beauty. Here, the film creates a stressed absence, a spectral power, in that it frames Suzanne's low self-esteem as a personal failure by not countering nor acknowledging the real psychological harm inflicted upon her in that she began to correlate her physical abuse as the result of her physical appearance. The film affirms this as Michael notes that he never received abuse as bad as Suzanne did and found it difficult to relate with her because of it.

<sup>59</sup> Billops stated that Billie was roughly seven years older than her (Alexander 2007, 310).

<sup>60</sup> Billops similarly states,

"I used to hear them say, "Billie is so pretty, and Bootsie [Billops], you're nice. You're cute too." I always rebelled against this. When she started having children, I should say, "She's having babies like a cat." At this point I had joined the Catholic Church and I was Miss Imperious walking around the house. I didn't admire motherhood. That was not a road I wanted to go down even at ten. Billie had "family," and what you did with family was endure." (hooks 1996, 181)

<sup>61</sup> I would like to stress the violent erasure of Black transwomen from our narratives of domestic violence especially when the majority of the ongoing killings of Black trans women emerge from intracommunity violence or domestic violence that goes unspoken.

<sup>62</sup> Monique Guillory goes so far as to assert that Billie was complicit in Suzanne's abuse for it took the 'heat' off of her (Guillory 1998, 71).

## Chapter Two

### Mothering Ourselves: *I Am Somebody* (1970) and Madeline Anderson's Early Film Beginnings

“Ever since I was a little girl, I could remember that the tourists would come to Charleston in the spring of the year. They would come to see Fort Sumter where the first shot of the Civil War was fired. And they would come to see our stately beautiful mansions and all our lovely gardens. But those who came in the spring of 1969 saw Charleston as it really was, if you're poor and black.” (Claire Brown via voiceover in *I Am Somebody*)

#### Introduction

*I Am Somebody*, Madeline Anderson's 1970 documentary on the Medical College strikes conducted by three hundred and eighty-eight Black women in Charleston, South Carolina, opens with the above refrain by 199B striker Claire Brown. Brown's statement is voiced over images that feature a slew of tourist sites in Charleston, including the Harbor Bridge, boat tours of Fort Sumter, carriage rides, and, of course, “lovely gardens and stately mansions.” We do not see Brown at first, but we hear her. We hear her voice sharpen to disdain as she describes these tourist sites in Charleston. The tourists who come to visit Charleston are also driven by a desire to see Fort Sumter where the first shot of the Civil War was fired. The tourists are so enamored with the façade that they, either willfully or naively, turn a blind eye to the slave labor that built these sites and whose subjection is the source of the city's profits. It is clear in this sequence that the voiceover is not synching up nicely with the assembled footage and it, in fact, exists in

opposition to the images we are given. Just what kind of labor documentary is this? Brown's voiceover is poetically used to alert the viewer that the images seen thus far are not meant to be trusted, as she ends her refrain by revealing that the truth behind the city's "loveliness" lies in the existence of those who are "poor and Black." In this chapter, I read *I am Somebody* as an experimental documentary and thus analyze it for its counter-poetics of rhythm; that is, how Anderson aesthetically brings a memory of the freedom from *Man* to the fore beyond the representational image.

Anderson manipulates the documentary form to emphasize and portray the consciousness of a Black woman, which is fundamentally a different film experience that many audience members had not encountered before in 1970. While Anderson does not explicitly refer to the theft of Black women's labor in these opening shots, the friction that emerges between her voiceover and the film's images posits an alternative way of reconciling with the present, past, and future histories of Black women's labor. Fabulation in Anderson's film, I argue, drives the experimental poetic (narrative and formal aesthetics) found in the film to tell a story of Black women's labor that documents the contemporary medical college strike by union 1199b while also poetically addressing a fuller historical account of Black women's labor. By using a poetic voiceover, as opposed to an authoritative narrative, to introduce the narrative to the audience, *I Am Somebody* "fails" as a standard documentary in this establishing scene in order to engage with the viewer in a more affective (and responsive) manner. Anderson reflexively conveys through the film's aesthetics *how* to see the world for what is not representationally visible.

I construct a narrative biography of Madeline Anderson's (b. 1923) early beginnings in film to examine the unequitable labor conditions in film and television that Black women faced in the 1960s and 1970s. I turn to Anderson to pull her work into the field of Black feminist

experimental film and video history, for the limited scholarship on her work has boxed her into the context of “ethno-aesthetics” through her works’ representational meaning and has very little to say about her aesthetics (Warren 2010; 2013; Martin 2013). Despite the paucity of film scholarship on Anderson, I am not the first one to acknowledge her clear experimental practice. In his book on experimental filmmakers left outside of the canon *Exploding Eye: A Re-Visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema* (1997), Wheeler Dixon dedicates an entry to Anderson, including her work along with the likes of Kenneth Anger, Jerome Hiler, Roy Loe, and Vivian Dick. While Dixon does not have much to say with regards to Anderson’s filmmaking practices, he does situate her guerilla film tactics and work with Shirley Clarke as experimental and unacknowledged in the genre’s history (Dixon 1997, 8-9).<sup>1</sup> This connection is not accidental, for Anderson worked with Clarke on *The Cool World* (1963) as an assistant director. Anderson’s erased labor is not just a discursive claim but one with real material stakes for situating Black women’s absence in film— as Lorraine O’Grady writes, the normalization of Black women as there but unseen (O’Grady 1992, 23). For Anderson, this absence looks like the removal of her pioneering work creating the Direct Cinema movement; it looks like being sidelined by the feminist film movement in New York City; and it, sadly, looks like intra-community negation, with her most experimental film being stolen from her by the poet Osburne Smith. This chapter restores that film, *Just Like You* (1969), to Anderson after fifty years of loss through analysis and biography.

I employ several intersecting methods of fabulation and gossip to help me flesh out the life of a woman who is largely defined by her absence in official records on film and television history and studies. Fabulation is a way of inventing new truths by embracing what is not known or what did not happen about a particular history, subject, or narrative. Saidiya Hartman’s

definition of fabulation succinctly describes it as “the work of reconstruction and fabulation” needed to “highlight the relation between power and voice and the constraints and closures that determine not only what can be spoken but also who speaks” (1997, 12). Fabulation guides how I make sense of the absence of Black women and feminist work within experimental film and video studies. I also take up fabulation as a kind of film labor that sees Anderson gathering research and material to produce what she describes as compilation films on what *had happened* (Billops hatch 2003). To mobilize fabulation in this sense, I use the work of Deleuze in concert with Black feminist scholars like Sylvia Wynter to draw out its ethic-principle of care.

I turn to gossip to redress the term from its pejorative sexist meaning and return to its origins as female companionship through the work of Sylvia Federici (2004, 100). I am grateful for the invaluable information I gained on Anderson’s work through gossip, for its form *as* knowledge distribution reveals all the ways in which women’s lives and labor are produced off the record and exceed the standards of “professionalism” mandated for traditional discourse (exhibition catalogues, journal articles, anthologies, conferences, etc.).<sup>2</sup> Gossip engenders the speaking subject and points to how that subject, typically understood as women and queer men, must communicate through alternative means in order to spread and impart valuable information to others. In my childhood household, the gossipier was a condemned woman doubly named as a conjurer in that the gossip’s use of communication and excessive knowledge of things was framed as the ability to “hex” others.<sup>3</sup> The gossipier was socialized to be an unmarried woman who wreaked havoc in the lives of others due to her unwed status; she had too much time, was without wifely duties, and talked too much. She existed outside of the portrayal of chastity and respectability that were aspirational roles for Black women in the twentieth century.

The connection between gossip and alterity, like conjure culture, is further fleshed out in Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004).

Federici uses the figure of the witch to address how women's roles in early capitalism were strategically reduced through the witch panic to symbolically and financially cast them outside of the status of property owner (Federici 2004, 88). The symbolic construction of the witch as a damned woman was key to the growth of primitive accumulation and women needed to become suspicious of themselves and other women for that condemned status to take root. Federici uses the transformation of the work gossip to emphasize this symbolic recoding of women's status. The original term defined female companionship but over time came to carry the pejorative traits that I described above making women mistrustful of other women's company, thus ensuring their alienated social status in the market and firmly fixing women to the home. To return to gossip is to remind my readers of how, as Black women, communication via institutional means exists outside of our reach unless some serious sacrifices are made. To reclaim gossip as an available means of knowledge production and distribution also demonstrates all the ways in which professionalism are weaponized against Black women's various forms of communication. As in the previous chapter, my methods are experimentally enacted and oriented as a way to convey the reflexive properties of my research to the reader—that is, the generative collisions of affect that emerge in the research and writing process. Moreover, this style enables me to attend more productively to the information in Anderson's life that exceeds official discourse of what can be said about a life.

It is not my intention to situate Anderson as a “mother” to the generation of Black women experimental filmmakers who follow, but rather to place her early beginnings in the field amidst overwhelming professional and social isolation that bore the need for Anderson to attend to



kinship in a manner that saw her mother her own artistic practice. My title, “Mothering Ourselves”, is taken from Audre Lorde’s poem “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” (Lorde [1984] 2007). In this poem, Lorde confronts the trouble Black women have with facing other Black women in the world due to our broken affective links with Blackness (145–146). “Eye to Eye” brilliantly encapsulates how our cognitive schema must be recoded in order to relate to and care for Black humanity, for we are socialized affectively to condemn Blackness at every level, including within ourselves.

“Eye to Eye” reveals the deep psychological and affective wounds that this socialized status has on Black women: namely, the difficulty of loving ourselves as Black women and of loving other Black women as an extension of ourselves. Lorde addresses the alienated position of Black womanhood—specifically that which is poor, dark, and outside of Eurocentric beauty values—as the representational image of Black femininity that we do not want to see within ourselves and that we seek to remove ourselves from publicly (155–56). Lorde is refreshingly honest about this difficulty in that it hinders our ability to make kin with our Black women, specifically our mothers. She writes, “All mothers see their daughters leaving. Black mothers see it happening as a sacrifice through the veil of hatred hung like sheets of lava in the pathway before their daughters. All daughters see their mothers leaving. Black girls see it happening through a veil of threatened isolation no fire of trusting pierces” (Lorde [1984] 2007, 158). Lorde examines how the common psychological pain we share as Black women alters our capacity to feel. That process first emerges with the relationship Black women have with their mothers. Following Hortense Spillers, what Lorde is getting at is the deep trauma of Black motherhood’s origins in the New World, which came through the gross sexual abuse within and outside of

Black communities. The only form of recognition available for many Black women comes from their mothers, but what of us who do not have a mamma?

What I am arguing here is that alienation for Black women, be that familial or social, produces a deep mistrust of oneself and one's creative power. In order for agency or consciousness to emerge, one must completely reorient their cognitive schema of one's self against overwhelming structures of oppression. Lorde proposes that we redress these wounds by creating the model of learning to mother ourselves (Lorde [1984] 2007, 173). She writes, "We must establish authority over our own definition, provide an attentive concern and expectation of growth which is the beginning of that acceptance we came to expect only from our mothers. It means that I affirm my own worth by committing myself to my own survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women" (Lorde [1984] 2007, 173). Mothering ourselves not only seeks to reconcile the violence committed against Black women and the condemned image of the Black mother through radical self-affirmation, but impactfully situates our existence as alienated subjects in that we must recalibrate every aspect of our existence to reassess situations and find agency in places and sources not legible to others; it is a re-establishment of our kin relations. Mothering ourselves describes the incredible labor by Anderson as a pioneer in her field who was largely isolated from other Black women for most of her film and video practice. It speaks to her extraordinary creative pursuit of self-determination in literally carving out a lane for her experimental vision to exist in the world. Additionally, I employ the title in relation to Anderson's labor as a mother that intersected with her production labor on *I Am Somebody*. Her biography becomes a radical document for other Black feminists to see how she navigated those structural conditions of oppression and found agency against a totalizing system of anti-Blackness.

I begin with a methodological breakdown of the concepts of fabulation and gossip that I utilize in my reading of Anderson's life and experimental filmography. I trace her early interests in film, emerging in the mid 1950s, through the completion and premiere of *I Am Somebody* in 1970. In this time period, I narrate her engagements and associations with notable experimental and avant-garde filmmakers of the period that do not include references to her in their records. I aim to redress her role as a pioneer of the Direct Cinema movement with her film *Integration Report One* (1958), her labor in the construction of the radical lens seen in television program *Black Journal* (1968–1971), and the intracommunity mistreatment that led her to her work being stolen and her departure from that program in 1969.

I conclude this chapter with a detailed analysis of Anderson's most well-known work, *I Am Somebody*, to read it not as traditional documentary but for its experimentation, which has yet to be examined in any analysis of Anderson's work. My analysis will pay close attention to Anderson's aesthetics; critically, how she uses a counter-poetics of rhythm to affectively draw out and convey various memories of Black women's labor to her audience. The film constructs a consciousness of Black women and the fight for equitable pay. Anderson admitted that the process transformed her and the labor battles she was fighting at the time. I examine why and how Anderson turned to experimental techniques rather than representational ones to draw out that rhythm of memory, of agency, in the film. I now turn my attention to methodologically unpacking the use of fabulation and gossip that shape how I read Anderson's life and what materials I used to construct a narrative biography of her beginnings in film.

### **Fabulating My Methods of Approach**

My use of fabulation is derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and that of Sylvia Wynter, along with other Black theorists who have gestured to the work of fabulation as something that makes amends for the stories that can be neither told nor found in the archives. The work of fabulation is to unsettle a system that views itself in service of narratively reproducing the truth. In its problematizing of the “truth,” fabulation sends a once-viable prospect, like representation, into crisis. Moving beyond representation has always been a critical focus for Black artists, as representation has often foreclosed their “freedom of movement” in the world (Peterson 2000, xii). In an effort to move beyond representation as a static receptacle for portraying symbols that convey “truth” to the public, Deleuze turns our attention to the creative forger and their ability to invent truths in their work as opposed to merely reproducing meaning. Fabulation not only describes my research practices, but can also be used to methodologically interpret the filmic doing of Anderson’s work. Here, fabulation as a process of working toward or inviting otherness functions as a mnemonic aberration.

Deleuze lays out the process of fabulation in his chapter “The Powers of the False” in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Deleuze writes that there are two regimes of the image: the organic and the crystalline. For Deleuze the organic image uses movement to stand for a pre-existing reality, whereas the crystalline image “stands for its object, replaces it, both creates and erases it ... constantly gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones” (Deleuze 1986, 126). Following the move towards the crystalline image, the crystalline image utilizes or enforces a narration that ceases to be truthful and becomes fundamentally falsifying. Deleuze sees this falsifying act as “the power of the false which replaces and supersedes the form of the true, because it poses the simultaneity of incompatible presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts” (1986, 131). The crystalline image goes a step further

as it “poses inexplicable differences to the present and alternatives which are undecidable between true and false to the past. The truthful man dies, every model of truth collapses, in favor of the new narration” (1986, 131). The collapse of the truth is an effort, as Deleuze argues, to push the image (its aesthetics and content) to create new creative ambitions in the world. For the powers of the false, or fabulation, leads us to new possibilities that are not exhausted and continuously remake themselves in the service of the body. Moreover, the act of fabulation also throws our understanding of temporality into chaos, acting, I will argue, as a mnemonic aberration.

In her essay “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues” (1994), Afro-Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter describes this as the problem by which meaning or truth is constituted under hegemonic systems in service of justifying the subjection of others. Using the acronym of N.H.I. (No Humans Involved)—which law enforcers use to describe black bodies that are jobless or homeless when they die or are subjected to more pronounced uses of violence from the state—Wynter writes that a system of truth needs to be taught and repeated to constitute such a dismissal of human life as a mere fact. She writes,

It was therefore the role of these systemic cognitive distortions to provide the mode of ‘truth’ able to induce the White students (as the potential enforcers of their totemic group differential status vis à vis the Black category, where as adult lyncher, policeman-beater or Simi Valley juror), to perceive it as their ‘just’ and legitimate duty to keep the order’s conceptual other in its systemic place. (Wynter 1994, 9)

Wynter’s quote here reveals that many individuals do not create new meaning through their interactions with others so much as they reproduce it, for the reproduction of meaning (as informed by colonialism) has constituted the subjectivity of many white individuals in the world

(subjectivities that are defined and rewarded by the state through their willingness to uphold the state). Wynter's study on the representation of Black women, in addition to how they are subjected to daily public scrutiny and abuse (be that for their name, hair, dress, body, etc.), reveals the concentrated effort by individuals to reproduce and repeat meaning (and subsequently power). Fabulation, in one way, takes this system that strives to reproduce hegemonic meaning as a given and plies open space for alternative possibilities to emerge. It enacts, as Deleuze writes, a jam in the cognitive schema of perception for the ways in which we come to know what we know in the world (Deleuze 1989, 20).

Deleuze further framed the work of fabulation as a way of going against the legal structure that enable the organic image to emerge as a symbolic holder of the "truth" (1986, 130). To fabulate the image would be to free the image (and the work that goes into the production of the image) from this system as it shatters the "judgement because the poser of the false (not error or doubt) affects the investigator and the witness as much as the person presumed guilty" (1986, 133). Fabulation in cinema thus holds the power to unsettle meaning and impact the creator (or, as Deleuze writes, the forger), the viewer, and the production of the image. It uses our creative ambition of storytelling, or what Wynter calls the "linguaging telos" (this term refers to how mankind uses language to speak myth into existence) of *Man*, to invent new narratives that may affect our daily creative ambitions with one another (McKittrick 2015, 25). Wynter writes that the human is "*homo narrans*," which means that the human species emerged through the co-evolution of the brain with "the emergent faculties of language, storytelling. This socio-evolution must be understood concomitantly with the uniquely mythmaking region of the human brain" (McKittrick 2015, 25). Wynter's focus on *homo narrans* is excavated here to ground fabulation

as a free-for-all with creative ambition; but also as a fruitful creative ambition for Black artists to pursue, as the “given” assurances of truth in this world do not work in our favor.

In his article “Unburdening Representation,” Black cultural and performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong’o accounts for the uneven reciprocal relationship that emerges between Deleuze and Black thought in Deleuze’s (re)construction of fabulation in “The Powers of the False.” Nyong’o astutely points out that Deleuze turns to two films by feminist filmmaker Shirley Clarke, *The Connection* (1961) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967), as cinematic examples of the powers of the false/fabulation (Nyong’o 2015, 70-71). Nyong’o is invested in reclaiming the bodies of the Black subjects in those films, specifically Jason Holliday’s performance as an act of queer Black fabulation in *Portrait of Jason* that moves his body beyond the controlling white representative gaze of Clarke. While Nyong’o uses fabulation in dialogue with Afrological aesthetics to create afro-fabulation, I remain firm in my use of fabulation as a standalone term, as I argue that it can best be reflected and found in the work of Black women’s experimental cinema and maintain that a political ethics is already present in Deleuze’s work. More importantly, like affect, I view fabulation as already an effect of Black studies, as is evident by its appearance in the methodological studies of Black feminist scholars like Hartman, Spillers, and Wynter. Fabulation crosses the liminal frontier zone of corporeality, suggesting that “knowing” through identification, representation, or testimony are not always viable projects for conveying lives intimately woven through radical, contradictory emotions, nor for full comprehension of them (Deleuze 1989, 154). Fabulation engages and sits with the opacity of knowledge or “knowing,” asserting to its audience that reducibility is not the goal.

For experimental cinema by Black women, the work of fabulation is a critical tool for creation: it seeks to use their images to induce new transformations and moments of collective

witnessing and actualization with each viewing. The research of such work must also strive not to repeat stale discourses on Black women's films, and thus constantly question time and truth through every aesthetic decision, reimagining them at every turn. Thus, fabulation is also understood in this study as a methodological practice that enables scholars to make sense of incomplete archives on Black women's cinema that were never in our interests in the first place. When reading fabulation in the work of the artists featured here, I am describing how they use the poetics of the film (narrative and formal aesthetics) to invent new truths, temporalities, and narratives through Black expressive culture. For me, truth, time, and narrative—as they exist in discourse, institutions, and exhibitions on Black life, let alone Black women's experimental film—are not guaranteed assurances for scholars pursuing historical questions about Black women's creative ambitions. This study takes that as a given and asks, through these films, what unpredictable possibilities can emerge through our film poetics when we accept that we are not guaranteed a history or future based on conditions as they currently stand.

Christina Sharpe reminds us that “wake work” imagines “new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. . . a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (Sharpe 2016, 18). Wake work is a method of fabulating the incomplete archives, research, and discourses on Black life that Black scholars encounter (Sharpe 2016, 12). In Sharpe's words, “the failure of the archive to account for Black labor necessitates the destruction of the archive by the scholar in order to tell the story that “cannot be told but must be told anyway” (Sharpe 2016, 19). To tell the story that cannot be told but must still be told is to fabulate the story, but also to seek new creative ambitions that could tell that story. For the filmmakers of this study,



those creative ambitions look like experimentation via a counter-poetics of rhythm. I now turn to the critical use of gossip for assembling narratives of lives socialized not to have such narratives.

### *The Gossiper*

Following my own archival research, I can attest that the story of Black women's experimental cinema as addressed through the life of Madeline Anderson in this chapter did not have a chance at making the official records. Due to this, I have looked at the traditional modes of knowledge dissemination (exhibitions, monographs, anthologies, etc.) with a grain of salt. But more importantly, this also meant turning to alternative modes of knowledge dissemination, such as a gossip, to make sense of these forgotten women. In the interviews that I conducted with some of the filmmakers that make up the rest of this dissertation, I treated these conversations as encounters of gossip; or, to be more colloquially specific, as opportunities to talk shit.

Gossip is a gendered methodological practice in which women share information with other women. To gossip with others or to be accused of gossip is to be immediately identified as a woman (or to be feminized), specifically as a woman who talks too much, for it defines the alternative ways in which women had to share information with others to be informed of the spaces that they were intellectually and physically kept out of. Borrowing from the work of Silvia Federici, I employ gossip as a pedagogical tool. Gossip is a form of knowledge production and distribution that is often dismissed as women's work or as carrying non-essential information. This is not accidental, as the term's original meaning of "friend" was transformed during the witch-hunt era of colonialization as a way of making female friendships suspicious and of encouraging women's denouncement of each other (Federici 2004, 186).

To take up gossip is to acknowledge the bonds of intimacy and knowledge that women often share with one another. Or even, as Hannah Black writes, following Federici, to acknowledge that “a hatred of gossip is a hatred of women talking to each other. . . communities of gossips nurse each other through the degradations that partners, bosses and families inflict on us” (Black 2017). Some of the stories that follow in this chapter and the rest of this dissertation—stories that I overheard in the archives, stories that were left on tapes that authors forgot to turn off, stories that were shared to me in person over drinks, on the tube/metro/subway/train, in the theaters, and at conferences—have been procured through gossip. The re-appearance of some of these stories here is a way of passing down these forgotten tales, but also constitute the love of sharing information and bonding with other women. As this study will discuss, for some of these artists, being in a community with other women is what helped them make the work in the first place. It is likewise certainly what has propelled this study.

Some of the media history analysis in this dissertation is best told through the history or life of a particular figure, as is the case with this chapter and its focus on Madeline Anderson. Analyzing how an individual or collective navigated their experience is useful information for helping to make sense of the disparate history that frames Black women’s experimental film. I try not to prioritize any one specific person, but rather am trying to think of the collection of anecdotes and gossip that I have gathered as enabling me to paint a clear picture of this field and specific stories or lives at particular moments in time. I spend some time outlining Anderson’s work via her biography because it affords me the opportunity to address the disparity around Black women in and around the avant-garde during de-segregation and the subsequent Civil-Rights movement. To analyze her story, and to recount how she got to pick up a camera then, is

to analyze a story of Black women and the abuse of their labor. This chapter then doubles as a history of the scarcity of Black images and content during the 1950s and early 1960s and how television served as an initial place to disrupt those changes for Black people following the publicity of the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

### **As the World Turns: New York City, Direct Cinema and the Avant-Garde (1954-1964)**

“Angry Young White Men.” This was Anderson’s response when asked for her opinion of the beatnik movement in New York. “No, I didn’t hang around them,” she further adds (Billops & Hatch 2003). The question was addressed to Anderson during an interview with artist and scholar Michelle Materre as part of Camille Billops and James V. Hatch’s long running oral history series with minoritarian artists, “Artist and Influence,” in October of 2003.<sup>4</sup> The footage of the interview can be found in the Billops and Hatch Archives at Emory University.

Considering the paucity of scholarship surrounding Madeline Anderson’s film work, I found this ninety-minute interview invaluable for my research. Anderson’s dismissal of the beatnik movement is not a simple aside, but one that holds a wealth of information about what it was like to navigate white art groups as a Black woman in the 1950s.

Moving to New York City by way of Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the early 1950s to study education at New York University, Anderson arrived to a city that was being socially constructed by the beatniks (so to speak), especially if you were an artist. The exclusion from these social spaces initially isolated Anderson from interacting with artists and avant-garde filmmakers associated with the beatnik movement. Of that early period, Anderson recounts that she mostly kept to herself, pursuing her interest in film, which had instigated her move to the city, alone. Unlike other artistic mediums at that time, film production could be an inaccessible medium for

nascent individuals to pursue without the help of a community to interact with. This was specifically true for Black individuals who had historically been excluded by mainstream film practices and were greatly affected by the dissolution of the Black culturally owned productions, film companies, and community-run theaters that nourished Black independent cinema from the late 1910s to the mid 1940s (Sieving 2011, 43–44).<sup>5</sup>

The dissolution of these Black-supported film production companies dealt an intense blow to the memory of Black independent cinema prior to the 1940s. As theaters and production companies closed, many films of this era would be lost, damaged, and forgotten. The loss of these films and the communities that supported them impacted and shaped how Anderson encountered and experienced cinema during her formative years. Whenever she expressed her desire to be a film director to her family, they would frequently discourage her, as it was a “known” fact that Black women did not aspire to be filmmakers (Clark 2017). To appease her family’s concern about her film aspirations, Anderson enrolled in secretarial school at Millersville State Teacher’s College where she was the only Black student. Her time at Millersville was short-lived, however, as Anderson experienced racial violence from her peers, leading to her to drop out after her first year, much to her family’s disappointment. The fallout from Millersville led Anderson to rekindle her interests in film production. After two years of working full-time and with the aid of a partial scholarship from NYU, Anderson saved enough money to move to New York.

When Anderson moved to New York, she immediately filled her spare time with attending “any and every” film night class that the city had to offer at institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem while completing courses for her Bachelors during the day. Fortunately for Anderson, her arrival and interest in cinema coincided

with the advent of more accessible technology that led to the Direct Cinema movement and a more progressive shift in social ideology surrounding film production.<sup>6</sup> Anderson took on production work with Direct Cinema founder Richard Leacock, who would act as a sort of mentor to Anderson during her early years in New York, before later working with feminist experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Anderson met Leacock through his wife, Dr. Eleanor Leacock, after interviewing for a childcare provider position for the Leacock family.<sup>8</sup> Upon Leacock learned of her interest in film, Anderson was surprised and ecstatic that he immediately took her under his wing and offered her production work (Clark 2017).

Direct Cinema was ushered in by new technological inventions in cinema, specifically the invention of the pilot tone. The pilot tone enabled sound to be synchronized to live footage through the connection of a portable sixteen millimeter camera to an automatized tape recorder, like the Nagra III.<sup>9</sup> In his book on the Direct Cinema of the Maysles brothers, Jonathan B. Vogels writes that this advancement would change the formal structures of cinema, especially documentary, as films could now “elicit a spontaneity not found in earlier documentaries”, giving audiences “a novel sense of being on the scene, amidst unfolding events” (Vogels 2010, 4). It was now easier than ever to take your camera, literally put it in someone’s face, and capture their live reaction, now with sound! Anderson called this technological shift, in conversation with the affordable (or free) classes on film production offered in the city, a democratizing process that assisted many individuals from varied socio-economic backgrounds (Billops & Hatch 2003).

As cinema technology became more mobile, cheaper, and less regulated, causing a perception of “democracy” around the craft, purveyors of the new technological advancements in film attributed a specific ideological focus to their work. There was a desire to move beyond

documentary's stale effects—including presentational-style filming, talking heads, voiceover narration, and wide shots, amongst other formal techniques—that created a stagnant distance between the subject, the camera, and, ultimately, the audience. Because of this shift, Direct Cinema is discussed, at times, in conversation with experimental cinema, as shifts in film methods deeply affected film's formal aesthetics and enabled filmmakers to be spontaneous, go off script, film non-sequiturs, and turn the camera upside down (Elder 2016, 493).

In 1958 Anderson began work on her first short film, *Integration Report One*, through her production company Andover Productions, which she founded with Leacock. *Integration Report One* is a documentary survey filmed in the style of Direct Cinema, aimed at capturing and informing Black people about the sit-ins and school integration occurring across the United States. Utilizing a combination of archival footage and footage that Anderson shot, the film set the tone for future Direct Cinema films that dealt with race, notably Richard Leacock's *The Children Were Watching* (1961).

The title *Integration Report One* was an optimistic one in that Anderson anticipated that her film would be the first of many “integration reports” in the United States (Moon 1997, 13). Anderson listed two factors that prevented the creation of “sequels” to *Integration Report One*: a lack of funding and the fact that integration was never fully realized in the United States (Billops & Hatch 2003). Of the film's production, Anderson remarked that it taught her that to be an independent filmmaker you “really have to do it all,” and that the creating the film is what led her to hone her skills as an editor (Moon 1997, 9). While this statement calls attention to Anderson's growing skill and the independent nature of the D.I.Y style that was propelled by the Direct Cinema movement, Anderson felt it was critical to push back against the concept of being an auteur in her “Artist and Influence” interview. For Anderson, auteurs were individuals devoid

of community who disrespected their staff with their egos; they were the “Angry white men” that she avoided upon her arrival in New York. While Anderson was certainly doing most of the work for *Integration Report One*, she placed a great emphasis in many of interviews on film being a collaborative effort (Moon 1997; Billops & Hatch 2003; Martin 2013). Her disdain for the concept of the auteur does not undermine her artistic and technical skill and vision, but rather places tension on the idea that cinema is a one (white) man show.

The Direct Cinema movement provided the best accessible entry into film production for Anderson largely due to its *perceived* ethos of film pedagogical practices that utilized cinema’s technological turn towards the mobile: that is, the use of the sixteen millimeter camera. Anderson remarks that she would often take night classes on film hosted by producers and filmmakers of the emerging movement (Billops 2003). Although she herself has not been explicitly critical of the movement, its limitations for feminist and racial engagement has been well documented (Rabinovitz 1991; Walderman and Walker 1999).

Direct Cinema was known for its experiential engagement with the audience through the disappearance of the physical presence of the camera or director. The mobility and smaller size of sixteen millimeter cameras enabled directors to put the camera “in your face” and sink within the immersive image of the frame. Such a feat is quite difficult to achieve when your camera is grounded and cumbersome. Direct Cinema’s insistence on the “invisibility” of the camera or director was ideologically imprinted in its films and reinforced by its members, such as Robert Drew and Richard Leacock. The directors advocated for the camera as neutral in its observation and saw the “cinematographic image” in opposition to narrative (Rabinovitz 1991, 113–114); a curious belief, as Direct Cinema also depended on a “crisis narrative” where a “crisis” shapes the “narrative” unfolding onscreen.

For the founders of Direct Cinema, crisis narratives were natural dramatic events presented to the audience as seemingly “unscathed” by narrative manipulation. As film scholar Stephen Mamber writes, the crisis structure enabled the audience to experience unfolding dramatic events for the following reasons: “Because he or she is so engrossed in the crisis at hand, the subject is less aware of the camera. The drama inherent in a crisis provides excitement in what are typically more slow-moving, less-structured films. A subject reveals his or her ‘true’ identity or ‘character’ when put to the test of a crisis” (Vogels 2010, 2). I take issue with the structure and emphasis of the crisis narrative deployed by many advocates of Direct Cinema, mainly around the issue that a “true” identity from a character or individual can ever be revealed to its audience. The framing of a crisis narrative forecloses the ways in which bodies pull from social actions to reuse them in any given situation. We live, reply, repeat, and remix. No one moment holds the wealth of an individual’s existence, and it is precisely this type of framing of knowing that allowed Direct Cinema to claim to “comprehend” its subjects through these moments, in which the bodies that were thereby “known” were often those who were marginalized and excluded (or erased) from the position of making or intervening in their own representation.

The Civil Rights Movement around voting equality and desegregation provided numerous crisis narratives that were “eager” to be captured by Direct Cinema enthusiasts. In fact, the bulk of Direct Cinema focuses on the structural oppression of Black Americans during sit-ins and Integration, visible struggles that “fed” the movement’s “preoccupation with postwar conditions in Black America” (Sieving 2011, 49). It is curious, then, that the work of one of the few Direct Cinema directors of color is often not included in existing anthologies, articles, and screenings of the movement.<sup>10</sup> Direct Cinema directors’ insistence on objectivity clouded the



narrative and perspective of their camera's gaze, meaning that they failed to see how their class, gender, and racial positions (i.e. whiteness) shaped their narratives, or how the conditions of the film are already subjected to a narrative structure itself (be that an election, segregation, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, the framework and celebration of the "crisis narrative" would lead to the misrepresentation of Richard Leacock's *The Children Were Watching* (1961), a film about school desegregation in the United States. *The Children Were Watching* has been widely praised for its focus on race relations in the United States. The film is even cited as *the* first example of a Direct Cinema documentary that shows the "ugly side of racism" to the public (Vogels 2010, 5). This is factually untrue, as *Integration Report One* was created three years prior. No scholars writing on Direct Cinema make mention of Anderson's film, even as Leacock's focus on school desegregation gets taken up as a critical film both in and outside of the Direct Cinema movement. When watching both films, it is painfully obvious that Leacock's film was inspired by the work that he did on Anderson's film. Both films share the same production staff, and Leacock was an assistant director on *Integration Report One*. This is not to say that *The Children Were Watching* is not an "original" film, but instead to raise awareness about how Anderson's production company and early films have been erased from the history of Direct Cinema despite their obvious influence in the work in the films of Drew Associates.

Feminist experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke was quite vocal in her criticism against Direct Cinema after briefly working with the movement in the early 1960s. Clarke had turned to cinema after her career as a dancer stalled. Using her interests and experience as a choreographer, Clarke was inspired by Maya Deren's cinematic dance films to map movement onto film's form.<sup>11</sup> Following her emergent success with early New York experimental cinema (between 1940 and 1960), Clarke became well known amidst the independent avant-garde film

circles in New York and often taught film classes to aspiring filmmakers (Rabinovitz 1991). In the late 1950s Clarke's interests, along with those of several notable experimental filmmakers, were directed towards the Direct Cinema movement, as they felt experimental cinema (in the New York scene) had become sterile and what Jonas Mekas critiqued as a style of "intuitive, self-directed lyricism" like that found in the work of Stan Brakhage (Rabinovitz 1991, 108). Clarke echoed this feeling and was aching for cinematic practices that were more socially informed. Coinciding with Clarke's awakening socio-political consciousness, Direct Cinema turned to distribution via public access channels on television as "television provided a new, more popular outlet for a socially committed independent cinema" (Rabinovitz 1991, 109). Clarke's interests led her to create Filmmakers Inc. with several notable direct cinema pioneers, among them Graham Ferguson, Willard Van Dyke, D.A. Pennebaker, and Leacock (Moon 1997, 15). Filmmakers Inc. created a social hub for avant-garde independent filmmaking in New York.

In *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics*, Rabinovitz clarifies the perceived value of television's ability to produce "immediacy" between maker and viewer in relation to a political project. For members of the New York Avant Garde and Direct Cinema movements, immediacy was seen a threshold to cross in order to produce social reform. By engaging with "real" people and putting a camera in their face, filmmakers believed that they could give an "unmediated" account of daily life that was structured by class and racial hardships (although Direct Cinema's engagement with race tended to highlight how white people were responding to desegregation), and that viewers could thereby be politically swayed to become more invested in class consciousness and social reform in the United States (Rabinovitz 1991, 111).<sup>12</sup> The lack of thorough engagement with race and gender, however, made the aesthetics around these film movements ultimately lacking in political efficacy, as in many cases the sense of direct

engagement or mobility was in service of a longer dialectics of “knowing” the other that ultimately reproduces hegemonic ways of seeing the world, rather than critiquing or destabilizing them. By 1960, Andover Productions had dissolved and Anderson moved over fully to television to work for WNET (New York’s first public access channel as part of National Education Television). She would remain in television through the 1960s, when she was ultimately brought on to direct, produce, and edit the seminal *Black Journal* for its first two seasons. Anderson would keep in contact with a handful of members from Filmmakers Inc. though the mid 1960s, specifically Shirley Clarke. To understand the limitations of Direct Cinema’s aesthetics, I would like to briefly turn to Shirley Clarke’s 1964 film *The Cool World* for two reasons: first, *The Cool World* (in addition to Clarke’s *The Connection* [1961]) was made in the style of Direct Cinema to specifically push against the “objective” stance of the camera that Direct Cinema purported; second, Anderson was Clarke’s assistant director and collaborator for *The Cool World*. I want to suggest that the aesthetic manipulations that Clarke (or perhaps Anderson) used in the film would be styles that Anderson would later incorporate in *I Am Somebody*, thereby filling in the gap between Anderson’s move from Direct Cinema to the experimentation that she executes in the latter film.

In 1962, Clarke planned to adapt Warren Miller’s 1959 novel *The Cool World*. Riding off the success of her last film, *The Connection*, Clarke wanted to create another narrative film that used the styles of Direct Cinema to place tension on the “objective” narrative that was now popularized by the films of Drew Associates, as most notably seen in *Primary* (1960). Her intention was to incorporate her experimental filmmaking background to manipulate the film so as to not only create a feeling of “authenticity”, but to draw attention to the camera’s gaze and how it engages with the characters onscreen. As noted earlier, if Direct Cinema’s insistence on

making the director invisible also depended on a crisis narratives—say, of racism, for example—awareness should be drawn to the ethics of the film and who is filming it (Rabinovitz 1991,115).

*The Cool World* functions as a product of Direct Cinema, but gives the camera the “position” of an outsider watching Black Harlem youth in the 1960s. In Clarke’s efforts to stage “authenticity,” she used the camera’s voyeuristic gaze to remind viewers of the camera’s presence and thus her status as an “intruder” capturing “authentic” portrayals of Harlem youth. *The Cool World* was largely improvised using real teens from Harlem with her then-partner, the actor Carl Lee, co-directing the teens and acting alongside them as the priest in the film (Sieving 2011, 51). Film scholar Lauren Rabinovitz writes that racially mixed crews were often individually named to viewers as a way to signal the “diverse” production of the crew to a predominantly white “liberal” audience (Rabinovitz 1991, 129).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the film did attract and gain popularity among a Black audience and would play at Black film festivals after its release (Rabinovitz 1991, 125). In noting the diversity of the crew as something that was highlighted to the press at the time is to do some recuperative work and to highlight Anderson’s involvement with the production as an assistant director. Few interviewers have asked Anderson about her involvement with the film, but she did note the following in a 1997 interview: “The way I feel about the film now is that, I think it was an honest film. It wasn’t a romantic idea of who the young people were in the film. That’s how they were. Some of the young actors in the film were from gangs or were friends of gang members. I think Shirley tried to do a good job of telling the truth about what was going on at the time. I think it was one of the best films at the time of the [Direct Cinema] genre” (Moon 1997, 15).<sup>14</sup>

While the reception of *The Cool World* is mixed to this day, many critics at the time praised the film for its poetic structure as a “real or documentary-like picture” (Rabinovitz 1991,

25). A review from *Newsweek* focuses on a series of shots, poetic voiceovers, and stylized edits featured in the film, stating that Clarke

invents visual rhymes, cutting from a cigar smoker to a fat man smoking a ceramic pipe, to a man with a cigarette; or from a little girl skipping, to a man doing a trick dance on a manhole cover, to a group of young women twisting outside a record shop. The visuals and their accompanying jazz soundtrack are emotional, highly kinetic manifestations of the restless energy and sense of frustration expressed in Duke's monologues. (Rabinovitz 1991, 125).

The visual rhymes of cutting featured in *The Cool World* may have been the work of Anderson, as they mirror the visual lyricism featured in the opening shots of *I Am Somebody*, for which Anderson was also an editor, addressed earlier (Clark 2017). Or perhaps Clarke's own visual lyricism conducted in *The Cool World* inspired Anderson to develop her own in *I Am Somebody*. I am not suggesting that the stylistic traits described above do not belong to Clarke, but rather want to reinforce that these are stylistically similar traits that appear in Anderson's work which have been dismissed or unacknowledged for their experimental attributes and yet can have clearly been praised in Clarke's work (Warren 2013, 355).<sup>15</sup> I believe that Anderson's turn towards experimentation was not something taught to her by Clarke, but rather was a collaborative process that she honed in *The Cool World* and carried over to other endeavors, particularly *Black Journal* programs like *Just Like You* and, ultimately, *I Am Somebody*.

### ***Black Journal* (1967-1969)**

Anderson started production on *I Am Somebody* while she was working on the Black television program *Black Journal*. Following the shift in media coverage of Integration and Voting Rights

in the United States, public access television sought to tap into to the visual struggle of Black American life, not unlike Direct Cinema's interests in Black struggle for its ability to produce consistent "crisis narratives." Upon the dissolution of Andover Productions in 1960, Anderson joined WNET as an editor and was part of the original all-white staff for *Black Journal*, the channel's televisual program to "speak to the people," in 1967. Fortunately for Anderson and *Black Journal*, fellow Black filmmaker and photojournalist William Greaves raised such a ruckus about the production crew not having a Black showrunner that executive producer Al Perlmutter handed the reigns to Greaves.

Anderson describes Greaves appointment as a necessary change for the program and as part of a struggle for truth, and not representation, because "*Black Journal* was being advertised as a series for, about, and by Black people. That wasn't true. We had a white head and Black body" (Martin 2013, 82). Greaves' first act as showrunner was to replace the all-white crew with Black filmmakers and cultural producers (including photojournalist St. Claire Bourne), with Anderson transferring over to the series (Martin 2013, 84). The creation of a Black culturally-produced television program did not go unnoticed by the network, who made production for the show extremely difficult by decreasing the budget from \$150,000 per episode (when Perlmutter was executive producer) to \$90,000 (Billops & Hatch 2003).<sup>16</sup> In Gregory Zinman's *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (2020), he recounts the budget available for many public television stations in the late 1960s and early 1970s for video art and experimental programming. At the same time that *Black Journal* struggled to receive \$90,000 per episode (for the entire staff of the show), other broadcasters were committing nearly \$400,000 a year—and for independent, experimental works, rather than shows, no less. I include this detail to demonstrate the financial inequality that limited the type of work *Black Journal*

could do, but also to show how Blackness has structurally existed outside of society's vision of experimentation and has always been tasked with the 'responsibility' of representation. The fact that *Black Journal* exceeded that task is in spite of those structural financial inequalities (Zinman 2020, 254). Media studies scholar Devorah Heitner further contextualizes the network's faux support in her book *Black Power TV*, describing how the series of Black television journals that sprang up following the Civil Rights movement were driven by white networks' desire to shift the attention of Black viewers from "rioting" to watching TV as a mean to control the population (Heitner 2013, 11). Anderson echoes a similar statement in her interview with film curator Ashley Clark, where she describe that television was a way of giving us limited power in order to silence us (Clark 2017).

The dissolution and erasure of Black Independent cinema prior to World War II delivered a near death blow to Black cultural memory that lasted for nearly forty years.<sup>17</sup> So, for many Black viewers in the New York area, *Black Journal* gave them something novel: Black images produced and created by Black cultural producers. Its popularity was such that despite the network's efforts to suppress the show financially, Black people watched. They devoured a series that provided a variety of informative, cultural, and artistic images, all of which were unlike anything that had been done before on television. Anderson notes the uniqueness of this production in a 2013 interview with scholar Michael T. Martin: "I wanted to be where the action was and where the struggles for my people were. . . It was like no other show that had ever been done on television—Black or white" (Martin 2013, 83-84).

The "Black image" was a contested one that was seldom controlled by Black creators, let alone experimented with. The push for alternatives frameworks came merely in opposition to mainstream film which was undemocratic, racist, and exclusionary of Blackness, perfectly in line

with Jim Crow Segregation in the United States. The image of Blackness was so disparate that President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated The Kerner Commission to analyze the interplay between social riots and media representation of Black individuals. The report strongly advocated for better representation of Black people. While the results were taken with a grain of salt (to say the least) by many dominant media executives, the official inquiry into the media representation of a class of individuals demonstrates how precarious Black representation was at the time (Lott 1999, 72–73). Although images of Blackness are still a point of contestation, we are far removed from the near bottomless void of Black representation that plagued film and television from the second World War to the late 1960s (Heitner 2013, 6).<sup>18</sup> Thus, to show Black beauty, love, intellect, passion, and freedom was to push the viewer’s consciousness and inherently utilize a different set of filmmaking skills, which all the filmmakers of *Black Journal* brought to the table.<sup>19</sup>

I turn to Anderson’s time at *Black Journal* (1967–69) for its impact on Anderson’s work and succeeding generation of Black experimental feminist filmmakers (Klotman and Cutler 1999, 374).<sup>20</sup> I also turn to *Black Journal* to analyze another experimental short film by Anderson, *Just Like You*. If you were to look at the metadata for *Just Like You* in the archival collection of taped *Black Journal* television episodes today, the film would not be listed under Anderson’s name but rather that of Osburne Smith. The short film closed the twelfth episode of *Black Journal* that premiered on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1969. Moreover, *Just Like You* has never publicly been attributed to Anderson, until now. After completing the film, Smith (with the support of Greeves) promoted and screened this film as his own, effectively erasing Anderson from its records. In the following paragraphs, I give an account of how I came into awareness about this film.



While conducting my archival research at the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, I paid attention to the gossip; to the interjections, chuckles, naming calling, eye rolls, silences, et cetera that were shared in these oral history interviews. This is to say the gaps in the narrative of Anderson's life, practices, styles, and insight into her work are largely revealed by the gossip that occurred in that "Artist and Influence" interview, much of which did not make the transcribed version printed in the journal. There was a moment, for instance, where Camille and James were conducting a sound check and Anderson mentioned to Michelle Materre that she had indeed made another film with *Black Journal* besides *Malcom X—Nationalist or Humanist* that was explicitly experimental. Anderson explained that she was assigned a segment on Black poet Osburne Smith in New York.

Anderson worked with Smith, whose contribution to film was "just reading his poems into a microphone" (Billops & Hatch 2003). Some years later she recalled seeing the resulting film travel in an experimental film festival, and was horrified to see that the poet took full credit for the work. When she called William Greaves, she was further devastated to know that Greaves signed off on Osburne's use of the film and told Anderson to "let him have it" (Billops & Hatch 2003). In this portion of the talk, Anderson becomes visibly upset and, when pressed by Camille and her interviewer to spill the "tea" on the issue (name names), Anderson quietly shakes her head and says that while she had brought the film with her if they wanted to watch it, she had changed her mind and would no longer say anything about it. She situated this loss as one of the many times where she learned when to pick her battles and when to let something go.

I was unable to let go of this lost film after hearing Anderson's story. Some research into the *Black Journal* archive (or of what films are available, considering the terrible archival practices of public television, which consisted of literally taping over previous episodes [Heitner

2013, 17]), I found a film that matched the description that Anderson gave in that interview, Osburne Smith's *Just Like You*. I watched about seven hours of the few episodes of *Black Journal* preserved via the Alexander Street Press company archives, which are organized by year (Dear Reader, there was a moment about three hours into this viewing binge where I thought that I had purchased the wrong year of the program, but was relieved when hour seven rolled in and "Smith's" film played). I watched the film and recognized many of Anderson's editorial and poetic camera techniques, confirming for me that this must be the film that she refused to name in that interview back in 2003.

I sat with it for about six months before I had the opportunity to meet Anderson at a screening of *I Am Somebody* organized by Michelle Materre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Rose Cinemas in March of 2018. I waited until after the Q+A to ask her about whether or not *Just Like You* was her film. I was timid because while the "Artist and Influence" interview in which she announced this lost film that she cared about quite deeply was fifteen years in the past for her, it was only a few months ago for me, and I collapsed that time in my immediate reaction to the loss of her work. I mention the temporal disparity between the events because her response took me aback: "Yes, I made that film. Are you going to write about it?" I stammered back with, "Well, I plan to, at least." "Good, you should!" was her response. In recalling her 2003 conversation with Materre, I remember the firmness of her insistence that this film was stolen, but in that moment, the firmness, still present, shifted to mark an urgency around her craft and pride in what she had constructed. Anderson remarked that when the editors of *Black Journal* saw the first cut of *Just like You* they cried, and she remembered being very pleased by that response because it showed that they "got it"; even if they did not understand it, they were able to resonate with the film on some "other level" (Anderson 2018).

### ***Just Like You (1969)***

*Just Like You* is a six-minute, color and B&W, sixteen millimeter film that was produced for *Black Journal*. For the short films produced for *Black Journal*, Anderson would often receive between 100 to 400 feet of film to shoot on; each 100 feet is about three minutes of film (the cost of 100 feet of color negative film in 1968 was around \$25). There was a strict budget for these smaller film segments for *Black Journal*, meaning that there was minimal room for error, and each shot captured had to be purposeful in its execution, given the limited footage available. Moreover, budget costs often limited the amount of synchronized sound and image footage that could be produced (despite the invention of the pilottone, the process and cost of synching sound to image was not only costly but also labor intensive), which meant that many of these filmmakers relied on optical sound for their shorts. The use of optical sound in some ways pushed filmmakers like Anderson's work to experimentation. In describing the production costs for the smaller film segments that appeared in *Black Journal*, I want to highlight the way in which Anderson not only executed an experimental short film under difficult conditions, but additionally used those limitations to manipulate the poetics featured in the film.

*Just Like You* gathers images in and against dialogue to Osburne Smith's poem of the same name. When William Greaves announced the film on *Black Journal* he prefaced it as a poetic film that "does not have any answers" in its quest to paint a picture of Black life in the United States. He also attributed this film to Osburne Smith alone. Again, Anderson has been adamant when discussing the film that Smith's only contribution was going into the studio and recording his poem (Billops and Hatch 2003). Left with a deadline and no creative input by the poet, Anderson pulled together photographs of everyday Black life, in addition to filming key

shots at a predominantly Black elementary school (Figure 2.1). The scenes shot at the school open and close the film and additionally provide a rhythmic structure. What we see in these opening shots are several Black girls pushing their swing (in unison) before hopping onto their swings and standing atop their seats in a synchronized rhythm as they swing back and forth. Still images populate the film, primarily focusing on children whose gaze at the camera directly meets our eyes (Figure 2.2).

The poem and its audio recording of the short are not the strongest part of the film. The poem is extraordinarily simplistic with regards to its focus on how a “Black man is just like you,” which reduces difference to something that can be conquered through assimilation (not necessarily a viable project for Black life, as we are precisely targeted in the fact that we are not “just like them”). Anderson does her best to match up her images alongside Smith’s reductive poem, but exercises free will during a drum solo that frees the audience from Smith’s speech and comes along with a series of images and footage of marches and active gazes from Black children staring confidently at the audience. These more free-form images take flight and create an indeterminate purpose for the short (figure 2.3). The photo collages of Black life mixed with her footage of quotidian Black life in the city and the suburbs nearly anticipate Camille Billops’s “affective-archival” aesthetic. This free sequence reminds me of the animacy that moving images bring through their sheer existence and how they can still move and affect audiences when divorced from narrative, representational purpose. In this way, *Just Like You* demonstrates how cinema animates *things* in film that the work of the early film experimentalists, like Shirley Clarke did at the end of the 1950s. There is a shot around the four-minute mark where Anderson seemingly animates a still image of children running across the beach by rapidly shifting the

mise en scène to incorporate parts of the image before moving out to the whole. The film ends with a crucial auditory signal of a child's voice, demanding that we "Listen!"

I am interested in the way that Anderson uses images as a mise en scène in the film. Mise en scène defines the setting and arrangement of scenery in a shot. Considering that the production budget was limited, Anderson combs through archives of Black life as captured through the photograph to allow a varied staging of spatiality to be experienced onscreen in a way that her budget otherwise would not afford. The image does not stand in as fact, or reflect truth, but instead invites the audience in to the different choreographies at play around Blackness in the United States. *Just Like You*, a quiet film that focuses on the quotidian nature of Blackness in 1968, is of much value in navigating the aesthetic decisions that Anderson made to produce something that is distinctively experimental. To turn our attention away from films that have been dismissed for their quotidian focus, or amateur personal expression, is to deny ourselves the possibility of creating new meaning, as to do so is to fall into the trap of repeating hegemonic discourse that continually erase Black life.

My investment in Black women is informed by structural oppression that erases their work from public consumption, which greatly affects our cultural memory of Black women's experimental cinema. This small bit of gossip concerning Anderson's uncredited (or stolen) experimental film also alludes to a larger problem of scholarship on Black filmmaking, especially on collectives during the Black independent filmmaking movements in both the United States and United Kingdom. Anderson having one (and perhaps the most experimental) of her films stolen with the aid of Greaves is not unlike how Black women are often sidelined in the Black collectives that they have helped to create or popularize. In an interview with Rhea Combs, curator of Film and Photography at the National Museum of African American History

and Culture for the accompanying pamphlet for the Icarus re-release of *I Am Somebody* (which also includes *Integration Report One* and *Malcom X—Nationalist or Humanist* [Combs 2018, 4]), Anderson also alluded to the fact that there may be other such lost films.

Of the scholarship that I have conducted on *Black Journal*, Anderson only gets passing mention here and there in comparison to the attention that her peers, St. Clair Bourne and William Greaves, receive. A clear example of this resides in Clyde Taylor's 1999 article on *Black Journal* "Paths of Enlightenment: Heroes, Rebels, and Thinkers." In this piece, Taylor masterfully notes that Anderson's work is avant-garde, progressive, and the highlight of *Black Journal*, yet devotes his space to analyzing the male-directed segments of the series (Taylor 1999, 123). Now, this is not to say that Taylor should have written about Anderson, but rather that this sidelining of women's work in and contributions to Black collectives is a common occurrence in scholarship of the field, notably affecting Black women from the L.A. Rebellion in the US and Sankofa in Great Britain. While "Chapter Three: Crafting a Collective Commons" constructs a history around the collective commons of Black feminist experimental film and video makers from 1970 through 1998, the question of cultural memory will be a recurring argument throughout this dissertation. To detail the ways in which Anderson's work has been erased, over-looked, misread, ignored, and so on is to return our cultural memory of Black women's experimental cinema, which often exists in plain sight, to blind eyes who render its narrative and formal aesthetics illegible. Anderson's history with film further reiterates Alice Walker's declaration that Black women must "be in search of our mother's garden" (Walker 2003 [1983]), for if we do not do this work, it is unlikely that anyone else will.

### ***I Am Somebody* and the Struggle for Equitable Labor Recognition**

*I Am Somebody* opens with an account of remembrance. Claire Brown situates the struggle for equitable labor in conversation with the afterlife of Slavery, describing how tourists come to Fort Sumter to see the stately mansions that erase the terrors of human ownership. Brown's poetic voiceover is starkly contrasted against the spaces and sites that make up Fort Sumter for the casual white individual. Through this evocation of Brown's memory, Anderson demonstrates, as film philosopher Bliss Cua Lim describes, that "space is not the neutral container imagined by notions of empty homogeneous time-as-space, a space evacuated of any time but the present," but instead is haunted and shaped by the past. This framing of space will become a prominent technique in Black women's experimental short films that follow Anderson's work and later chapters in this dissertation (Cua Lim 2009, 211).

Moreover, and perhaps more critically, Anderson's evocation of memory in the film's opening shot declares the film's political position around labor and Black women. Anderson's emphasis on the political framing of labor and the Black body falls within the tradition of Black documentary that does not use "documentary as a form of visual anthropology to investigate 'the other', but instead expresses "an identification with their subjects and a sense of shared concerns" (Klotman and Cutler 1999, xix). Identification here, I argue, does not mean the process of cognitive sense making—ergo: "I understand it because I identify with it"—but rather refers to ways in which labor shapes a political project around representation and narratives of Black women's bodies. The opening voiceover in *I Am Somebody* embeds a Black feminist ethics in the film through its formal aesthetics, which convey embodiment and memory. But just in case that point was missed by the audience, Anderson immediately follows the opening voiceover with an image of Brown staring at her reflection in the mirror, at the film's ninety-

second mark. Brown's gaze, however, does not meet the camera's lens, suggesting that this act of recognition is for herself and other Black women.

In the few articles written about *I Am Somebody*, Brown's mirrored reflection scene has been singled out for its "representational" moment of Black women's "desire of equitable recognition" (Warren 2013, 368). I would like to move beyond the surface of the representational image of Brown gazing into a mirror, because, as powerful as it is, the labor in that scene speaks volumes. Brown is not simply gazing into the mirror but is also cleaning it. Wiping the surface is an action that mirrors (pun intended) the quotidian "women's labor" being done by the Black women marching in 199B. And, as Brown states, of the "four hundred strikers, all but twelve of us were women. All of us were Black." The statistical references to the strike are given to the audience over shots of Claire Brown doing quotidian acts around her home, such as cleaning her mirror and making instant coffee. These scenes of private "women's work" are juxtaposed with Brown's commentary on the very public labor and equitable wages that they were striking for.

The analogous relationship that Anderson establishes between Black women's public and private labor is conveyed (poetically) through the film's aesthetics, and not through Brown's commentary or the interviews seen in the film. Anderson's emphasis on the labor of Black women's bodies in both domestic and public spaces is of note as she was pregnant with her fourth child at the time of filming (Davis 1981, 129).<sup>21</sup> In this pairing, an unremarkable act of labor is charged with a new meaning that makes the audience reconsider the relationship that Black women's bodies have to labor, not just in the context of this labor documentary but in the context of the everyday, the quotidian that of home cleaning and childcare.

Anderson's poetic focus on the different ways in which labor intersects with and affects Black women in *I Am Somebody* is further emphasized in her critique of women's feminist films



of the 1970s for not being more socially involved with labor and Civil Rights issues. She told Billops and Hatch that during the infancy of the women's movement, in the late 1960s, many women were only making films about their personal lives, and "most of them were white" (Billops & Hatch 2003). This critique is not to condemn the feminist films that were being made by white women at the time, but rather to emphasize that for Black women the struggle was different. As Davis writes, "we have been working" all along:

Proportionately, more Black women have always worked outside their homes than have their white sisters. The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadows every other aspect of women's existence. It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for any exploration of Black women's lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers. (Davis 1981, 5)

However, while Anderson's own role as a mother drew her to highlight Claire Brown's role as well, Anderson's filmic gaze focuses on the ways in which these spaces overlap. There is no clear separation of the two, no clear division of space, as some other feminist films emphasized around the time (think Laura Mulvey's 1977 film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, for example).

The lack of visual separation between the spaces of public and private labor as definitive of Black women's bodies is further illustrated when Anderson has Brown sit with her husband and children to talk about the strike on the family couch. Brown details the ways in which her labor shapes her relationship with her boss, husband, and children. When asked why she was interested in creating a film around the Medical College strikes in South Carolina, Anderson states that "it was the last time, I felt, in which the Civil Rights movement would be in direct relationship with labor of which Black women were greatly affected" (Billops & Hatch 2003).

Here, Anderson is interested in revealing to the audience that the labor and positions of Black women are integral to our dialogue around the Civil Rights movement, and that it is precisely the labor of Black mothers that structure public and private labor arguments in society. Anderson's focus on making a connection between labor and Black women is further affirmed in the title of the film, which references a phrase popularized by Jessie Jackson that cites the 1963 Memphis sanitation strike conducted by Black men where the phrase "I Am a Man" was used. Anderson uses Jackson's "I am somebody" instead of the original "I am a man" (or instead of changing it to "I am a woman") to situate the labor struggle of the women of 1199B as a *human* struggle (Warren 2013, 362).

The 1199B (the first chapter of the National Health Care Workers' Union outside of New York) union strikes in South Carolina came on the heels of Anderson's own labor struggles with the Motion Picture Editors Guild, which she described as a white boy's club that only offered membership to someone's son or father: "Not being anyone's son or father, you can imagine that I had a problem." Anderson had to threaten to sue on the grounds of discrimination before receiving her membership, making her the second Black woman admitted to the union behind Hortense (Tee) Beveridge.<sup>22</sup>

Anderson's struggle to be admitted followed years of labor neglect. This was further compounded by the fact that she was raising children while going months waiting for backpay or for work to appear. She notes that the positions that she could take were often determined by whether or not she had access to childcare (via her husband or a paid professional [Crumbs 2018, 14]). In an interview with film scholar Michael T. Martin, Anderson elaborates on the labor parallels between herself and the strikers (in full):

Their struggle represented my struggle to join the union. I was kept out because of gender. I was disrespected and so were they. You see how identical our struggles were? The kinship I felt toward the women of *I Am Somebody* compelled me to translate the essence of their experience to film as genuinely as I could. I identified with them as a Black woman, as a Black working woman, as a wife and mother of children. Their grit and determination to succeed were evocative of my own efforts to become a member of the film editor's union. Our obstacles were the same, those of gender, racial discrimination, and politics. In the criticisms and analyses of the film by some white feminists during the '70s, *I Am Somebody* was not regarded as a feminist film. To me, the importance of the film was not its classification, however; it is a film made by a Black woman for and about Black women. At the time my concern was had I been successful in making a film that was true to their experience? (Martin 2013, 78–80)

For Anderson, bringing the struggles of these women to the screen was a pedagogical act: she wanted to educate a generation around Black women's labor and, in turn, this process provided a way for her to recognize her own political struggles with labor in solidarity with theirs. *I Am Somebody* demonstrates how Anderson was not only interested in the educational properties concerning labor in this strike, but the analogous connections that she could make through the structure of the film; that is, to see what the film's aesthetics do to tell this narrative.

*I Am Somebody* demonstrates how Anderson manipulates her aesthetics to subvert the gaze and power dynamics of traditional documentary film that frequently paints Black women as problems of study. A critical shot that evokes this is featured towards the end of the film, where we see fellow striker and 1199B labor representative Ms. Simmons speaking at a press conference, signaling the end of their successful strike. This shot ends with a freeze frame on

Ms. Simmons's face before cross-fading to the image of a bird flying near the Harbor Bridge. In its simplicity, the two shots may signify freedom for Black women's recognition (Warren 2010, 131; Warren 2013, 372), but I argue that it instead represents a continued struggle based on what the aesthetics do. The use of freeze-frame largely indicates a significant moment or event concerning the person being stilled as a photograph. It is then fascinating that the individual receiving this treatment is not Claire Brown (who does receive her own free-frame at the end of the film) but of a labor representative not previously seen or named in the film. The image of the bird in the water that is faded into is not the expected poetic use of the bird flying from the water into the sky, but instead that of its hunt, plunging near the water to grab a fish.

Now, I wish to avoid the trap of "reading too closely into the film," but rather hope to highlight the subversive cracks that appear when we try to read it as a "straight" documentary. The diving bird in some ways could be a poetic device; an analogy or simile for continued struggle, despite the recent victory. This is confirmed with an image of Brown walking across a dock near the Harbor Bridge—neither a public street nor the private space of the home—wearing a blue 1199B hat, commenting on the recent labor gains from the marches (via voiceover) while affirming that "1199B is here to stay." The film ends on a freeze frame of her with the marching chant, "Soul Power!" in voiceover. The fact that Brown walks as this voiceover is occurring mirrors the shots of wheels and the marching feet that opened the film. As in the opening shots, the film's ending employs the poetics of the voiceover to place struggle in relation to time and space. This concluding element illustrates how Anderson's aesthetic decisions at the time reflect standard tropes in an effort to subvert their symbolized relation to whiteness and power. As Toni Cade Bambara wrote in her preface to *Daughters of the Dust*, such aesthetic manipulations, used in service of uplifting Black women are evoked to "heal our imperialized eyes" (Dash 1992, xii).

As Wynter argues, film aesthetics code whiteness with positive values, with Blackness being coded with the symbolic meaning of death—meaning that aesthetics that recognize, uplift, and center Black women (for example) frequently involve experimentation of some sort beyond the “standard” mode of capturing Black women, and are thus often read as foreign to the casual viewer.<sup>23</sup> Media studies scholar Julia Lesage describes women’s film experimentation as expressing a desire to “complicate” subjectivity, “a strategy that goes against the grain of documentary’s common” framing of agency through aesthetic experimentation that includes layering “contrapuntal dialogues between various voices, contradictory aspects of the maker’s identity, and discrete moments of that identity across time, often a span of generations” (Lesage 2013, 456-457). Lesage’s statement here calls for a mode of film production that negates idealized “authentic” representations of identity, but rather that complicates ways of seeing and knowing around women’s personhood.

I view *I Am Somebody* as exemplifying the traits listed by Lesage as an effort to subvert the standard subjectivity of whiteness and its gaze. Following Wynter’s argument, I have written on how classic film aesthetics are a visual and oneiric power that produces images meant to shape and affect bodily responses to those images, with most films using that power to reproduce hegemonic myths and culture that surround whiteness (Dozier 2016, 4). I argue that Black women’s experimental film gets around this by not reproducing those images, using a variety of aesthetic manipulations that deploy Black expressive culture. Anderson, thus, manipulates aesthetics to convey poetic structures in the film and to align the camera’s gaze with Black women’s labor struggles as a viable political project for the audience to engage with. Anderson moves use beyond observation. Her narrative restraint renders the audience as not a passive receiver, but rather an engaged spectator trying to make sense of the filmmaker’s narrative on

Black women's labor. Before concluding, I would like to briefly turn our attention to what I consider Anderson's greatest accomplishment: the re-mixing of gathered news footage of the strike to create what she calls a "documentary compilation film" (Billops & Hatch 2003).

*I Am Somebody* does not adhere to a chronological arrangement of time, and instead frequently re-shuffles found newsreel footage with interviews, staged scenes, and B-roll footage. For example, Anderson received "lip-sync" film rolls (sound synchronized footage processed for television that is not labelled) to use for the film. This was of extreme importance, as syncing sound (despite the invention of the pilot tone) was a time-consuming and costly process. Receiving lip sync footage saved Anderson time, but it also enabled her to not strive for lip sync elsewhere in the film, meaning if she had enough of the interviews on hand from these newsreels then the rest of the film could employ optical sound to structure and move the sequence along. The footage from the night-time march appears to be from the same evening, and yet appears several times throughout the film to convey the repetition of the march, giving it the rhythm of an associative act. This is a deliberate falsification in order to visually place the audience in a place of continuous night-time gatherings that were certainly disrupted by the police.

Another falsification that appears outside of pure editing alone is a staged march that Anderson shot in front of the fruit stand towards the end of the film. The staged march appears in the context of Brown stating that the workers had a thirteen-day gap before the new contract was active, so "the workers just had to keep keeping on until it was settled." The staged march by Anderson creates a narrative that the marchers kept in formation and carried the organizing tactics from the marches in place after "the victory." It also roots and enforces the central focus in this film, that of the march itself—after all, the film begins with a cross dissolve shot from the

carriage wheel to the collective gathering of marching feet—thus it would be perfectly plausible to see participants of the strike continuing that strategy elsewhere.

The archival gathering and assembling seen in the film is a creation of fabulation through the image. The reparative work of splicing these film reels together to make a work that utilized voices from supporters of the strike, who most likely did not make it to primetime, is to make room for their images and voices. The fabulatory reconfiguration of this film footage could constitute what Sharpe describes as wake work: the sitting with and gathering of the archive to create a poetic depiction that narratively moves the viewer through time to encounter a strike that received attention but was swiftly being dismissed, or even erased, in real time. Even the auditory use of the phrase “soul power,” heard throughout the film appears as a sonic call to arms that rhythmically structures the marches and moves us through the film’s journey. When tense moments appear, the collective Black chants of “soul power” signal the protestors’ unification; even when the screen cuts to black, “soul power” is heard once again.

There is a particular image in *I Am Somebody* that I am quite drawn to: When Coretta Scott King says that the most discriminated individual is the Black woman in America. It is a sentiment that echoes Malcom X’s statement made several years prior, but here we see the faces of those Black women who make up the Baptist church, three separate shots of three different women who gaze as they sit with her words, with one woman’s eyes visibly welling up. Seeing the space of the Baptist church as a hybrid for organizing, praise and worship—often an exercise of movement and bodily configurations that could only be permitted in the confines of the church—communion, and, above all, listening conveyed onscreen, with these words and the sound of praise hymns accompanying faces of black women, charges the film, but also space itself. In that moment, the usual documentary standard shifts, as the focus on vernacular images

and sound betrays the traditional objective (white) body in mainstream aesthetics and instead relies on sisterhood and Black expressive culture for manipulating narrative and formal aesthetics. The expressions read on these women's faces; the different skin pigmentations, sizes; hearing something—for them a minor disruption—that visually captured Black expressive culture in that moment, goes beyond turning a camera on and shooting. This moment aesthetically frames the necessity of seeking out and hearing words that are meant for you.

When Anderson heard about the strike, she immediately sought funding to create a film about it, and like her attempts to produce a sequel to the *Integration Report One* years prior, she had little to no success. As the strike continued, many broadcast news stations began to cover the strike, and it was only at its conclusion that Anderson was commissioned to capture the event's "end" by prominent New York labor organizer and local 1199 union representative Moe Foner. Having minimal footage of the "in-process" strike, Anderson requested unused footage from news stations around North America. Anderson made a film that speaks to the recognition of Black women's labor, utilizing footage that exemplified the dominant gaze of "othering these strikers." Anderson's subversion of this footage, the actual process of changing the film's original meaning, is best understood through the term fabulation. My argument is supported by Wynter's assertion that aesthetics are an illocutionary force; that is, that what they do is reiterate hegemonic culture, as argued earlier (Wynter 1992, 267). *I Am Somebody's* use of compiled news footage in a film that distinctively does not reproduce the hegemonic gaze of "othering" Black individuals is the basis for my framing of Anderson, as editor, clustering around dominant aesthetics without ever reiterating them herself.

Finally, *I Am Somebody* remixes compiled news footage with staged scenes to create a poetic documentary. These staged scenes include the march through an empty supermarket and



the pivotal scenes where Claire Brown cleans the mirror and performs other banal tasks around the home. The home scenes were filmed in Anderson's apartment in New York during the recording of Brown's voiceover. The voiceover is interesting as Brown improvised the dialogue. Anderson wanted a spontaneous response from Brown to the film and not a scripted dialogue that would "explain things to people" (Martin 2013, 92-93n20). Knowing that there was no script beforehand is extremely important because it allows us to see how Anderson was shaping the documentary and the aesthetic decisions outside of narrative or dialogue influence. Anderson recalled that Moe Foner was extremely worried about the dialogue because it was unscripted and it cost a lot of money to fly Claire Brown to New York for an improvised reading (Billops & Hatch 2003). Even Anderson's decision to improvise can be read as an act of fabulation, for fabulation, as an aesthetic decision, can lead to unpredictable outcomes that can realize fruitful prospects.

The film's opening shots of Charleston takes on new meaning when we know that initially there was no attempt to contextualize that scene for the audience. Brown's foregrounding of memory in relation to those shots speaks to the cultural power of Black women's temporal relationship with space. After the film was completed, Anderson had many reservations about how Black women would respond to *I Am Somebody*. Anderson recalled that she feared that the film would not "read, nor speak" to an audience of Black women, considering the experimental nature of the production. Her fears were assuaged when she snuck into a screening that Mo[e?] Foner organized for Black women union members in New York, where she witnessed them "tear it up" with their laughter and tears. Anderson further stated that the feeling at the end of this screening was that of utilitarianism, where Black women not only

understood the film's themes but actively recognized and shared the film's struggle through the experience of the screening (Billops & Hatch 2003).

## **Conclusion**

I have used Madeline Anderson's film biography here to sketch out a history of the difficulties facing Black women filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s. The marginalized history of Black women filmmakers—let alone Black women's experimental films—is not accidental, but one that is brought about by intersecting structures of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization. Anderson's impactful career stands out because of her endurance and her making hard concessions, letting her labor be exploited so that she could “stay in the game” (Billops and Hatch 2003). And although Anderson benefitted from the support of many film legends, the fact that her work and life is never mentioned in any of their filmic texts, readers, and so on informs us of the ways in which Black women's labor has historically been constituted as a given in society. To clarify, it is the particular socio-historical status of Black women as laborers in the United States and elsewhere that grounds the conditions of neglect, theft, and erasure. The labor of Black women is so common that it is ignored.

I have highlighted the particular way in which Black women are ignored by focusing on three foundational filmmaker's interactions with Madeline Anderson. To be sure, Anderson gained so much from filmmakers like Leacock, Clarke, and Greaves, and each filmmaker was integral in the furthering of Anderson's career and transformation as a filmmaker. What I draw attention to in these brief biographic narratives is how these filmmakers also, unknowingly or knowingly, contributed to the difficulties in Anderson's career from not giving her dues on time, to drawing “inspiration” from her work, to forcing her to give up her own films to help the

“community.” So much was demanded from Anderson, and yet she was never able to profit from these filmmakers’ influence the same way they were able to profit from her labor. This chapter seeks to inscribe a new narrative around the history of experimental cinema in the United States as intimately connected with the labor of a very specific Black woman.

Additionally, through an analysis of *I Am Somebody*, I have proposed rethinking the conditions by which we learn about the films that constitute experimental film and to reclaim the ways in which Anderson uses culture to animate her work as a very distinct aesthetic experimental tactic that constitutes a counter-poetics of rhythm. In framing Anderson’s work as experimental here, I want to thread together how Anderson’s work not only inspires other Black filmmakers but also serves as a filmic template for others to continue to re-work and re-mix in dialogue with archival research. Anderson’s work shies away from archives insofar as she was invested in compiling footage from what was available from local newsreels around her. Many filmmakers following Anderson tend to show a greater investment in remembering and utilizing the archive (broadly defined) as a way of re-animating spaces that no longer exists, such as in the films *Suzanne, Suzanne* [Dir. Camille Billops, 1979], *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* [Dir. Leah Gilliam, 1995], and *An Ecstatic Experience* [Dir. Ja’Tovia Gary, 2016]. The space of the archive for racialized and queer individuals is, in and of itself, a radical topology of affect, and affect is what is needed in order to make sense of the contradictory information that resides in those spaces. The following chapter continues with constructing the histories of the field by analyzing the collective commons of Black feminist film and video makers within various collectives like the L.A. Rebellion, Sankofa, and the Third World Newsreel production workshops from the 1970s through the 1990s.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Dixon writes, “An African-American filmmaker whose work during the 1960s has been unjustly marginalized is Madeline Anderson, who began working in December, 1958, for a company called Andover Productions (which was co-owned by filmmaker Ricky Leacock). For the Omnibus television series, Anderson and Leacock created Bernstein in Europe, following the legendary composer/conductor during his travels overseas, and also a series of science film for MIT ... In a letter to William Greaves dated August 11, 1995, Anderson expressed great satisfaction that her work was still remembered; she is certainly one of the most important (and yet curiously underappreciated) talents of 1960s African-American Independent Cinema.

<sup>2</sup> Feminist scholarship has long championed the use of expansive materials into their research as a way to challenge the conditions in which a document ends up as an official record.

<sup>3</sup> Luisah Teish affirms this connection in *Jambalaya: The Natural Women’s Book* where vicious gossipers cast hexes. Teish includes a powerful, though stigmatizing spell against vicious gossipers that can easily be conflated with gossip overall (1985, 21).

<sup>4</sup> The “Artist and Influence” series takes place at Camille Billops and James V. Hatch apartment in lower Manhattan where much of their archives still reside. The “Artist and Influence” interview exists in two forms (three if you count the initial interview): the recorded documentation of the interview and a truncated transcription of the interview featured in a print edition of the series.

<sup>5</sup> “With the dissolution in the 1950s of the race-movies business and the network of Blacks-only theaters that had supported it, a producer intent on making a Black-cast film succeed only with the aid of considerable drive and ambition.”

<sup>6</sup> Direct Cinema is a mode of cinema with many different origins around the world. In France, it was called Cinéma Vérité and pioneered by Jean Rouch and Chris Marker. Free Cinema in Great Britain, Candid Eye in some parts of Canada and Direct Cinema throughout most of North America. Although not entirely the same, many of these movements share similar stylistic traits that were the effect of portable and more accessible film equipment, enabling them to try to “capture” the truth of human interaction. Moreover, many of the films created in the Direct Cinema style are short films as they fit the equipment being used at the time (Elder 1999, 492).

<sup>7</sup> Of Leacock, Anderson remarked that after expressing her desire to be a director to him, Leacock gave her a camera and told her to just do it. Anderson frames her completion of her first film, *Integration Report One* as being supported and encouraged by Leacock, who worked as an assistant director on the film (Billops & Hatch 2003).

<sup>8</sup> It is not lost to me that Madeline Anderson’s “in” to the industry was deeply entwined with the labor possibilities that have historically been regulated to Black women in the United States that of childcare providers. The history of childcare provided by Black women descends from Slavery and has culturally shaped the stereotype of the “mammy” figure.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Kudelski invented the Nagra and the neo-pilottone in 1957, which received international attention for its use in Robert Drew and Richard Leacock’s *Primary* (1960).

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<sup>10</sup> Although film screenings, included curated selections have gotten a lot better at including Anderson's work under this rubric. Recently (2018), the Film Forum in New York City held a curated screening series on 60s vérité where Anderson's *Integration Report One* and *I Am Somebody* were included (<https://filmforum.org/film/the-bus-60s-verite>). Prior to this series, Anderson's work is screened under the context of Black feminist films like BAM's *One Way or Another* curated by film curator Ashley Clark (<https://www.bam.org/film/2017/one-way-or-another>). Clark has been at the forefront of recent film screenings of Anderson's work around New York City, mostly at BAM where he works.

<sup>11</sup> This effect is most evident in Shirley Clarke's *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958). Lauren Rabinovitz's writes that "when Clarke brought the footage home after the State Department rejected the loop, her eleven-year old responded with fright to the imagery. Clarke said Wendy's reaction made her realize that cinematic choreography applied to such inanimate objects could deliver an emotional jolt that she had not achieved in her earlier effort" (Rabinovitz 1991, 102).

<sup>12</sup> "Unlike [Jean] Rouch and [Chris] Marker, who believed that the filmmaker's and camera's presence were catalysts that activated the pro-filmic event (events unfolding in front of the camera), the American cinéma vérité filmmakers believed that their presence and camera offered a minimum of interference or interpretation. The Drew team brought to television documentary the liberal values of social reform. The presumed the moral that they saw would be evident to everyone."

<sup>13</sup> "The same articles always named individuals African-American workers to emphasize that the production crew was racially mixed (a significant inclusion in film journals presumably aimed at a narrower professional audience when there were practically no African-Americans with either the technical training or access to film craft unions). Stories and tag lines on production stills explicitly admired the crew's courageousness for shooting a film on the streets of Harlem---an admiration obviously directed from a white, bourgeois position. Making known the narrative of the film's production played a central role within the film's larger discourse of white liberalism and social justice."

<sup>14</sup> In a 2017 interview with film curator Ashley Clark, Anderson further commented on what it was like to work with Clarke. Anderson recalls that Clarke was difficult at times, but no more than most directors. She specifically contextualizes her ambivalence towards Clarke's "difficulty" as related to gender discrimination, asserting that the issue has been played up more than it should be, "She wasn't easy to work with, but I had worked in worse, very bad conditions. What I liked about Shirley was that she was honest, even though she was tough. If you were doing your job, she was pleased, but if you weren't she wasn't, and she let you know it. She used to say to me, 'I don't mind divas if they can sing'. So she got a reputation, which I think was too harsh, in some ways ..." (Clark 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Warren takes a surface reading to Anderson's film as such a reaching supports the politics of recognition featured in the film's realist aesthetics. While this is not incorrect, Warren makes this claim at the expense of dismissing the experimentation featured in Anderson's film (or her prior work). She writes, "For surface readers, a critical approach that reads for what the text presents also constitutes an ethical stance and a conversation with that text, its historical and material context, and its continuing existence in the present. To speak of surface reading a film might evoke and approach that I will not take in this article. Celluloid is of course a physical material with literal and chemical surfaces that experimental artists, from Man Ray and Stan Brakhage to Carolee Schneemann and Naomi Uman, have used as their medium. However, I will argue that Anderson's use of 16-mm film occurs within a distinct framework of cinematic surfaces. Anderson's vision as a filmmaker does not evidence a challenge to the act of seeing cinema. Rather, her intervention occurs at the level of surface representation, where the technologies of cinema make possible the public, visual emergence of a new political subject."

<sup>16</sup> Zinman writes,

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The construction of new video tools like the Archetron was fostered (and financed) by the establishment of a number of experimental video workshops at public television stations in the late 1960s. KQED in San Francisco and WGBH in Boston received grants from the Rockefeller Foundation to found what would become two of the leading television workshops. At KQED, Brice Howard oversaw the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET), which brought together musical composers, sculptors, poets, choreographers, and others ... WGBH founded its New Television workshop in 1974, producing work by Paik, Stan VanDerBeek, Bill Viola, and William Wegman, among others. WNET, New York's public broadcasting stations, started its own Television laboratory in 1975 under the direction of Jon Loxton. The annual operating budget for the project was \$375,000 a year, with which WNET purchased sophisticated equipment and started an artist-in-residence program that situated itself between KQED's free experimentation with the medium, unencumbered by the pressure of having to broadcast work, and WGBH's workshops, which often aired the resulting projects.

<sup>17</sup> Pearl bowser's scholarship is essential here in recalibrating that history see "Pioneers of Black Documentary Film" in *Struggles For Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* (1999) edited by Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler.

<sup>18</sup> "Today, while images of African Americans on television are still too infrequent and too often stereotyped, it can be difficult to remember how absent African Americans were from the screen and how keenly that void created a hunger for more and better representation. African Americans were so absent that in the later 1950s *Jet Magazine* began to publish listings of every African American appearance on TV. On the relatively rare occasions that Blacks appeared onscreen, African American families and friends gathered around their sets to partake in the pleasures of representation. The increasing visibility of the civil rights movement influenced programs like *Julia* (1968-71) and *I Spy* (1965-68), which tried to demonstrate the liberal intentions of their producers by featuring Black protagonists."

<sup>19</sup> While at *Black Journal* Anderson directed a short documentary on Malcom X entitled *Malcom X—Nationalist or Humanist*, which featured an extensive interview with his widow, Betty Shabazz. Anderson did not take a sentimental approach to the topic and instead showcased the depth of Malcom X's rhetoric, specifically highlighting how Malcom X was framed as an essentialist. Anderson's background in education and desire to use cinema as pedagogical practice enabled her to create one of the most detailed and sincere explorations on Malcom X that has ever been produced and all in the span of ten minutes.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Parkerson details the impact that *Black Journal* (and the work of Anderson broadly) had on her career (in full): "My knowledge of ... documentary filmmaking among African Americans dates back—you know I'm 39 years old---dates back to Black Journal, particularly the 1970-1972 season. I was an avid watcher of Black Journal, and I was just entering Temple University at the time. And, it was around that time that I was figuring that, 'maybe I'll do filmmaking'—I was greatly impressed by Black Journal's all-Black production staff. Bill Greaves remains continually influential in my life, work, and attitude about documentary filmmaking. Madeline Anderson, who was one of the first Black woman producer/directors that I ever heard of, showed me that, obviously, it is possible for an African American woman to do this."

<sup>21</sup> Davis describes the public/private realm of Black women's lives during the abolition effectively through her description of the women's club scene, "Black women, North and South, worked outside their homes to a far greater extent than their white counterparts. In 1890, of the four million women in the labor force, almost one million were Black. Not nearly as many Black women were confronted with the domestic void which plagued their white middle-class sisters."

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<sup>22</sup> During Anderson's interview, Materre incorrectly attributes Anderson with being the first Black woman accepted to Motion Picture Editor's Guild. Pearl Bowser (who was in the audience) interrupts Materre to correct this mistake. I admire how Bowser's authority of Black cinematic history operates in these spaces.

<sup>23</sup> Julie Dash best describes the process of viewing Black women outside of pre-discursive forms or stereotypes as a type of disengagement as it gives them an image of Black womanhood that they are not used to encountering. She describes receiving a rejection letter from Cannes for *Daughters of the Dust* because they did not understand it. Dash elaborates, "I believe that it has nothing to do with their reality this film I am asking them to sit for two hours and look at Black women. Black women that they have never seen on the screen before, because it is not the type of Black women that they are used to looking at. It is not the type of story of about Black family that they are used to looking at and so they disengage from it" (Welbon 1992).

## Chapter Three

### Crafting a Collective Commons: The Intersecting Narratives of Black Feminist Experimental Film and Video Artists (1970–1998)

#### Introduction

This chapter offers a preliminary construction of the histories, narratives, and work of Black feminist experimental film and video artists between 1970 and 1998 across the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> I say preliminary here because an expansive gathering of the history of Black feminist experimental film and video artists exceeds the limitations of not only this chapter, but also this dissertation. I utilize ephemeral material, including pamphlets, anecdotes and gossip collected from oral histories and interviews to construct a collective commons of the various, intersecting film and video collectives that gathers the scattered histories of Black feminists experimental film and video in one place. The chapter sees me as a seamstress, of sorts, stitching together momentary encounters, programs, screenings, criticisms, and production support to build an archive through which we can begin to view these film and video makers as part of a larger genealogical history of Black feminist experimentation in the arts.

My intention, here, is to draft a larger collective commons around Black feminist experimentation where we can see these different artists and collectives in conversation with one another, as opposed to them remaining situated in distinct, separated narratives. In so doing, this chapter is antithetical to the institutional alienation in the arts and the academy that thrives on stripping genealogies from Black women to render them, and their work, unprotected. By restoring that past of experimentation—a sense that “we’ve been here all along”—this chapter reminds its current readers of the rich, forgotten, and erased work and lives of the numerous



Black women creating experimental film and video art before the present. I want my readers to confront what they do not know about this history and the gaps in their educational training that made this absence possible. Thus, I have chosen to amplify the narratives of these histories procured from my research, rather than center film analysis, in order to state who was where and when in this history.

To be clear, this chapter is not the first to suggest or write about communities or collectives of Black feminist experimentation with moving images from the 1970s through the mid 1990s.<sup>2</sup> What this chapter is doing, though, is sketching a larger collective commons around Black feminist experimental moving image work by Black women across the U.S. and the U.K. The narratives collated here demonstrate the similarity of the struggles against erasure that these film and video makers endured, despite existing at different moments in time. Moreover, they speak to the overwhelming isolating structures that prevent Black women from being in communion with one another. The communal support offered by other Black women to realize projects came not from a democratic action but rather out of necessity. I do not romanticize these anecdotes of “production support”, for they ultimately speak to unpaid labor and unfair, stressful conditions that surrounded all parties involved in completing a work. This is not to say that I am critical of these anecdotes; quite the contrary. I admire the women’s resilience and fortitude in leaving a mark through their work for others to return to. I mourn, though, the time lost due to the precarious positions Black women artists encounter that necessitate the exploitation of their labor, be that in free production support or in the need to develop multiple skill sets (like curation, marketing, distribution, organizing, and criticism) in order to facilitate their work’s delivery to an audience. It is both awe-inspiring and maddening how many of the directors

discussed here also operate as festival organizers, curators, educators, distributors, et cetera; roles they had to take on if they wanted their work, or the work of their community, to thrive.

In the previous chapter, I turned to Audre Lorde's concept of "mothering ourselves" to examine how Black women filmmakers learn to care for themselves, to fight for their work and creative imagination. I employ the concept again here and expand it to the production of a collective commons, for it situates the stakes for Black women's retaining agency while also working alongside others, specifically other Black women. I take after Sylvia Federici's critique against the commons and similarly argue that most constructions, imaginings, and practices of the commons are inattentive to reproductive labor, childcare, and sexual abuse survivors (Federici 2019, 160). The political aspiration of the commons remains, however, a useful project, in that it is essentially an ongoing project to develop radical configurations of assembly. As this study has demonstrated thus far, combatting anti-Blackness is more than an intellectual question, but rather one of our cognitive schema. As such, it requires a complete reorientation of how we come and work together, especially with the need to work toward supporting Black women's agency. While Federici's critique of the commons via the reproductive commons is generative for my argument, I find that her definition has limits around queerness and sex work. I therefore do not mobilize the reproductive commons as central to my use of the term.

A collective commons designates the multitudes of labor and spaces for various individuals to exist beyond a central commons. In my use, it reveals all the practices, strategies, and networks that the film and video makers I discuss constructed to sustain their artistic craft while supporting one another when they could. Following my use of Sylvia Wynter throughout this study, we can examine how the commons is reestablished not for its representational political purpose but for its ethics of care. I situate the labor of committing to ensure the self-

actualization of someone else as a beautiful insurrection of being and assembling. I believe the collective commons expands the various ways in which we can rethink assembly beyond physical meetings and foregrounds the affective dimension of assembling, which can be overly romanticized.<sup>3</sup> The collective commons also foregrounds the difficulty of assembling and its shortcomings when anti-Black, feminist, and queer ethics are not centered in concert with a critique of class. To re-state, part of my goal with *Mnemonic Aberrations* is to illustrate how film can refuse the alienation of Black womanhood and carry an ethic-aesthetic of care in its construction. Thus, the collective commons expands what I find to be the limitations of the commons, and is mobilized here to craft a tapestry of Black women film and video makers working with one another across geographies and time periods, including the living and the dead.

My dissatisfaction with most idealizations of the commons emerges from how they negate the social imaginary in which those commons exists (Wynter 1992b, 67). Wynter's discussion of the labor commons is useful here for how she argues against the classarchy of centering the laborer as the norm (Wynter 1992b, 75). As stated in my introduction, I find Marxist's monoconceptual use of labor to be limiting for mobilizing discourse on Black women and labor. Thus, my use of the commons is pluri-conceptually organized. I am attentive to its affective dimension, but also to the difficulty of assembly with Black women when we ourselves are still struggling to love ourselves as Black women, let alone to support others for their independent creative pursuits. Lorde brilliantly sums up this tension with the following: "We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting. Because we survived and survival breeds desire for more self. A face we never stopped wanting at the same time as we try to obliterate it" (Lorde [1984] 2007). This chapter follows Black women in their agentic pursuits of creating

experimental crafted networks, discourses, communal spaces, screenings, and film and video works that exceeded the enclosures of their existence. The labor that I narrate in this chapter demonstrates the collective commons in practice. My goal is not to mount an analytical construction of the collective commons—a task that far exceeds the scope of this project—but, rather, to name the work and communities that these film and video makers exist within, where their work contributes to a larger narrative of Black feminist film and video collectivity across geography and time.<sup>4</sup>

The experimental film and video work, then, becomes an extension of the filmmakers' social reality and we see the artists attempting to collapse time and space in order to be in communion with a larger social collective of Black artists and lives. This includes ancestral lives, as we will see in my brief analysis of Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979). I begin this chapter with an analysis of Barbara McCullough's short film from 1979 to provide a visual example of what is “missing” in the history of feminist experimental film and video art. In the film, McCullough attempts to not only make sense of herself as a third world subject in the first world, but also reconciles the liminality of Black womanhood with the backdrop of revolutionary discourse in the 1970s on womanhood, which was depicted as all white, and on Black identity, which was depicted as being all male. McCullough's short demonstrates an attempt to build a collective commons with ancestors in the film through ritual, but also across a larger spatial environment, in that the film aspires for other Black women to see it and respond to it.<sup>5</sup>

A quick note about method in distributing these narratives here: This is a selective gathering, and while my attempt is to be as broad as my limitations will afford me, I am ultimately crafting a history that flows together, emphasizing some connections over others. I am

reading and pulling from a variety of materials, like film programs, posters, interviews, oral histories, gossip, reviews, anecdotes, and criticism, to present a “coherent” thread here. I weave in out and out of affective methods where necessary. This is most evidently seen with my eschewing of film collectives as an “end all” feminist goal and, rather, as a shift to a collective commons, insofar as we witness social bonds forged around communal support rather than the organizational labor of collectively that speaks to what Alexandra Juhasz describes as the “democratic ethics” of feminist film collectives” (Juhasz 2003, 74–75). This is not to say that organizational labor did not exist in these histories, for it did, especially with artists of the Queer Video Art scene in the 1990s (nor is it an argument dismissing such extraordinary feminist practices). Rather, I see it as more beneficial to amplify communal bonds of support because I recognize that sometimes support is taking someone out to dinner, conversing over coffee or drinks, or just being present for someone, rather than the tactical organizational labor and material evidence of such work being done. The former example of labor attends to the cognitive schematic work needed to affirm Black womanhood through affective methods of care—that is, “mothering ourselves”—that goes beyond verbal affirmation. Additionally, I read these film histories theoretically for what they reveal about Black women’s feminist approach to moving images as a way to alter our engagement with the world and redress the past while punctuating accountability.

Thematically, we will see that many of the films discussed below demonstrate a meaningful focus on sexuality, rape, and sexual reproduction, staples of much feminist film and video work. However, we also find in this body of work a common use of ritual, ancestral reverence, conjure culture, and the manipulation of time as a way to filmically respond to genocidal terror and its afterlives (that is the *Middle Passage*). These topics and experimental

aesthetic techniques illustrate the long history of Black women forging alternative social realities. The continuation of a feminist experimental aesthetic, despite these oppositions, communicates experiences of Black womanhood by alternative means. From there, I turn my attention to the exhibition of the discussed works and explore the multiple strategies taken by these women to get their shorts released, revealing that the production is literally only half the battle for Black feminist experimental film and video artists.

While I recognize that the section on distribution could be its own chapter, I am limited by what I can feasibly accomplish in relaying this history in a succinct manner. By examining how these artists navigated the distribution of their work, we witness how critically underexamined distribution bias is in the industry and how many Black women directors have been disadvantaged in their careers due to lack of distribution. Black feminist experimental directors whose work exists on the praxis of feminist politics and differential aesthetics particularly bear the brunt of limited distribution reach in which their work is deemed “inaccessible”, or too mysterious, to distributors. The anecdotes about distribution account for Black feminist experimental film and video art’s “failure” to receive an overarching history or analysis prior to my study. In compiling some of the narratives included in this chapter, I intend for this “failure” to reveal and make more transparent the argument that film and festival distribution requires expansive work across disciplines, geographies, and styles to ensure that a commons of communal support is available for Black women.

The archives I utilized are wide and vast. They include the L.A. Rebellion Archive at the UCLA Film and Television Archives, the Camille Billops & James V. Hatch Archives at the Rose Library at Emory University, the Third World Newsreel Archives, and the British Film Institute Archives. The bulk of what I relied on were first-hand testimonial accounts from the

directors to not only piece together a narrative history, but also to read the affect of these testimonies; what was *not* said in these testimonies becomes something for me to outline as a possibility here. As stated in “Kinship with the Dead,” much can be learned from absences and what remains unspoken. Lastly, we will see artists and critics repeatedly appearing in other narratives, or crossing over space, communities, and timespans to collaborate or interact with a new generation of filmmakers. These repeated lives speak not only to the multiplicity of roles played by the individuals accounted for here, but also to their willingness to support other Black feminist experimental work, with the firsthand awareness that it is a practice that is marginalized by many others in society.

***Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification (1979)***

She wanted to become the Zora Neale Hurston of video! In a 1991 interview with Elizabeth Jackson, Barbara McCullough declared her admiration for Hurston’s ability to translate the South through the written form and her desire to similarly produce work that was deeply psychological, expressive, and visual by combining the written word with photography. McCullough’s interests in photography led her to video, as accessible video technology became more available and widespread in the 1970s. This inspiration speaks multitudes about the sources that Black women pull from to craft their artistic visions. Here, we have a filmmaker witnessing a lack (in experimental film and video history) around Black feminism and literature by declaring herself as the solution to that missing link. Mind you, McCullough’s enthusiasm for Hurston was emerging alongside renewed interest in the author’s work after Alice Walker had found and paid for a tombstone for Hurston’s unmarked grave in Florida (and would eventually edit an anthology on Hurston’s writings in 1979, entitled *I Love Myself When I am Laughing ...*

*And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*). McCullough's interest in film and video work emerged out of the similar expressive work of Black women cultural producers who relied on cultural practices rooted in alterity to convey and express Black life (as we saw with the work of Camille Billops), rather than trying to represent it.

Although born in Louisiana, McCullough's formative and early adulthood was spent in Los Angeles. She was a mother of three by the time she started the MFA program at UCLA, after completing a Bachelors of Arts in Communication Studies there just a few years prior.<sup>6</sup> Her children, whose ages were ten, nine, and two at the start of her MFA program, were often brought along to the editing booth on campus (Davis and McCullough 2019). For McCullough, the L.A. Black arts scene, rather than the immediacy of her fellow Film and Television MFA cohort, provided spiritual and practical communal support, as several artists in that scene, like Senga Nengudi and Betye Saar were also mothers.<sup>7</sup> McCullough notes that her shift to the arts rather than the film environment emerged because she felt intimidated by the "politics" of the L.A. Rebellion, largely espoused by her male colleagues who were constantly citing male political literature that seemingly devalued the work she was doing on motherhood (McCullough 2016, 331, 337; McCullough 2019).<sup>8</sup>

For McCullough, and others, the communality around Black filmmakers at UCLA may not have been enough in that some of her classmates could not relate to her experience and needs as a mother. McCullough's interest in film came from literary and artistic sources, as opposed to filmic ones. She has stated that it was the visual arts that taught her how to "see" and led her to experimental film production, hence her desire to become the Hurston of video (McCullough 1991). To convey "sight" to her audiences, McCullough's work pulls heavily from conjure culture, like the work of Saar and Nengudi, and uses conjure culture as a practice to fold time



and pull out film's spectral power to communicate between the dead and the living. Although McCullough is relying on aesthetics forged from a counter-poetic structure of Black life, she borrows heavily from early experimental film history, specifically the structure of a surrealist trance film in the vein of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). By opening with an analysis of McCullough's *Water Ritual #1* for this chapter on the histories of Black feminist experiment film and video art, I accentuate what is not foregrounded in other experimental or feminist film and video art histories and what it informs us about the liminality—which here describes the abstraction of one's body, which facilitates material effects against that body—of Black womanhood in the time of Black emancipation and women's rights in the 1970s.

The 2013 restored black and white version of *Water Ritual #1*, a six-minute experimental trance film, is dramatically different from the 1979 original, in which the director hand-colored the frames individually. The colored version is unrestored because restoration would require the director to hand-paint the film stock, since the original version has significantly decayed past the point of digital intervention. McCullough crafted *Water Ritual #1* as a personal camera exercise in response to *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and that inspiration is evident. McCullough, though, places *Water Ritual #1* in a different landscape than *Meshes of the Afternoon*, where the freeway and its neglected neighboring fields, rather than the home and the ocean, are the site for spiritual transformation (Field, Horak, Stewart 2016, 334–35; Davis and McCullough 2019). I view part of the stylistic structure of *Water Ritual #1* as being in line with the trance genre practiced by the filmmakers of the American Avant-Garde. In their work, the goal of the trance film was to disorient the viewer's relationship with the subject's narrative, such that it would become unclear whether the story was real or a dream. P. Adams Sitney writes that the classic tropes of a trance

film include “the protagonist who passes invisibly among people; the dramatic landscapes; the climatic confrontation with one’s self and one’s past” (Sitney 2002, 19). All of these tropes are evident in *Water Ritual #1* where Milanda (played by Yolanda Vidato) goes through a purification ritual to reconcile herself with her past in an urban landscape of displacement, development, consecration, and desecration. In interviews, McCullough continuously emphasized the burned detritus of the structures and artifacts in this scene, emphasizing that someone, somewhere prepared the space for her ritual to exist—cleansing the environment (while retaining the presence of what once was) for the film (McCullough 1980; Stewart 2013). The inspiration for *Water Ritual #1* came from a friend of McCullough’s who had just experienced a nervous breakdown (Stewart 2013). McCullough was additionally in search of reconciliation for herself in her roles as a Black mother and woman in the 1970s against the backdrop of the U.S. Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation Movements. McCullough’s turn to body-driven cinema came from these experiences. She has described how pregnancy changed her conception of her body and that film was a way to transfer that affective force of embodiment—specifically of expulsion—to an audience (Davis and McCullough 2019). McCullough also expressed frustration to feeling like a third world subject in the cultural landscape of Los Angeles and of film and not being seen as *of* either (McCullough 1980).

*Water Ritual#1* was a collaborative film exercise between Vidato and McCullough to transcend the alienation they felt as Black women in society through a communicative ancestral bonding ritual. The film opens with Milanda inhabiting an abandoned structure on desecrated land on the corner of East 118th Street and Main near the 105 Freeway in Los Angeles. The freeway looms in the background of the space, which is empty save for two abandoned structures. McCullough states that the land had formerly had inhabitants, but they were displaced

to make room for the expansion of the 105 in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the city ran out of funds and abandoned the project leaving the land “barren.” The site metaphorically, then, becomes the liminal space that McCullough and Vidato seek to purge through their ritual of bodily purification.

The camera zooms in on Milanda wearing a headscarf and a defiant gaze as she stands in the doorway of one of these structures. True to the genre of a trance film, the time and space of the film is indeterminate. Like the seminal trance film, Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), we see a similar use of camera movement and the blurring of imaginative and real actions to obliterate a “normal” sense of time and space (Figure 3.1). A false sense of time and movement—that is, how movement dictates the passage of time—is created by McCullough’s blurring of what is real with what is imagined in the film. We see such an effect when Milanda sits down and the camera follows her as she performs a ritual to conjure up ancestors from an African past. I read this as Milanda impacting the camera, rather than the camera merely tracking her, for her ritual act carries the same agential power as the spectral force (as discussed in “Kinship with the Dead”). The *mise-en-scène* includes shells, shards of glass, an ancestral sculpture, a broken vinyl record, and a mortar and pestle. Some of the items in this ritual were brought to the scene, while others were found in the field on the day of the shoot. Working with found objects in a ritual maintains the spatial integrity of the found object, just as the film enacts a creative act on so-called “found” land. In the context of decolonial studies, McCullough has suggested that the land itself is not “hers,” for she is a forcibly displaced subject living in a culture that she is not of; thus the land itself is tendered as sacred for its temporal and literal connections to native sovereignty and her desire to commune with her sacred past. Quickly here, I want to address any confusion as to the ritual of ancestral communion, the land,

and the status of settlerism that might be raised. McCullough and other Black subjects exists outside of the matrix of being a settler. As Black individuals were constructed as alienated things to be bought and sold rather than as humans who can buy/sell/settle territory, our positionhood does not inhabit the vocabulary of being a settler for all constructions of discourse, legality, and kin relations are forged through the fold of anti-Blackness that denies any right to a personhood for Black life.<sup>9</sup>

A number of superimpositions transition between moments and sequences in the film, signaling that the ritual carries a reflexive property in moving us in time. The superimpositions convey an intensification of the communication between this world and the next. The filmic style creates an ethereal effect in that we encounter a “real” woman on a journey to make an immaterial, communicative contact with the ancestors (through ritual), and thus pulls us as viewers into the realm of the imagined with her. *Water Ritual #1* locates the narrative in the zone of mythology, blurring the real and the imagined to literally draw out ritual’s power in providing clarity for the protagonists and the audience. This is to say that ritual (as will be discussed at length in “Chapter Four: Conjuring Caliban’s Woman”) is a procedural task, or repetition, that is in service of potential transcendence; a break of the mind and spirit. The film follows through on this ritual to its audience. The transitions in the film are decentered, “false” in that they do not lead to a linear engagement with time, time becomes aberrant (Deleuze 1989 142-43). Time is suspended in the trance as Milanda’s ritual unfolds. The suspension of time is what enables Milanda’s body to move in such aberrant ways (crossing through spaces and blurring our sense of “reality”), affecting the camera to act in kind (Deleuze 1989, 143).

Of the found objects McCullough and Vidato gathered on the shoot, the broken record of Stevie Wonder’s 1976 album *Songs in the Keys of Life* stands out. The record is evidence of a

previous body, a prior occupant in this seemingly barren space that constitutes a land outside of the city through which others have passed. In another film by McCullough, *Shopping Bags Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1979), the filmmaker interviews artists in the L.A. area in the 1970s, like David Hammons, Betye Saar, and Houston Cornwill, about the nature of ritual and conjure culture in their work. The artists talk about how the detritus in the area is specific to its racialized communities, in that the waste and its accumulation in some areas are the residue of a racialized people (Figure 3.2). In this sense, the broken Stevie Wonder record takes on the properties of, and marks the absence of, the people displaced from the land. In one way, *Water Ritual #1* seeks to recycle those items of contemporary urban desecration and unify them with a larger cultural ancestral past. This is conveyed not only through the ancestral link of the ritual itself but by the music selection, as well.

The crickets in “Karmapa Chenno”, from Don Cherry’s 1976 album *Hear and Now*, set the rhythmic tone of the film before transitioning to the stupendous “Chenrezig” from Cherry’s 1975’s album *Brown Rice*. *Brown Rice* continues free jazz’s turn towards the experimental and funk style of “world music” after being spearheaded by Alice Coltrane’s 1971 magnum opus “Journey in Satchidananda,” which I discuss briefly in the conclusion via Ja’Tovia Gary’s *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015). Don Cherry named the album *Brown Rice* after the food that sustains an impoverished global population. Brown rice is the sustenance of poor people.<sup>10</sup> The song, “Chenrezig,” catalogues Cherry’s travels to the Himalayas and engagements with Tibetan music and Tibetan Buddhism intermixed with his free jazz style of trumpet playing and vocals. Chenrezig (Avalokitesvara) itself is one of the most beloved Bodhisattvas, who listens to the prayers of all. In the limited existing scholarship on *Water Ritual #1*, many have assumed that Cherry provides an indiscernible African chant for its lyrics (James 2016, 162). However, given

the Tibetan influences and the fact that the song includes a dedication to the lotus, Cherry is likely chanting in Lhasa Tibetan.<sup>11</sup> The lyrical content of the chant is uncertain, if not downright ambiguous, and that ambiguity opens up its prayer to interpretation for some listener, much like the musical style itself and its use in the film.<sup>12</sup> If anything, its use here reminds the audience how unnatural the link between image and sound is, and that those connections are curated ones that the director has instilled to shift the flow of an image in the affective direction of their choosing.

“Chenrezig” is emblematic of a communal engagement across musical styles, where Cherry uses his trumpet to weave different ways of “musicking” in the space of a song to deliver a sonic interpretation of deliverance. One certainly hears that effect over the song’s twelve minutes, where the rhythm moves in and out of melodic hums before crescendoing into a frantic and ecstatic release. This is, as Morgan Woolsey describes the music in *L.A. Rebellion* films, “self-determination music.” Woolsey’s word choice here defines music “as a blueprint for political processes—such as consciousness raising, community building, and liberation or self-determination”; a critical component in the road toward cultural liberation (Woolsey 2016, 185). McCullough grounds the non-narrative of her ritual with the hums of Cherry’s chant, which is heard most prominently at the beginning of the song. Although *Water Ritual #1* does not use all of “Chenrezig,” it uses enough to provide a sonic framework for the experimental short, enabling audiences to feel their way through the film. The music becomes a conduit to Milanda’s movement that draws the soundtrack to the fore of the image, without ever escaping its compositional placement (Deleuze 1989, 239).

Don Cherry's music is placed in dialogue here with the genre of the trance film, which emphasizes how rhythm draws out the affective force of time. As Deleuze has argued, such uses of music "temporalize the image."

The 'ciné-trance' and its music are a temporalization of the image which never stays in the present, continually crossing the limit in both directions, all driven by a teacher who turns out to be a forger, nothing but a forger, the power of the false of Dionysus himself.

If the real-fictional alternative is so completely surpassed it is because the camera, instead of marking out a fictional or real present, constantly reattaches the character to the before and after which constitute a direct time-image. (Deleuze 1989, 152)

McCullough is the forger of false time in *Water Ritual #1*. The soundtrack temporalizes the image by placing it in in time rather than in space alone. We know that all audio-visual documents are spatiotemporally located. However here, through a counter-poetics of rhythm, the artist places space in time, ceding the spatial properties of the image to the movement and fluidity of time itself through the use of music. *Water Ritual #1*'s ritualistic engagement with the process of collapsing time transfigures how Milanda can cross the spatial barriers between her and the ancestors.<sup>13</sup>

After Milanda grinds corn into meal, itself a staple of global food cultures, we see her rummage in the nude through a burned building that has already been consecrated as a space for renewal. The disrobing of the character underscores the gravity of the ritual as she prepares her body for purification. The trance film sees Vidato walk in the dream-like scape of this urban field. As no other bodies are present to witness her purification in the film, the documentation of the ritual act lies in the film alone. This is especially evident in the original version, which features the hallucinatory colors blurring the images of the real and of the magical with bursts of

infrared yellow, red, blue, purple, and pink coloring the sky, Milanda's body, the shack, and the ground. In this original print, which is only viewable in a truncated fashion at the beginning of *Shopping Bags Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*, McCullough's metaphorical hand becomes visible to reveal the labor process of producing a film that is both technologically constructed and handmade (Figure 3.3). McCullough emphasized this tension in her interview with *The View*, insofar as she is submitting the mechanical eye to a practice of embodied actions (McCullough 1980). Her hand-painted color interventions demonstrate an interest in carrying forth the abstract possibilities found in painting but translated to a canvas that is temporally placed rather than spatially placed in the context of the film.<sup>14</sup> The colors respond to the free-form movements of the film and not to the "sequence of narrative events." The original version is still available on video as part of McCullough's compilation video *Fragments* but the restored version is the only one available for any current screenings, rentals, and exhibitions.<sup>15</sup> At the film's closure, Milanda squats and urinates on the land as an act of purification, ridding the bodies of its "impurities" at the conclusion of the ritual. Urination becomes symbolically recoded here to not be an impurity, but rather a release from the solidity of time. Milanda has reached her communicative link and it gives her a history; a time in this world that she is in, but not of.

McCullough's *Water Ritual #1* demonstrates the various ways in which Black women reconciled with their womanhood in ways that transcended the domestic and social spilt frequently emphasized in feminist experimental film and video artwork of that era.<sup>16</sup> The short addresses the emancipation of Black women as a practice rooted in time, rather than defined by the spatial limitations of the social and the domestic—forgoing the "security" of patriarchalized female gender in the world. McCullough writes from a position not defined by the state, but by its liminality in between living and dead, between speech and what remains unspoken. We also



see a formal nod to mainstream feminist experimental film history meshed with Black cultural production in the short; this reveals McCullough's creative hand in that she will pull from any resource that enables her to pursue her filmic vision of an alternative expression of Black womanhood felt in the world. McCullough's citation of early feminist experimental film history is also somewhat counter to the work of white feminist film and video artists of the era, who rallied behind video as an "uncharted" terrain unburdened by masculinity and formalist dogma.<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that work of that era was not interested in formal experimentation, but rather that such experimentation strayed too far from the work of what was canonically known about moving images, which also meant an accidental disavowal of women artists of early film history.

*Water Ritual #1*'s aesthetics foreground how different the needs and expressions of Black women were to their white women colleagues in the 1970s. I write this not to negate the very real needs of social mobility that white women were advocating for through the variety of political, artistic, and cultural expressions that the Women's Movement afforded to them, but rather to address what Angela Davis describes as asking "for whom is the advocacy for?" when it comes to fighting for women's advancement. Davis reminds us, in *Women, Race, and Class* (1980), that Black women have long worked outside of the home and that the demands of "entering the workforce" that were central to many arguments in the Women's movement do not speak to the ways in which Black women's labor already occupied the social and private position of laborer (and how they often do so in the homes of white women as caretakers). By connecting their needs to the larger ancestral connections of Black womanhood, as we see in *Water Ritual #1* and in other films of the timespan covered here, Black feminists were able to expand our comprehension of vision, temporality, and Blackness in the world.<sup>18</sup>

I now examine how the Black women MFA students at the UCLA Film and Television Program from 1970 to 1989 (L.A. Rebellion), which included McCullough, came to their aesthetic style through political and communal upheaval. I recount the opposition they faced while pursuing aesthetic creativity that would go on to be the largest body of Black feminist experimentation in film and video art available for study today. The women of the Rebellion's narratives, anecdotes, and filmography demonstrate the difficulty of producing Black feminist work against the rampant misogyny enacted against them by their male peers of color and the larger white student and faculty body. Moreover, the women of the Rebellion's history exhibits how limited the vision of political Black art was insofar as many fought an uphill battle where their work on reproductive care and motherhood was routinely sidelined as "personal" and not in tempo with the larger "politics" of the time (Springer 1984). My construction of a collective commons seeks to redress that exclusion and to center those narratives as fundamental to the political work needed for the refusal of anti-Blackness.

### **Something New: Women and Experimentation in the L.A. Rebellion (1970–1989)**

The L.A. Rebellion moniker describes the over 20-year run (from 1968 to 1991, loosely) of the curriculum that shaped the UCLA Film and Television program, where a greater number of students of color were admitted into the MFA program with financial packages in response to the 1965 Watts uprisings. The moniker comes from a film program curated by Clyde Taylor for the "New Voices in American Film Series" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1986 (Taylor 1986). At various points during the L.A. Rebellion era, internal clusters of communal bonding were created in, around, and through film production. All Rebellion "members," though, were connected by this program, and thus many intergenerational connections were forged and

sustained. Those who completed the program often returned to mentor the next generation of filmmakers. This is notably true of Charles Burnett, a student in the program who went on to become an instructor (Davis 2013; Field 2016, 87). Centering the women of the Rebellion, I outline its inception, examine networks of support on and off the UCLA campus, and the financial and institutional opposition students faced while in the program, including struggles with tuition, production costs, and distribution. I return to the women of the Rebellion's struggles with distribution at the end of this chapter.

The L.A. Rebellion is a contested history of Black filmmakers from the UCLA Film and Television Program, rather than the story of a uniform collective of artists working together.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the L.A. Rebellion and its archive best reflects a wave of filmmakers of color's work produced at and with UCLA Film and Television equipment. I say this not to undermine the communities forged through the program but rather to downplay the institution's role, as there are no records to show that the Department made an effort to practice inclusivity beyond diversifying its applicant selection.<sup>20</sup> To narrate this history, I pull from numerous interviews, archives and a corresponding anthology by archivists and scholars Allyson Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jaqueline Najuma Stewart, as well as the raw footage from an unfinished documentary on the Rebellion, *Spirits of the Rebellion*, by Zeinabu irene Davis, which is available to view at the L.A. Rebellion Archives.

The strongest communal bonds beyond production support that my research reveals exists within the first and second wave of Black women participants in the program in the mid 1970s. The first wave included Alicia Dhanifu, Alile Sharon Larkin, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, Melvonna Ballenger, Pamela Jones, O. Fummilayo Makarah, Carroll Parrott Blue, Jacqueline Frazier, Imelda Sheen (Miranda Richard), and Stormé Bright Sweet. The second

wave, emerging in the early 1980s, had a larger inclusion of African women: Omah Diegu (Ijeoma Iloputaife), Shirikiana Aina, Ruby Bell-Gam, Anita Addison, Anne S. Ngu, Karen Guyot, Zeinabu irene Davis, and O. Fummilayo Makarah, who returned to the program in the mid 1980s after a five year absence. In various interviews, many of the women of the Rebellion describe being brought in to neutralize the politics within the department, in that the men who made up the inaugural admissions to the program were deemed “too aggressive” by faculty. These men included Haile Gerima, Ben Caldwell, Charles Burnett, Jamaa Fanaka, and Elseo J. Taylor (who was also on UCLA’s faculty and instrumental to the creation of the program), amongst others (Springer 1986; Davis 2013; Field, Horak, Stewart 2016, 332; Davis and McCullough 2019).<sup>21</sup> Some of the women who entered the program were able to forge bonds with some of their male colleagues from the previous class; Jamaa Fanaka, Ben Caldwell and Charles Burnett are frequently mentioned in interviews as providing support to the inaugural class of women of the Rebellion’s Project One pieces (Davis and McCullough 2019).

Project One films were short assignments for first-year MFA students that were meant to push the boundaries of film’s form.<sup>22</sup> These projects encouraged students to draw on experimental techniques in an effort to obtain a feel for the world. According to Allyson Field, “Project One functioned like a laboratory for experimenting with the medium of film as a means of expression, and the films demonstrate this sense of formal experimentation that would be foundational for the filmmakers’ later work” (Field 2016, 86).<sup>23</sup> Field further notes that “each student wrote, produced, directed, and edited his or her own Project One film, which was then screened and critiqued by faculty and fellow students” (Field 2016, 86).

While the Project One films were meant to be under three minutes in length, L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Larry Clark recalls that many of the students of color’s films well exceeded

this time limit. “Well you’ve kept us quiet all these years, and you give us a chance to speak and you can’t tell us it’s got to be three minutes, it’s whatever you want it to be” (Field 2016, 86). Clark’s statement reveals students’ desire, enthusiasm, and dedication to begin to work through film as a medium that could reflect, and more importantly communicate, a non-monolithic portrayal of Blackness. Experimentation became an ideological as well as an aesthetic set of tools for Black filmmakers to emancipate the image of Black culture through the aesthetics of the frame. The experimentation in these Project One shorts uses cinema’s expressive properties to demonstrate what Field describes as the desire to rethink cinema as a mode of communication, persuasion and activism (Field 2016, 87). Many of the most experimental works from the Rebellion were produced as part of these Project One assignment, including *Medea* [Dir. Ben Caldwell, 1973], *The Kitchen* [Dir. Alile Sharon Larkin, 1975], *Rain (Nyesha)* [Dir. Melvonna Ballenger, 1978], and *Water Ritual #1* [Dir. Barbara McCullough, 1979].<sup>24</sup>

Turning our attention more fully to the women of the L.A. Rebellion archive reveals a clear differentiation in work made across gender. Many of the male filmmakers produced films that responded to the “political immediacy” of Black liberation as seen in *Child of Resistance* [Dir. Haile Gerima, 1972], *Penitentiary* [Dir. Jamaa Fanaka, 1979], and *Gidget Meets Hondo* [Dir. Bernard Nicolas, 1980]. The figure of the rebellion in these films emerges as a lower class Black man or woman who is “in between” political activism. The figure can usually recognize that they are oppressed, but at the start of the film is uncertain as to how to confront their oppression until they reach a breaking point where political thought turns to action. Many of the women filmmakers’ films focused instead on cross-generational, trans-geographical, and African ancestral exchanges through culture, alongside issues specific to womanhood and sexuality. When viewed under the rubric of “revolutionary cinema,” the male filmmakers of the Rebellion

center a radical vision that has little to nothing to say about queer liberation, or women's reproductive health and child care. Sylvia Federici's body of work on the reproductive commons argues that the framing of liberation not inclusive of who is watching the children of the revolution assumes the emancipated "new" world will continue to uphold gender dynamics around the labor of care and reproduction (Federici 2019).

The women's work in the L.A. Rebellion takes a more diasporic approach in considering gendered labor around reproductive care and raising children. For example, Barbara McCullough's Project One film *Chephren-Kjafra: Two Years of a Dynasty* (1977) was a "cross between home video and inspired cinema" depicting her two-year old son's perspective of family life (Davis and McCullough 2019). As "the title suggests, [McCullough's] interest in Egyptian and other African histories, as well as the relationship between the Black diaspora and Africa" was clear (Field 2016, 109). Stormé Bright Sweet's film *The Single Parent: Images in Black*, a non-experimental documentary from 1978, interviews single Black parents in the Los Angeles area about their lives as single parents. Alile Sharon Larkin's feature-length narrative *A Different Image* (1982) tackles the issues of sexual assault and Black women's self-determination, while Jacqueline's Frazier's narrative short *Hidden Memories* (1977) features an unwanted teenage pregnancy and abortion that are portrayed through flashbacks. The subject matter may not be unique for its time, but it is unique for its focused intersectional analysis of Black womanhood. Black womanhood in the short is situated within a matrix of wage labor and domestic labor, positioning her struggles not solely as a fight for social recognition but rather one for equitable labor recognition in any space. While these films tackle the domestic, none of them are framed as spilt between the domestic and the social and they approach the labor fulfillment of Black

women as something that remains a constant fixture of their existence in and out of Black communities.

The women of the Rebellion also revealed a larger interest in working with the African diaspora in a meaningful way. Using cinema's ability to collapse time and space, filmmakers like McCullough, Dash, and Davis brought together ancestral pasts and memories in their work.<sup>25</sup> Black women's literary production in the 1970s influenced many of the women of the Rebellion, who were interested in crafting a more diasporic cinema. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Barbara, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Paule Marshall produced poems, narratives, and short stories that experimented with the form of literary structure and tradition. Their works interrogated slavery, the slave trade, and its afterlife in the Caribbean, West Africa, Europe and the Americas. In a fleeting passage for his *New American Filmmakers Series* on the L.A. Rebellion at the Whitney Museum, Clyde Taylor writes that "[t]he Black women directors who emerged at UCLA in the late 1970s extended the aesthetic tendencies of the movement, grounding perceptions of [B]lack culture in African sources, exploring vehicles of symbol, icon, and ritual beyond normative practice, and explicating concerns for social justice" (Taylor 1986, 64). In her interview with the Black women of UCLA Film and Television in the early 1980s, Claudia Springer addresses how many of the women are interested in digging deeper into their shared and intersecting African diasporic cultures (whether ancestral or communal with other African students in the program). Since most of the scholarship around the "liberatory image" often neglects reproduction or other issues specific to women and non-binary folks concerning reproductive care, the bulk of the women's work of the Rebellion fails to be cited as participating in the same "emancipatory" image as the work of Gerima, Bennet, Fanaka, Caldwell, and others. In reality, their work carried the most critical concern for, and deployed the clearest aesthetic

tactics toward, emancipation. I argue that emancipatory images take a margins-to-center approach, and emphasize the struggles of those who are most vulnerable amongst us in addition to those who have historically served as an exploited labor force. I center Black women as attending in various ways to that emancipatory image, but, of course, draw out how proximities to whiteness can remove them from that unprotected status. I find that the work of the women of the Rebellion were more likely to attend to the concern of vulnerability than their male colleagues.

Many of the African women who went through UCLA Film and Television also have very little external scholarship dedicated to their work. For some, their names and films are missing from the archive altogether. This is true for Cameroonian filmmaker Anne S. Ngu, who is not named in the book or in the collection database as a participant of the program, despite being a student in the MFA program from the mid 1970s through the early 1980s. I have tried to track down Ngu's short *Little Ones* (1982), as described by Claudia Springer, with little success.<sup>26</sup> The film is described as an experimental poetic examination of a woman's recent stillbirth. Omah Diegu is another filmmaker who has received little acknowledgement of her work.<sup>27</sup> Despite the establishment of the L.A. Rebellion archive and its "recent vogue emergence" in film scholarship, there is still so much work to do to recuperate, remember and recognize the work of so many women in the movement.

Students at the UCLA Film and Television Program had access to emerging video technology and production courses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most notably, though, the premier video course at the program was taught by Shirley Clarke from 1975 to 1985. The bulk of McCullough's videography from her time as a student were produced as part of her class projects with Clarke.<sup>28</sup> In a 2019 panel discussion for the exhibition *Time is Running Out of*



*Time: Experimental Film and Video from the L.A. Rebellion and Today* with Desha Dauchan, Zeinabu irene Davis, and McCullough at Art and Practice in Los Angeles, McCullough named Clarke as a mentor for her work not only in the program but throughout her life, until Clarke's 1997 death. L.A. Rebellion filmmaker O Fuminilya Makarah expresses a similar feeling towards Clarke and describes how supportive Clarke was to the students, compared to the other professors. For Makarah, Clarke encouraged the students to experiment with new technology. Makarah writes,

My most memorable (and useful) classes at UCLA were with Shirley Clarke, who became my mentor and encouraged me to push myself beyond my own self-imposed boundaries. She made quite an impact on many of us as she taught us about experimental and independent media. In those pre-palm-sized-camcorder days, you needed a football team to carry the portable video equipment. Special effects such as instant slow motion didn't exist. Shirley taught us how to create slow motion by hooking up four or five video porta-packs (which were clunky reel to reel video machines) and worked with us to set up programs at Theta Cable, LA's new cable station. (Makarah 1998, 136).

Traces of Clarke's production assistance, as relayed by Makarah, are evident in McCullough's 1980 video *Wind Spirit* in that the conjurer central to the two minute short both reverses and slows down its movements according to the logic of the soundtrack's rhythm. This effect enables the image to not only play upon video's capacity to replay time, but also taps into the technology's potential as an anarchic force in that time itself can be reversed through the power of cultural production—that is, through music. The psychedelic effect at the beginning of the film carries a similarly indeterminate relation to the moving image in Clarke's infamous *Bridges Go Round* (1958). In that film, the infrastructure of New York City (as expressed through its

bridges) puts the rhythm of the people to its own purpose, becoming a liberated force; a force so unsettling that it terrified Clarke's daughter (Rabinovitz 1994, 102).

Clarke's support of her students extended to the screening of their shorts, as well. She worked with a local Los Angeles cable station to play the student's dailies (capitalizing off of the format's playback ability) in addition to programming screenings in New York. In 1980, Clarke curated a film and video program of select experimental video works from her UCLA students at the Global Theater in New York, which included *Wind Spirit* (Clarke 1980). Clarke's own relationship with video coincided with the medium's emergence. In 1972, she started the T.P video collective, which monopolized the instant playback nature of video to capture moving bodies and dance that would then become models to replay for others in attendance (Hill [1995] 2008, 13).

It appears that Clarke's support for the student's work, along with her instruction of experimentation in film and video, was an outlier to many student's experiences with instructors at UCLA. Many of the interviews, oral histories, and anecdotes in both the archives and the anthology suggests that the experience for many of the filmmakers of color at UCLA, specifically Black women, was an incredibly hostile one. Many report receiving little support, positive critical feedback, or proper education on film history and distribution (Springer 1984; Makarah 1998, 135–136; Field 2016, 90; Davis and McCullough 2019). Several of the Black women who were in the program in the early 1980s recall being frequently told that their work was “unbelievable,” too biased because of its focus on Black women, and too “maternal” (Springer 1984). In these brief remarks we can see how the image of the Black mother is condemned as a representative image. On one hand, the passing remark of “too maternal” is hurled against all mothers, but here we see that the intersection of race pulls out another

meaning; that of not recognizing Black women as mothers to their own children. The image of Black motherhood is essential, especially in the context of a collective commons, for it serves to create an alternative image of what we know about Black women and critically constructs an image archive where, as Lorde writes in describing the implications of the denial of Black motherhood, Black girls are cared for in the world (Lorde [1984] 2007, 159). Moreover, outside of equipment costs, many of the filmmakers ran into additional production costs that were not provided to them by the University, like the purchasing and processing of film stock (which apparently was covered in the film program at the University of Southern California [Springer 1984]). The filmmakers of color who passed through UCLA's campus also struggled with the exhibition of their work in dialogue with other filmmakers' pieces, and any community that was built between students and faculty in the program was hard fought.

Elsewhere in the Rebellion's archives we see incomplete records, which is unsurprising for any archive, but also telling for those gaps follow the women of the Rebellion's work (Davis 2013). For example, the work of Imelda Sheen points to missing pieces still present in the ongoing archiving of the Rebellion's catalogue. Sheen has very little to no scholarship devoted to her work or life in the UCLA anthology, archives, or screenings.<sup>29</sup> The archive's sole film of Sheen's catalogue, *Forbidden Joy* is, though, included in the research copy of selected films of the Rebellion that is available for institutional purchase only—meaning that Horak, Stewart, and Fields sought to make the film available to a larger audience, albeit limited to the university.<sup>30</sup> The restricted distribution of the research copy of the film is due to the fact that several of the Rebellion films cited music without seeking the rights to them, making exhibition of some of these films not only costly, but potential legally hazardous (Horak 2017). I suspect *Forbidden Joy* would invite a large sum of such unlicensed copyright fees in that Sheen cites any and every

popular song and genre that she desires.<sup>31</sup> The inclusion of *Forbidden Joy* in this research copy may be viewed as a recuperative gesture to drum up more interest around Sheen's filmic practice, although it is one severely hindered by the lack of available information on the filmmaker.<sup>32</sup>

The listing of Sheen's filmography, as an example of the missing pieces still present in the L.A. Rebellion archives, but their physical absence in the archive suggest several things. Perhaps the only versions available are the sixteen millimeter prints that can be released for screenings. If this is the case, no film program has, of yet, requested her work aside from *Forbidden Joy* for screening, leaving those films in an in-between zone as they will not be able to be digitized until they are financially profitable. *And*, if Sheen's other films are anything like *Forbidden Joy* with regards to its use of music, I would imagine the screening fees to be costly and limited in the spaces in which they can be screened. This is why film screenings via screening fees and institutional acquisition are so integral to the continuation of a film's legacy; because they literally aide funding for preservation and research engagement. The other, equally likely, reason is that the films listed in the anthology may not exist in their records at all, but are known works that the archivists hope to track down. The L.A. Rebellion archive unfortunately ran out of grant funding towards the end of its completion in 2013, leaving many visible loose ends in its archival housing and documentation.

The "end" of the Rebellion came around 1989. Haile Gerima suggests that the Rebellion era of support, production, and awareness of one another's work departed with Zeinabu irene Davis, who arrived in 1983 and left the program in 1989 (Davis 2013; Field, Horak, Stewart 2016). Davis's account of her time at UCLA vastly differs from descriptions of the decade before as the grant that was used to aide students of color's tuition and living expenses had run out less

than a decade after its inception in 1969. Davis secured tuition funding through Gerima, who recommended her to the program and placed her in contact with faculty member and former student Teshome Gabriel to assist with funding. As a professor of Film and Television studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Gabriel assisted in the creation of a grant that provided students with a concentration in African, Asian, Latin American studies who had received full funding in the English Department to transfer over to the Film and Television Program with no additional application or tuition fees once the inaugural grant “ran dry” (Davis 2013; Davis and McCullough 2019).<sup>33</sup>

Many of the Rebellion members who attended UCLA in that last wave have both an MFA and MA degree from the English Department. This may explain why many of the women drew upon Black feminist literary references that were emerging at the time. It was through these resources that Davis was able to attend and was immediately acquainted with Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, Julie Dash, and Charles Burnett. While Davis was able to secure communal connections with alumni, she was one of only three Black students in her 1983 cohort, and by the end of her first year she was the sole Black student in the program (McCullough and Davis 2019). Dash and Burnett’s support manifested in the production of Davis’s narrative short *Crocodile Conspiracy* (1986) and the experimental short *Cycles* (1989).<sup>34</sup> Despite the rich support and community that Davis received from other alumnae, students of color who entered the program after Davis (in the mid-to-late 1980s and beyond) like Dawn Suggs (who attended the Third World Newsreel production workshop in the late 1980s and early 1990s), Cauleen Smith (early-to-mid 1990s), and Desha Dauchan (late 1990s to early 2000s) lacked intense communal ties and connections with other Black filmmakers (let alone members of the Rebellion) and therefore exist outside of the immediacy of the Rebellion cannon and archive.<sup>35</sup>

This overview of the women of the Rebellion reveals the crushing tension Black women navigated around making “political” work during moments of emancipatory change. It also reveals the all too common way in which critics and filmmakers dismiss Black women’s narratives of labor as not political, or not speaking to the collective needs of Blackness or womanhood as articulated by others. Moreover, we see the role that experimentation played for these artists, exercised as an emancipatory effort against the filmic image of Blackness. This communal agenda compounded with the Project One course, Shirley Clarke, Black feminist literary references, conjure culture, and the liminality of Black womanhood (in trying to think and create work beyond fixed positions of existence) shaped the women of the Rebellion’s filmic practice to pursue work that challenged representational linear narratives of Black womanhood. The work from the women of the Rebellion would set a template of what is possible for Black women to pursue via aesthetics as their work began to travel beyond the Los Angeles area in the late 1970s, influencing generations of filmmakers for years to follow.<sup>36</sup>

### **Against Representation: Sankofa and the Colonial Eye (1981–1993)**

In Great Britain, the conditions surrounding the first consistent body of Black experimental film and video art were similarly born out of communal political uprisings against systemic racism and oppression. The film collectives and communities that emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s were forged in the wake of the 1981 Brixton riots “and the institutional responses that gave the filmmakers access to funding. The newly established workshops provided the infrastructure that, combined with racially sensitive cultural policies, created condition for them to explore and question theoretical issues” (Fusco 1998, 9). Like the L.A. Rebellion, access to film and video art production emerged in the wake of social upheaval. Both movements, to a degree, marshalled

these new opportunities to build communities of cultural production, crafting a political community through film and video work. The development of workshops aided in materializing a rich conceptual engagement with the history of film and representation, alongside facilitating the learning of the technical skillset of film and video production. In their 1984 workshop on “Black Women and Representation,” Sankofa filmmakers Martina Attille and Maureen Blackwood sought to teach an audience how mass images of Black life served an ideological purpose in shaping a public’s reception to the rights and values of Black bodies in the world (Attille and Blackwood 1986, 207). Sankofa’s documentary films, like *A Family Called Abrew* (1992), directed by Maureen Blackwood, use the form of the film to re-write the symbol of British nationalism—as represented through the accumulation of white Eurocentric bodies—to show, for example, the Black Scottish family of Abrew, whose heritage and “national” service goes back generations and yet exist fundamentally outside of British identity. The workshop advocated for examining the economic conditions of the representation of Black women in relation to its specific historical contexts (Attille and Blackwood 1986, 204). Attille argues that the limitation of Black women’s visibility and “harmful” images put forth are made possible by the code of representational power, in that those limited colonial representations gain power and legitimize the power of the code each time they are repeated.

Representation is defined by Blackwood as “the presentation of an image which serves as a symbol for something else immediately, and then beyond that to the social, political and historical situations which have or have a had a direct relationship to how an image is presented” (Attille and Blackwood 1986, 205). Attille and Blackwood map out the conditions needed to present alternative productions of representation that address the code, and not simply the “agents of the code” (Attille and Blackwood 1986, 204; Wynter 1976, 16). Similar to

McCullough and other directors discussed thus far, the films of Sankofa drew out the relational experience of watching their images invent histories together with an audience, insofar as history was understood as mythology in their work. This is to say that the audience could not anticipate the structure or ending of Sankofa's history-based projects, even if they knew the history, due to the collective's use of fabulation as a means to challenge history. We see this practice in *Dreaming Rivers* (1988), but also in the *Passion of Remembrance* [Dir. Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien, 1986] and *Looking for Langston* [Dir. Isaac Julien, 1989], where fabulation is used to complicate time and the concept of historical legibility. Working against legibility afforded these filmmakers the opportunity to navigate Caribbean culture, history, and belonging via experimental means. Recollection is used as an aesthetic device to disrupt the image's capacity to hold a frame or body together; as viewers, we are left constantly questioning the frame's integrity, allowing the images to pass through the veil of mythology in order to scramble the historical singularity of representation.

Sankofa was a British and Caribbean Black queer feminist film and video art collective established in 1983. The collective—which included Martina Attille, Isaac Julien, Maureen Blackwood, and Nadine Marsh Edwards was acclaimed for its interest in experimental film and video production. Sankofa produced documentaries and experimental narrative shorts and features. Many of their shorts challenged the Eurocentric, ethnographic gaze on Black migrant culture in Great Britain. Experimentation gave the members of Sankofa a film vocabulary by which they could call attention to how aesthetics were weaponized against the image and narrative of Black life in Great Britain, giving the filmmakers an alternative toolkit and helping them develop alternative reading strategies when it came to critiquing the representation of Black life onscreen. As Attille writes, “The repetition of a very limited range of images goes towards



building POPULAR MYTHS, commonsense assumptions about us ... *Voyeurism. To be able to look, without being part*, without participating, sets up a distance between the observer and the object of the look that puts the voyeur in a position of power. Looking is never natural” (Attille 1986, 206–207). Attille’s passage here sets up the praxis of Sankofa: to make the act of looking or watching a communal one, one that pulls the viewer into a cultural act of witness bearing and partaking to aide in the creation of a living memory.

Experimentation as a necessary practice to the documentation of Black life remained a constant not just for Sankofa, but also for the other Black British collectives that formed in the early 1980s, like Ceddo and Black Audio Video Film Collective in 1982. Although the Black Audio Video Film Collective (BAVFC) had a Black woman, Claire Joseph, as a founding member, she was replaced in 1985 with David Lawson. And while Ceddo featured Elmina D. Davis and Valerie Thomas, the collective’s work on the whole steers toward non-experimental narrative and documentary and thus are not featured in this study. Sankofa, then, occupies the space of producing specifically queer Black feminist experimental film and video work for an audience. The collective also benefitted from having its content distributed on BBC’s Channel 4, which still today carries a reputation for showing edgier content than BBC 1 or BBC 2, a badge it received at its inception as a space for centering experimental shorts and feature films. The experimentation found in the work of Sankofa and BAVFC were largely debated by audiences within communities of color (Hall 1988). Coco Fusco recounts that the manipulation of formal aesthetics drew much ire, in that they were perceived by audiences, broadcasters, and critics (like Salman Rushdie)<sup>37</sup> to be too “intellectual” for their intended audiences (Fusco 1988, 15). This backlash created an argument as to what type of image should “represent” a people, in that the contestation to Black experimental images makes visible the narrative that “Black filmmaking is

a form of social work, or rather that aesthetically self-conscious film practice is too highbrow and superfluous” (1988, 16). Fusco situates Black filmmaking as “social work”, but we may also think of it as labor, as I do throughout this chapter, in that film and video work beyond production is meant to activate audiences’ ability to think and look differently. The “difficulty” of reading the work of the Black experimental practices by Sankofa and BAVFC would create a schismatic break in British identity politics.

Prior to the mid-to-late 1980s, “Black” was used to signify any racialized or marginalized body, and non Black individuals often ‘self’-identified with the term in solidarity with the “Black” struggle. Stuart Hall’s seminal 1988 lecture “New Ethnicities” strongly advocates for this rupture in that the usage of the term has led to essentialist positions around lived experiences, rather than culturally produced ones (Hall [1988] 1996, 3). Hall’s argument was greatly informed by the films of the aforementioned collectives and the attacks waged against them for their experimental focus, namely a damning critique against BAVFC’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986) by Salman Rushdie (Hall [1988] 1996, 7). In “New Ethnicities”, Hall positions culture as the frontier for collective gathering, for it retains difference and make “participants” of us all. Hall also centers culture as a practice when it comes to reading these experimental films. As Fusco asserts, the filmmakers

draw on the experiences of a cultural environment in which musical performance can function as a laboratory for experimenting with ready-made technologically (re)produced materials. They also produce film in an environment where television is the archetypical viewing experience. The fast-pace[d] editing and nonnarrative structures found in advertising and music video[s]—not to mention the effect of frequently flipping

channels—have already sensitized television audience[s] to “unconventional” representation, upsetting the hegemony of the classic realist text. (Fusco 1988, 19)

In this passage Fusco, similarly to Hall, names the power of the Black British filmmakers as developing an aesthetic from diasporic experiences common to Black people from a culturally produced context. Moreover, Fusco chides critics who dismiss the experimentation in Black British audiovisual work as “not speaking” to a people “properly.” Fusco amplifies how the “common” eye is already attuned to non-narrative and non-linear editing techniques in televisual content due to the popularity of music videos, which have already altered audience’s relationship with the “classical” narrative text. The goal of these experimental aesthetics is to shift the audience’s focus from a narrative to the effects of culture, in that the works draw out a *feeling* of a people and their differences.

The films of Sankofa, specifically *Dreaming Rivers*, use Caribbean culture and its *affects* to heal an internal colonized eye. These affect-driven films challenge our assumptions around what type of image production is even possible when it comes to Black life in Great Britain. For example, Maureen Blackwood’s *Home Away From Home* (1993) visualizes the tension of Afro immigrants living in Great Britain as a woman builds a traditional hut in her backyard only to have that hut destroyed by her white neighbors. The short itself is atmospherically driven, as the weather drives the sequences in the film. Similarly, Blackwood’s *Perfect Image?* (1988) navigates the tensions of immigration, generational differences, and colorism in Black British Communities. Both *Home Away From Home* and *Perfect Image?* play with experimentation, but *Perfect Image?*’s non-narrative structure fully pushes it into the realm of experimental feminist work. The short plays with the conventions of after school television programming aimed at pre-teens, employing vignettes to create a collection of images, sketches, songs, and monologues that

convey the un-representable feelings of Black beauty values against the backdrop of white Eurocentric beauty standards that frame its “negation.”

These films eschew the forms in which Black life has traditionally been taken up to release a difference that demonstrates film’s anarchic potential. The difficulty of healing a colonized eye and showing another way—or conjuring Caliban’s woman—lies in the biculturalism of its product. Black life exists, as Barbara McCullough stated, in a dominant culture, but not of it. The implications of her statement carry great weight when applied in geographic contexts in which Black life is the majority and is still haunted by the colonial commodity culture of the West. The form of the decolonial eye will vary and has no uniform vision, however the work of culture and experimentation as produced in these films speak to how the tasks of the filmmakers may be

to find a structure and a form which would allow us the space to deconstruct the hegemonic voice of the British TV newsreel. That was absolutely crucial if we were to succeed in articulating those special and temporal states of belonging and displacement differently. In order to bring emotions, uncertainties and anxieties alive we had to poeticize that which was captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units—by poeticizing every image we were able to succeed in recasting the binary of myth and history of imagination and experiential states of occasional violence. (Fusco 1988, 19)

The history of the cinema is embedded in the history of colonial occupation of the Caribbean, thus the poeticization of those symbols or images are instrumental to removing its power; they enact the conjuring of Caliban’s woman. Mbye Cham states in the introduction for *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (1992) that because of the hybrid axis of colonial nations in the

Caribbean, each new national transformation of cinema emerging out of France, Great Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and other countries immediately found their way to cinemas there.<sup>38</sup>

The question of Caribbean cinema has to do with race, location, and nationality. Cham writes, “On the whole, then, Caribbean cinema seems to be a composite of two discrete but related entities: production by Caribbean people inside the Caribbean, on the one hand, and those outside of the Caribbean, on the other. It is a cinema ‘ex-iles’—from the islands/of people from the islands—and it is also a cinema of ‘exiles’—by people from the islands living in exile” (Cham 1992, 9). Cham acknowledges the difficulties of producing work that locates a Caribbean identity when migration to colonial “homelands”, or places adjacent, are frequently made for the possibility of better work conditions. Such migrations are also made possible because the colonialized subject knows the language of the colonizer. If a Caribbean subject removed from their home produces work in the West, does it negate their Caribbean heritage? For Cham’s, and my, argument, of course not; nonetheless, the fact that such a question exists suggests that a first or second generation migrant becomes “less authentic” in their cultural production. The tensions around the question of what constitutes a Caribbean film speaks to the fractured identity of Caribbean filmmakers.

The screening of Sankofa’s work abroad during the early 1990s plays upon the colonial connective threads that Black filmmakers marshal to have their work released; that is, circulation that mirrors the passageway of colonialization and other diasporic Black communities. This travelogue points to the uprooted nature of Blackness, where artistic work reflects the trail of colonial travel and occupation. The work itself may not represent the existence of Caribbean life in the Caribbean, but is indicative of the slippage of *being* that indexes Black Caribbean and

African culture in Great Britain, further threading out its position of liminality, as is especially evident in the work of Sankofa. Sankofa's focus on questioning identity under the throes of nationality and ethnicity contributed to its widespread recognition in the arts—albeit momentarily— in the late 1980s. Isaac Julian's *Looking for Langston* spearheaded a global awareness of the collective's work through its critical reception in the United States, specifically through the rise of new queer film and video aesthetics in the 1990s. When Sankofa disbanded in the early 1990s, the international attention they garnered shifted toward the amplification of Julian, who has maintained a successful career as a leading experimental filmmaker of Black British cinema.

The archive of British Black experimental film reveals a strong engagement with Black diasporic culture and questions of migration as found in the work of Ngozi Onwurah, Barby Asante, Jamika Ajalon, and others who emerged in the wake of Sankofa's disbandment in the early 1990s. Following the shift from the Channel 4 film and video productions, the arts and MFA scene in London became a leading conduit for Black experimentation in audio/visual work, as was encapsulated in the 1995 exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art, *Mirage*. I focus my attention here on Sankofa for its broader archive of women's experimentation. The emergence of Sankofa's body of work, including *Dreaming Rivers* and the more widely recognized *Looking for Langston*, marks a cataclysmic shift in the production of experimental moving images by Black artists globally, specifically by Black queer artists in the U.S. in the 1990s. Thus, it is paramount to remind audiences of the equally important experimental Sankofa production of *Dreaming Rivers* that for many years has been underexamined by scholars, at least in comparison with *Looking for Langston*.<sup>39</sup> Turning our attention to see how Black, primarily queer women combatted an onslaught of ongoing erasure in the 1990s through their communal

work and aesthetic practices is key to interpreting and fully grounding how artists can redress historical wrongs and build innovative communal grounds for the exhibition of work that confronts our internalized colonial gaze.

### **Playback Time: Video and the New Queer Aesthetic (1986–1998)**

The Third World Newsreel (TWN) production workshop is where we witness the commons beginning to ground itself with a more organized political structure. TWN participants like Jocelyn Taylor, Cheryl Duayne, and Dawn Suggs were active in the production of counter-discourse to combat the stigmatization around HIV/AIDS and queer people. Video art in this period was instrumental in the construction of alternative images. Alexandra Juhasz describes these images as,

[t]he potential of media production for those individuals and communities who never before could afford it or master it occurred just as a social crisis of massive proportions and multiple dimensions begged to be represented in a manner available to the most and the least economically and culturally privileged. The politics of AIDS—the demands for a better quality of life of the people affected by this epidemic—are well matched by the potentials and politics of video. (Juhasz 1995, 2)

Video, as Juhasz further argues, is notable for its quick and accessible format and made image production easier, economical, and quicker than film (Juhasz 1995, 7–8). Thus, many activists saw the power of combatting the homophobic image-archive with one of their own to literally disrupt individuals' perception of the virus, using quick edits and playback effects to change how people saw the virus and queerness. Video art then became an area in which to forge communal, activist, and political support for Black women in that image production gave them a chance to

assert their presence, but also to mobilize action that centered care in their work and communities to create a local response to HIV/AIDS that was not accounted for publicly elsewhere (Juhasz 1995, 3). The following section examines the intersecting communities of Black women working with video through TWN production workshops in New York City from the late 1980s through 1998. I examine how care structured their ethic-aesthetic video production as well as their communal support of distribution. I break this *very* varied section into three parts to analyze this history for its background and the aesthetics and topics included in the discussed filmmakers' works. The explicit centering of Black queer women, I argue, grounded the politics of assembly and shifted toward more organizational forms of support that included creating space for Black queer women, both outside and inside of video production. This emphasis on organization segues, in the following section, into a larger historical narrative of the opposition Black women faced in distributing their work.

### *Background*

While white women's histories with video art date back to the medium's portability—as far back as the late 1960s—women of color, specifically those from a lower socio-economic background, were often priced out of video until the 1990s, when the technology was fully enveloped into widespread production and general market consumer demand. As an emergent technology in the 1970s, video was an expensive format that catered to, at best, a middle class budget and income. For instance, the cost of the Portapak around 1970 was \$1500, which is roughly \$9500 today (United States dollar). While this new technology literally made images move quicker, few artists of color outside of a film production degree program like UCLA's had access to the format in the 1970s. Additionally, a model like the Portapak was very amateur in the type of



images it could capture and was more expensive than film. If one wanted to work with a more professional video camera, the Sony DHX 1600 Tricon cost an estimated \$6000 in 1974, which is the equivalent of roughly \$30,000 today.<sup>40</sup> There is a tendency to collapse, or outright omit, the costs of production when mentioning the history of video. Such an omission fails to recognize both the innovation of the format as well as prices at the time, and does not fully explain who was capable of working with that medium based on access. It is paramount to state that early video cameras were not light devices, for video tape was still a reel setup and was much wider than film, coming in at two inches (whereas film registers at eight millimeters, sixteen millimeters, and thirty-five millimeters ). A device like the Portapak was technically portable, but also weighed eighteen pounds. Therefore the explosion of video art by Black women that came to the fore in the 1990s intersects with a variety of factors, among them actual portability (in that video cameras became “palm” sized during this decade) and lower prices, which enabled a greater range of affordability.

Video’s directness enabled the New Queer Video Movement a mobility and immediacy not previously seen in film history, even with the Direct Cinema Movement. As Cynthia A. Young writes on the development of TWN production workshops, “mobile film and sound units’ would ‘show films in the streets to the people’. . . to serve as a ‘means for organizing and mobilizing people already involved in struggle’, thereby giving them the ‘theoretical and practical bases for remaking themselves and their environment’” (Young 2006, 178–179). By the early 1990s, TWN workshops reached a peak in terms of its mobile approach to video production. The bulk of Black queer video work of that era incorporates street interviews and hard edits resembling the type of “daily” video footage seen on the news. Video shifted the focus of film production to movement in time, creating pure “movement” images with no center

foundation or fixed narrative point. Black queer feminists of this era marshalled this ability to distribute new constructions of Black womanhood that dismantled the fixed position of identity, especially around Black women's sexuality.

In their oral history contribution for *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet, Thomas Allen Harris, Shari Frilot, Leah Gilliam, Dawn Suggs, Jocelyn Taylor, and Yvonne Wilborn remember the burdensome whiteness that shaped and excluded queer communities in the early 1990s. Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet and Thomas Aleen Harris created an archive project, "Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the Africa Diaspora," in 1996, which gathered many of the out Black queer women video artists of the time. Jocelyn Taylor gives a particularly damning account of her tokenization in her early years as a Black lesbian who positioned her video art around identificatory issues; she recalls quickly losing favor with white queer artists once she did (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 29).<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere, Taylor recounts the importance of the collaborative kinships between queer women that were formed through the shared struggle of making film in an environment that continually puts little to no support for Black women in the industry. She states (in full):

The network among ourselves is born from necessity and proximity. Many of us are closely connected to alternative media networks, know each other from our fields of activism, and have maintained those relationships. We are friend who have started making work under similar circumstances for similar reason. Here's a proximity example: makers whose works have evolved around questions of identity and/or sexuality have gravitated toward one another to talk about programming issues, give critique, and analyze style. We run into each other, touch base, maybe have dinner, then pass the word

on to another maker at another event about what so-and-so is doing. Since many of us are busy representing black queer culture (if such a monolith does exist), it is necessary that we discuss the reception of our work by our various audiences. (Taylor 2018, 35–36)

Suggs similarly describes the founding of a queer artists community of color as a response to how dismissed queer artists of color felt at film festivals and conferences centering queer art and video (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 33). Suggs’s anecdotes further reveal how being the only Black queer woman in attendance drove her to search and find other Black queer women in these queer video communities (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 33).

In her stunning rebuke of the perceived collectivity of queer artists in the 1990s, experimental queer filmmaker Michelle Parkerson writes in her 1991 essay “Birth of a Notion: Toward Black, Gay, and lesbian Imagery in Film and Video” that while great acclaim is rightfully being geared towards queer cinema, she questions the lack of visibility and inclusion of Black queer women media makers within more popular queer networks. She acknowledges the productive representation of Black queer men’s cinema, but wonders why it comes at the expense of Black queer women, positing that the overdetermination of race exceeds gender discourse in all areas of Black life where the same erasure of Black women in mainstream film is replicated in queer cinema, as well (Parkerson [1991] 2018, 21). Indeed, Greg Tate’s supportive 1991 *Village Voice* piece on Black women media makers, “Cinematic Sisterhood,” affirms this narrative, stating that Black feminist cinema is the vanguard of the movement and yet it is the only terrain of Black cinema that is not being examined by critics, exhibitors, curators, and other artists in favor of pursuing Black “authentic” masculinity.<sup>42</sup> He writes,

Black film can be political, spiritual, and historicizing power base for us as well as an aesthetic and economic one. Quiet as it’s kept, if you want to find a group of Black

filmmakers kicking that kind of science, you got to go to the sisters. Matter of fact, after interviewing sisters for this piece, I stepped back feeling like a lot of the your brothers out here on the Black film mission ain't about nothing but some self-serving, self-aggrandizing, macho-posturing-ass bullshit. Yo, what do a brother know? If we're talking about visionary narratives and subject matter, and filmmakers grounded in daily struggles against sexism, white supremacy, and professional marginalization, the sisters are the ones I hear taking not shorts and talking no sellout. They're more about solidarity. (Tate [1991] 2015, 252–253)<sup>43</sup>

The intertextual documents being produced by Black queer women not only had to navigate rewriting the stereotypes of Black womanhood that were created by white supremacy and fortified through intracultural misogynoir, they also had to deal with deafening silence and a lack of acknowledgement from a larger queer and Black commons.

Although Michele Parkerson emerged as a key participant of the Black feminist queer video art community in the 1990s, her film beginnings go back to the 1970s. In her “Artist & Influence” interview with filmmaker and then lead curator of TWN’s programming Ada Gay Griffin, Parkerson cites *Black Journal*, and the work of William Greaves and Madeline Anderson in particular, as key figures in developing her interest in experimentation (Billops Hatch 1998).<sup>44</sup> While the majority of Parkerson’s work centers a documentary style, she forgoes traditional aesthetics to find a space to give agency to her subjects in a bid to reconcile with documentary’s invasive, testimonial style. Parkerson describes her aesthetic manipulation as a way of meshing autobiography with performance, autobiography, narration, and compilation (Klotman and Parkerson 1993, 3). She further states, “[I]t’s an approach to subject matter. Not necessarily that [B]lack filmmakers angle their camera like this and that’s what makes their aesthetic different,

but elements such as the kinds of subjects, who speaks in the film, who determines the action of the film, who the issues concerns in the film—all of these things define [B]lack film aesthetics” (Gibson and Parkerson 1988, 6). In her videos, ... *But then, She’s Betty Carter* (1980) and *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987) we see a similar screening archive style akin to Billops’s work, where documents are juxtaposed to give a feeling of what happened. Parkerson’s subjects were culled from her childhood idols and intended to convey a feeling of Black expressive culture (Brownworth and Redding 1997, 59–60), while also introducing audiences to the rich archive of Black trans men and queer women (as evident with *Stormé*). As a poet, Parkerson’s practice is shaped by alternative narrative structures (she lists Gwendolyn Brooks as a major inspiration for her film work).<sup>45</sup>

The work of Black queer video art in the 1990s is the best example of a communal practice. Many of the directors I discuss networked in and across communities to sustain their work and support others. There was no “formal” collective per se, but rather a plurality of ways in which these filmmakers organized and helped one another. New York became a sort of “hybrid” center for Black queer video art due to the resources available for video work, like the Experimental Television Center (1969–2011) in Owego, in Upstate New York, where Gilliam and Pamela Jennings both had residencies along with other notable Black experimental film and video artists including Ayoka Chenzira, Michelle Parkerson, and Thomas Allen Harris. In *Sisters in the Life*, experimental video artist and scholar Yvonne Welborn gives an account of the multiple communities of Black queers and queers of color in the 1990s film and video art scene, largely centering Black women as a way to combat the hostility and pigeonholing of Black queer women that exists in larger queer communities. While queer cinema experienced a sort of boom in the 1990s, queers of color—specifically Black queer women—found their efforts shut out and

their criticisms ignored (Welborn, 2018, 5). This critical moment reveals how race overdetermines the position of Black queer women's lives and needs, as Black queer men would become the de-facto image of Black queer life at large (Parkerson [1991] 2018, 24–25).

### *Aesthetics*

What we find in the Black queer feminist cinema is a strategic focus on the narrative and symbolic coding of Black women's bodies and video's capacity, in its ability to revisit time, to rewrite information that gives way to a polyvalence of interpretations. This polyvalence of "meanings" fabulates a past narrative to free Black women's bodies and sexualities in time, and to open them up to possibility rather than the historical singularity of "meaning" these intertextual documents and concepts have been fixed to; what Keeling defines as a "memory-image" of Blackness. Experimentation in video art in this body of work is a way to emancipate one's future by emancipating the image of the past through new technological means; a way of revisiting time.

The possibility of revisiting time made video art's direct action appeal different than the effect of the Direct Cinema Movement, in that Direct Cinema would build to a catharsis moment, capturing events unfolding to a boiling point for maximum exposure. Video artists were less "careful" with their images, for directors and viewers could always go back and revisit what they did not catch the first time, pause, and reengage. Repetition becomes the standard for video art: repeat it to know it. With the availability of playback control, revisiting time and wanting to expand upon the world featured in the video made the images within that video simultaneously static and fluid, for you could pause and study individual "frames" while missing them altogether

when they appeared in motion. Experimental video art gave way to more hybrid texts, more references, more chances to go back and extend the world before you, and to catch citations.

Of course, in 1992 B. Ruby Rich had similarly linked the aesthetics of queer video art to the transformations of video technology in the 1980s and 1990s, although without centering Black queer women's specificity in that dialogue (Rich 2013, xxx, 10). In the 1980s and 1990s, many queer video artists exploited video's ability to create intertextual documents by recoding films on television, or ripping films now available in a home ownership market. This exploitation of video's ability to "rip" enabled directors to remix "meaning" in previous film texts and draw out their queer undertones in the process. Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Videos* (1993) infamously shows Hudson narrating his queer life from beyond the grave over clips from his major Hollywood film productions. Rappaport edits these clips in such a way to purposefully draw out Hudson's characters' ambiguous relationship with women and heterosexuality at large. The New Queer Video Movement, as Rich so aptly defined it in her 1992 piece for the *Village Voice*, uproariously affirmed and documented queer life as counter-image to the constant negative images and narratives against queer lives at the height of the visibility of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s.

In this body of video art from the 1990s, we see video artists inhabit the aesthetics of the structural order to change its outcome. Some video makers like Leah Gilliam used video to comment on the surveillance of racialized bodies, drawing out video's origins in CCTV surveillance footage (*Sapphire and the Slave Girl* [1995]). Others, like Jocelyn Taylor, used the interview format popularized through daytime and nighttime talk shows to *not* provide clear testimonials of Black queer women's lives, and instead to complicate the presumption of "knowing" the *Other* that has long been embedded in Western spectatorship (*Bodily Functions*

[1995]). Experimental video makers like Jamika Ajalon, Kym Ragusa, Pamela Jennings, Leah Gilliam, and others used video to bring unresolved issues of a collective memory to the fore and play back their current present through video's temporal sequential arch; essentially, past "troubling" images of Blackness are set in the present, while the current "present" in the video is constantly interrupted and revisiting as the video moves towards its eventual end.<sup>46</sup> The lack of film within a video camera means that the camera's movements are its own, not in dialogue with an internal material, so the mobility of the video image is the mobility of the complete apparatus, not merely a component of it. Black queer feminist cinema uses the mobility of the camera to resist petrification of collective memory, affecting the present through new technology.

### *Topics*

Support for the queer distribution of Black feminist experimental film and video art also came from TWN (Figures 3.4 & 3.5). Their pamphlets from the 1990s show a sincere interest and investment in Black experimental feminist and queer film and video art. These pamphlets also reveal the work of writing history in time, for the curation of experimental titles began to build a historical thread of Black feminist experimental film and video art. Camille Billops and Martina Attille are included alongside emergent voices in contemporary film and video art practice of the mid 1990s. The sections in these pamphlets were organized thematically to group work together, but also to build a vocabulary around select titles to aide potential renters or acquirers in learning how to frame and talk about the work (Figures 3.6 & 3.7). Two notable booklets stand out: *Black Independents in the 90s* (1996) and *The Politics of Eros* (1996). In the former, film curator Cynthia A. Young writes that the gathered films



demonstrate that Third World Newsreel continues to play a vital role in today's social justice movements, chronicling the deep inequities that still mar the face of American democracy. But Third World Newsreel has expanded its role far beyond that of social commentator, showcasing cutting edge films that use aesthetic innovation to encourage the reconstruction of individual as well as collective imaginaries. Whether joyful celebration or lyrical mediation these works challenge us, infuriate us, console us, enlighten us. . . for these film constitute a collective outcry against the protectors of privilege, be they white or black, male or female, gay or straight. This collection encourages us to explore new vistas and imagine new existences, a first step in the transformation of the personal and political. (Young 1996, 2)

In Young's introduction to the catalogue of films available for distribution, we see a scholar and critic recognize the changing aesthetic challenges advanced by Black film and video artists, paying close attention to how identity in relation to the body is read in society against how one reads one's self. Further, *The Politics of Eros* catalogue provides a gathering of films dealing with sex, sexuality, embodiment, romance, and trauma. Scholar Kobena Mercer provides a fruitful introduction regarding how audiences (critics, viewers, curators, scholars, and the like) should navigate the question of the erotic in film by racialized artists from the diaspora: "With the desire to replenish the flesh of the multicultural body politic, these films bear witness to the power of Eros as a force that can change the way we think and feel. Once you accept the invitation and surrender to the seduction, your outlook on life may never be the same" (Mercer 1996, 1). Much like the larger analysis of this study, Mercer's words illuminate the affective dimensions of the largely experimental film and video art scene of the 1980s and 1990s in that it is both carnal and fleshly in its production of cinematic bodies. Both introductions point to the

development of experimental aesthetics as a way to disrupt familiar binary associations with the body, specifically in the work of Black queer women aiming to transgress and pass through fixed images and myths around their bodies and desires.

Of the experimental films and videos listed in these programs, the majority focus on some kind of documentary or narrative vignette through which Black queer film and video makers use the “playfulness” available in experimental aesthetics to play with the moving image’s capacity to narrate and read a body. Videos like *Drive By Shoot* [Dir. Portia Cobb, 1994], *Mother Tongue* [Dir. Patrice Mallard, 1994], and *Remembering Wei Yi-Fang*, *Remembering Myself* [Yvonne Welborn, 1995] speak to Black queer women’s manipulation of the image of “reality” in video to not only reveal its artificial contributions in mythologizing their bodies, but also how to invent a new reality foregrounding their bodily autonomy. Sexuality and the sexual body become a recurrent focus in this body of work, as these video makers use form to demystify sex and present experimental counter-documents that challenge the depiction of queer sex in mainstream pornography. These videos sought to return erotics to the body to produce a pulsating experience of queer jouissance not often seen in onscreen depictions of Black women. *She Don’t Fade* [Dir. Cheryl Dunye, 1991], *What is a Line* [Dir. Shari Frilot, 1994], and *Bodily Functions* [Dir. Jocelyn Taylor, 1995] are select examples of this work at play. Moreover, a large portion of this video art seeks to uncover intergenerational trauma, domestic and interpersonal coercion and abuse, and sexual assault, paying close attention to how the body retains memories and relives experiences independent of one’s consciousness (as chapter one examined). Videos like *Demarcations* [Dir. Kym Ragusa, 1992], *Human Touch: Pain and Power* [Dir. Vejan Lee Smith, 1995], and Melodie McDaniel’s superb music video for Jazz Lee Alston’s “Love ... Never That” (1995) are key examples of this type of work.

Similarly, Ayoka Chenzira's thirty minute video documentary on sexual abuse and children, *Secret Sounds Screaming: The Sexual Abuse of Children* (1986), is worth briefly mentioning here for its manipulation of video's daily news structure, quick editing, and its reflection of "reality" in dialogue with the aforementioned topics found in other Black feminist experimental video art of the era. *Secret Sounds Screaming* uses video's whiplash temporality to flood and distort viewer's sense of reality, placing tension on how memory testimony hovers between vividness and absence in sexual abuse survivors, especially when they are children. Former Whitney Curator of Film and Video Programming Lucianda Furlong wrote the following in a pamphlet program for the screening of the video:

Actors are used to relate the stories of actual victims. However, the tape is not a docudrama in the usual sense. Chenzira rapidly cuts from these stories, to interviews with social workers and the mother of a four-year-old victim, to a slow-motion scene of an empty playground swing set, which signifies the silence that many victims endure. Through this structure and pacing, Chenzira not only presents information about the myths and realities of child sexual abuse, but also captures the emotionally charged nature of the issue. (Furlong 1987).

In Furlong's brief analysis she draws out how Chenzira uses her aesthetics to instill an affective register between the subjects, the situation, the observers, and the audience, emphasizing the tension in demanding speech from these young survivors. Having worked as an experimental filmmaker for more than a decade by the late 1980s, Chenzira, living in New York at the time, would assist and network with many of the young queer Black feminists flexing their muscles in the craft in the early 1990s through various video production workshops in the area.<sup>47</sup>

The reception of Black feminist queer film and video art was sometimes met with hostility from queer and straight audiences, depending on the racial community (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 43–46). Dawn Suggs recalls the negative feedback her film *She Left the Script Behind* (1993) received at a Black community screening when two women kissed (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 43). Suggs stresses the importance of exhibition and screening as spaces that literally mediate the work and can crucially aide in the perception of the work being screened. The screenings served as ample opportunities to create dialogues with other video makers work, but also to shift audience’s experience with the theater in that their works’ experimentation drew upon ambivalence to jam audiences’ normative perception engagement and demanded a more active thinking engagement in watching cinema. Programs and rental pamphlets like TWN’s *The Politics of Eros* were instrumental in this work. Part of this mediation also includes bringing the director to a screening, for it provides them with the opportunity to speak about their work in their own words (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018, 44–45). This, of course, also limited the possibilities to screen one’s work insofar as a filmmaker might not “trust” the venue or organizer to adequately speak on their behalf. Thus, the films (as we will see in chapter five) bear the brunt of inscribing self-reflective acts of “looking” into the frame to draw attention to the restricted field of vision audiences have toward queer, feminist images of Black womanhood. This perceptual correction is not unlike Sankofa’s interest in healing a colonized eye, in that they recognized the moving image’s power to enforce ideology and sought to unmake past discourse surrounding queer life. The videos produced by queer Black feminists during the 1990s laid the ground for a more self-reflexive style of experimentation to emerge around the indexing of Black womanhood and the gaze. This style worked well with the expanded screening possibilities that video technology opened the door for,

but additionally accentuated the problems Black feminist experimental directors faced with film and video exhibition and distribution, which I turn my attention to below.

### **Distribution and Exhibition Strategies**

We see, with Black feminist experimental film and video, a greater need for the filmmaker to appear alongside their work in order to adequately communicate or carry its “purpose” forth to an audience. While film is known for its ability to travel more frequently and further than its director, Black feminist experimental film and video art histories document a troubling narrative where festival bias, limited budgets (or limited funds made available for Black women directors), and hostile environments severely impact and limit their work’s ability to travel; hence my focus on a collective commons to examine how Black women were able to organize screenings, network, and share advice on distribution in spite of these limitations. What I have compiled here, in this chapter’s final section, is an outline of some of the oppositions the aforementioned directors faced while distributing their work. I have also included key programs that were essential to building the ephemeral archive of Black feminist film and video exhibition over time and whose program records and pamphlets contributed greatly to my gathering of experimental film and video titles from 1970 to 1998.

Few opportunities were extended to the Black women filmmakers to participate in festival discussion, meaning that Black women filmmakers saw their work circulate without their critical input that can be essential in framing your work for an audience. Black women’s filmmaking, thus, was dependent on the reception, distribution, and interpretation of a majority white audience for Black women were (and still are, sadly) marginalized in the field of film distribution, criticism, and curation. Many of the white critics assessing these films were illiterate

to the film's cultural references and how those references drove the films' aesthetic choices. The Black women in the UCLA Film and Television program interviewed by Claudia Springer in 1981 lament the lack of Black women film critics to assess their work. As most of their films were being read by white men, they found their work to be systemically shut out of press, reviews, and scholarship, or misinterpreted. In Yvonne Welborn's short film on Julie Dash, *The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash* (1992), Dash similarly recounts the numerous rejections and poor reviews she received simply because her work was "too obscure" or "too mysterious." She recalls the rejection of *Daughters of the Dust* from Cannes, Locarno, Venice, and other festivals.

The letters the festival organizers sent back declared that they "could not understand [the film] at all. I thought that was very interesting because you think Cannes is at the cutting edge of things. It's like if these few guys could not understand it does that mean that it was not worthwhile. And that's basically what they're telling you. I believe that it has nothing to do with their reality, this film. I'm asking them to sit for two hours and look at Black women that they've never seen on the screen before because it's not the type of Black woman that they're used to looking at. . . and so they disengage from it. We were hoping to get a wider distribution for [*Daughters of the Dust*] but that's still up in the air. Because we have distributors who are all white, males, who are telling us that the general public does not want to see this type of film. (Welborn 1992)

In Dash's damning statement, she emphasizes the limitations of interpretation around what is perceived to be "avant-garde" in film. If even Cannes, the premier festival for innovative and often experimental cinema, cannot "understand" her work, then what exhibition platforms are available to Black women who deviate from the perceived norm? Unfortunately, excavating the interviews of experimental women filmmakers of the Rebellion, this became a recurring obstacle

that ultimately shut out a generation of radical filmmakers from building recognition and a larger body of work.

In a 1991 interview with Elizabeth Jackson, McCullough similarly remarks that distribution was difficult because of the lack of imagination on the part of distributors. The “best” approach was to do the festival circuit and to have the opportunity to speak about your work in that context:

If I can get my work around to festivals, and invited to speak about my work around the country, then that’s what I want to do. Word of mouth helps show my films a lot, which is why they play a great deal during Black history month. I know realistically that I won’t make a lot of money out of my films, but each project I do provides me with an opportunity. The more people who know about what I have done, the better it is, because it provides more of an opportunity. All of the showings lend to your legitimacy for future funding rounds. The programmers many times are on the boards that distribute funding, so I like that. (Jackson 1991)

McCullough is careful to note that the festival circuit only works for Black women directors, let alone those whose work is experimental, if the filmmaker can be invited to “explain” the work, thus assuming that the work will be misinterpreted. This comment points to the paucity of distributors and critics who are comfortable assessing the needs of a Black feminist experimental film archive. The lives of the experimental Black women filmmakers of the Rebellion tell us that equal in measure to the distribution of their work is the development and use of a language to name their work, their history, their citations, and aesthetic practices, as expressed in film criticism and scholarship. For McCullough, turning her efforts to the arts more fully was beneficial in finding an audience, but it was and is not a one-size-fits-all solution to overall

distribution problems (and even then the arts more broadly carry their own problems, as Billops's repeated demonstrations against museums revealed).<sup>48</sup>

The work of Black feminist experimental film (though never labelled as such) found its circulation through curated film programs, including many organized by Clyde Taylor and some self-started programs by the directors themselves in the 1970s (McCullough 1979). McCullough was known to organize screenings in the community as part of The Open Eye and Double X, an organization of Los Angeles women artists. While McCullough was not a member of Double X, she did curate the film program "Convergence and Conjunction" on its behalf. McCullough was a member of The Open Eye, which was an organization of third world artists of all disciplines (McCullough 1979). For many of the Rebellion filmmakers, distribution of their work was quite limited beyond immediate community and classroom playback screenings. McCullough remarks in her 1979 video interview for *The View* that "the only way that my work is going to get out there is for somebody to get it together, to formalize something, to organize something so that it is shown. Right now, I have the energy to do that but I don't know how long" (McCullough 1979) captures the precarity concisely. Small, communally organized screenings like the ones McCullough describes are essentially how many films of the Rebellion were shown in the Los Angeles area (Field, Horak, Stewart 2016, 344).<sup>49</sup> Some filmmakers of the Rebellion, like Robert Nakamura and Jamaa Fanaka, took distribution into their own hands, screening their films in residential buildings, community centers, and outdoor gatherings (Field, Horak, Stewart 2016, 343–44).

In their oral history interviews for the L.A. Rebellion book, many filmmakers describe feeling a sense of distribution illiteracy around film screening and exhibition; a sense of simply not knowing that you were supposed to apply to festivals, or not knowing that festivals were



supposed to invite filmmakers when their work was being screened (Field, Horak, Stewart 2016, 345). In the anthology, distribution, exhibition, and screening are only partially covered in the interviews, leaving the specificity of when and where out of the collected oral histories. We know that Shirley Clarke assisted greatly in the distribution of the L.A. Rebellion work, be that through working with local television channels to premiere video work or curating screenings of her students' work in New York.<sup>50</sup> Beyond Clarke's high profile support, works by the students of the Rebellion, alongside other Black feminist experimental film and video art, were exhibited internationally through Pearl Bowser's *Independent Black American Cinema* program.

One of the first international iterations of *Black Independent American Cinema* drew a crowd of over 10,000 in Paris, France during its first week of a multi-week run in 1980 (Bowser 1980, 1).<sup>51</sup> Pearl Bowser's traveling program featured a pedagogical practice of (re)introducing Black American Independent cinema to an audience, in addition to critiquing an institution of neglect. As "few writers over the last decade chose to write about the significance of independent Black films or to analyze the socio-political and cultural values they may have held in for the generation of viewers they were made for" (Bowser 1980, 1). *Black Independent American Cinema* was an ongoing series that Bowser began in the early 1970s before it was formalized through her position at TWN; it was updated each time it was held. With the support of a New York Council for the Arts grant, a program covering the Paris showing was produced (Figure 3.8). This program focused heavily on contemporary independent short films, including a large selection by members of the L.A. Rebellion. Bowser framed the retrospective not as a "new" examination of Black film, but rather as a restorative practice centered on memory, with the aim of giving space over to the forgotten. In addition to the curation of films and screenings, each film was followed by a Q+A with Black filmmakers and critics who debated with audiences,

explored the ongoing definition of Black film, and examined “how the influence of Jazz and an African heritage shaped the look and sound of their films” (Bowser 1980, 1). The corresponding pamphlet features essays on the absence of Black filmmakers from the commercial screen; interviews with filmmakers Kathleen Collins, William Greaves, and Ben Caldwell; photos; a filmography of the forty-one screened films; and a partial list of both the historical independent Black production and of Independent Black Production (Figure 3.9).<sup>52</sup> Bowser’s practice of re-animating these histories via her traveling film exhibitions is absolutely entwined with similar memory-focused projects that many Black independent filmmakers are invested in today.<sup>53</sup>

Pearl Bowser was born in 1931 in Harlem, New York. Bowser’s introduction to film production was through filmmaker Richard Leacock (Juhasz 2001, 49). She recalls working in the offices of Drew Associates in the early 1960s, when Leacock asked her to edit a film. Bowser described the “hands on” approach to be instrumental in giving her the confidence to pursue film as an artistic practice.<sup>54</sup> Following her time as a secretary for Drew Associates, Bowser began her role as a curator and leading archivist for TWN. While at TWN, Bowser’s interest in Black film history exploded as she began to think critically about the histories that were being hidden from her view. She used her role as a film curator at TWN to begin to actively seek out Black films, which she often procured in leftover film reels from theaters and distribution centers. Bowser went out of her way to read Black press and devour newspaper arts sections to find out about community screenings, independent films, student films, and the like.<sup>55</sup> Many of the filmmakers whose work I analyze over the course of the following chapters cite Bowser’s curated film screenings in the 1970s and 1980s as their introduction to Black filmmaking. Filmmaker Michelle Parkerson recalls Bowser lugging around her films in Pennsylvania and

setting up the film reels herself in the late 1970s. It was there where she was made aware of the work of Julie Dash and McCullough (Billops and Hatch 1993).

Bowser's attentiveness to Black independent filmmaking, specifically centering women, is an integral contribution to an archive of Black experimental film. Although she was not collecting specifically experimental titles, her interests in non-Hollywood, independent, and non-narrative film meant that her film programs were some of the early programs to feature Black experimentations onscreen, including Black feminist experimental film. Her pamphlets have been invaluable in helping me track down films or build a list of filmmakers not included in archives or books elsewhere, in addition to seeing the reach of an artist's work.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, programs like *The New American Film Series*, founded by film curator Lucinda Furlong at the Whitney Museum of American Art, were able to host screenings including work from the Rebellion beginning in the mid 1980s. *The New American Film Series* was an ongoing series that invited film critics and curators to create a specialty program. Critics and curators like Clyde Taylor used his invitation to center filmmakers from the Rebellion, while curators Valerie Smith and Furlong and Bowser amplified the work of women's video artwork, foregrounding experimentation by women of color. It was Taylor's 1986 program "The L.A. Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema" at the Whitney Museum that was responsible for introducing these filmmakers' work to the New York "arts-scene," bringing them closer to representation and validity in the "highbrow" categories of cultural making. Women Rebellion filmmakers in Taylor's program included Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, and Monona Wali. Following Taylor's program, scholar and curator Valerie Smith hosted "The Black Woman Independent: Representing Race and Gender" at the Whitney Museum in 1987, which included *Suzanne, Suzanne, Gotta Make This Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock, Hair Piece: A Film for*

*Nappyheaded people*, and *Fannie's Film* (Figure 3.10). Smith's program, though, was more focused on narrative and thus downplayed the experimentation in these works, whereas Taylor's series foreground the aesthetics of the included films as altering the language of film production and the symbology of Black images (Taylor 1986). Chenzira and Parkerson's work would go on to be included in Furlong's program "Social Engagement: Women's Video in the '80s" (1987).

The Whitney's program was unique in that museums in the 1970s, 1980s, and even for the first part of the 1990s rarely dedicated space to screenings of films that were not situated as part of an installation. The second floor of the Whitney Museum's Breuer building, then on Madison Avenue, was a fluid space solely dedicated to film and equipped to project Super 8, sixteen millimeter, and thirty-five millimeter films, which was not possible in other museums. This facilitated the development of such museum film series as *The New American Film Series*. In the mid 1990s, museums started to incorporate more contemporary film and video due, in response, to the growing popularity of video art and artists' films (Curtis 2006). Part of the eruption of video into the gallery system, as Cauleen Smith's work reveals, derives from the possibility of expanding and changing video again through its projection. Experimental video, already leaning toward questioning perception and experience, began to be altered again through the rise of installation video art in the 1990s, an effect that can still be seen in the work of select experimental video artist today.<sup>57</sup> These innovative screening practices found their way to film programs with Shari Frilot's directorship of MIX: New York Experimental Gay and Lesbian Film Festival from 1993 to 1997. Under Frilot's leadership, the festival was one of the first to cross the "line" between the theater and the gallery in regard to film and video screening.<sup>58</sup>

To challenge the dominant mode of cinematic discourse, Frilot used MIX to experiment with models of exhibition, to include marginalized artists and film and video makers as part of

the discussion, to work with community in the programming process, and to disrupt the space of the festival.<sup>59</sup> For the seventh iteration of MIX in 1993, Frilot decided to switch venues from the Anthology Film Archives in the historic Lower East Side to The Kitchen located in the then-emerging gallery district in Chelsea, on the lower West side of Manhattan. Frilot stated that “the festival needed to physically break out of that traditional venue. There was a heaviness to the space” (Rastegar 2018, 76). The “heaviness” Frilot describes refers not only to the brick and mortar of Anthology Film Archives, but also the circulation of ideas it hosted at the time, meaning that the client—the people pursuing films there—were heavily repeating and citing ideas that re-iterated the narratives of a largely white and male—with the exception of a few white women—“old avant-garde”.

Frilot’s decision to hold an experimental queer film festival in a facility known for showcasing experimental art takes space seriously, and suggests that the environment in which you are watching a film affects and orients your perception of the work itself. For Frilot, experimental film is difficult to access, and the viewer needs to practice openness, to be aware that they will engage with something that might challenge them ideologically and physically. In 1993, The Kitchen provided a flexible space that would facilitate an open relationship between film and space, where the audience could embrace the unusual without feeling bogged down by the history of the genre. Here, we see the space of the screening take on the same ethos of the video work in that Frilot remixes our engagement with the “theatrical experience” to reorient our physical and affective response to the theater. This remixing mirrors the transformations and reorientation of citations and stereotypes in experimental video work, for it calls attention to the way that space, like the image and video, dictates who enters the theater. If Frilot wanted to attract a POC, queer audience in her programming of MIX, Anthology Film Archive’s film

exhibition history, at that point in 1993, revealed that such an audience was not included and may have been excluded from its theaters in the past. Frilot's examination of space, like Bowser's, was way of foregrounding the parameters by which moving images are shown and of inviting discussion and community engagement around the question and definition of Black cinema (be that independent or queer-focused in its themes). Their practices provide a blueprint by which memory can be an affective bond in filmmaking practice and in theatrical experience.

Outside of live film and video exhibitions, Black experimental directors increasingly turned their attention to television as a mode of distribution. This was partially influenced by the rich work of directors like William Greaves and Madeline Anderson, who produced work for *Black Journal*. Opportunities for local broadcasting of one's work was seen as a useful opportunity for directors in the 1980s and 1990s, rather than solely relying on the festival circuit.<sup>60</sup> However, public broadcast in the United States has no mandate for inclusive practices. In 1991, the same year that Dash released *Praise House* on KCTV in Minneapolis, Barbara McCullough was denied funding for a short feature by KCET, PBS in Los Angeles because her idea was deemed "too obscure" (Jackson 1991).<sup>61</sup>

Unlike the U.S., Great Britain has a national film and television program that supports filmmaker's production. To be sure, this does not mean that it is any "easier" for Black British individuals to receive funding compared to their non-Black colleagues, as racism dictates and effects the "viability" of the reception of their work. However, it does mean that, unlike, filmmakers associated with the L.A. Rebellion, who were solely relying on self-financed productions, Black British individuals had opportunities for national funding, although the amount they might receive varied greatly. In the early 1980s, a concentrated effort was made by The British Film Institute to give marginalized voices a space to represent themselves and to

integrate that representation onscreen for a larger British public. In her interview with me, Attille stated that this distribution of funding was nothing more than lip service to a cause of “diversity” and lacked any meaningful, sincere address to structural inequality (Attille 2018). This shift, in all its successes and limitations, bears strong resemblance to the funding made available to Black Americans at the end of the 1960s for television programming following a series of civil unrests and demonstrations on race relations. Nonetheless, the impact of these marginal funds were expansive not because of the gesture, but because of the nationalization of British television; a little went a long way in the contribution to an archive of publicly visible, experimental feminist works.

As I begin to shift my focus toward analysis in the following chapter, I do want to summarize here how integral film exhibition and screenings are for film, especially for the Black feminist experimental shorts mentioned here, which carry a wealth of critical evaluation for the ways they speak to various experiences of Black womanhood in time. Re-animating this archive of work through screenings—be it through television, galleries, theaters, or street screenings—remains the next task in my ongoing project around the recovery of this body of work.

## **Conclusion**

What I have relayed in the aforementioned narratives, anecdotes, and examples of film distribution programs are the opportunities, or difficulties, that Black feminist experimental film and video artists faced over this twenty-five year period. In this admittedly brief synthesis, I hope to have provided insight into approaching the larger collective commons of Black feminist experimental film and video art, which is lacking from narratives of experimental film history and feminist film and video art as a whole. What this anecdotal gathering demonstrates through

the use of archival material is how easy erasure is achieved when the documentation of events become “archival material”, hidden away until someone engages with it again. In this case, the ephemerality of film programs are both film’s unmaking and the foundation for projects like this one, that seek to gather and name its genealogical lineage and histories.

Documents like the *Independent Black American Cinema* and the TWN pamphlets are key indexes that I have used to reconfigure this absent list of experimental film and video art history and beyond. I have been fortunate to track down hidden narrative gems like Louise Fleming’s *Just Briefly* (1976), a tender, poetic short on the end of a love affair. There are only three copies of this film available worldwide, as the distributor of the film went out of business in the 1990s, leaving only the institutional copies, three sixteen millimeter prints, and one VHS buried in the basement of the African American Cultural Center at the New Jersey Public Library. I was able to view the film after waiting six months for a librarian to find it, as the NJPL discarded their VHS tapes sometime in 2012 in their ongoing bid to advance more digital-friendly media. Sadly, this, like so many of the wonderful films I have watched over the last five years, is not included in my fuller analysis, as the film follows more or less a traditional narrative structure (Figure 3.11).

Likewise, Dawn Suggs’ *Chasing the Moon* (1991) was buried in the archives of TWN before finances were raised to preserve the film digitally and make it available for a wider audience through their distribution platforms. The three-minute sixteen millimeter film follows a Black queer women navigating a brief excursion into the city while reeling from a traumatic memory of domestic assault. The film features little dialogue, but is set to house music that builds in intensity to match the flashbacks that disrupt her routine engagement. The film also subtly engages the added physical threat of homophobic antiblackness that can be distributed



against her visibly queer body. While the film was screened at numerous festivals, it was never acquired by an institution (library or museum) for further preservation or cataloging, and remained as an archival copy in TWN's collection.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the medium of the film was not updated from its original sixteen millimeter print for nearly thirty years. The majority of the films at TWN still exist in their original format and are only updated when an institution acquires a copy. The cost of acquiring an institutional copy—usually two hundred US dollars—can be used to update a print to a digital copy. If the film is never acquired, as is the case for many of the films in this study, a small distribution company like TWN does not possess the means to digitize, update, or transfer films in their collection.<sup>63</sup> A wealth of films owned by TWN unfortunately exist outside of circulation and are only viewable at their archives in New York.<sup>64</sup>

My inclusion of these two brief film anecdotes (*Just Briefly* and *Chasing the Moon*) is to raise, by way of conclusion, how disadvantaged Black women directors are not just in their works' production and distribution but, again, in its perseverance, as we saw in the previous chapter with Madeline Anderson's work. Anecdotes like these are testament to the scale of the body of work that is out of print, and so not committed to general memory.

This chapter marks the conclusion of Part One, which foregrounded the history of Black feminist experimental film and video art from its early beginnings in the contemporary era with Madeline Anderson in the late 1960s, to its further development along with key archival strategies that solidified its critique against time in the work of Camille Billops, and the myriad communities and diasporic structures of feeling foregrounded through the mid 1990s. Over the course of the last three chapters, I have approached the histories of Black feminist experimental film and video conceptually in order to link key theoretical arguments on Black womanhood in relation to the moves and shifts emerging in Black feminist film and video across a thirty year

period. These conceptual shifts, like Hortense Spillers's body/flesh and Lorde's "mothering ourselves", have been instrumental in describing the liminal status of Black womanhood in the world. But moreover, they situate the particular conditions in which Black women reinvent themselves within a matrix of patriarchal anti-Blackness. These reinvented lives produce rebellious inventions in their cultural productions, largely rooted in alterity. Covering the histories of this collective commons allows us to examine how and why these women turned to alterity in their artistic practices.

In Part Two, I turn my attention to a more concentrated development and application of analysis, which I then apply to the films and videos produced during this time period. I examine what alterity allows them to *do* in their aesthetics, and how a mnemonic aberration is forged through their ethic-aesthetic practice. I begin with an expansive engagement with ritual to see how its properties of depersonalization can be aesthetically used in film and video to shift audience's relation with the "screen" to enter a plane of movement where we can redress our kin relations and myths and construct a new memory that is free from *Man*. Ritual's relational shift toward movement provides the opportunity to reorient our cognitive schema and, in so doing, construct an affective/intellectual ethics of care for Black women. Importantly, I work to unpack the commonality of ritual seen in these experimental shorts, the lives of the directors, and their approach to film and video making, as we have seen thus far. I build a theory of the ritual body in the following chapter that, like the cinematic body, understands ritual for its capacity to hold social relations, experiences, and images beyond the immediate occurrence of ritual. I examine how experimental film and video directors use film's ability to manifest an ambiguous body as a container for these ritualistic engagements and actions. From there, I conclude with a culminative analysis of the ritual body as integral aesthetic practice, as a way of

shifting our kinship relations from an ethno construction to a field of relationality grounded by alterity.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the work of the Black Film and Video Network in Canada are not covered here due to the scale of that archive in having chapters of that network in various cities across the country. Additionally, the Black Film and Video Network has numerous feature length films present within their work.

<sup>2</sup> See the following key texts that have contributed to this field that emphasize experimentation in Black feminist work, “Springing Tired Chains: Experimental Film and Video” by Paul Arthur (1999), “Women Directors of the Los Angeles School” by Ntongela Masilela (1998), and “Rebellious Unlearning: UCLA Project One Films (1967-1978) by Allyson Nadia Field, to name a few. In addition to the generous work of interviews conducted by Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Culter bell hooks, Valerie Smith, Alexandra Juhasz and others where the directors can plainly state what their work is to the reader.

<sup>3</sup> See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Figurative Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> This study does not engage with the more popular engagement of the commons with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’ the undercommons. To be frank, I find the undercommons actually works against its ethos and participates in a classarchy by treating the university student as a normative status rather than an extreme exception to the norm.

<sup>5</sup> What the undertaking of labor also speaks to, sadly, is the isolation of these women, for it is difficult to be in fellowship with one another when you are constantly at work. I recall Lorraine O’Grady speaking directly to this tension to a younger crowd of Black feminists by stating, “I don’t know if you can tell how lonely many of us were back then,” despite the images of “collectivity,” they were always working (Leigh 2018).

<sup>6</sup> In her interview with Desha Dauchan and Zienabu irene Davis in 2019, McCullough discussed the difficulty of pursuing her education with kids in terms of keeping her priorities straight being a single mother. At one point she recalled having her car repossessed and lights off and being forced into a position to still purchase and process film out of pocket to complete her projects (McCullough and Davis 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Despite McCullough’s kinship and collaboration with many leading artists of the Los Angeles area, her work or name is largely absent from art history books on that area. She receives a passing mention in Kellie Jones’s *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017) in relation to her experimental feature length documentary *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1980) which interviews key Black artists of the era. The documentary is glossed over as just a series of interviews McCullough conducted with artists rather than being treated as an art object on ritual in its own right.

<sup>8</sup> This particular juxtaposition between Haile Gerima and Barbara McCullough’s experiences on campus is quite naked for what it lays bare in terms of lack of solidarity amongst some members of the Rebellion.

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Germia: “When I came to UCLA, I had decided to fighter everybody, even when I’m wrong. I don’t have to the right because I’m threatened; my whole identity’s threatened, I’m devaluated, I was not going to accept.”

McCullough: “Things at UCLA at that time were really very, very political you know? I mean, you had Jamaa on one hand, back in the classroom yelling at the instructor, you got Haile in the hallways being the professor that he actually became and, basically, they were saying some stuff that was probably really true and things that needed to be said, but it was a highly politically charged environment, you know?”

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks similarly raises this concern in her personal memoirs and in “Revolutionary ‘Renegades’: Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Indians” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, [1992] 2015). As Black lives still exist outside of the status of the human, I raise ire that one cannot be human and yet possess and inherit the history of settlerism within their personhood; that one can carry the accumulative study of *Man* while being constructed as *Man’s Other*. The tension here are the absolute values and claims around land, culture, geography, and personhood constructed by Settler discourse through brute and violent colonialization. As stated in my introduction, I do not define Blackness nor Black life in absolute claims but rather identify them for their activity of cultural production, especially in the American South, the Caribbean, and Brazil where much of our understanding of Blackness is produced by Native histories and lives, specifically that of the Carib/Arawaks. What Wynter’s work enables us to consider is how—through these absolute values brought on by colonization—Blackness becomes a totalizing negation of one’s personhood, erasing any conception by which we understand indigeneity in the New World (Wynter 1989, 641).

To be clear, this argument does not mirror the gross narratives of whiteness appropriating and claiming indigeneity through familial kin relations or geographic proximity. The difference between arguments lies in the fact that Black life as always existed as an alienated ‘object’ and thus the majority of kin relations between indigenous lives and Black folk in the New World were borne through shared resistance. Whereas with whiteness those histories of kin relations, not unlike with Black life, were born through brute violence and rape.

I am interested in those narratives, past and present, of Black folk who internalize anti-Blackness to take on the memory of *Man* and enact settlerism through capitalist production. The language however must attend to the specificity in which those narratives appear rather than grossly claim an entire racialized poor population as descendants of *Man* when our very status exists to produce kin relations through the participation of anti-Blackness. Furthermore, I am suspicious of discourse that undermines the inventions of Black activity in the New World that robs us of the indigeneity specific to this geographic collision of terror. This discourse is *intra* and *inter*-community constructed and prioritizes the absolute value of Black indigeneity only to Native Africans and completely dismisses and evens denies cultural autonomy and origin of Black life forged through the Americas largely in dialogue with Native life present in those spaces (McKittrick 2016, 82).

<sup>10</sup> Don Cherry reportedly ate brown rice for a year in solidarity with it being a ‘world’ food, but the title could also be a reference to heroin.

<sup>11</sup> Several audio apps struggle with what he is saying but point to this as a possibility.

<sup>12</sup> It is uncertain if the lyrics serve a crucial role to the ritual beyond their ambiguity.

<sup>13</sup> The song carries nice symmetry to the visuals in the film as the frequent bounces of notes and styles resemble the bounces between texture and embodiment. The cymbal is contrasted with the trumpet, is contrasted with the rust of the building and urination that purifies the land. McCullough’s film exercise seeks to reconcile difference and time through cultural production.

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<sup>14</sup> While McCullough is not included in his study, Gregory Zinman's *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and Other Arts* (2020), provides a useful analysis on artists' approach to camera-less film and hand drawn animation on top of pre-existing film stock. Contemporary artist, Ja'Tovia Gary is featured, briefly, in his overall study.

<sup>15</sup> This is also the version available for sixteen millimeter rental screening and exhibition.

<sup>16</sup> We see this in videos like *Vertical Roll* [Dir. Joan Jonas, 1972], *Art Herstory* [Hermine Freed, 1974], *Semiotics of the Kitchen* [Dir. Martha Rosler, 1975], and *Learn Where Meat Comes From* [Dir. Suzanne Lacy, 1976].

<sup>17</sup> B. Ruby Rich has a marvelous breakdown of the contradictory rhetoric used by women's video art festivals and criticism of the times that assumed activism behind every exhibition of "women's video art." See *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (1998, 31-34).

<sup>18</sup> Space does not permit me here to exercise a fuller critique against the annexation of Black women's film and video work from the larger (white) feminist circles and histories as partially covered in the previous two chapters but I want to briefly state here some key problems with this larger history and what Black feminist experimentation in film and video opens our feminist analysis to, the move away from mobilizing around a shared assumption of womanhood. Sylvia Wynter writes in damning lecture, "Beyond Liberal and Marxist Leninist Feminism: Towards an Autonomous Frame of Reference" (1982) that the representation of "household" as a form of labor that under the Marxist framework equates labor as 'true' value is not productive for feminism with the purpose of abolishing oppression. This is to say that housework is not equitable to the 'factory' labor but rather is based on a precondition of some bodies existing outside of form representation of the laborer rendering to them to insurmountable exploitation that cannot be understood through the monoconceptual argument of labor and value on equitable measures of production into a capitalist system. Wynter writes,

For what is at issue here is the entire logic of classarchy's discourse of justification; and of the related mode of calculation and laws of distribution which enable the replication and reproduction of the global domination of the middle classes ... For except an order of value is kept between 'real' production, and the rest of the related process—as-a-whole in whose context the activity of 'production' takes places, an insoluble problem would arise. By which mode of calculation is the global social product, and the accumulated value produced by the coordination of the multiple contributing activities of all peoples to be rationally redistributed? (Wynter 1982, 19-20)

Wynter's argument here while specific to the demands being made of Marxist-Leninist Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s is important to circle back to against our revisiting of that era in film and video work as well as contemporary artists begin to cite that body as a perceived equitable demand of labor acknowledgment. I argue through Wynter that feminist cultural production needs to move beyond representations of 'real' labor that can be accounted for through 'value' for that already participates in a classarchy in which many lives outside of the form representation of the laborer reside but additionally, it already suggests that the labor of the "First World" or middle working class is the 'real' labor and all other forms necessitate this production in order for the laborer to gain its ground. This is why my argument as relayed in these gatherings of histories in this chapters foregrounds how many of these artists forgo the traditional private/social spilt of the household and already began to sketch a larger critique against—what Sylvia Wynter writes—as the code itself rather than agents of the code (Wynter 1982, 16).

<sup>19</sup> Kara Keeling asserts in "School of Life: Kara Keeling on the L.A. Rebellion," "There is disagreement among the LA Rebellion filmmakers themselves and among the scholars engaged with their work, about the aims, strategies, purview, and even the name of the movement, and there are those who question whether this diverse group actually constitutes a movement per se." *Artforum International* 50, no. 2 (October 2011): 294.

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<sup>20</sup> Springer's interview with the Rebellion women, again, reveals more to the hostility of predominately white classroom dynamics. She states,

Several women gave examples of criticisms about their films which indicated that the instructors disliked the subject matter because it was from a black point of view. One woman's film, which has since received acclaim outside of the university, was called "unbelievable" when in fact it portrayed an event familiar to many black people. The white instructor and all-white class would not acknowledge the limited nature of their experiences and preconceived notions or see that there were other ways of perceiving the world than their own. Because her film received a low grade, the filmmaker had to go before a faculty committee in order to continue in the program. (Springer 1984)

<sup>21</sup> I use Springer's account here as it speaks to then skepticism of what later is written as a fact by members in their oral histories and interviews.

In fact, some of the women believe that the faculty felt threatened by black male students in the late 60s and early 70s and therefore began to accept more black women than men into the graduate program in the mid-70s. Many women mentioned a shift from the mid-70s to the present from predominantly men to predominantly women black students. (Springer 1984)

However, Larry Clark's anecdote as stated to Alyson Fields is also critical to describe the climate,

The machismo evident in some of these early films extended to the classroom, where professors reportedly felt intimidated by the perceived aggression of the male students of color. Larry Clark recalls one instance of a run-in with the faculty: "They would show *Birth of a Nation* [Dir. D.W. Griffith, 1915], and it was always prefaced, 'well, we're not going to talk about the sociological parts, we will talk about the film itself as cinema'. Now how can you not with *Birth of a Nation*? And so one year this professor was going to show *Birth of a Nation* and Haile Gerima and Francisco Martinez walk to the front of the room and one grabbed one arm and the other grabbed the other arm, they lifted him up and carried him out of Melnitz Hall and went back and taught the class." Incidents like this arguably prompted the faculty to admit more women in subsequent admissions cycles in an attempt to neutralized the aggression of the male students of color. (Fields 2016, 90)

<sup>22</sup> As noted by film scholar and L.A. Rebellion scholar and archivist Allyson Fields (2016) in her essay "Rebellious Unlearnings: UCLA Project One Films (1967-78).

<sup>23</sup> Field also notes that "Each student wrote, produced, directed, and edited his or her own Project One film, which was then screened and critiqued by faculty and fellow students" (2016, 86).

<sup>24</sup> See Ayanna Dozier, "Black Women and the Edit of Shame: Alile Sharon Larkin's *The Kitchen*" in *The cléo Reader* edited by Kiva Reardon (Toronto: cléo; Colour Code, 2020). The L.A. Rebellion's aesthetics are impossible to definitively summarize, however they point to an ideological investment in transforming the psyche of film itself to introduce a new symbology onscreen around the representation of Black life. Many of the films in the archive demonstrate an effort to reconcile with the magical nature of cinema as a medium that produces "meaning" in the world. Films like *As Above, So Below* [Dir. Larry Clarke, 1973], *Four Women* [Dir. Julie Dash, 1975], *I&I: An African Allegory* [Dir. Ben Caldwell, 1979], *Cycles* [Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989], amongst others reveal the apparatus of the camera lens, film stock, as a way to produce, shape, and distort vision in the world. As Caldwell states,

What was interesting to me were the subliminal aspects of cinema; I stated getting interested in the whole idea of how film was really a ritual and a spell. I've noticed that a lot of subliminal images were threaded throughout film in the history of filmmaking and all those things were to

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the demise of my culture. So I felt we had to work against that kind of symbology and we had to change the ritual. (Field, Horak, Stewart 2016 1)

With this in mind, many of the experimental driven work largely drew inspiration from Black cultural production that submitted the mysticism of the camera to the labor of ritual. The fragmentation of Black American cultural practices and history meant that the camera served as way to recuperate lost or hidden narratives through ritualistic means. The camera's recuperation via the labor of ritual was understood in these experimental shorts as a means of opening that fissure to repair what was culturally lost in the past and reinvent it in the present. Knowing this, we can see why a large portion of the Rebellion catalogue (experimental or not) is devoted to re-animating the legacy of Black cultural production, via dance, ritual, spirituality, and key among that list, music. Of the interest in Black musical production and history, jazz was consistently singled out for not only its historical narratives, but for its aesthetic framing of discontinuity between rhythm. This is evident in the following films; *Passing Through* [Dir. Larry Clarke, 1977], *Azz Izz Jazz* [Dir. Jacqueline Frazier, 1978], *The World Saxophone Quartet* [Dir. Barbara McCullough, 1980], and *Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant* [Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989] to name a few.

<sup>25</sup> Many of the early members of the Rebellion drew inspiration from Third Cinema and the New American Avant Garde, especially Maya Deren and Shirley Clarke who was a professor at UCLA. Many of the second wave Rebellion members drew inspiration from the aforementioned movements as well as the previous generation of members. This is true of Davis who saw films by Ballenger, Dash, and Burnett in her hometown of Philadelphia's independent theater in the late 1970s (Davis 2019). Against the backdrop of Hollywood, though, the paucity of Black images carried a particular sting. As the LA Rebellion anthology's own title, *L.A. Rebellion Archive is Creating a New Black Cinema*, makes clear, the "new" designates how UCLA students forged an image of Black life that had never been seen onscreen. They cut their way through the Hollywood symbolic negation of their image to manifest an image beyond colonial knowledge. However, as my previous chapters reveal, the experimentation coming from the L.A. Rebellion was not the first insistence of Black experimental cinema.

<sup>26</sup> Springer described Ngu's *Little Ones* as depicting, an African woman's grief after experiencing a stillbirth. The poem on the soundtrack addresses the dead infant, telling how it has hurt its parents by rejecting life; yet they understand its reluctance to enter a world where children are the victims of brutality, starvation, racism, and war. *LITTLE ONES* (Super 8 color, ten minutes) communicates lyrically through the poem, written by the filmmaker's husband, and through expressive images. Personal images, such as the woman's mourning her dead child at its grave, are juxtaposed with still photos of starving, injured, arid dying children from around the world; personal and political issues become entwined. Ngu told me that she envisions the film as important to women who have experienced stillbirths by helping them work through their feelings. She intends to distribute it in Cameroon. Currently, Ngu is working on a videotape about a Cameroonian naming ceremony. (Springer 1984)

<sup>27</sup> Horak alerted me to her omission in histories of the Rebellion during a post-conference discussion she and I had, which I examine in a forthcoming essay on her experimental documentary, *The Snake in My Bed* (1995). Others such as Ruby Bell-Gam and Karen Guyot have also been overlooked.

<sup>28</sup> *Wind Spirit* along with other shorts make up McCullough's ten-minute compilation film and video project, *Fragments* (1980).

<sup>29</sup> Many films of the collection are not digitized. The proposed documentary of the Rebellion by Davis, *Spirits of the Rebellion*, remains unfinished and the roadside screening series was cancelled part way through its run. Fields and Najuma-Stewart have since left UCLA and are now professors at University of

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Chicago, rendering the Rebellion archive, like most archives in a status of continual stasis (mending for completion by other scholars).

<sup>30</sup> This DVD of selection of shorts is only available for institutional acquisition and when acquired by an Institutional Library, the DVD is limited to in library use only.

*Forbidden Joy* (1975) is a ten-minute film by Imelda Sheen that troubles narrative experimental sequencing. The film sees an afroed bohemian woman conduct a cemetery panic with her presumed daughter. Throughout the film two “reapers” run amok in the graveyard and neighboring church to funk, South African, rock, classical, and R&B music. The mood shifts each time a song emerges, ranging from delight, to melancholy, and apprehension. So much of the film perplexes the engagement of audience reception and comprehension, including mine. Imelda Sheen works primarily with music as an editing device but she also deploys film stock and camera angles as a way to shift the sequencing of events. There are times when the camera is turned on its side to propel a shift in a character’s mood or action. The film occasionally switches between B&W eight millimeter film stock and color to serve as exposition of the protagonist’s past. All of these editing decisions however, are determined by the film’s musicality

<sup>31</sup> Sheen’s filmography suggests a fascinating experimental and potentially morbid practice that utterly delights me as a scholar. They include *Been Here Before* (1976), *Faux Pas* (1976), *Vampira Maraposa* (1978), and *Zivia* (1980). *Been Here Before*, like *Forbidden Joy* apparently also foregrounds music as a counter-poetic style to collapse cultural, temporal, and geographic distance. In Springer’s interview with the women students of the UCLA Film and Television Program in 1984, Sheen remarks that she has a great interest in using music for the way in can convey history, culture, space, and time in film. *Been Here Before* is described as using music as a narrative device to tell a story across multiple generations of Black bodies across space and time.

[The film is] about different types of white oppression of black people that have prevented black men from communicating with black women over the ages. It moves from 18th century Ghana where black people are kept captive in chains, to a plantation where black men and women are separated by law, to a jazz club in the 1950s where black people are destroyed by drugs, prostitution, and murder, to a semi-documentary in L.A.’s Jefferson High School where the system denies black students access to higher education. (Springer 1984)

The plot and style of *Been Here Before* are useful to my analysis on *Forbidden Joy* because it allows me to reconstruct if not outright fabulate Sheen’s creative practice with music, archives, and culture as experience in the latter film with little to no scholarly material available on the director.

<sup>32</sup> Although several films made by Imelda Sheen are listed as available for research viewing/distribution by the UCLA Film and Television Archive in the LA Rebellion book, her work and name are not searchable in the online archival database. This does not necessarily mean that is not available but that it may not have been digitized for screening. However though, Sheen’s work also does not appear in the excel spreadsheet that contains the “full” record of film available in the archive that the center makes available for researchers. The times in which I have requested her work for viewing, I was told that it was unavailable for viewing or that the specific title was not found.

<sup>33</sup> It appears that the grant Davis received was implemented sometime in the mid to late 1970s. The first “round” of applicants, which was predominately men, received the bulk of the inaugural grant for the program whereas the other cycles, which were predominantly women, received less funding and had to complete a second degree in order to participate.

<sup>34</sup> See Ayanna Dozier, “Affect and the Fluidity of the Black Gendered in *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* and *Cycles*,” *Liquid Blackness* 2, no. 5 (2015).



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<sup>35</sup> For Dauchan the connection is fairly abstract as she was somewhat unaware of the Rebellion work during her time there and only encountered the collection's work following the completion of her program in 2003 (McCullough and Davis 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Davis attended UCLA because of the work produced by McCullough, Gerima, Dash, and Burnett Cauleen Smith also attended UCLA because of the overall archive of Rebellion work produced from 1970s-1980s.

<sup>37</sup> See Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Studies in Cultural Studies* edited by Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, 441-449 (New York; Oxford: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> The Lumiere brothers Cinématographe arrives in Haiti four years after its 1895 Paris debut. See Michaëlle Lafontant-Médard's "Cinema in Haiti: 1899 to 1982" (1992) in *Ex-ILES: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* edited by Mbye B. Cham, 59-97.

<sup>39</sup> Because the content of this era received British funding all of the work is stored and available for viewing at the BFI archives. I purposefully started my research in the U.K because the archive was searchable (by race, gender, year, collective), organized and available to the public (not just researchers from a university which is true for Emory). For the Sankofa body of work, there is very little accompanying ephemera, just the work.

<sup>40</sup> Prices pulled from the 1971 U-matic advert.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor states,

The first time I spoke in public about my work was during the Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Festival in 1990. Cheryl Dunye was the only other woman of color on the panel. When I asked a question regarding funding, I naively stated that funding was not a problem for me considering the fact that my work at the time was of medium to low production quality. I had minimal access to a low-end production facility, and my piece was only five minutes long. I was alluding to the fact that it has been 'easy' for me. I was swept up into the politically correct chic of the queer festival. I have been 'discovered', as it were, as a new woman of color video maker. Every queer festival was calling me about my little five-minute piece. I thought it had been pretty simple to get a lot of exposure as a new maker. Being on a panel with Cheryl really opened my eyes to the hypocrisies existent within the queer festival circuit. Naturally we engaged in dialogue. (Juhasz and Welbon 2018, 29-30)

<sup>42</sup> In Yvonne Welbon's *The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash*, Dash states the following position on Black films commodifying hypermasculinity at the expense of Black womanhood and solidarity with their Black sisters struggling to have their work financed.

There are a lot of contemporary things that are happening beyond the 'homeboy' thing. Because ten years from now the 'homeboy' thing is goin' to be a joke. It's gonna be hard to watch. The music is gonna be dated, the language is gonna be dated ... When you role playing you're pretending to be that person, those people up there on the screen. And you do that for a good hour and a half, two hours and the way I see it, most white males do not want to be a Black woman for two hours. That's two hours too long, maybe a little skit on *In Living Color* or something, but that's it. Two hours is too much. But, they'll spend that two hours being a homie. It's a male fantasy and they can get up and walk out of the theater and be safe. They don't have to worry about being shot and all this. But they can be a homie for two hours and it's fun.

<sup>43</sup> I cannot help but draw parallels between Tate's statement and Julie Dash's remarks on the 'homeboy' aesthetics in *The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash*.

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<sup>44</sup> Parkerson was born in Washington, D.C., and received her Bachelors in Communications, which she linked as a key to getting her interested in career in film for she worked in television programs shortly after graduating from Temple University.

<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in her interview she lists early experimental film work as shaping her artistic eye, artists like Maya Deren, Don Chase, and Shirley Clarke had an impact on her work. Her first introduction to the work of Black experimental film came from Pearl Bowser who screened one of her programs at Temple University while she was a student in the early 1970s.

<sup>46</sup> We especially see this in the experimental filmography of Kym Ragusa, specifically *Demarcations* (1992), *Passing* (1995), *Fuori/Outside* (1997).

<sup>47</sup> A clear example of this emerges in Ayoka Chenzira's work coming out of the late 1980s. Chenzira's filmography intersects with many filmmakers included here as she was one of the few Black feminist directors to label herself and her work as strictly experimental. Chenzira's first film, *Syvilla: They Dance to Her Drum* (1979) was produced while she was student at New York University and taking dance classes with Syvilla Fort, who trained with Katherine Dunham. Chenzira states that her instinct to make a film on her dying instructor came from the realization that no one else seemed to care about the dance studio and life of this woman but her.<sup>47</sup> She raises a critical question on what lives do filmmakers value in their work and whether or not their attention is shifted towards lives that fall through the gaps, namely older Black women. *Syvilla* follows a documentary aesthetic but, like *Suzanne*, *Suzanne*, screens the archive of Fort as a way of mixing the film with not only various documents but various feelings. Chenzira's main use of experimentation emerges in her animated shorts later in the 1980s.

<sup>48</sup> In her interview with Elizabeth Jackson, McCullough had this to say,

Some of the work I have done has been experimental. I do not intend this to be stuff for a broad audience. My viewers have to have an affinity for offbeat, unusual images and characters. Mine are projects that have a different type of orientation, My work is shown basically through the art community, video exhibits, things that are confined to a museum or gallery setting, or an art theatre type of presentation, rather than to a broad-based community-exposure type situation. (Jackson 1991)

<sup>49</sup> Halie Gerima's account of his screening is particularly amusing for the setup in that apparently, everyone around campus attended to mock his work as recompense for his behavior in the classroom, only to praise his film with a thunderous applause. Ben Caldwell's recount is useful to understand the tension of screening locally and outside of the city.

We didn't get shown that much here in Los Angeles. It was mostly around the country, and here in Los Angeles it was mostly in the university, and then *I&I* also was shown as a part of the Brockman Gallery's festivals, which was the Pan-African film festival of that time period. So, I showed *I&I* during that era there, and I got pretty much positive reaction from all the communities here, and we showed our films as a series, we showed a group of films. Where I think our films didn't do well is like in places where I'm from, like New Mexico types of places, it doesn't do too well. Mainly because they're expecting to see Hollywood films.

<sup>50</sup> See *Shirley Clarke selects experimental TV from UCLA 1980*. (1980), a program of short video films (U-matic tapes) possibly screened at Global Village in New York City.

<sup>51</sup> As listed in the program the retrospective first premiered in Paris, France at the Forum Les Halles (October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1980) under the sponsorship of FNAC and Nouvelles Litteraires with an additional

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contribution from the Ford Foundation that enabled six filmmakers to participate in formal Q+As following their screenings.

<sup>52</sup> Bowser had another film retrospection on *Black Women's Independent Cinema* but the program for that retrospection was conspicuously missing when I went to view it at the New York Public Library For Performing Arts at the Lincoln Center.

<sup>53</sup> The work of Camille Billops, Madeline Anderson is highlighted in addition to Hortense Beveridge (of which I was made aware of her role as a director through this pamphlet as my only awareness of her was through the context of editing). This traveling program in many ways fills in the gaps of this forgotten history while re-screening the work.

<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, the work of Bowser does not fit any of the working definitions that I use for experimental cinema as such, her film works are not included in my dissertation. Her work has been written about in the context of documentary and narrative cinema.

<sup>55</sup> As Bowser gathered film for TWN's archive, she also began to collect films for her personal collection, films that could not be institutionally procured at the time such as taping the short films that appeared on Black televisual programming, like *Black Journal* for instance. Bowser's film and video programs focused on the Black women, Black Independent Cinema and Black Golden Age cinema. Her film programs served as an educational tool for many viewers as it was often the first time they encountered the Black film history. Bowser is also credited with re-animating the career of Oscar Micheaux whose history was all but forgotten to Black communities after the late 1940s (Bowser 1999). As is the case with the L.A. Rebellion, the majority of the films that Bowser collected post 1968 were self-financed, independent films. These films offered for Bowser a greater opportunity for "different" engagement with Black life that did not fall into the stereotypes derived and produced for Black bodies that many were accustomed to seeing. As Jacqueline Stewart notes on the L.A. Rebellion films (specifically Charles Bennett's *Killer of Sheep* and the work of Julie Dash), "it was like poor Black people's home movies and the music conveyed something real in that area," not seen to an audience in the capacity of a moving image.

<sup>56</sup> Her body of work led me to a wealth of films, many of which are not included in this study out of constraints and criteria, including the narrative short on a doomed love affair by Louise Fleming film, *Just Briefly* (1976).

<sup>57</sup> The 1993 Whitney Biennial is notable for its inclusion of multiple experimental film and video artworks not as separate screenings but as installations as evident with the screening of Camille Billops's *Finding Christa*.

<sup>58</sup> Shari Frilot is a long-term curator and director of Black queer experimental and independent film who emerged out of the New Queer Cinema Movement in the 1990s and passed through the TWN production workshop. She currently is a senior film programmer at the Sundance Film Festival and chief curator and founder of New Frontier at Sundance, a physical exhibition space and curated group of films that explores innovative modes of cinematic storytelling at the intersection of art and technology. Frilot was the director of programming of the MIX: New York Experimental Gay and Lesbian Film Festival from 1993-1997 (Rastegar 2018, 71). Shari Frilot re-named the festival from the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (NYLGEFF for short) to Mix: The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival in addition co-founding MIX: Brasil and MIX: Mexico (Rastegar 2018, 67).

<sup>59</sup> Frilot described her curatorial process for MIX as one that existed concomitantly with selection of the exhibition/theater space. There was a strong investment by Frilot to re-organize the festival into a social

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space that would be the antithesis to the whiteness of New Queer Cinema, which she viewed as the new gay dollar in its exclusion of queers of color and marketing to white non-queer environment.

<sup>60</sup> Public television was seen as the vanguard by many avant-garde filmmakers for its sense of immediacy. The new image of change would be freely broadcast to a larger audience directly in their homes, as oppose to a select few encountering the work via screenings/exhibitions. This attitude (along with structural changes against inequality) is precisely what made television the vanguard for programs emphasizing cultural change as found with the first three seasons of *Black Journal* (1968-1970), *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* (1968-1971), *Soul!*, and *Say Brother* (Heitner 2014). By 1991 though, this promise or site for television as an immediate link to the people with regards to Black cultural production was rapidly disintegrating and the tides in viewer consumption were changing toward subscription service. This change in television's production was facilitated by capitalist market that shapes creative practices according to the logic of commodification and capital accumulation (Kellner 2009, 101).

<sup>61</sup> The late 1980s brought a sharp end to the belief of television as the new frontier for Black artistic production as a more capital/conservative image emerged onscreen in the States. The structural changes that propelled an increase of diversity to primetime television in late 1960s was nearing its end and what follows is a decline of Black televisual visibility (outside of late 1990s teen/young adult work). Herman Gray writes that during this moment we see the television representations of Blackness that worked largely to legitimate and secure the terms of a dominant cultural and social order explode and reveal the deeply rooted terms of the racial, gender, and class hierarchy that structures televisual visibility (Gray [1995], 10). The shifts in television production and distribution in the United States were similarly occurring in Great Britain as well, where the 1980s saw television emerge as the leading platform to engage, manipulate, and emancipate the image of Black representation before seeing that opportunity similarly dissipate by the mid 1990s.

<sup>62</sup> According the pamphlet, the video was screened at the European Media Art Festival, Cinematheque, and the New York Lesbian & Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival (TWN 1996, 22).

<sup>63</sup> Melvonna Ballenger's *Rain (Nyasha)* was nearly lost due to poor film storage. Horak recalls that the badly damaged sixteen millimeter print needed to be baked (a process where the film is placed in an oven in order for a new film base to be applied through lamination) which is a gamble as there is a 50% chance that the process will fail and the film will be irrevocably damaged (although it's often a gamble archivists take as running severely damaged film stock through any form of light/projector will likely burn it completely). Unfortunately, Ballenger passed away in 2003 and her home was seized by the county, meaning that her films were displaced and dumped for removal. The only copies available remain the restored *Rain* and the unfinished print for *Nappy-headed Lady* (1985).

<sup>64</sup> A direct impact to help digitalize a distributor's collection is to have someone pay for the transfer services. Again, the individuals encountering these archives are usually researchers and thus lack the funds to pay to digitize not even a collection, but a single film which can vary from three hundred and fifty dollars to one thousand dollars. *Chasing the Moon* was recently digitized because of Arthur Jafa. The artist filmmaker has recently received a wealth of acclaim, support, and admiration of his work over the last five years and is now in a position to move some of his artistic interests towards curation. Jafa desired to include *Chasing the Moon* to be part of his latest film/art project commissioned by the Pacific Film Archive. Due to PFA financing Jafa's work they financed the digitization of *Chasing the Moon* in 2018 and now the film is available for screening and circulation purposes outside of TWN alone.

## **Part Two: Aesthetics and Analysis**

## Chapter Four

### Conjuring Caliban's Woman: Julie Dash's *Four Women* (1975), *Praise House* (1991) and the Ritual Body

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I construct and mobilize my conception of the ritual body, a theoretical term that gives a representational body to the reflexive activity available in screen-rituals. Screen-rituals uniquely cast the conjurers (be that the director or the representation of one in the film) as recorders of time, in which ritual restores the animacy and heterogeneity of time. Black feminist experimental film foregrounds the reflexive activity of ritual, which its ritual's affection of self by self. Ritual's affection of self by self describes how ritual alters the ritualist and their independent actions as well as the overall ritual's purpose. The key element here is that ritual as a reflexive activity is constantly referring back to itself through its independent smaller acts; it is the parts that relate to the whole while retaining their independence as well. Ritual shifts our attention from what something 'means' to what something *is*, *does* and *is doing*. It is a double for images and lives of the temporal past. Ritual is an expansive and heterogeneous practice in which I make no attempt, nor interest, to collapse its heterogeneity into one practice alone. In the previous chapter, I analyzed ritual for its communicative power in contacting an ancestral past in *Water Ritual #: An Urban Rite of Purification*. Here, I examine ritual's mode of representation, emphasizing embodiment and ritual process as a form through two films by Julie Dash, *Four Women* (1975) and *Praise House* (1991).

I use *Four Women* to draw out ritual's capacity to rewrite mythology through the "representation of another identity, with action deriving either from the actual performance or the

mask identity or from a play between them” (Sitney 2000, 33). I pull this definition from Maya Deren’s notes on rituals of depersonalization where a ritualist minimizes their identity in order to invites anotherness of the temporal past and the spiritual world within their bodies (Thain 2017, 4-5). I extend Alanna Thain’s definition of anotherness here as an experience “of the heterogeneity of the self in time that attends to its creative and compositional qualities” (Thain 2017, 9). Rituals of depersonalization work to corporeally actualize images, lives, deities, and the dead in time and *in so doing* commit to unpredictable result but crucially expand our awareness of a body not as a container but as an assemblage of forces that can animate time. I use my analysis on *Four Women* to construct ritual as a formal device using Hortense Spiller’s ritual diagram. Spillers’s ritual diagram maps out the architectonics of ritual in experimental literary works, I employ it here as a methodological approach to examine experimental film and video. Following my analysis of ritual’s form, I construct the ritual body as a term that allows us to foreground the reflexive activity in ritual available in a film like *Praise House*. Ritual in this chapter is not understood through the techniques of a trance film as seen in the previous chapter, rather is examined for its aesthetic *reflexive attributes of being a series of independent acts with associative meanings as well as a complete engagement that retains a larger meaning of cultural practice and tradition*. It is in this way that ritual commits its own affection of self by self.

In my analysis on *Praise House*, I argue that ritual’s reflexive activity places us in a position where we, the viewers, like the characters, constantly have to reconstitute our orientation to their personhood. The effect is to mobilize another way of relating to one another beyond representation and is an agent-centered purpose. My use of agent-centered follows Spillers’s description where the individual in a ritual have the potential to enter a zone of ontology where they can see the interlocking sequence of changes from history, mythology, and

their respective meanings in time (Spillers 1985, 154). For the characters in the film, this means shifting their kinship from familial ones to other bonds of care driven by possession and performance of otherness. For the audience, this shift models an ethics of care for all the ways in which we have to reestablish a response to their lives as they slip in and out of otherness and all the aberrations that otherness brings through those rituals. In *Four Women* we witness one woman's dispossession of her *self* to embody four different women from the temporal past. In *Praise House*, we witness a more intense affection of self by self where our protagonist Hannah, literally, draws out images from time through possessive, chaotic, embodied fits. These examples position us to care and make kin differently and the ritual body is the representational body that allows us to see that reflexivity in the film as distinct from the film's overall narrative. It is in this way that ritual, like the specter and fabulation before it constitutes a mnemonic aberration.

This space of movement where ritual begets otherness is not abstract but is the pursuit of agency and is what Sylvia Wynter describes as the conjuring of Caliban's woman, being, feeling, and knowing in the world beyond coloniality (Wynter 1990, 361). Caliban's woman is the representational figure for the ontological negations of Black/Native womanhood in our normative consciousness. My use of Caliban's woman here defines the ambition of creating social realities beyond coloniality. While I avoid the hermetic of what, Kara Keeling, describes as "Deleuzeobabble", I do use his work on the crystal-image, specifically pure recollection as a backdrop to the foundation in which ritual is forged (Keeling 2007, 5). I understand pure recollection to be the totality of the temporal past outside of consciousness in which images, and I would add lives, are alive and available to be activated by an "actual image." The actual image is the activation of time in the present and is perceived. The virtual image is subjective and in the



temporal past that is recollected for an audience. The crystal-image is the permanent bond of the virtual image and the actual image. Although I do not mount a deep engagement with pure recollection in this chapter, it is useful to introduce this terminology here for it exists as a foundation as to how I work through ritual. There are many definitions of ritual and many purposes to its work but here, as practiced within conjure culture, I define ritual to be the construction of images, mythologies, and lives of the temporal past into a present encounter that is perceived by others. Through this perception we quickly realize that our normative sensory-motor schema is ill-suited to comprehend or even participate with the ritual before us and thus shifts our relational modes of sense-making to the form itself, its movement rather than its representation. This relational shift to movement places us in a position, not unlike the ritualist (although they are bearing the brunt of time's intensity) to re-assemble ourselves and how we perceive the world. It is in this process where we can name our mythological origins of how we came to be, we can name our kin relations, and, critically, we can alter them. Black cultural production practices rooted in alterity like conjure culture have long weaponized ritual as a leading terrain to construct the reinvention of their life within a system of anti-Blackness. Ritual allows us to witness the embodiment of otherness from time as an activity of cultural production that creates rebellious invention of and for Black humanity in the process. We are participating in the re-invention of a past generation in the flesh made possible through movement. It is not surprising then that ritual is heavily foregrounded in the work of Black feminist experimental film and video.

Let me clarify and expand my use of conjure from its application in my chapter "Kinship with the Dead." Conjure culture defines a manifestation of the immaterial into the world of the visible through ceremonial rituals, ancestor reverence, herbal healing, and star reading. This

interpretation is pulled from several social definitions produced by Black feminist theory, examined below. In her introduction, “Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the ‘Ancient Power’ of Black Women,” Black literary studies scholar Marjorie Pryse describes conjure culture as the process through which something is made possible. In the literary tales of *The Conjure Woman* by Charles W. Chesnutt in the nineteenth century, the conjure women in those short tales made Chesnutt’s fiction possible as well making white men do what they did not want to do: read and learn about the lives and folklore of Black folk (Pryse 1985, 15). Pryse links the practice of Black women’s literary tradition with conjure in that the work of authors like Zora Neale Hurston, which “gave her the authority to tell stories because in the act of writing down the old ‘lies,’ Hurston created a bridge between the ‘primitive’ authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts” (Pryse 1985, 11). The labor of writing down the folklore of Black culture created blueprints to trace and study memory, spirituality, and space for considering such “riddles of the universe” as to “why they are poor, why they are black, and where they came from,” information that otherwise would only be made knowable through oral traditions (Pryse 1985, 11). Ritual allows the conjurer (also referred to as a ritualist when performing ritual) access to imagery, narratives, lives, and memories beyond the world of the visible. For this study, I situate conjure culture in relation to Black Southern and Caribbean folkloric spirituality, which has its roots in African and Caribbean Spirituality, specifically Voodoo. The most widespread/known Voodoo cultural practices emerge from Haitian Voodoo customs, which retained large portions of several traditional West African spiritual practices. This may be because the Haitian revolution of 1804 ended more immediate forms of cultural fragmentation to occur as they were liberated from the enforcement of the Code Noir, for example.

A schism emerged in the cultural and spiritual practices of the enslaved that began in the Caribbean and spread to North America with the passing of the Code Noir. Decreed by King Louis XIV in 1685, the Code Noir defined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire that mandated the compulsory practice of Catholicism and punishment of native religion for the enslaved. We see the remnants of this fracture today not only with the actual rituals practiced but with the variations of names available for different spiritual practices included under the same West African genealogical traditions. Specific to this study are four iterations of traditional Western African spirituality; Haitian Voodoo, Voudou, Hoodoo, and Kélé, all practices fragmented and transformed by slavery and specific to their geographic region.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to streamline the terminology and in to address a larger cultural commons around fragmented spiritual and cultural customs, I use conjure culture to locate my use of Black Southern and Caribbean folkloric spirituality and the rituals specific to these beliefs.

My interest in conjure culture can be described as a recovery project on the level of the symbolic. Due to colonialization's origins, investment in, and deployment of Christian divinity, conjure culture has been symbolically demonized as the great *Other* of Christian spirituality. Colonists often defined its practices as sorcerous (Taussig 1984, 487).<sup>2</sup> Thus, many conjurers or conjure woman share the symbolic distinction of "witch" in coloniality in that they both inhabit positions of independence, spiritual leadership and herbal healing even though not all conjure women are witches. As Phyllis J. Day explains:

capable women with power are most often called witches and considered deviant from their society. They are usually feared and hated by other tamed women, as well as by men. They are healers, wise women, religious leaders, or focal points for natural or preternatural powers. Their power is usually antimachine, though not always

antitechnology—that is, they may use technologies but in a nondeterministic manner in which nature is enhanced rather than destroyed. (Day 1983, 14)

Day explains how women blessed with the gift of healing and strong will are deemed as categorically deviant under patriarchal laws and structures, and are labelled as witches. As Sylvia Federici's work reminds us, the label witch could be deployed against any woman who threatened capitalism's expansion through property accumulation and was used to deny their ability to purchase and own property (Federici 2004, 25). Conjure women and witches are related but separate for the role of a witch is distinct from the role of a conjure woman however, a conjure woman can also bear both statues of witch and conjurer. My interest in this terminological quagmire of conjure woman and witch is that the amorphous zones between them are zones that I am not interested in demarcating for the overlap suggest past differences and purposes between the two that may be indiscernible to us now because of colonialization. The witch within conjure culture retains some of the broader aforementioned ambiguity regarding the definitions above but is more concentrated to the field of hexing and healing. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, describes some conjurers working in the field of herbal healing as witch doctors (Hurston [1938] 2008, 118). Luisah Teish states that in traditional African cultures (and in conjure culture, still), a witch was a "woman who performed medical works against menfolk" (Teish 1985, 64). Katrina Hazzard-Donald and Camille Billops both exemplifies Teish's definition of witch in their writings as women who hexed and cast love spells on the men in their community (Billops 1978, 46; Hazzard-Donald 2013, 208).<sup>3</sup> Teish uses the umbrella term of witch to express solidarity with women who have been murdered for their deviance under a patriarchal-capitalist order of domination (Teish 1985; x; Federici 2004).

I appreciate and encourage the cross cultural overlaps the term has with witch. I use conjurer or conjure women for their cultural specificity to the project's work toward alterity. Additionally, the conjurer, and not the witch, in conjure culture is blessed with the gift of sight, the ability to create another world and to access the perception of the past. I think of the conjurer as part of a larger tapestry alongside the witch whose wisdom was erased and whose agency was demonized by colonizers. Imani Perry describes the witch as a threat to patriarchal order for her ability to marry the intellectual with the sensual; she has access to sense-making skills beyond that of hegemonic systems of knowledge production. Witches “engaged in doings that are challenging; they are presenting ideas and orders that threaten to open up the dominant logic, shift the terrain of what is regarded as mattering ... restoring [that energy] to our social and political imaginary” (Perry 175). Witches’ labor is intellectual and affective at the same time; it balances ritual with its sensational effects and returns. It is precisely that type of energy and labor that this study simultaneously replicates and is in constant pursuit of conjuring. I link Perry’s use of the witch to the conjurer and expand it to ask what mode of the senses might be available in recoding time as a life process through film? And, how might ritual be the labor that gets us there?

Cinema has long trafficked into the territory of ritual and mysticism (broadly defined) since its inception. Leon Trotsky recognized the power of ritual in cinema and situated movie-watching and making in the vanguard of social experimentation. Trotsky suggested that cultural pastimes tend to be consumed by the “meaningless rituals” of the tavern and the church in his article “Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema.” Cinema, though, as its own form of ritual, has the power to supplement the pastime of church going and drinking in its ability to attract sight, performances, convey emotions, and cut “into the memory and be made a possible source of

revenue” (Trotsky [1923] 1973, 40-41). In his essay, Trotsky argues that with the advent of the eight-hour working day, adults are in a position to experiment with culture once again (Trotsky 1973, 38). Moreover, cinema’s ability to generate a “new” perception of memory makes it the instrument to secure for the future in that it does so through its power to “strike the imagination and liberate bodies” from finding ritual alone in the space and symbolics of the church or tavern.<sup>4</sup> This chapter similarly advocates for the ritual body as a means to move the deep care and fellowship forged through ritual outside of institutional spaces of worship.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, I want to follow the ritual possibilities cinema creates to form the ritual body as part of its matrix to pull bodies into an affective relational field that can alter their sense of self. I further argue that such a process recovers what Sylvia Wynter conceives of as Caliban’s woman; the search and invention of thinking, feeling, and being beyond coloniality.

I begin with an analysis of mysticism in early cinema history and connect that pursuit of the great magical other as a conduit for recovering Sylvia Wynter’s concept of Caliban’s woman. From there, I analyze Julie Dash’s *Four Women* for ritual’s reflexivity through dancer L. Martina Young’s depersonalization of self to embody the lives of four mythological women from the temporal past. I then briefly lay out how ritual collapses time and places audiences into a zone of movement and how drawing out that zone as a representational body enables us to more clearly related and interpret the otherness onscreen; this defines my project of the ritual body. I then analyze Julie Dash’s *Praise House* (1991) for the way it formalizes ritual in its aesthetics and how the ritual body can enable us to better grasp its transformative potential and effect. I view *Praise House* as a seminal contribution to Black feminist experimental films and their archives for its clear use of conjure culture and ritual form and how it centers multiple generations of Black womanhood onscreen. It is quite fitting that Julie Dash’s work is being used in this chapter

to mobilize the ritual body, for Dash is a leading architect of Black feminist experimental poetics in film.<sup>6</sup> Many scholars herald her cinematographic hand as one forged from Black feminism (although few have connected that with her use of experimentation).<sup>7</sup> I now direct my attention to unpacking Caliban's woman in which these rituals are in service of drawing out.

### **“Conjure” Cinema and Caliban's Woman**

Conjurers and the apparatuses that aided them—from flip books to magic lanterns to cinema—deceived audiences with their ability to manifest the dream world into reality. The illusions created by new technologies of light, illustration, shadows, movement, and perception (not exclusive to sight alone) were not inherently duplicitous inventions, but became so when placed in the hand of the conjurer or charlatan who used these technologies to do the unthinkable: render dreams into reality. There is a tension between duplicity as a perceptual trick and its morality of falsifying information to another. I disavow such tension and advocate for falsifying truths insofar as that creative ambition invites an ethics of compassion into the space to invent with someone. Conjuring was thought to pull audiences outside of what was possible, what Tom Gunning explains as situating them in a space that “opens a realm of delight in, perhaps even an unprincipled passion for, illusion whose very nature would seem to undermine the metaphysics of reassuring certainty” (Gunning 2012, 32). Cinema's capacity to produce and transmit an anarchic force to its audiences has long been recognized and disciplined (to an extent) in its production, distribution, exhibition, and archiving. In his excellent essay on the “inherent” evils of early cinema and its ties to magic, “Flickers: On Cinema's Power for Evil”, Gunning uses the 1915 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio Industrial Commission* as a starting point to examine the historical relationship between witchcraft and the

flickering image. In that case, the judge ruled that film was “capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of the attractiveness and manner of exhibition” (Gunning 2012, 22). What stands out in this controversial statement is film’s natural anarchic force for disrupting conceptions of the real or what has been ordained real in the world, and the additional threat of having such a power be distributed to a mass audience.

Cinematic deception is, following Sylvia Wynter, a demonic form of production that predates its nineteenth century invention in the sixteenth century flip-book. The hand’s capability to animate images from a blank white page that could imprint the minds of an individual was deemed as a sorcerous practice. Such possibility needed to solely be reserved for the “educator” (Kember 2010, 35). In the context of science, the educator was directly on hand to explain to students the trickery that the enlightened narrative conveyed through the pages. Reginald Scott’s sixteenth century study, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, names the flick-book as possessing a demonic, unpredictable force for its conjuring abilities (Gunning 2012, 31). Sorcery and mysticism, in this context, were related to technologies that enabled creators access to and “documentation” of the imagined world.

Outside of scientific study, the “moving-image” of flick books to cinema was perceived to be in service of the sensational; it was deemed sinister in nature. This sensational moving image took perception (here, understood in its Enlightenment tradition of ocular-centric) to turn sight into embodied pleasure rather than rational reason of the mind. The “magical” properties of technologies of the moving-image were concomitant with the production of the technology and in that way were exploited by magicians as a logical extension of their craft (Solomon 2006, 598). The magician’s appearance in nineteenth century cinema culture is not as taboo as we may think, for many magicians saw themselves as technicians who decoded the “trick” of the



“moving-image” to their audiences (Solomon 2006, 600). This is not to say that they gave their secrets away, but rather that their stage performances were less rooted in the “evil” magic of sorcery than they were in the “good” magic of mastering technology. And to be sure, we cannot deny the mysticism that lies within these technologies, from the candles that flickered against a series of coordinated mirrors to project the image from a hand painted image plate to the spring or motored shutters capturing glimpses of light that bled an image onto film. While viewed as less of a demonic power today than in 1915, cinema still maintains that capacity to transmit an anarchic force that challenges our normative consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

It is here, then, that I want to argue the possibility that experimental film offers in dialogue with Black feminism around its ability to restore the unpredictable possibility of change for the audience through cinema’s ability to conjure. As we will see later in this chapter, conjure invokes the use of ritual in pursuit of ontogenic transformation. Where I diverge from the scholarship on magic in early cinema is in my sincere advocacy for cinema as magic as opposed to magic being nothing more than a scientific trick.<sup>9</sup> The history of cinema as Gunning tells it is already imbued with full-fledged symbolic codings of mysticism that verges into the field of demonology. I want to return to that shadow of cinema for I find potential in drawing out cinema’s power for re-assembling the mind in pursuit of deploying different methods that might attend to Black womanhood differently. Most scholarship on early cinema’s relationship with mysticism tends to foreground the technical mastery of the directors and situate the more outlandish elements of mysticism as little more than trick cinema (Barnouw 1981). Rather than foreground the technical wizardry of the form, I approach the directors in this study as conjurers. To be clear, designating the directors as conjurers does not come at the expense of their proficiency over the form but rather places their inspiration outside of the colonial framing of

technique/thought into Black folkloric spirituality, conjure practices, and poetics where experimentation has long pioneered the discovery of our communities.

In conjure culture, the conjurer serves a multifaceted purpose. They often see themselves as healer, spiritual leader, ritualist, and medium, who is blessed with the gift of sight. Zora Neale Hurston writes that most conjurers in the Black Southern folkloric tradition were referred to as “two-headed’ doctors for they had twice as much sense (Hurston 1990, 165*n*2).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Katherine Hazzard-Donald describes the conjurer as possessing a number of roles in the community with links back to traditional African creators, artists, and healers.

The role of the conjurer had been more long-standing than any social role to emerge from slavery and existed well before the appearance of the Negro preacher. Like the African priest, both the Hoodoo priest and the early slave preacher employed a complex system of symbols to raise client expectations of a successful outcome ... Slaves viewed conjurers as embodied spiritual power; these enslaved men of power apparently provided a rewarding and hopeful counterbalance to the powerlessness experienced by [B]lacks because of enslavement. As part of a wider community response to social expectations for problem solving, the conjurer [them]self was a living symbol signifying deep levels of hope as well as access to alternative sources of support and assistance beyond the slave master’s control. (2013, 59)

I use Hazzard-Donald’s definition of the conjurer to situate it firmly within the field of filmmaking. The conjurer’s power of invention and manipulation of symbols for communal good, often produced through rituals, describes the work that Black feminist experimental filmmakers construct in their film and video art. Therefore, this chapter partially restores—in this naming—the communal role of the conjurer as realized by the directors discussed in this study.

If we take seriously early cinema's history of cinema as mysticism we can begin to think in more inventive and expansive terms of the role ritual plays in film and video art as well as the conjurer's role in drawing ritual's form to the fore of its enactment. We must value and affirm conjure as a specialized skillset, even it is not achieved through formal means (like an apprenticeship as Hurston pursued in her life). The conjurer is not any director but one closely rooted in and linked with the community of conjure culture at large. It would be incorrect of us to assume that anyone can perform a communal ritual. Ritual is a form of specialized, largely hidden knowledge that requires conjurers to formalize actions in pursuit of accessing a specific movement in time. Barbara McCullough identified this specialized knowledge in her filmic work. McCullough addresses herself as an emerging specialist of conjure culture in her documentary, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1980). She describes her film and video art as rituals and further links them to traditional African practices where ritual and art objects are one and the same.

More than being a completed film. *Water Ritual #1* is a filmic exercise where I realized the first time that I had an affinity for ritual and that I would like to employ ritual in some way in whatever video and film work that I do ... ritual is a symbolic action that I've dealt with in terms of my own internal state to help me release myself in order to move from one space in time to another.<sup>11</sup>

McCullough defines ritual as an artistic practice. While she admits that she is still learning to find a vocabulary for it, she affirms that her ritual actions have long dictated her artistic and cultural practice and grounded her work as part of a larger African tradition. With that, I ask how might ritual be the type of form needed to draw out cinema's anarchic potential in time?

Cinema can snatch perception away from its ocular-centric grips rooted in Enlightenment and anti-emancipatory discourse and restore it to the body as way of situating alternative forms of knowledge production that can only be felt, lived, and embodied.

But if the trick [that of cinema] served neither as educational, demystifying demonstration nor as redeeming allegory, as buttress neither to the explanations of science nor to the mysteries of the faith, then trick and visual illusion might maintain a dangerous anarchic force, an undermining of authority itself in favor of the pure play of sensation. The fascination of visual uncertainty remains a potentially dangerous force.

(Gunning 2012, 31)

This potentially dangerous force bears exhilarating potential, opening up engagement with a different relation to sixteenth century conjuring practices emerging from Caribbean Black and native women.<sup>12</sup>

This may seem quite superfluous in its creation for I am arguing that the work outlined thus far and the work to be analyzed by Black experimental film and video arts is nothing short of ontological and spiritual rupture our normative consciousness; as Denise Ferreira da Silva states the end of the world (Ferreira da Silva 2014, 84). Such “superfluity”, though, is supported by early cinema history itself. Gunning argues that the tradition of the moving-image may have been a lost deity and in its free-form ability to offer illusions outside of the realm of “Good” and “Evil”: “The Evil Demon of Cinema is not simply a duplicitous and complicit ideological swindle, but a banished deity of a nearly forgotten, but once worldwide religion, a deity torn within by a cosmic struggle between Good and Evil, faced with a creation that is itself illusory, the product of demons rather than a beneficent creator” (Gunning 2012, 34). Cinema’s capacity for troubling the mind via the body needs to be restored in the filmic image in order for a true

expansionary engagement with narrative, time, movement, and symbology to be completely felt and understood. I do this restoration work in my study as the conjuring of Caliban's woman.

Caliban's woman represents the ontological gap in knowledge production suppressed by violent means, for its practice demonstrates that another way of knowing, feeling, and living in this world is possible (Wynter 1990, 360-61). Caliban's woman is the representational 'woman' of demonic territory who brings about a fundamental disruption to what we know and feel in the world. To conjure Caliban's woman is, inevitably, a rupture of this world's episteme and a violent un/silencing of her pasts and memories. It is that evocation of emancipation that emerges alongside the theory and body of Caliban's woman that I am interested in placing here in dialogue with experimental film. To make sense of its application in cinema, I will revisit Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman" (1990) to analyze how the representational 'woman' of Caliban's woman reveals the rich theoretical practice in Black feminist experimental cinema and names the ontogenic rupture that these rituals may convey.<sup>13</sup>

In "Beyond Miranda's Meaning," Wynter recuperates the ontology of the silenced/negated Black woman who inhabits the space of demonic ground and its meanings. As Caribbean scholar Carol Boyce argues, "Demonic ground is how the latter is preoccupied with the systematic function of the 'ontological absence' of a black female subject position within the ruling epistemes of the modern world" (Boyce-Davies 2018, 844). Wynter argues that the hegemonic episteme has symbolically produced lives that are condemned to live without the right to a life and thus, she provides new analytical tools that examine works for what they do (Gracia 2016, 344). These analytical tools may lead us to analyze works of cultural production for their emancipatory potential instead of their representational meanings. Representation itself

masks the kinship relations that frame how individuals affectively respond and relate to the image and how that structure itself already imbues an ethno commodity myth of *Man* in its form. The following chapter will expand upon this structure more concretely. Wynter draws out *Man*'s acultural mode of being as conveyed through its power to represent "*the way things are in themselves, the way they will have to be*, with this representation then serving a teleological purpose" (Wynter 2000, 30). Experimental Black feminist filmmakers move beyond the cinematic representational parameters of reality to question the terrain of reality where one is condemned by *and* in it.

Boyce-Davies's synthesis of Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" reveals that demonic ground draws explicit attention to the way in which Western Eurocentric discourse, as a hegemony over theory and philosophy globally, defines meanings constructed through particular praxis of identities on the 'demonic' ground of the New World. This praxis of identities included the symbolic order of man (white) and woman (white) with a spilt of that who is non-man (Black/native male). The location of that symbolic spilt and nonconsensual union is paramount to understanding its migration and variations of its meanings back to Western Europe and across North America. Locating the larger region of the Antilles is critical to examine how Black is recoded in the larger diaspora. To conjure Caliban's woman in art (through poetics) is episteme production and asks new questions and considerations around humanity; we may also think of Caliban's woman as the name of a very specific type of rebellious invention. I argue that it additionally manifests knowledge from outside (extended and beyond reach from the visible frame) colonial knowledge production to include other theorists, scholars, researchers, archivists, artists, writers. To conjure Caliban's woman is an act embedded in the deconstruction of colonial

ways of knowing through unpredictable forms of creativity that place the conjurer and their creations in time to grasp the ruptures produced through colonization.

Wynter begins “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings” with a key Enlightenment play, William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. *The Tempest*, she argues, can be used analogously to break down ontological meaning for *Man*, *Woman*, and its *Other* produced by Western colonialism. In *The Tempest*, an Italian merchant Prospero is exiled to a Caribbean island with his daughter Miranda where they enslave the island natives, of which one, Caliban, occupies a speaking role in the play. As Wynter explains, Caliban represents all things monstrous on the island. Prospero even says that Caliban was sired by the devil himself (Wynter 1990, 360). It is Caliban’s unseen deceased mother Sycorax whose use of magic is the ultimate harbinger of unpredictability and destructive forces as evident by her “inability” to work with the spirit Ariel. While Caliban is native to the island, Sycorax is not and was banished there from Algiers, meaning narratively there are no native women in the island deceased or living in this matrix of human relations in *The Tempest*.

Prospero, who “frees” Ariel from the tree that Sycorax bound it to before the first act of the play, comes to represent the “rational” man of the sixteenth century; that is one who studies letters and who learns from consciousness. This is the same *Man* who is (at that moment in time) inheriting meaning from the Christian identity of divine right and life. Prospero’s use of magic is coded as “Good” for it is based on the Western exploration of rationality. Prospero analyzes the land through literature and their “divine” perspective. Caliban, then, is the antithesis to Prospero, vengeful of Prospero’s enslavement of the natives, his use of magic, and his taking of the island, which Caliban believes is his to inherit. Caliban is the referent for the symbolic death of *Man* and thus, its oppositional *Other*.

Miranda, who has few words, comes to represent the silence of European women who participated in colonial conquest as extensions of propertied personhood. The process of migration afforded European women “new” freedoms to own slaves. Art historian Kay Dian Kriz writes about the contradiction that emerged for white women in the new world where they took power by silence in that it gave them freedom of ownership of an *Other* (Kriz 2008, 46). Kriz relies on sixteenth century paintings from the Caribbean to trace and analyze the limited representation of dark skinned Black women of the New World, the “peaceful” savage depiction of dark skinned Black men, and the emergence and marketing of the *mulâtresses* as the production of a new “inferior” woman whose representation brought new forms of ethnic and social differences into representation of the enslaved woman against (the white) woman.

Brunias’s *mulâtresses* provoke the fantasy of possessing a body that both is and is not white, bearing the marks of refined whiteness and the promise of savage sexual pleasure so closely associated with blackness ... Brunias’s images of *mulâtresses* permit possible viewing options that involve fantasies not only of subjection via a master-slave encounter, but also of identification. It is all too easy to assume that Brunias’s images were designed to appeal to white heterosexual men, but they equally, if perhaps more surreptitiously, invite the gaze of white women. Who might fantasize about ‘possessing’ (in either sense) a body that is so closely associated with ‘dark’ sexual pleasures. (Kriz 2008, 55)

In this way, we can see how Wynter views Miranda as the symbolic referent of white women whose interest in speech hinged in part on their ability to gain subjecthood, through their proximity to whiteness and ownership of an *Other*; that position was leveraged by occupying meaning through images. With regards to concerns many feminist have to “give voice” to



Miranda (or the Miranda's of the world), Wynter raises the concern that this fails to recognize how Miranda gained a voice through visibility and had access to power through the ownership of land and Black/native bodies. It is image production that gives Miranda her voice in the world, and it is something that Miranda weaponizes against other women (Wynter 1990, 363).<sup>14</sup> Wynter critically argues that we, especially Black feminists, need to move beyond the white feminist symbolics of Miranda for her meanings are built upon the silence and absence of ours (Wynter 1990, 363-64).

Despite her limited speech, Miranda is an active participant in the production of meaning around humanity in *The Tempest*. Image production is the battleground for discourse for it is the “terms of agreement” (its poetics and aesthetics) that set in motion how representation is constructed (Wynter 1990, 363). Thus, production of images (understood here to be film and video) without a re-evaluation of the aesthetic structure is to reiterate Miranda's position of colonial perception and reproduce the weaponized power of white domination over others. Wynter calls for a new force of relationality in the world through other aesthetic strategies. What is missing in this poetic form is Caliban's equal, his physiognomic complementary mate (Wynter 1990, 360). The woman of the same “monstrosity” as Caliban, with the same hair texture and color of skin who is also enslaved by Prospero and Miranda.

The absence of Caliban's woman does several things for Wynter's reading of *The Tempest*. One, it annuls the existence of native familial kinship and reproduction. Secondly, it silences the rape of native women of the Caribbean by white slave owners so that the reproduction of the enslaved now stands as mixed-race and *mulâtresses* (as Kriz argues above) and without maternal lineage (beyond their status of enslavement). And thirdly, the erasure annexes this woman from not just visibility, but desire, as Caliban did not desire his mother. In

the absence of “his” woman, Caliban placed his desire onto Miranda where he fantasized about populating the island with their kin (Wynter 1990, 361). Again, this inter-racial copulation produces a color-line amongst the enslaved in which the offspring produced may create an “equal” of (potential) lighter skin and Eurocentric features to the native men to place their (at times, unrequited) desire for the Miranda’s of the world. This is to say that we must attend to the color line in the recollection-images pulled forth from ritual, for the image we are searching for to rupture our sense of knowing comes from the abjected negation of and erasure of Black womanhood.

In her absence, Caliban’s woman possesses meaning beyond colonial symbolics and the referents in its place. Conjuring Caliban’s woman transforms the symbolic frameworks and poetics of our myths and introduces knowledge and collective memory that can lead to self-determination. It works against the systemic visual power of Miranda. To conjure Caliban’s woman is to go beyond our inheritance of Western discourse of the symbolic and its meanings. She opens possibilities for different ways of living—potentially emancipated—in this world, even if those possibilities are themselves aberrant. But also the very conception of Caliban’s woman shifts our attention to think of *being* in more demanding terms of mysticism, and to deploy tactics such as ritual in our pedagogy and methods for analyzing film.

I would like to now shift focus to ritual in cinema to examine its conjuring properties and make the case for the ritual body as a vehicle through which ritual enables the affection of self by self. Ritual offers a reflexive activity of relating through which audiences are pulled into a zone of movement. In these rituals, ritualists (those who oversee the ritual) conjure recollection images that are shared in collective memory making. I argue that the thrust into a zone of affective relations is the place to re-orient communal myths that determine how we make kin

with one another and constitute meaning in the world. The rituals in *Four Women* and *Praise House* make meaning in pursuit of Caliban's woman. The effect of these pursuits take different forms but shift our perceptual process to move outside of what we are prescribed to perceive and work with anotherness. It is this shift that allows us to name our mythology and kin relations and creates a different enactment of care in the process—one that becomes a memory upon the conclusion of the ritual and teaches us how to model care for others. I now turn my attention in the following section to seeing the above in action in Julie Dash's *Four Women*.

### ***Four Women***

I read ritual in *Four Women* for its capacity to actualize mythology or Black womanhood's temporal past in the present. This is achieved through the screendance of L. Martina Young and her depersonalization of the self.<sup>15</sup> I derive my method of reading ritual from Hortense Spillers's ritual diagram in her essay, "*Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World*" (1985). This diagram demonstrates the various ways in which we can read ritual's form in cultural production. My analysis on *Four Women* sets up ritual's form which I later use to mobilize the ritual body in *Praise House*. To restate ritual another way, ritual places the body into a place of immanence through corporeal 'habits' like dance, prayer, and performance that merge present states of embodiment with the extraordinary force of life and death. Ritual in this analysis uses depersonalization and repetition to situate bodies in time. However large or small an act may be, ritual in relation to conjure culture remains a core act of bonding individuals together through the distillation of a collective memory. This is due to ritual's reflexive activity where, in performing ritual practices, ritual recollects the past *and* its present and becomes the past in the process.

In her essay “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” Sylvia Wynter argues for deeper scholarly engagement with cultural production rooted in alterity (Wynter 1976, 87-88). Wynter describes Black cultural production and its rhythm as a reflexive activity: “Every living member of the system is both a message in the code and a message which maintains the code, a message which retains and remembers a part of the code” (Wynter 1976, 93n43). I return to this same quote in the next chapter in relation to film and video aesthetics but here I use it to foreground ritual’s simultaneity of being a message in the code (through its independent acts) while overall being a message that retains the code of conjure culture. As such, we experience that reflexivity of the cultural inventions of Black life through reinvented lives. Put another way, ritual makes available the rebellious inventions made by Black reinvented lives to be experienced in the present encounter. This encounter bears the possibility of engulfing us with their memory, their mythology, their consciousness which are instrumental to our survival in the present and it is this power that grants ritual its mnemonic aberration. Ritual triggers the processes in time where memory is forged to bring bodies into a zone of movement, recoding time as a life force. It is important to distinguish that ritual’s efficacy of affective displacement is pulled from time, not the unconscious.<sup>16</sup>

Julie Dash’s *Four Women* combines the choreography of L. Martina Young and Nina Simone’s 1966 song of the same name for a seven-minute ritual that pulls audiences into time. *Four Women*’s soundtrack—be that sound effects and Simone’s titular song—transmits a historical archive of pure recollection that brush against the images of Young’s embodiment of four different Black women heard in the song: Aunt Sarah, Safforina, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. My use of pure recollection follows Gilles Deleuze in that I employ it to refer to the images that exist in the temporal past that are awaiting to be conjured by an actual image, which exists in the

present and is perceived through our immediate sensory motor schema (Deleuze 1989, 80-81). Through dance, Young gives a body, aided with the vocality of Simone, to the pure recollection of Black womanhood and their mythology. Young embodies these Black women who have fallen through the gaps of time, transforming her psyche and physical appearance in the pursuit of emancipation. Young submits herself to the depersonalization her *self* to invite anotherness of time in her present body for audiences to experience. Because Young's ritual is geared more towards mythology rather than familial memory (like Nana Peazant's was in my introduction), Young is opening herself to the heterogeneity of time overall rather than a specific circuit like memory, a deity, or an ancestral figure. This opening can make way for possession of the body from the dead and other unknown figures.

The sixteen millimeter film was completed while Dash was enrolled at the Film and Television Program at UCLA (aka The L.A. Rebellion) for her MFA and bears great similarities to Maya Deren's three-minute, sixteen millimeter short, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) starring Talley Beatty for the way in which it frees the body from space and sends them into time where their movements drive sequential flow but additionally become part of the architectonics of the film itself, its reflexive activity.<sup>17</sup> Dash's *Four Women* articulates how Black experimental filmmakers begin to exploit the medium's aesthetics to manifest suppressed cultural struggles that bear on the medium itself (Deleuze 1989, 220). As conveyed here, ritual uses conjure culture to shape and intercede on the medium of film, not only carving out and contributing to formal structures and vision in film but situating their filmic needs as ones located in Black cultural production. *Four Women* is exemplar of the new counter-poetics of rhythm aesthetic that emerges, largely, in the women's experimental short films from the students in the UCLA Film and Television Program from the 1970s through the late 1980s.

*Four Women* features Young as choreographer and sole dancer in a spare empty room (similar to a black box theater) with an orange screen as a backdrop. Dash opens the film with Young immersed beneath a long sheer veil against a multitude of sounds that convey the horrors of the middle passage like wailing, whips, waves, and footsteps. Following this opening, Dash then follows Young as she embodies each of the four women in Simone's song. Young performs the lives of four Black women with different skin pigmentation (which also include presumed physiognomic differences), temporal placements, and lived experience to give a mythological account of Black women's histories. The first woman, Aunt Sarah is enslaved as indexed by her lashed back and familial relations with the other slaves in the lyrics. The second woman, Saffronia, is mixed-race and bears the visible marks of the mass rapes committed by white men against Black women in the New Americas. She exists in the passage of both worlds. The third woman, Sweet Thing is seductive and indexes Black women's new sexual freedom in the twentieth century. The final woman, Peaches emerges as a revolutionary figure using the anger of her enslaved parents and the generations of Black women before to fight for her liberation; Nina Simone's vocals are particularly haunting during this final refrain and immerse the listener in a wave of righteous, aggressive affect.

The film features a series of superimpositions as a way to collapse time. Many of the transitions between women in Simone's song, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches are conducted through photo-stills of Young's body that gradually fade to black. These techniques draw out ritual's heterogeneity of representation in that Young depersonalizes herself to usher forth the lives of others from the temporal past. There is no singularity in ritual the ritualist and the audience are simultaneously experiencing otherness together in this process that is the temporal past becoming an image/or gaining a body in the present. *Four Women* demonstrates

though that our perception of ritual as an actual image, happening in the present, is still offset by our sensory-motor schema in that we must depersonalize ourselves with Young to comprehend these women as *lived* beings. Ritual serves as alternative form of sense-making and distribution of knowledge—reminding us that some memories or temporal pasts cannot be taught but must be embodied.

I derive my analysis of ritual's formal properties from Spillers's contribution to *Conjuring: Black women Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1984), edited by herself and Marjorie Pryse, Spillers recovers and theorizes with Caribbean novelist Paule Marshall's 1965 novel *Chosen Place, Timeless People* in her essay.<sup>18</sup> In Marshall's novel, Spillers finds a text that can both analytically reveal insights into the disjuncture of Black life in time through ritual and methodologically deploy new literary architectonics that double the novel's analytical potential; we can read ritual in the form itself while reading about rituals that emerge in the drama. While Spillers steers shy of the term double or reflexive, she notes that the novel is difficult to comprehend and that "[a]ny attempt to summarize *Chosen Place* is ultimately frustrating since single threads of it disappear into the whole, integrated fabric" (Spillers 1985, 152). It is the novel's reflexive activity, conveying the actions that are engulfed by the form overall, that marks its difficulty of comprehension: because ritual shapes the architectonics of the work, as an audience we must suspend our "simplistic expectations" of a quick read. I sympathize with Spillers's frustration for the work analyzed in this study bears similar formal traits to the literary experimentation found in Marshall's text.

Spillers uses *Chosen Place* to construct a method of ritual. She analyzes what ritual *does* in the novel but also draws out how Marshall mirrors the exact *doing* in her aesthetics, similar to my work here. Thus, I absorb her argument in my analysis on *Four Women* and later on of the

ritual body. While I recognize her detailed reading of *Chosen Place* is integral to her argument, I mobilize her claims as a distinct methodological tactic that allows us to read ritual for its form rather than solely through Marshall's novel. Spillers provides a handy diagram in her argument by which we can assess ritual that allow us to read various diagrammatic function of ritual (Figure 4.1).

In the diagram, Spillers sets up the architectonics of ritual to be “these four circles of involvement—myth, history, ritual, and ontology” (Spillers 1985, 152). Mythology which Spillers following Barthes, defines as discourse ordained by history (Spillers 1985, 165). History, for Spillers, functions to cement or record time by way of solidifying colonial myths about divinity, damnation, and a people.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while the circles are distinctively separated in Spiller's diagram, she recognizes how they intersect with one another. History ordains myth—suggesting that time is the key interlocuter between the two and must be fully recognized in order to realize myth and history's separate roles from one another. The next two circles show the agent-centered work of ritual that lead to ritual as a distinct circle that leads us closer to ontogeny—which Spillers argues is rarely achieved but made possible through ritual. The circle of ontogeny represents in my argument the ability to remake kin and mythology of one's status. This is the center that enables lives to reinvent themselves as Katherine McKittrick argues in “Rebellion/Invention/Groove” (2016). I use the diagram and Spillers's analysis to read *Four Women* for its remaking of mythology.

*Four Women* uses the labor of ritual to collaborate with Black culture's immaterial pasts. Because Dash has structured this film as a ritual, she situates the historical archive of Black womanhood in mythological terms (Simone's song) rather than designated historical ones; this frees Young's ritual dance to the temporal past overall rather than a distinct moment or image to



conjure forth in the present. This shift to mythology makes collaboration with time possible and moves participants into an order where they can name their origins. In order to participate in mythology one must lose their sense of self and invite otherness. Throughout this study, I have gestured to how alterity does this work of otherness from my ambiguous haunting in the archives to our reestablishing of community to mother ourselves, here the process of ritual enforces otherness upon us. The purpose it serves is to shift us to movement but critically to shift us into a space to welcome otherness where we move outside of normative social imaginary and its colonial temporality. Ritual has the capacity to make that shift emerge on a communal level. In order to emancipate ourselves from colonial time's oppressive grip we must first be able to name the origins of our myth that are (Spillers 1985, 165).

Ritual's shift to mythology rather than history affords Dash the freedom to jump through time to capture feelings attendant to the mythological origins of Black womanhood. These women, while fleshed out in discourse, often are representationally fragmented. To mirror that schism, Dash opens *Four Women* with fragmentation.<sup>20</sup> In the opening frames, Young is crouched and veiled in seated butterfly position. The slow pace of the beginning sets the scene of the ritual where we are simultaneously grounded in Young's pose and whirling through time through the soundtrack. We hear horns blaring, people chanting, various stomping, a loud crack of a whip, water rushing and crashing against a ship, crying, wailing, and low mummings of moaning set to Young's body moving her way out of the veil (Figure 4.2). The poses she strikes affectively take on the potential of those in the past reaching out through time; the film reflexively draws out those lives of Black womanhood in this moment. Quite crudely, we can draw a parallel between this sheer sheet and the veil that Dubois (Dubois [1903]1994, 2) describes as existing between the Black body and the world.<sup>21</sup>

Following the removal of the veil, Young embodies the first woman in Simone's song, Aunt Sarah who has "wooly hair and Black skin." Although Young herself is a light-skin woman, the movement of both her body and the camera convey the spirit of Aunt Sarah rather than trying to *literally represent* her as described. It is here where we see the purpose of reenactment in ritual, a literal embodying of cultural signs to usher that spirit to the fore as we enter the plane of immanence. We are left with the essence of Aunt Sarah or a feeling of Aunt Sarah as opposed to a stock representation of her. The form of the film reflects the fluid manner in which Dash demonstrates how memory informs the construction of and engagement with Blackness, which is also apparent in Simone's lyrics as well:

My skin is black  
My arms are long  
My hair is woolly  
My back is strong  
Strong enough to take the pain  
inflicted again and again  
What do they call me  
My name is AUNT SARAH  
My name is Aunt Sarah

Through their relationship with Dash's direction and Young's body, Simone's lyrics inform us of a memory-driven conscious whose energies freely flow between the body, camera, voice, lighting, and audience.<sup>22</sup> Consciousness here is specifically derived from its embodiment that is time lived, we cannot learn this but must live it and ritual makes that possible for Young to live through the lives of these women carrying the reinventions of past Black womanhood to the

present. Simone also uses repetition to bring them forth, “my name is” cements their presence to the fold of relations they are not abstractly defined nor affixed to the past but are embodied, alive, and presently with us. These are women we need for our future and they cannot be known through discourse but can only be lived through the body.

To restate and expand, *Four Women* conducts a ritual by reenacting mythological women that stand in for the temporal past, alive and awaiting to take an image or a body in the present. This dance ritual re-enacts their presence by giving them a current body that moves their presence along with Young’s and those in attendance into the same zone: a zone of movement. While Young, and by extension the audience, opens herself to depersonalization, her corporeality is still *with* us and it is through her body that we see the temporal past take root and alter our perception of Young. Each woman moves through Young differently and we and Dash have to reestablish our senses to respond to her body moving differently each time a new possession takes root. We see this in the focused shots of Young’s curves and legs during her performance of Sweet Thing, a woman whose “hips invite you” and whose “mouth is like wine” as Simone’s sings (Figures 4.3 & 4.4). The camera glides over Dash’s belly button extending the zone of eroticism indexed by her stomach. In one sequence, Dash uses multiple exposures to envelope Sweet Thing’s body into herself, literally doubling her corporeal intensity as a near possession of Young’s body. Compare this to the camera moves for Aunt Sarah that rarely incorporate any cuts, superimpositions, or above head shots. Instead the camera is grounded and largely static so that we may feel the weight of Aunt Sarah in that moment.

For Peaches, Young fervently begins to move through the space with vigorous kicks and jumps than previously seen in the movements of the other women. The lyrics, while always effective, are distinctly mobilized here in a cumulative fashion. When Simone sings “I’m awfully

bitter these days, because my parents were slaves,” Dash utilizes a tightly-angled shot of Young’s face from the chin up and begins to follow Young’s movements from this enclosed perspective (Figure 4.5). Dash amplifies the camera’s corporeality with Peaches, suggesting that Peaches’ movements determine the flow and sequence of the camera. This effect lures audiences into, not the space of the film, but into the space of Peaches’ movement by its sheer force of determinacy that recodes time as a life process. When this happens, returning photo stills of Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, and Sweet Thing appear before us swirling us through the zone of movement before ending with a close shot of Peaches’ head adorned in Fulani braids before zooming intensely into her eyes.

The ritual completes itself for it not only remember Black narratives but it conjured up those bodies through the film and similarly alters Young’s sense of determinacy. The ending shot of Young’s eyes offers the stillest sequence of the film, suggesting that the embodiment of Peaches has taken over, perhaps not quite yet to the extent of possession, in a transformation where Young’s political and spiritual consciousness now mirrors the energy of Peaches. All of this bodily labor shifts our attention to the reflexive properties of ritual’s form, its capacity to transmit meaning of a code while maintaining a meaning of a code. The body is but one of many forces operating in this ritual, sound is another.

The ritual form of *Four Women* also suggests an efficacy in Young’s ritual. This can be heard in the beginning through the overlapping use of sound. Dash does not channel, nor attempt, to stabilize any of these recollection triggered “feelings” of events, like the Middle Passage, into digestible images but rather conveys the whole past as the zone in which Young materializes her women in this ritual. Dash gives the sound and feeling of the Middle Passage but deliberately does not show the corresponding images of the whip or the wail allows the film to avoid the

casual visual portrayal of Black suffering. This omission leaves the audience with an isolated soundtrack that drives a feeling of collective memory (in this case slavery) as opposed to a depiction of an event. Saidiya Hartman’s scholarship reminds us of the value of Black noise—the wailing, shrieks, moans—for it points to the ways in which Black life and history exists in excess of representational legibility (2008, 12). Dash and Young reveal the possibilities of Black imagination when it disconnects itself from trying to “represent” Black individuals, from trying to adhere to the burden of “authenticity.” As the poet M. NourbeSe Phillip writes, “ritual inserts the body to transform the archive, offering objects and poems so that they may live, look through and breathe. The risk has always been with here and in them now the risk cannot be transferred” (Kim 2016, 59).

The purpose of the ritual may be a repetitive act of remembrance, materializing the images that lived but have no life in history, but the effect is transformative for the collective (both living, dead, and mythological).<sup>23</sup> Ritual’s dailiness (its repeated actions) does not exhaust this connection but “rather participates in the rules of behavior that determine its identity” (158). Hence, the doubling of ritual where it is the code and message of the code. In Spillers’s essay, she similarly advocates the dual role of ritual in the diagram: as a distinct circle but also the labor that troubles the situatedness of the independent circles (Spillers 1985, 154). Spillers argues how ritual acts exceed the mere repetition of signs and instead fold us into a field of relations focusing on a key ritual of carnival (in both Marshall’s novel and in life).

The syntax of Carnival and Carnival events determine the principles of meaning, or the rules by which a certain set of givens is ‘marshalled into orderly array’... The act [the ritual of Carnival] does not vary much across time, we imagine, as its original meaning is buried along with the original actors. To that extent, *Chosen Place* traces the grammar of

a mythology ... we witness the healed rupture between linear and memorial functions of time. (Spillers 1985, 165)

Ritual pulls us to recognize the myth, to be aware of its existence and potentially to change it. Therein Spillers argues that ritual's relationship with time and the body, which facilitates ritual labor, is what makes it available to disruption. That type of traversing through myth and history is not completed through thought alone but through the body and its affects; again ritual illustrates a different form of knowledge distribution from time that allows us to live it.

The signs of Black diasporic practice like Carnival imbue a sense of kin relations outside of our normative consciousness that trigger these affective effects but hold bodies suspended in time together. In *Four Women* this triggering of affective effects is set off by Young's dance in which the opening veil purposefully unsettles our introduction to these women. Dash uses this imagery to open up the temporal past for Young to conduct her ritual. The sounds, dance movements, superimpositions, and edits work in service to draw out the heterogeneity of time filmically for the audience—what Young is experiencing in that present embodiment of the temporal past. As an audience we experience fissures in our perception of the film in that the appearances of these women do not fall into what Keeling writes as memory-images—images that remind us of dominant images of Black women in the moment of perception—due to all four women inhabiting one woman's body (Keeling 2007, 14-15). Thus, our perception shifts towards the non-representational elements in the dance where we focus on Young's ability to convey the feeling of these women. This shift foregrounds and alteration in our cognitive schema where we have to reorient ourselves differently in order to fully engage with the film. In so doing this shift opens us up, like Young, to the heterogeneity of time and its movements. Once we are in that space, we can remake ourselves, our myths, and kin relations.

The effect of being shifted into a zone of movement re-orientates our sense of self but also our ability to relate with others, constituting our agency. Ritual can bring in severe aberrations to the fore of our engagement. Here *Four Women* provides a ground for that engagement because of its centering of very specific mythology of Black womanhood. In *Praise House* we will see that alterity in all its terrifying potential. In her essay, Spillers alerts us to the aberration and how that difference can feed into the ritual itself creating manic intensity of feeling time as seen in the ritual of Carnival in *Chosen Place*. Carnival is not dissimilar to *Four Women* for both center mythology, but Carnival openly conjures the dead and deities. The carnival scene, for example, in *Chosen Place* brings forth all sorts of challenging symbols and ancestral rites for the characters to confront. At every corner the ritual enacted there serves as an act of repetition that blur the daily, the habit and schism into something else; time. One character, Saul is transformed by the labor of ritual for its sheer power of affection by being immersed in its topologies of affect. Although Saul studies the natives and culture of Bournehills he is overwhelmed by the experience—suggesting that ritual flies through the grasp of colonial forms of knowledge production and is something that can only be understood through affect, alternative sense-making registers what Wynter reminds us as lived memory (Wynter 1976,93n43). We can grasp that ritual is able to achieve such affective power because of its ability to place bodies into a zone of movement and how the body is the premier channel to usher forth such engagement. But, it is the body's role in ritual's temporal displacement that also situates its cultural distinction in these ritualistic actions, bringing that 'past' with it to the ritual.

Short films like *Four Women* embrace the performing body's ability to affect other bodies and the body of the film. This is the effect of ritual's reflexive activity for it transforms the ritualist (Young) but also transforms the film itself and in turn the audience's relationship

with the images onscreen. Through the ritual we are caught up with the movement the swirling power of Young's choreography, Simone's vocals, and Dash's camerawork. Ritual enables Dash to not only engage with the technicality of rhythm to produce her counter-poetics but also deploys Black feminist thought to (re)invent the flesh of Black embodied life onscreen through the film's formal aesthetics rather than its representational, narrative ones. This creates an aberration to the "narrative" sequential flow of the film in that any one image emphasized in dialogue with the structure of the song could reemerge at any moment, or could simply disappear. The effect of this screen-ritual is the creation of a false sense of movement for the film's movements are determined by Young and Young shifts dance styles, dependent on the embodied woman. We move laterally in time with each woman occupying a temporal space in the film rather than a linear sequential one.

I now want turn my attention to the development of the ritual body where I build upon this argument of methodologically reading ritual for its various forms. The ritual body is a topology of relations forged through ritual in Black cultural production and given Black feminist experimental film and video's explicit use and deployment of ritual in their work, the ritual body can be considered a feature of reading their filmic practice. Ritual's deployment of bodily repetition largely understood through Black diasporic cultural ceremonial aims is a depersonalization of the self and does so by sending participants into a field of movement as evident in *Four Women*. My brief definition of how I contrast the ritual body is then further mobilized in my analysis of Julie Dash's *Praise House* at the end of this chapter.

## **The Ritual Body**



Ritual body is the vehicle for relating with the reflexive activity in which the sensation of time travels between the representational image of ritual and the labor of ritual. We alter our relations with the ritualist, ourselves, and time through this process. The ritual body conveys ritual's power of affection to the audience through various modes of ritual's enactment. I am focused on the ritualist's capacity of the affection of self by self through time for that force pulls us into a virtual space for us to name the origins of our representational myths that emerge through the ritual's performance. Once we name our origins, we are placed in a space in time to transform their kinship structures—moving away from a sense of ethno class oriented bonds rooted in the memory of *Man* and towards more human interpersonal connections of care. This emerges through our recognition of the thunderous labor of the ritualist tearing themselves asunder in time on our behalf.

The ritual body, as a term, encompasses the relations of ritual's activity and defines a mode of relations in film. The guidance of the conjurer stirs us into the field of reaching, possibly Caliban's woman, through this shift in movement and communality. Maya Deren describes the effect of ritual form as one of depersonalization:

“[t]he ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such a depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges [them] beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of personality.” (Deren 1946, 20)

As Deren astutely notes, the depersonalization of self does not abandon the individual or our sense of self. Rather, as I have argued, it is the state of otherness that draws out a field of relations of care for and with others.<sup>24</sup> Again, my intention with and for the ritual body is to

grasp the intensity of ritual for its transformative ontogenic potential and to “body” that topology of relations not as separate from ritual but as communicated through ritual form onscreen. The ritual body mobilizes the reflexive activity that audiences experience with ritual onscreen to sensationalize time; introducing new myths and rituals for fellowship and care to emerge.

The ritual body bears similarities to the cinematic body in that it doubles the relations experienced through the terms of corporeality. Cinematic body, as defined by Steven Shaviro, is the gap between representation and affect in film. To mobilize the cinematic body to the fore delays representational meaning in the film that allows us to imagine what else could the film do and mean beyond its intended representational effect. For Shaviro, this engagement turns our focus from the actual image of perception happening before us to the virtual images emerging in time from the labor of construction of the image and its representational effect (Shaviro 2007). The cinematic body shifts our perception and makes it asynchronous with something else happening in the representation of the image. The cinematic body allows us to mobilize that delay in representation, extend it and begin to think through it in corporeal terms.

I find Alanna Thain’s synthesis of the cinematic body and her move toward suspense as the phantom that cinema gives a body productive for thinking about ritual’s natural double occupancy of form (its reflexive activity) and experience that can be clarified through corporeal terms (the ritual body). For Thain, “affect opens up new ways of conceiving the body in terms of its temporal dimension ... How might we reopen this double vision to temporality, rather than the spatiality of double occupancy,” (Thain 2017, 25) and more critically how we might approach this in manner that attends to it corporeally (Thain 2017, 21)?

Ritual’s temporal placement of bodies into the zone of movement is affective but also mirrors the sensorial forces we feel outside naturally in time. To name the ritual body is a way of

connecting the form of ritual with corporeal forms of sense-making. Again, this is supported by ritual's use of pure recollection in its reenactment. Reenactment distributes the temporal past to a community becoming a collective memory. As Thain articulates in her use of corporeality, affect provides a language for conceiving the "body in terms of its temporal dimension." For her it is productive for suspense, in my work is useful for identifying and analyzing ritual.

Thain draws out in her suspended body "the effect of the body's ongoing otherness" (Thain 2017, 24), which is developed by time's ability to gain a doubled body where characters and audiences confront the 'crime of time' firsthand through this body (Thain 2017, 6). While this reading is enabled by terminology in corporeal studies, it pushes past the strictly literal flesh terminology of the field. Thain's development of the suspended body indexes a theoretical language and space for the ritual body to emerge in a manner that recognizes ritual's aptness for aberration to the recording of time as a life force (perhaps even its otherness).

This returns us to my argument for the necessity of incorporating spirituality into our modes of knowledge production, specifically that of conjure culture. As the rituals used by Black feminists in this study emerge from conjure culture, recognizing and allowing those gaps of incomprehension or knowledge by another means—like the specter, the ritual, or even with Marilyn Anderson's work of fabulation—is necessary to "make sense" of what Black feminist experimental film and video does. In addition to recognizing its affective power and its pursuit of ontogenic transformation with its audiences, we must remember what the specter taught us in its presence, for they enact a different way of building agency. I now turn my attention more fully to unpacking the ritual body through a film example, that of Julie Dash's *Praise House*. This film analysis returns to several threads expressed throughout this chapter; the conjurer, the manifestation of Caliban's woman, ritual's form, and the ritual body. I read *Praise House* as an

exemplar of the ritual form and its pursuit of Caliban's woman by which we can realize the ritual body.

### *Praise House*

*Praise House* (1991) is a thirty-minute, sixteen millimeter experimental narrative short that premiered on KTCA-TV in Minneapolis. The program was commissioned by Alive and KTCA-TV, a local PBS affiliate, marking a new opportunity for Dash to make work that would be distributed to a larger audience via television following her completion of work during her time as a student at UCLA in the early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> The film premiered the same year as *Daughters of the Dust* did in the festival circuit, which when it received theatrical distribution in 1992 would make her the first Black woman director to have her film be distributed in theaters in the United States. Ritual in *Praise House* acts as a form of inaccessible knowledge production for the audience and relies on a variety of styles; drafting, dance, and prayer to convey its effect to the audience. The film is partially inspired by the artwork of Minnie Evans and sees Dash collaborate with the Urban Bush Women dance collective, whose founder and director, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar choreographs and plays a role in the film. The Urban Bush Women dance collective (1984-) is a Black feminist dance collective based in Brooklyn, NY known for their narrative-focused dance performances. The dance-narrative that Zollar created for *Praise House* exists only as the film. I further analyze *Praise House* for its ability to show how Black feminist poetics ultimately have a goal in emancipating us from the “tools of universal reason, and the narratives of science and history that sustain the transparent trajectory of the subjects of universal reason and of its grip on our political imagination” through ritual (Da Silva 2014, 82). This allows for Caliban's woman to take flight.

The following analysis uses the ritual body as a vehicle to examine the reflexive activity of the ritual's form and the labor to manifest the recollection images of time to its audience and how that activity sensationalizes time for us in corporeal terms. *Praise House* is a unique film in the larger Black feminist experimental archive for its use of conjure culture, its ritual form, and narrative of intergenerational responses to the conjuring gift against the backdrop of wage labor and modernity. The film focuses on three generations of conjure women (grandmother, mother, and daughter) who navigate and respond to their gift with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance. Guiding these women is a guardian angel whose teaches them how to cope with their gift and care for one another. It is in the presence of the angel and the ritual dances where the characters and the audience are pulled into the space of time and learn valuable lessons on relationality, breaking familial kinship structures in the process. Outside of the film's use of ritual, Dash deploys an arsenal of affective engagements and actions onscreen that keep the audience thinking through affective registers of sense-making in between representational use of dance rituals.

The first line of dialogue in the film invokes the practice of conjuring, "Bring the spirit, child!" and with that declaration, the spirits manifest through the artwork of Minnie Evans, the choreography by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and the director's gaze of Dash, creating a praxis of conjure culture that is embedded in the formal and narrative aesthetics of the film. The matriarch of the three, Granny (Laurie Carlos), who is in between life and death at the start of the film, spends most of her time passing between worlds, memories, spaces and in communion with angels. The youngest of the three, Hannah (Viola Sheely), is beginning to conjure visions from the other side (or in time): "draw or die," they tell her. Unlike Granny's present state of liminality, Hannah's conjuring abilities are unpredictable and may manifest themselves in

varying rituals which include communion with angels, dance fits, or through drafting. The mother (Terri Cousar) is the bridge between the two generations and represents the link to “reality”; she has the ability to conjure but resists the practice as she focuses on prayer and symbolism of the rational, real world of wage labor. Due to this, Mama’s personhood is firmly affixed in time and bound by colonial temporality’s limited mobility for Black womanhood. Haunting all three women is a Guardian Angel wearing a black leather coat, played by Zollar, there to help Granny pass on to the next world, guide Hannah’s conjuring fits, and lead the mother back to the knowledge and practice of memory that she has suppressed for years. The Guardian Angel is there to free these women and their bodies from time. “Bring the spirit, child” is a command that incites action through its declaration of time and presence that another world in time one can be made visible in ours through the work of conjurers.

The film, like most of Dash’s filmography, is an account for generational remembrance.<sup>26</sup> Granny’s conjuring days have since passed but they are starting to emerge in Hannah, who conjures her sight through drawings and dance. The film plays with familiar hauntings through its circular and pluri-conceptual use of time and space between worlds. The audience is constantly being pulled into Hannah and Granny’s visions; since we are able to “see” the angels, Dash provides the camera with access to this “gift” as well.

*Praise House* notably features no male authority onscreen. While some of the angels may be gendered as male, I prefer to leave their gender identity open to ambiguity as they are vessels for the memory of ancestors and do not inscribe nor benefit from the oppression of the women onscreen. A praise house specifies a place of worship without the aid of a minister or “leader” (George-Graves 2010, 73). It is a place largely filled with women conducting the labor of the spiritual healers, the dancers, and the choir—labor that is normally gendered as “female” in the

Southern Baptist Christian practices—freely move without the “watchful,” and at times predatorial, eye of the patriarchal pastor/reverend/minister. *Praise House* acts as an extension of the fluidity of that non-denominational space as these women’s live unfold without a male ‘gaze’. This is not to suggest that systems of patriarchy do not exist in the film, they do, and are exemplified through the mother’s labor as a dishwasher, struggling to provide for the home. Mama is constantly “worn” out, physically searching for peace; her personhood represents the conditions of reality in that she is condemned *by* and *in* it, she *is* the image of the actual or ‘reality’. The mother’s body is also the only body to convey the passing of time, for Hannah and Granny’s rituals pull them outside the legibility of the “representation” of linear time. Each time the sight takes hold, time becomes suspended in the image demonstrating ritual’s reflexive activity in the form of the film and the representational effect. With Mama, her wage labor--hourly and daily--puts time into her body; she has the before and after embedded in her appearance that is tiredness, weariness. Her body becomes the revealer of the deadline and Dash uses her presence to return audiences back into reality whenever she emerges (Deleuze 1989, 189). A clear break between these women is manifested for the audience where we begin to recognize how ritual frees Granny and Hannah from time and see how violent time’s burden lays upon Mama’s personhood.

The film mythologizes Minnie Evans and uses non-sequential editing, voice-over, aberrant sounds, and vignettes to unsettle the audience’s relationship with a traditional three-arc narrative (Act one—set up: exposition, inciting incident; Act two—confrontation: rising action, midpoint; Act three—resolution: pre-climax, climax, and denouement). The vignettes are especially unnerving as we, essentially, waft through the film rather than concretely move through a narrative with clear transitions. This effect conveys the film’s use of ritual where we

are pulled into the film through movement or force (and even at time through the force of the rituals conveyed onscreen) rather than pure narrative alone.

Zollar's narrative choreography for *Urban Bush Women's* production follows a long tradition of Black women's storytelling by embracing the linear and circular "to blur (or indeed simply refuse to accept) boundaries between theater, dance, storytelling, and ritual" (George-Graves 2010, 70). Like Dash, Zollar's work often relies upon the use of plurisignant texts in the tradition of Black women's literary practices, as Karla F. C. Holloway insightful article "Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African-American Women Writers" reminds us. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century literature produced by Black women often resists simple interpretation and usually deploy multiple expressions and fractured points of view from the characters giving way to ambiguity rather than absolute resolution. *Praise House's* formal aesthetics mobilize ritual to shift audience's perspectives of time and space, the vignette structure that dictates the film is the key technique that allows us to waft through time and space ultimately allowing us to be suspended in movement during key ritual scenes where we are able to feel the ritual through its form. Dash and Zollar utilize *Praise House* as a way to center, un/silence and work out the folklore of Black women across three generations by visualizing what they "know" and "see" about the world. Zollar has repeatedly stated that her practice is to "work it," a term she learned while studying improvisation and dance, meaning that in order to work through memory, to improvise, one must "take one movement and work it— explore it from all angles, try it out in different positions" a practice that is strikingly similar to effects of ritual (George-Graves 2010, 5).

The reflexive activity of ritual comes to the fore early on in the film when we are first introduced to Granny and Hannah's daily activities simultaneously. Granny narrates her life set



against the imagery of Hannah discovering and conjuring in a field as she converses with the angels. The grandmother states, “Hannah is my name and I paint pictures. Pictures of what I see. I was born to this blessed earth born with the gift of sight. Least ways as far as I can remember, I have had this gift. As a child, oh the gift it wore me.” The use of voiceover here with images to disorient narrative authority as well as sequential movement in time is reminiscent of how the practice of conjuring is also a way to collapse the “chorological distance that separates us from our mothers” (Pryse 1985, 4). Moreover, this use of simultaneity concludes with Hannah painting into thin air an image (inspired by Evan’s work) that emerges to the audience via computer technology. The use of early video technology troubles the ‘real’ in *Praise House* and demonstrates ritual’s power to affect the film (Figure 4.6). Reading the film for its ritual body centers sequences such as this, where the reflexive activity of affecting these and the film through ritual pulls us in to that movement of ritual’s labor where the work of depersonalization can begin.

*Praise House* presents this multi-generational tale as a link to the not so distant past and ways of knowing for Black women that emerge with it. Hannah, her mother, and Granny are not “exiled” bodies from the source of these conjuring abilities in the Caribbean but are the descendants of the new world in the United States striving through cultural production in the vein of the histories of the enslaved to make sense of this world. Although Hannah is directly linked to the power and gift of sight as her mother, she possesses the ability to conjure those visions into something visible, specifically through sporadic enactments of ritual. The first frame of Hannah is one where she is drawing a vision, trembling as her hands and torso convulsed from the severity of the practice.

Our first encounter with Granny is in communion with the spirits. Dash visually conjures the angles here to convey a key difference between Granny's relative ease with her sight as a conjurer compared to the intensity of ritual labor that Hannah enacts through drawing and dance. Hannah's body is defined by its process of relationality, she is constantly laboring for the audience and for her family (Thain 2017, 16). As audiences we are encouraged to view Hannah's body for its otherness, in that her 'center' lacks a fixed identity but rather a series of processes of senses that propel her to conjure forth the recollection images or other personhoods suspended in time. Her labor ritually brings communion to characters and the audience in that Hannah's violent embodiment of intensity enables a constant reservoir of a choreographic "replay to the [cultural] rites of [s]isterhood" (Spillers 1985, 163). If Hannah's rituals replay cultural rites for her family (in which her mother is in need of that affection) then the audience too is enraptured in the process of re-orienting our aesthetic kinship mode of relations in the process. The film makes good use of Hannah's ritual, for it mythologizes the life of Minnie Evans a twentieth century conjure artist.

Evans was born in in Pender County, North Carolina in 1892 and worked in several domestic and gatekeeper positions until her retirement at the age of eighty-two. In 1935, at the age of forty-three Evans had a vision where the voices called out to her and said, "why don't you draw or die?" Evans completed two drawings from that call, *My Very First* (Figures 4.7 & 4.8), and *My Second* are ink on paper pieces with abstract mapping that canvases the entire sheet. Evans was so terrified by the process of possession and translation that she would not pick up a crayon again until 1940 when she became possessed and would draw those aberrations (recollection images) manifesting before her for they would not cease (Lovell and Hester 1993, 4).

Evans' family thought she had "lost her mind" for the early periods of practice until they understood the acts of possession and could comprehend its force over her artistic production. In a post-screening discussion of *Praise House* held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019, Zollar stated that Evans would be considered schizophrenic today in Western Eurocentric terms however, it is important to know that she pursued the act of artistic vision (or conjure) regardless of financial compensation, or widespread visibility. The ritual—that is the translation for Evans of her visions—was the point that "there was something vital that was striving the need to create." To Zollar, Evans' practice was a model for her to ascertain how to translate narrative through the labor of the body in dance, transforming the narrative as ritual to conjure the essence of Evans to others. These dueling manifestations emerge in the body of Hannah who is carrying the sight and ways of knowing from a previous generation (her grandmother and artist Minnie Evans) to the work of dance.<sup>27</sup> Here, Zollar's specificity about Evans' perceived 'madness' names the stakes of the film: can we learn to relate with a mad Black woman in the world? And are we able to provide care for her? Ritual, the plunging into time and drawing audiences into the space of movement, seeing time spilt itself is Dash's way of not only drawing out our affective responses (being consumed by movement) but draws out a model of relationality to the characters and one another. For Dash, this looks like the emancipation of Black womanhood from colonial temporality.

Mama is firmly defined by her temporal placement in the film and rises as an opponent to Hannah and Granny's ritual labor, refusing to relate. Mama continually pulls Hannah out of her rituals by calling her name and pointing to the domestic and wage labor that needs to be done to get by in life. Again, the image of reality is not outside of the frame but composed within it where the virtual and narrative image of Hannah can confront its legibility through ritual.

Hannah's mother is burdened by labor practices that do not give back to her on the spiritual; she is presented as disconnected from the spiritual and her mother and mothers before her. This separation is exemplified in a vignette where Mama testifies to a group of church healers that Hannah's always talking about some vision and that "If I had a nickel for every dish I wash, I'd be set up. I'd have me a good life. Maybe I'd be able to have me one of those big visions for me," suggesting, as George-Graves writes, that Mama cannot literally afford the time and labor (the commitment to ritual) that the visions demand (George-Graves 2010, 78).

Dash and Zollar do not frame "the spiritual" of the church as opposition in the film when Mama tries to "right" Hannah through the healing power of God. Here, we see a strategic symbolic recoding where the otherworldly use of aberrant movement of Hannah parallels the movement of the healers and conjures the same angels. Hannah moves between both worlds as her mother testifies against her, unknown to Mama that Granny, Hannah, the healers, and the angels are all on the same side. Lovell reminds us that the practices of Hoodoo and the Black Southern Baptist church were often entwined as the same practice for many individuals. For Black artists in the Americas and Caribbean the spiritual practice (in either sense) travels between Africa and the New World and that their art must be understood in that context—that is the demonic ground constituted from enslavement (Lovell and Hester 1993, 5).

Granny departs this world halfway through the film. Just prior, Hannah communicates with Granny about their shared gifts—marking this as one of the few times Hannah uses speech (Figure 4.9). As Hannah brushes Granny's hair, she asks her about the gift of sight (to see the angels) and seeks guidance to comprehend the command they take on her body. Granny tells Hannah that these things have a "way of working themselves out." She then sings about the secret that exists in her hair and the gift that is shared between them and alerts her to her

impending death that she “will understand just where my world is gone,” before requesting her purple dress for the “angels are coming here this evening.” Once again, Granny’s riddles in speech and song carry meaning. Granny’s “formal” preparation for the angels is disrupted by Mama’s insistence that Hannah do the dishes and places Granny to bed, but they also signpost to the audience that ‘meaning’ is revealed through time and being immersed into time’s fracture where communion with the past can ushered to the fore of the present. This is just another example where Dash relies on more affective registers and actions to communicate the film to her audience rather than structure meaning as solely available in language, representation, and speech.<sup>28</sup>

After Granny’s passing, Mama and Hannah are left at odds with one another. Dash uses a vignette where Mama prays before a makeshift altar to save her daughter while Hannah partakes in a dance ritual in the graveyard with the angels. The scene features parallel shots of both the mama praying and Hannah dancing; this editing style here is usually deployed to suggest the scenes are happening simultaneously and that they are each other’s equal. This is of particular interest as both Mama and Hannah are performing rituals. However, Dash disrupts this simultaneity by inserting Mama’s body in the graveyard searching for Hannah; she is both praying for her daughter in her scene and exists in Hannah’s scene to guide her home and give Hannah her shoes after the angels take a more ambiguous hold of her body than in scenes past (Figure 4.10). If the shots of simultaneity exist, then the suggestion is that Mama’s ritual of prayer enabled her to find and help her daughter, foreshadowing the climax where it is revealed that Mama possesses the gift of sight and conjure (through dance) as well.

In his critical study on dance and movement in performance art André Lepecki situates performance artists’ use of dance as threat to dance’s tomorrow because it indicates a disruption

of dance's identity as being in flow through its lack of choreographed being. He writes, "Perception of a hiccupping in choreographed movement produces a critical anxiety; it is dance's very future that appears menaced by the eruption of kinesthetic stuttering" (Lepecki 2006, 1). Furthermore, Lepecki situates this anxiety as being one intimately connected with space, place, bodies and the history of colonialism. What I take from this is that spaces we inhabit and the memory that shapes those places affect and shape our being. Movement, specifically forms that produce a kinesthetic stuttering or aberration in dance through their use of cultural specificity to memory, hauntings, in relation to race, produces ways of disrupting and transforming, albeit momentarily, the choreography of space to move us closer to *being* in time, which is achieved through the ritual dance in the film and the form of ritual of the film.<sup>29</sup> *Praise House* is a dance ritual pulled from a variety of dramaturgical practices that include Zollar's archive of theatrical performance, a dance narrative working out forms of expressions and feelings from the dancers, and a negro ballet in the style of Katherine Dunham (Dee Das 2017, 25). Zollar trained in the Dunham technique while pursuing her studies at University of Florida before applying more theatrical, experimental, and social engagements with dance into her practice for Urban Bush Women.<sup>30</sup>

We see then elements of the rich pedagogical replay that Dunham meticulously researched to convey to an audience of how folklore did not just exist in an isolated region but often incorporated dance and movements into its oratory practices. Dunham frequently inscribed theory into her ballets as her aesthetics became her politics for her "dance technique, which emphasized the creative reimagining of tradition, demanded a place for people of African descent in the realm of the modern" (Dee Das 2017, 56). In her biography on Dunham, Joanna Dee Das theorizes that the form of Dunham's works carried the political disruption around Black

representation and folklore in the theaters in the United States as opposed to the content alone. She writes, “her seemingly neutral aesthetic choice to format the show as a revue ... allowed audience to travel without leaving their seats, on a journey of the imagination ... [h]er black audience could experience kinesthetic empathy on an egalitarian level, a crucial aspect to the development of a diasporic sense of transnational belonging” (Dee Das 2017, 56). The depth of Dunham’s investment is seen in her invaluable translation of the *ag’ya*.

The *ag’ya* is a Martinican dance, colloquially referred to as the Martinican fighting dance. As Dee Das writes it relies heavily upon dissociation of movement and improvisation, a reworking of one’s feelings to articulate to an audience (Dee Das 2017, 63). The general moves depict a turn not dissimilar from a pirouette with the leg firmly outstretched in turnout with flexed feet, a clear opposite of the tucked in form and divine lines of ballet. The leg firmly planted on the ground enabling the turn jumps and strikes a kick pose and the outstretched leg takes its former place as support. From there, various “fighting” moves and leaps are enacted against another opponent. In the *ag’ya*, the opponent usually goes low when its opponent “strikes,” creating a rhythm of endless weaving in and out of “aggressiveness” and “passiveness.”

Dunham’s construction of the *ag’ya* appear in *Praise House*, specifically in the climax where Hannah—after receiving a scolding from her mother for “surrendering” to her visions as oppose to the “necessary” work of labor—tries to resist the call from the angels against a frantically beating drum and the angels’ relentless chant, “There ain’t no turning back!” This last dance is more violent than the others, which carried a sense of jubilee or glee to them (with the exception of the graveyard dance). The angels forcefully grab Hannah and in turn draw out the tension of the gift is one that is mandated by force; there is no other way but to work through it

with the body. This knowledge is made pointedly clear as the film ends with Hannah's mother likewise being pulled by the ritual against her will. The Guardian Angel watching over these women throughout the film is there to comfort Mama through the process just as she was there to help Granny cross over. This symbolic coding of the violence of force and the angels' guidance suggests that although the process is violent, ultimately, the access to other ways of knowing are invaluable for Black life and are now possible for Hannah and her mother to pursue and work it out together. In turn this alters their familial relationship as Mama accepts the gift; it is now Hannah who must 'mother' her through that process. Again, the audience is caught up in this movement (the ritual body) and imbued with an alternative structure of care for others (and familial bonds) in through the intensity of the ritual (Figures 4.11 & 4.12).

Hannah works out the *ag'ya* as a movement in tandem with her internal struggle and response to that struggle. In Zollar's choreography we grasp specific Black folkloric movements in dialogue with the dancer's response to the narrative, the narrative arc, and improvisation. The ritual of the dance exemplifies the ambiguity of the gift of sight, in that the movements are never at ease but always convey some tension, the citation of the *ag'ya* is an exemplar of this ambiguity (why cite a "fighting dance" for angels?). The gift (as manifested through rituals)—be that through riddles, drawings, convulsions, or dance—is a form of communication and thus, knowledge production; we are pulled into this field of relations (the ritual body) through Hannah's evocation of it in the film.

The use of conjure in the film bridges a gap from the relative absence of speech produced by Hannah in the film and the fractured forms of communication that emerge through her practices of conjuring (as brought forth by the Dash and Zollar). Hannah rarely communicates through the forms of knowledge that her mother has inherited but can communicate through the



gift. Similarly, while Granny speaks, her speech is in riddles or in spontaneous songs, indiscernible to her daughter but comprehensive to the angels whom she sees. Granny's vocality follows this pattern as she weaves in and out of song, accompanied by some type of soundtrack—which, like the presence of the angels to the audience can be heard to us, suggesting the engagement with the angels is not because she's "crazy." When singing, her voice evokes the deep baritones emerging from southern spiritual tunes: "I crossing da river" is verbally dragged out to tremble the river into a much longer note than exists in its syllables. This is the song that slows our engagement with the singer and with time. Granny's vocal timbre when she is not singing is often several octaves higher than her singing voice, producing an almost childish quality to her presence that enables her daughter, Mama, to be dismissive and slightly patronizing of Granny's speech.

Hannah's silence and Dash's filmic shift to alternative forms of communication conceptualizes, in Wynter's terms, "un/silencing" or conjuring Caliban's woman (Wynter 1990, 363-64). To conjure Caliban's woman does not always mean manifesting her voice through speech but, as Wynter argues, utilizes poetics, like experimental filmmaking and ritual, to make an account of their lives visible to others. In this way, Hannah and Granny conjure up the communication of that silenced woman, including Evans whose work and life are reanimated in this film as a form of remembrance just only four years after her death in 1987. *Praise House* is an affirmation of Evans' life, her visions, and her conjuring skills and in so doing, provides a necessary way of learning about ways of 'meaning' that exists beyond our colonial framework. True to Spillers' diagram of ontogenic pursuit, *Praise House*'s architectonics submit the life of Evans to the circle of mythology to pull out the historical and temporal considerations that are made legible through a constant production of ritual. Evans' life becomes a speculative historical

account for Dash in that she understands history to be something that can “be reincarnated, recollected, its spirit given new life as living memory” (Mellencamp 1999, 100).

Ritual carries multiple reflexive properties in the film, for it commits an affection of the self by the self in Hannah and those around her, including the audience. Due to this, the climax of Hannah’s violent dance-ritual pulls Mama into the space of time where the weight of Granny’s troubles, Hannah’s, and other conjure women can be experienced and she can relate to them in a way that emphasizes care or awareness. This process transforms her and draws out her capacity to perform dance ritual as well. Zollar’s angel—the dutiful observer—glides in as an angel of time to ease the transformation within Mama and the audience. As the ritual intensifies with Mama it intensifies with us, overwhelming our relation with the images onscreen, Zollar’s presence shows us the mirror in a way that allows us to comprehend what is happening, has happened, and will happen within us. The ritual body enables us to more clearly recognize that reflective activity that pulls audiences into the form of ritual onscreen. It is this process where time is sensationalized and agency is made possible through the depersonalization of ourselves and the transformation of kin from an individual structure toward an ethics of communal care for others.

## **Conclusion**

Ritual shifts our attention from what something “means” to what something *is*, *does* and *is doing*. The ritual body then allows us to work with that space of possibility by shifting our attention to the reflexive activity of ritual that is its affection of self by self. This shift opens up a different relational exchange with ritual onscreen beyond the intended representation, one that is attendant to its movement and capacity to move themselves and its audience in time: to feel time as a life

process. In conjure culture the temporal past is the space of memories, mythology, the dead, and the living lie awaiting activation in the present through a ritual. To give into time's otherness through ritual is for a communal well-being, however intense that formation might take, its intent is to instill that life within us, becoming a memory in the process. Bringing the ritual body to the fore in my analysis of *Praise House*, extends that well-being to rethink our kinship relations with others not based on familial ties or likeness but based on movement of existing in the depths of time together. The reflexive activity of the dance rituals in both *Four Women* and *Praise House* additionally draws out a state of otherness for others in pursuit of alternative ways of being for Black womanhood that free the body in time. This enactment and ritual of otherness is precisely the type of conjuring power needed imagine Caliban's woman to an audience.

Ritual's power of affection demonstrates the role and power of movement and the sense in shifting our ability to relate to one another. In a ritual we are captivated by the conjurer's dispossession of their self in time, their ability to pull out lives and myths from pure recollection and place their body into a state of otherness to do this labor as seen in *Four Women*. Spillers reminds us, ritual's power resides in the idea that a community can be transfixed by a notion whose intent is movement to startle the senses. Movement is literal, erratic, and is understood through the time as a life process. This clear depersonalization both on the part of the conjurer and the audience imbues a different type of ethics of care and concern through feeling. On one hand there is care for the conjurer meeting and embodying the recollection-images of time on our behalf. On the other, there is our encounter with the recollection-images of time conjured to impart meaning to aide our present circumstances. These dual effects not only define the reflexive activity of ritual but also its centering of movement as the space where we can feel and relate with time. This new mode of relationality exceeds what we can learn from the

representational image of ritual alone in film. The ritual body mobilizes that power in service of Caliban's woman and the alteration of how we think and make kin in the world. This is an ethics of care.

Both *Four Women* and *Praise House* is an exemplary Black feminist experimental film to read for the ritual body. Julie Dash's intentional Black feminist direction mobilizes ritual in pursuit of emancipating Black women's personhood in time. In *Four Women*, L. Martina Young and Dash enact a ritual of depersonalization that enables Young to live the lives of these four distinct women to the audience. This is not mythology one can learn must be live. To live myth, anotherness, an ancestor, or a deity is to embody their image to others, in so doing this image becomes a memory in the ritualist and the audience. For we see Dash convey to the audience, through the film's aesthetics, Young's transformation through possession from these women, notably with Peaches. In *Praise House*, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and the Urban Bush Women, as collaborators with Dash, become the agents who use their bodies through dance rituals to draw out other states of Black womanhood, physically, from time that exceed the stratification of the wage-laboring body that our personhood is frequently collapsed as being. The dance ritual's power imbues an ethics of care for one another as they violently enter these states of anotherness in pursuit of this collective aim of well being for Black womanhood. We see that the effects of this ethics of care transforms the kinship relations where the Guardian Angel and Hannah must attend and nurture Mama through her fit. This effect becomes a model for the audience to follow and we enter the space of movement with them. Additionally, I analyzed *Praise House* for its intentional citation of the conjure woman (through the mythologizing of Minnie Evans) in pursuit of its ritual aims.

Conjure women are extraordinary figures who make tangible how sensations and affect contribute to knowledge production in the world. This sensational effect enables them to “recover feeling, memory, extension, generosity, and receptivity—those elements that cluster under the name of compassion, here played in communal remembrance of the ancestors—just as the body once enslaved is now set free to readdress the world” (Spillers 1985, 171). The ritual body, then, allows us to read this process and interpret its affective power in ourselves. The effect is an attempt to not only name and transform our kinship with one another but to introduce a new affective, caring mode of intellectual relationality into the field, what I have named as Caliban’s woman, with the form of film being the battleground for this process to take flight.

The following chapter shifts our focus to more concretely defining the counter-poetics of rhythm using key Black feminist experimental film and video to map out its definition and use in film. I return to the recollection-image and mythology there to examine the circuit of memory in Black feminist experimental film and video. Memory is not a foundation for time and recollection images to spurn forth form but rather is a circuit (albeit a central one) of time. The counter-poetics of rhythm as I have used sparsely throughout this study refers to the unmaking of the poetics of *Man* seen and felt in Black feminist experimental film and video art. Rhythm, as Katherine McKittrick argues in building upon the work of Wynter, is the aesthetic principle of work that underlies the anticolonial pursuit of liberation in Black cultural production (McKittrick 2016, 80). For rhythm is a learned communicative structure that can be deployed as a pedagogical tool for remembering cultures, bodies, and customs that have been long lost, and for those that are still practiced. I argue there that the counter poetics of rhythm grids the deployment of mnemonic aberration in Black feminist experimental film and video seen

throughout this study and names the poetic rebellion and experimental aesthetics against *Man* that emerge in this body of work.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Luisah Teish uses Voodoo, which, as discussed in “Kinship with the Dead,” encompasses conjure culture practices in New Orleans. There’s Hoodoo which is the larger Black Southern American interpretation transformed to meet the living conditions of the enslaved—emphasizing private, personal ceremonies that do not require a large gathering. And there’s Kélé a practice in St. Lucia which bears large traces of the Chango cult rituals from Yoruban spiritually. practices initially in the deep South during Enslavement before spreading to pockets of Black communities across the nation after the Great Migration at the turn of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> See Sylvia Wynter’s work, specifically “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, It’s Overrepresentation—An Argument” (2003) and “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism” (1984).

<sup>3</sup> In Billops’s 1977 interview with photographer James Van der Zee (born 1886, died 1983), she asks him about the myths of women and magic in Black communities at the turn of the twentieth century, “Did you feel that women practiced some kind of magic on men or had control of them or something?” to which Van der Zee responds, “Some women, as I said, have more influence than others.” Furthermore, Hazzard-Donald provides a useful glossary on Hoodoo rituals and customs. In this glossary she describe the origins of the still practiced “jumping the broom” which, although forgotten, is actually a test to prove that the bride is not a witch before the wedding ceremony can commerce. It was believed that a witch would have to count the straws on the broom before she could jump over it. As an aside, I encouraged a family friend many moons ago to count the straws on her broom during her ceremony before jumping it, much to the bewilderment of her guests.

<sup>4</sup> Trotsky, though, recognizes the foolishness of his comrades for not investing in cinema sooner as he foreshadows its ability to be used for the purpose of propaganda and that if not weaponized by the socialist state or the revolutionary, cinema will be the very medium that will secure their oppression and sedate the masses in the same way the church (in his argument) pacifies a labor force from questioning the order of the world.

<sup>5</sup> I affirm ritual practices in more collective spiritual practices, towards those more abject, demonic environments that allow for a destratification of the body to emerge and in so doing re-orient our sense of care and kinship with one another that is not predicated based on the same ‘spiritual governance of institutions’. One of the central differences between the Baptist Church and conjure culture (outside of the obvious difference of the institution of the Church) lies with the latter’s amplification of communal well-being over individual salvation. In conjure culture there is nothing for anyone to be saved *from* spiritually (in that we are not perceived as eternally dammed creatures that need to enter the sanctity of the church; we simply are natural beings affected by hardship) but rather the desire to seek immanence for the betterment of our communities and in turn ourselves I mention the Baptist Church here for it is an institution (along with Caribbean Catholicism) that helped preserved many of our erased traditional rituals and cultural customs in the guise of Christianity. The rituals of a Baptist Church vary greatly from other non-denominational Christian churches in the United States. We see this is the use of speaking in tongues,

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catching the holy ghost, eating gizzards during communion (this is a very watered down version of the blood rites practiced in Haitian Voodoo where participants eat guts for access to the ancestral past. In Baptist Church it is in place of the cracker or waif that serves as the body of Christ. My childhood Baptist Church partook in this ritual) and the like. While there is much to be said and has been said about the smuggling of rituals into Black Christianity, I want to note here that the institution of the church is still patriarchally-rooted as make a demand to take the ritual out and into other spaces of shared communion and fellowship that are not predicated upon patriarchal salvation. See Katherine Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo-Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2013) and Ashon T. Crawley's *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Toni Cade Bambara's introduction as well as bell hooks's interview with Julie Dash for the companion book to *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). In addition a wealth of articles have been published on Julie Dash's relationship with ritual, largely pulling from her film *Daughters of the Dust*, following its citation in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. See Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah L. Martin's introduction for the *Lemonade Reader* (2019) which effectively summarizes the 'new' interest in ritual and Dash's work being conducted.

<sup>7</sup> See "Outing the Black Feminist Filmmaker in Julie Dash's *Illusions*" by Judylyn S. Ryan (2004), Patricia Mellencamp's "Making History: Julie Dash" (1999), bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women Spectators" (1992), and Jacqueline Bobo *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995).

<sup>8</sup> See Douglas Kellner "Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation," 95-107, in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Solomon's work speaks to this feature. Moreover, when scholars attempt to work through director's who had a preternatural relationship with mysticism, many fall short of mobilizing that magic potential in their analysis beyond mere acknowledgement of its presence. Lucy Fischer's essay on Maya Deren is a clear example of this tactic.

<sup>10</sup> I find Hurston's transcription of a conjurer to be very powerful for the way she captures how conjurers were perceived in their communities.

Why he was a man dat was more'n a man. He was big and strong like Big Sixteen and he was two-headed. He knowed all de words dat Moses used to make. God give 'im de power to bring den ten plagues and part de Red Sea. He had done seen de Smokey Mountatin and de Burnin' Bush. And his head didn't have no hair on it, and it sweated blood all de time. Dat's why he was named Raw head.

A definition for "two-headed" doctor is provided in a footnote in this passage, "He was a conjure doctor. They are always referred to as 'two-headed doctors,' i.e. twice as much sense" (165n2).

<sup>11</sup> Worth mentioning here, is Maya Deren's own articulation of ritual where she situates herself as an expert with access to the images present in time and is quoted in Lucy Fischer's article "The Eye for Magic: Maya and Méliès," "[I]n the dimensions of the real [the magician/artist] creates the manifestations of the apparently non-real which is always astonishing to those who do not admit of the existence of always apart from the limits of their own intelligence" (Fischer 2001, 197). Fischer misreads Deren's emphasis on the specialized knowledge of conjurers as elitist (197). This is unsurprising as many spiritualist making demands of their specialized knowledge are often labeled as such, by which I do believe Deren was a spiritualist in the larger Voodoo practices. See Martina Kudláček's excellent documentary, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2001).

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<sup>12</sup> I would be remiss if I did not mention the work of Katherine McKittrick and her recovery and use of demonic ground in her study *Demonic Ground: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006). This body of work around geography is not used in this chapter for my interest to argue for a temporal relation that shifts our attention from space to movement in order to sensationalize time. I do not believe that McKittrick's work in *Demonic Ground* is against such a reading but rather that is not closely connected to my argument on cinema and ritual here. McKittrick's work on Wynter, rhythm, and Black cultural production is central to my argument on the counter-poetics of rhythm elsewhere in this study.

<sup>13</sup> I find the manifestation of Caliban's woman to bear similarities with Teish's ritual of conjuring a "generic" African woman to supplement what we know to have been but does not exist in literature or history. This conjuring of a woman gives a name, life story, existence, clothes, and memory to a woman in time in order to aide on our journey in life. Teish writes,

It may be difficult for women raised in the West to understand the life of the African woman ... [i]t is true that the African woman works hard and fights hard, but she also has a colorful life full of myth, music, ritual, and honor. In order to facilitate an understanding of her inner life, I will now create a generic West African woman. She is based on my knowledge of African culture and the personal experiences that sisters from the Motherland have chosen to share with me. I will call this generic woman *Iyalode*. (Teish 1985, 71)

<sup>14</sup> Wynter writes,

In consequence if, before the sixteenth century, what Irigaray terms as "patriarchal discourse" had erected itself on the "silenced ground" of women, from then on, the new primarily silenced ground (which at the same time now enables the partial liberation of Miranda's hitherto stifled speech), would be that of the majority population-groups of the globe—all signified now as the 'native' (Caliban's) to the "men" of Prospero and Fernando, with Miranda becoming both a co-participant, if to a lesser *derived*, extent, in the power and privileges generated by the empirical supremacy of her own population; and as well, the beneficiary of a mode of privilege unique to her, that of being the metaphysically invested and "idealize" object of desires for all classes (Stephano and Trinculo) and all population-groups (Caliban).

<sup>15</sup> Space does not permit me to fully contextualize this piece as a screendance. My analysis on *Four Women* will contextualize ritual's embodied presence by focusing on how dance becomes the conduit for filmic ritual. Due to my specific intentions of deploying *Four Women* to examine what ritual *is* in service of a larger argument on the ritual body, I do not have the space to elaborate on the rich archive of dance as and in ritual, especially in film. I return to dance as ritual practice and its power in my concluding analysis in this chapter on Dash's *Praise House*.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze clarifies this distinction of the crystal-image, as an image of time whereas dream images are pulled from the psychological and its variations. He writes,

The virtual image (pure recollection) is not a psychological state or consciousness: it exists outside of consciousness, in time, and we should have no more difficulty in admitting the virtual insistence of pure recollections in time than we do for the actual existence of non-perceived objects in space. What causes our mistake is that recollection-images, and even dream-images or dreaming, haunt a consciousness which necessarily accords them a capricious or intermittent allure, since they are actualized according to the momentary needs of this consciousness. (Deleuze 1989, 80)

<sup>17</sup> Deren's collaboration with Beatty has also been read as an excursion of racial emancipation to construct a new vision of modernity. See Terri Geis, "'Death by Amnesia': Maya Deren, Egypt, 'Racial' Memory," *Dada/Surrealism* 19 (2013): 1-14.



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<sup>18</sup> Spillers aims in this essay were to introduce a sect of readers to a novel that was out of print for nearly fifteen years and raise the critical task of analyzing and historicizing the aesthetic craft of the novel as reflective of the non-linear position of the Caribbean Black body as *Other* to *Man*.

<sup>19</sup> This is strikingly similar to the work of Sylvia Wynter's argument that it is the myth of *Man* that constitutes its power for its origins lie in the falsity of a spilt from 'divinity' to rationality, thus masking arguments on the poetics of *Man* as built on an origin of its eternal opposite, the *Other* as doomed to eternal damnation. Each narrative of *Man* serves to reiterate its poetics, which are based on not being *and* sharing a hatred of its *Other* (Wynter 1984, 27).

<sup>20</sup> I am thinking here of Spillers's work in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" where the Moynihan Report as a mode of discourse structures the negation of kinship against Black womanhood, specially Black mothers (Spillers 1987, 66).

<sup>21</sup> "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1994, 2).

<sup>22</sup> Keenly, Simone's turn to mythology in the song's inception also points to the rich reservoirs of Black musicality that began to blueprint ritual acts before we picked up a camera. Sadly, space does not permit to be as detailed with my analysis on Nina Simone and "Four Women" as I would like.

<sup>23</sup> Teish summarizes dance rituals as breaking through the barrier of time to honor the spirits for they can impact our consciousness by offering wisdom and assistance (Teish 1985, 69).

<sup>24</sup> Here, I am thinking of Thomas Carlyle's work on the hero as a lone, divinely ordained individual who possesses visuality to lead the people as well as Nicolas Mirzoeff's brilliant critique of visuality in "On Visuality" (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Although Dash continues to struggle to receive financial backing for feature films following her, still sole, theatrical release, *Daughters of the Dust*, she has maintained somewhat steady directorial work in television. Like several other women from the L.A. Rebellion, Pamela Jones and Carrot Parrot Blue come to mind, Dash has accumulated a solid resume (if still not near expansive as her male colleagues) through directing television episodes (most recently with *Queen Sugar* [2016-]), made for television films (*Subway Stories* [1997] and *The Rosa Parks Story* [2002] ) and a few shorts for public television channels like KCTA TV.

<sup>26</sup> We see this in films like *Illusions*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and her (unproduced) script for *Digital Diva*. "*Digital Diva* is about a young [B]lack woman who is a third-generation computer encryption specialist. She's the digital diva. Her grandfather was a mathematical genius who worked for the Allies during World War II. And her father, a Carnegie Mello Fellow, was a Black Panther" (Dash and Martin 2007, 5).

<sup>27</sup> Hannah becomes a the very re-invention of the flesh that Wynter argues is made possible through a counter-poetics of rhythm.

<sup>28</sup> Granny requests Hannah to brush her hair. Nadine George-Graves astutely points to the intimacy of the request that combing a Black woman's hair provides a direct link of intergenerational communion, and is one that Zollar has choreographed in her other pieces in her oeuvre like *Hair Stories* (2001-present). Zollar stated in the post-screening discussion that the "hair vignette" manifests the dynamic of bodily labor and interpersonal relationship required to interact and convene with Black women, as "You just don't let anyone touch your hair" (Zollar 2019). The framing of this scene features several tight shots of

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Hannah brushing/working with Granny's tight curls. These shots are similar to the opening shots of Mama washing the dishes and an unnamed individual shaving ice as Mama waits for the bus. The similarities of these shots suggests that Dash is interested in drawing out the social, interpersonal dynamics of domestic Black labor alongside questions of wage labor in society while also linking that the ritual's reflexive activity if transformative to Mama can shift our attention from the actual toward the virtual, the recollection images of time.

<sup>29</sup> The practice of conjure is to draw attention to the pluri-conceptual work that make up Black cultural production. In a similar tactic Zollar's hybrid dramaturgical-driven style of dance that is performed in *Praise House* relies on traditional three-arc narrative form in addition to vignettes and practices like breaking the fourth wall to convey narrative progression that circumvent linear time and form.

<sup>30</sup> I am fascinated by the threads of connection on conjuring that bring my back to Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Maya Deren. Additionally, time does not permit me in this study to draw out interpersonal relationship these women shared with one another in their work and partnerships in anthropology, literature, dance, and film.

## Chapter Five

### Freedom From the Memory of *Man*: The Aesthetics and Analysis of the Counter-Poetics of Rhythm In Black Feminist Film and Video Art

#### Introduction

This chapter foregrounds and expands Black feminist experimental filmmakers' construction of memory outside of the "normative consciousness in whose terms [they] are both socialised and at the same time, prescriptively subordinated." Memories culled from outside of this totalizing system not only engender a new consciousness but mark an uprising in form and embodiment as a result (Wynter 2000, 39). The use of memory in Black feminist experimental film and video is not just a deployment of personal memory but rather the emergence of consciousness that affirms Black womanhood within a system of racialized sexist and homophobic violence enacted against them. Memory, as a form of consciousness, is an agential power and cultivating a memory outside of our normative consciousness can kinetically transform the body altering our cognitive schema. Through these new memories, we feel ourselves differently and in that feeling possess an alternative to our subjugated status of *how things are* to rebel against that structure. In order for such consciousness to emerge, these film and video makers must enact a mnemonic aberration to embrace liminal states of existence to name the mythological origins that structure their negation and to invent something outside of that system.

My argument is that consciousness can only be lived and is not something that one can obtain via ocular motor sense alone. We must have an embodied model of difference in order to enact difference and know what difference feels like. Memory shapes our cognitive schema and instills within us a mode of how to act in the world. My turn to alterity is to pull out those other

memories from the living and dead, what Katherine McKittrick describes as those who reinvented their lives within a system of anti-Blackness, to embody that memory *in* action. To invent a consciousness free from *Man* we must embody a reinvented life, “One cannot reinvent the human without rebellious inventions and rebellious inventions require reinvented lives” (McKittrick 2016, 81n6). I conduct several film analyses to uncover how Black feminist experimental filmmakers write consciousness or, following Wynter, a memory of freedom into their aesthetics rather than their representation. This consciousness constitutes a rebellious invention through a mnemonic aberration. The films that I analyze in this chapter are *Dreaming Rivers* [Dir. Martina Attille, 1989] *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* [Dir. Leah Gilliam, 1995] and *Memory Tracks* [Dir. Jamika Ajalon, 1997]. I selected these films for they best reflect the construction of consciousness outside of the memory of *Man* through the film and video’s aesthetic rhythm. I work largely through Sylvia Wynter’s second seminal text on cinema (following “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice” [1992]), “Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man” (2000) to situate how a memory of freedom (beyond *Man*) names the construction of a mnemonic aberration. I examine how consciousness, as constructed in the film’s aesthetics, becomes an example of the counter-poetics of rhythm. I utilize Wynter’s argument in concert with Kara Keeling’s construction of the memory-image, which defines how cinematic images shape and influence our perception of Blackness. And, I use McKittrick’s argument on Black rhythm-making as a rebellious invention that transforms our cognitive schema to instill anti-colonial life forces affectively. I work with these concepts to consider how key Black feminist experimental film and video works articulates a mnemonic aberration to produce a consciousness that affirms Black humanity. For we should consider, how does one constitute a self in face of a reality that one is both condemned *by* and *in*

it? (Wynter 2000, 30). And which methods are available for them to do such work beyond representation?

Time in our normative consciousness is money. When I write that a mnemonic aberration frees us from the memory of *Man*, I am advocating for a recoding of how we live time to move from *Man*'s accumulative status of earning income and "goods" toward a structure of inter and intrapersonal care. The memory of *Man* is what currently grounds our sense-motor capacities and how we perceive the world. It is more than just an intellectual breach to combat this memory but rather a breach against how we assemble our bodies—our cognitive schema. Rhythm, as employed through conjure culture, brings a temporality that carries with each beat an associated practice of alterity, recoding time as a life process. Rhythm shifts our conception of time as money to time as a lived experience, an expansive force that generates affect. Time as a life process is precisely what we need to then free ourselves symbolically from the linearity and violence of colonial temporality. Our current normative construction determines our mythologies and kin relations. In this this social imaginary, how we live it is filtered through the matrix of anti-Blackness wherein Black lives bear an alienated status, negated from the conception of the human (Wynter 2000, 28-29). Our current memory of *Man* then codes kin relations not only through the negation of Black life but through initiation rituals of anti-Blackness like lynching, rape, beatings, subjugated labor, and more (McKittrick 2016, 82) What violence! Sylvia Wynter asserts that *Man* has submitted a global audience to its ethno-class status of commodity culture as *being* in the world (Wynter 1976, 87). This ethno-class status turns accumulation into an ethic-principle of life where humanness is only achieved through the capacity to own with a racialized poor population serving as a the ultimate objects to be "owned" by *Man* (Wynter 1976, 86). Rhythm's unique structure of conjuring associative practices with each beat in time is what

helps us remember and invent alternative ways of living that affirm Blackness. I turn this practice into an ethic-aesthetic, the counter-poetics of rhythm, to name how Black feminist experimental film and video construct memory that is a freedom from *Man*.

In “Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture,” Wynter names the above inquiries as the overarching problems of the cinematic text in relation to the production of the memory of *Man* (Wynter 2000, 30). She argues that we are aesthetically already subjugated by a system of symbols that work in overwhelming opposition to Black womanhood. To restate in this chapter, *Man* is borne out of the mutation of divinity, carrying the same symbolic meaning of Christianity into the representational body of secular rationality that birthed terrible evils into the world through its forcible collision with other nations and cultures (Wynter 2000, 31). This includes three:

remarkable monstrosities—the slave trade, colonialism and imperialism ... fascism and Nazism ... that is so because the West was to be itself submitted to the same memory to which it would submit the rest of the world. It was to be the that same memory that would lead, on the other side of the equation, to equally unimaginable achievements in many field. These achievements included , central, the field of technology out of which the cinema was to emerge. (Wynter 2000, 29)

Wynter labels those technological achievements as further conduits that transmit the same memory of *Man* to others on a global scale. Cinema is the most effective in ensuring the submission of a single memory to a population; its process of transmitting images that reiterate a past restated differently or similarly in the present is a way to retain the code of *Man* (Wynter 2000, 29). Our perception or ability to read images has been altered through this memory in that cinema can and has produced the same social reality to its audiences and maintained that social

reality as the norm for our social imaginary and reality (Keeling 2007, 12). To free ourselves from the memory of *Man* concerns the production of a new consciousness and agency for it requires a reinvention of oneself within a system that symbolically and physically structures our negation. This reinvention must utilize symbols beyond our normative consciousness (for our present symbols work against the autonomy of our being) and require imaginative and inventive constructions of a reality to make the concept of Black humanity a reality. Cinema, then, equally presents a formidable defense against the memory of *Man* for its power to alter our symbolic codes, consciousness, and our social, familial, and physical kinship structures to affirm Black humanity through cinema's ability to generate affect (Wynter 2000, 58-59).

These inventions become rebellious activities against the memory of *Man* for they recode time in their work not as the petrified structure of linearity that names colonial temporality (in which the memory of *Man* is a crucial circuit) but rather as affective realm of alterity where time becomes a life process (McKittrick 2016, 87).<sup>1</sup> Time as life process in this argument is another way of speaking about time through its affective registers of sense making this ultimately shifts our awareness of knowledge distribution in that some memories cannot be 'learned' via text but rather must be lived. I constitute Black feminist experimental film and video as an invention from the reinvention of a people where:

reinvention is the process through which enslaved and postslavery black communities in the New World came to live and construct black humanity within the context of racial violence—a range of rebellious acts that affirmed black humanity and black life were and are imperative to reinvention. *Invention* is meant to signal those cultural practices and texts—marronages, mutinies, funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music making and listening, revolts—that emerged alongside reinvented

black lives ... One cannot reinvent the human without rebellious inventions, and rebellious inventions require reinvented lives.

Inventions like Black experimental feminist film and video exists dynamically alongside the production of consciousness for the director where memory, as pulled from beyond this world, is not just a representational image but an aesthetic construction that affects our cognitive schema of knowing in the world.

Kara Keeling's image of common sense compliments Wynter's argument on memory nicely in this chapter for the way she further thinks through the application of memory and how it affects our perception. Building off the work of Deleuze, Keeling analyzes the cinematic as "the influence of cinema and the image and the effects that both of these have on society's accepted notions of people" (Mayne 2011, 165). Keeling, like Wynter, argues that cinema has been the greatest deployment of imagery of anti-Blackness and well as the instrument by which Black humanity can craft insurgent social realities through its form. Keeling's thesis centers the cinematic image of the Black femme, who analogously is read as the witch's flight in that her presence (whether visible or not) exposes the formulation of racialized, sexist, homophobic and, I would add, transphobic cinematic images through the alternative social realities she exists within (Keeling 2007, 1-2).

In *The Witch's Flight*, Keeling foregrounds films with broad circulation of distribution and popular audience to examine how the medium can construct a social reality that ensures the survival of the image of the Black femme. The Black femme as a multifaceted character is not a tangible, fleshed out, body in her study but rather emerges through slippages in mainstream films like *Set it Off* [Dir. F. Gary Gray, 1996] and *Eve's Bayou* [Dir. Kasi Lemmons, 1997]. The liminality of the Black femme, emerging only through the gaps of the cinematic image (be that a



silent woman in *Set it Off*, or a vague reference in *Eve's Bayou*), is what expresses an alternative social reality is present within this image and others. Keeling writes, “because she often invisible (but nonetheless present), when she becomes visible, her appearance stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different, or differently” (Keeling 2007, 2). Thus, the Black femme in *The Witch's Flight* is a representational figure for difference to our normative social imaginary conveyed through Black queer womanhood onscreen. This attendance to Black queer womanhood's difference is something I return to in the queer video art of Leah Gilliam and Jamika Ajalon analyzed at the end of this chapter. The Black femme mounts an interruption to our normative sense-making process and how we remember time—what Keeling describes as common-sense (Keeling 2007, 5). She describes common-sense as “a collective set of memory-images available for memory to direct onto a perception carved out according to a collective moto habituation” (Keeling 2007, 18). Common-sense in Keeling's argument shares a relationship with memory in this study for it describes how we are subjugated to a system of sense-making rather than invent systems as we exist. Put another way, we inherent perception and ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling in the world through the memory of *Man* and breaking that requires rebellious inventions of being. For Keeling, this is the work of the witch's flight in cinema. I extend that construction and instead turn to film and video with limited distribution circulation as the index of rebellious memory of the freedom from *Man* that alters our cognitive schema and perception.

McKittrick convincingly writes in “Rebellion/Invention/Groove” that the creation of *Man* necessitated anti-Blackness to produce an alienated life in which all aspects of human life came to understand the cognitive recognition and feeling of Blackness as negation (McKittrick 2016, 82). This is to say that the construction of consciousness in Black feminist experimental film

must affectively and well as aesthetically attend to the overwhelming negation of Black humanity that is embedded in our symbolics and humanness. This work necessitates the push to liminal zones of *being* to exercise self-determination by another means. Critically, inventions that center affective registers affirm Black humanity and equally refuse anti-Blackness in their production of consciousness. They demonstrate how affect—if already present in the aesthetics of anti-Blackness—must also be utilized to alter a new conception of relating with one another through feeling. This is what constitutes the recoding of time as a life force in the inventions by Black feminists in this study (McKittrick 2016, 90). McKittrick points to how rhythm is uniquely suited as conduit of rebellious invention for the way in which it alters our senses, we vibrate and move with the beats and the associative cultural practices mnemonically conveyed to the groove.<sup>2</sup>

*Mnemonic Aberrations* foregrounds how memory emits the feeling of black refusal to anti-Blackness. McKittrick describes this memory as an invention that emerges from a reinvented life who have created agency within structures of anti-Blackness that negate their humanity. In the work of the film and video gathered here we experience a shift from thought to feeling in our perception and engagement with memory. As Wynter argues the memory of *Man* structures how we exercise our sense of self in the world in which agency is conceived through accumulation but critically the financial value achieved through commodity culture that is producing and subjugating a labor force. Memory that frees us from *Man* comes from liminal spaces outside what we know, think, and feel in the world. In previous chapters, this space has been defined as that of Caliban's woman achieved through the labor of ritual and the affection of the specter. Alongside that work, this chapter centers, then, not the labor or conceptual naming of that place of alterity but, rather, the consciousness or memory that is written into the film's

aesthetics. Throughout this study, experimental film has been examined for its disavowal of aesthetics as we know, its normative order. I now want to examine how memory is marshaled in these films to challenge the memory of *Man*. I conceive of memory here to be agency that emerges through the deep rhythmic associative acts of conjure culture. I analyze three films in the chapter with each director using memory, in ‘technically’ different ways, to draw out time as a life process as they construct a new consciousness for themselves and their audiences around Black womanhood.

I first analyze *Dreaming Rivers* for its use of the third space, between life and death, as a suspension of time where the protagonist Miss T manifests her consciousness to the audience to give an image and name to her existence. I analyze how the rhythm of a suppressed culture emerges in time to aide Miss T on her journey to the other side. But far from being utilized as background ‘noise’, rhythm affectively grids the autobiography of Miss T’s life through her embodiment, memories, trinkets, and the distant voices of St. Lucia in the film. Director Martina Attille, through Miss T’s ‘dreams,’ manifests the geographical activities of Black culture on St. Lucia to the fore of the cinematic image in *Dreaming Rivers*. Film enables a temporal return home for Miss T rather than a physical or spatial return in that her dreams evoke the memories and feeling of St. Lucia rather than represent the island. Attille fashions consciousness for Black womanhood enclosed by anti-Black patriarchal structures to demonstrate a life that had *lived* in face of a structure that denied her right to a *life* (Wynter 2000, 30).

In my analysis of *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, I examine the citations and ‘doubles’ of the Sapphire detectives as, what Keeling argues, memory-images of Black womanhood. Keeling defines memory-images as a collective of images available that follow a prescribed sensory motor function that assuage the experience of perception by reminding audiences of images

similar to it or that those images, in fact, repeat dominant clichés in society (Keeling 2007, 18). These citations repeatedly mutate themselves in time in the film, changing clothes, appearances, and bodies to convey a shared transformation of queer Black womanhood that constructs itself in spite of colonial closure of time, where we are ‘known’ by and through controlling images (stereotypes). I read how rhythm in the film as a pluri-construction of *being* parallels the queer multitudes of Sapphires spreading in the film to construct a commons that is temporally structured rather than spatially. This is to say that film’s sequentiality is determined rhythmically. Each appearance of a Sapphire and citation brings a soundtrack with them that shifts our focus from a plot-driven structure to what scholar Carol Vernallis, writing on music videos, describes as images constructed to “initiate sound’s ebb and flow and its indeterminate boundaries.” Such images allow for a free for all engagement with the images onscreen, insofar as there are no clear predetermined images to accompany the beats of a song, so any visual can be foregrounded at any time (Vernallis 2004, 44).

Lastly, I read *Memory Tracks* for its use of the specter of the revolutionary past coming as a source of aid to the protagonist and the audience. I return to methods utilized in “Kinship with the Dead” that situate the specter’s appearance as a source of agency for the living in helping us make ourselves outside of the structures of anti-Blackness. The liminality of *Memory Track’s* central character, a mad woman, produces an image of self-recovery in her pursuit of agency. I analyze the film for its centering of difference and the spectrality of the dead as a metaphor of tearing the veil between this world and the next to manifest the space of awareness beyond coloniality. Moreover, I examine how aesthetically Jamika Ajalon uses the gaze to name the cinematic memory of *Man* and her opposition to that image and its production. The specter in *Memory Tracks* imparts a memory of freedom to our protagonist, giving her an oppositional gaze

to look back at the viewer and construct herself (within a system that condemns her body through racism, sexism, and homophobia structuring her personhood in the world) in her own terms, through a mnemonic aberration. The protagonist reinvents the flesh through rebellious affective means where music, jazz wafts our protagonist through the film and lures us into the construction of what is happening onscreen. Before turning my attention to these film analyses, I want to briefly reiterate my claims and use of mnemonic aberrations in this study.

### **Mnemonic Aberrations**

In the previous chapter, I analyzed ritual for its reflexive activity in shifting audiences to feel time, through ritual's process of placing audiences into a space of movement. I used this to construct the ritual body as a vehicle by which we can ascertain ritual's reflexive activity and discuss that power in corporeal terms, which shift us to more affective means of sense-making and knowing in society. Ritual, like the specter before it, points to alterity of being and the methods available to us to pursue liminality in order to construct a consciousness outside of coloniality. However fleeting this process might be, it enables us to see the code that names our condemnation. For Wynter, the pursuit of alterity is a pedagogical tactic in that the pursuit of alterity or liminality (she uses the terms interchangeably at times in her book *Do Not Call Us Negroes* [1992c]) addresses how discourse mobilizes and enforces anti-Blackness.<sup>3</sup> Alterity, then, can “empower us to free ourselves from the ‘categories and prescription’ of our specific order and from its ‘generalized horizon of understanding’” (Wynter 1992c, 27).

I use alterity here in line with otherness in the previous chapter for the way it designates heterogeneity and an outsideness to our colonial normative order of what is human. With those terms and stakes clarified, I want to restate the term mnemonic aberrations for it

speaks to the inventions constructed in this chapter that I then mobilize in my film analysis. The use of memory becomes a device—mnemonic—for it signals the agent-centered work of their artistic practice that is memory not forged from this world but from the other spaces. This turn to liminality constructs what is not remembered in colonial time to push against the conception that Black life emerges coterminous with Western Eurocentricity—meaning that negation is the only aesthetic symbolic coding through which we exist and come to know ourselves in the world. This is not an argument for a return to precolonial cultures via memory. This *is* an argument that considers *where* we pull our memory from, by which we come to know ourselves; these must come from some other space not governed by the codings of negation.

How and where we construct consciousness cinematically is critical for Black feminists for in film history. Images of Black individuals have been around since the dawn of the cinematic image but have rarely been subject to our control (Stewart 2005, 50). As Kara Keeling clarifies, the social reality of the Black body is one partly produced by cinematic processes so much so that “each appearance of a black image to an eye is an appearance of every black insofar as ‘black identity’ is a historical project predicated upon a substitution that implies an aporia” (Keeling 2007, 43). It is an aporia insofar as each appearance of a Black image always refers back to a previous appearance of similarly “Black” images. Kara Keeling notes this as the “problem” with the visual representation of Blackness (Keeling 2007, 43). The colonial memory-imagery renders Black images as “problems” available to public memory via perception. Keeling defines perception, following Deleuze, as the opening of the circuits of sensing that are flooded with Clichés. Pure perception, which is rid of these Clichés “exists in the aggregate of images” the affection of one’s body in relation to the images they encounter (Keeling 2007, 13). Cliché, for Keeling, “is a type of common sense that enables motor movement to occur.” Clichés enable

the continuation of movement through their connection of the sensory-motor schema they allow, in that moment, recognition to occur while present movement continues. Black images operate as troubling encounters whose occupation and bodies are always made “known” to viewers via public (colonial) perceptions of Blackness. The Black femme jams this process in *The Witch’s Flight*. And while the memory-image is something that carries forth our habitual perceptive awareness of Blackness, I argue that Black feminist experimental videos in this chapter work with and distort memory-images as a way to jam the system. This jam as it emerges in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* and *Memory Tracks* reestablishes our cognitive schema in the process. Black feminist experimental film and video troubles the memory-image of Blackness by presenting images that reflect the global diasporic structures of feeling of Black culture, which are not made available to public (colonial) memory based on perception alone (Keeling 2007, 43).<sup>4</sup> They affectively swerve the intended outcome of our perception of Black womanhood not representationally but aesthetically. *This* jam in our system of knowing, feeling, and being shifts us to movement rather than an representational meaning and thus forces us to invent with the activities emerging through this ethic-aesthetic practice.

I want to I re-state my claims made in the introduction, mnemonic signals memory as consciousness and the strategic deployment of memory like rhythm. Aberration names the labor needed to pull memory from outside of our current ways of knowing, feeling, and being in the world. Mnemonic aberration designates that agent-centered work by Black feminists to construct memory from a position in which Black humanity is affirmed; where we have no mythological *Other* in order to name our existence (Wynter 1976, 85). Mnemonic aberration also describes the re-writing of our mythological origins needed in order to escape our entrapment by them; that is the foundation for agency, consciousness to be constructed. Wynter nicely situates that such

work calls for new memories to emerge in order to put the old world to rest in the context of Black African cinema and other Black diasporic cinemas.<sup>5</sup> She writes:

a new conceptual ground for African cinema will call for our putting an end to our present conception of being human ... the Spirits had existed only as a function of that traditional Agrarian conception of being and therefore because of the collective *belief* held by the people and chief of the village in that conception, so our present Western bourgeois or ethno-class, techno-industrial conception of being *Man* exists only because of our collective belief in, and faithful adherence to, its now purely secular of desupernaturalised/degodded criterion of what it is to be good man or woman of our kind. Only because, in our words, of our continued subordination to the memory and order of consciousness to which this conception/criterion gives rise; to, in effect, its notion of the 'freedom package' as *Material Redemption*, rather than as freedom *from* the mode of memory and world outlook which induces us to conceive of freedom in the terms of *Man's* conception of being. How then shall we reimagine freedom as emancipation from our present ethno-class or Western bourgeois conception of freedom? And therefore, in *human*, rather than as now, *Man's* terms? (Wynter 2000, 41)

The proposal put forth by Wynter and expanded here is for a cinema that does not aesthetically reproduce the code of Black subjugation through its ethno-class structure of commodity culture. The memory of *Man* is conveyed to audiences aesthetically and representationally and in order to combat that memory, our work must first attend to an aesthetics of difference before a representational image of freedom can emerge. This is ethics as aesthetics (Wynter 900).

The counter-poetics of rhythm then exists within this umbrella of mnemonic aberration and names the specific cinematic aesthetics utilized for the survival of a suppressed culture, one



that facilitates its existence by maintaining, reconstructing, representing, and reinventing the flesh of each generation in the present through cultural practice. “Every living member of the system is both a message in the code and a message which maintains the code, a message which retains and remembers a part of the code” (Wynter 1976, 93n43). In Wynter’s passage she insists that these cultural practices are coded, in that they carry aesthetic transformations, not just representational ones. Aesthetics similarly convey this doubling effect of the code, where effects from aesthetics are both the message in the code and a message that retains part of the code. We simultaneously experience independent messages, here, memories while following a form that maintains a larger memory. In my study, I approach this doubling through ritual in the previous chapter. Thus, a shift to how we aesthetically code Black humanity is a key concern as part of a counter-poetics of rhythm one that attends to how aesthetics affectively shape our perception and cognitive schemas.

What is critical here in restating my claims with a counter-poetics of rhythm are the anti-capitalist aesthetics deployed in their work. Focusing solely on representation, for me, is a distraction, for the aesthetics used in film overall largely adhere to the commodity ethno-class production *Man*, where freedom in those aesthetics can only be represented through accumulation. In “Cinematic Text After Man,” and throughout her body of work, Wynter argues that *Man’s Other* is the racialized poor—those who were socialized as objects to be bought and sold rather than as settlers who can buy and sell (Wynter 2000, 30-31). The proximity to *Man*, which takes on a varied representational status of whiteness, emerges through the divinity that is recoded to provide spiritual redemption through material means.<sup>6</sup> Material redemption becomes a life principle where the poetics and the aesthetic used to convey that structure reside in utilizing the “dealt cards” of life to code value into bodies onscreen (Wynter 2000, 30-31). For instance,

in some films bodies (note not *lives*) will redeem themselves through material accumulation thus earning a representation of freedom. An example of this on display can aesthetically be seen with Beyoncé's *Black is King* [Dir. Beyoncé, 2020] where the vast poor population of African life is regionally collapsed to be an image of "nativeness" that resides on vague symbols and rituals to situate its ancestral difference. Aesthetically, the arc of *Black is King* features the redemption and recoding of Blackness through an ethic-principle of capitalism and Christianity. Where Beyoncé's "power" is articulated through the reversal of race in the status of subjugated roles of domesticity (this looks like a white wait staff attending Beyoncé and Jay-Z in their freakishly large mansion) and salvation through the anointment of Christ. In this latter principle African deities and rituals are in service of the Christian God, rather than a separate practice that used Christianity to survive in the New World. Memory in Black *feminist* experimental film and video, distinguishes itself from the previous example, precisely for its anti-capitalist ethics that is its refusal of *Man*. Following this principle, Black feminist experimental film and video works with liminal spaces outside of commodity culture as *being* and saturates new life forces to its audiences, forces that are affectively constructed and driven. It recodes time away from financial value where the poor do not have to materially redeem themselves in order to have a life.

Black feminist experimental film is not just a counter-poetic practice working through symbols outside of *Man* but is one whose counter-poetics are forged through a pedagogical exchange of rhythm that is conveyed through the frame of the moving image. Wynter clarifies the implications and intent of rhythm in her 1976 lecture "Ethno or Socio Poetics," as the Black culturally produced sounds that relate back to the body. She writes, "Rhythm, music, in the Black oral tradition in the New World, embodies and still embody the writing of that society. But this 'writing' is concrete, not abstract. It is learnt only through living" (Wynter 1976, 93n43).

This is to say that we must live through memory, we must embodied the forgotten and condemned lives in order to learn from them to reinvent our lives within coloniality. As much as Black and Feminist Studies have marshaled the institutions of academia and the arts, this process of inhabiting cultural memory rooted in alterity cannot be learned through the same systems that currently condemns us and must pedagogically be practiced from a position, experience of alterity. For Wynter, rhythm carries this memory and teaches our bodies how to *live it*. In *Mnemonic Aberrations*, I extend that argument further by working through conjure culture, ritual, and the specter. My methods in previous chapters like “Kinship with the Dead” conveyed what this looks like—ambiguous possessions, hauntings, rituals, and the necessary use of non-academic sources to express memory differently in my writing.

In the following film analyses, I analyze memory for its rhythm. I consider how the film and video’s use of rhythm reveal the director’s construction of consciousnesses when brought to the fore of a study rather than reduced to mere background aesthetics and techniques. I appreciate McKittrick’s astute definition (and synthesis of Wynter’s work) of rhythm as:

frequencies that undergird black [art]—affirm, through cognitive schemas, modes of being human that refuse antiblackness [and] draw attention to the ways an ungraspable resonance—sound—allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black [art] is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life. (McKittrick 2016, 81)

McKittrick argues that rhythm works embodies the aesthetic/ethic principle of the gestalt (McKittrick 2016, 90). Rhythm’s aesthetics can determine and shape our ethics of engagement with one another, in that sharing a groove (in her argument is with Black music) produces a

embodied response of choreographing the refusal of anti-Blackness (McKittrick 2016, 90). The work of the film's culture, which manifests through its rhythm (as we will see in *Dreaming Rivers*, for example) is then the structure of counter-poetics where the naming of our myths are done followed by a re-enchantment of our being in the aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> I now want to refer to technical specifics in the films themselves where the use of rhythm and mnemonic merges to recode time as a life process. A new conception of freedom relies on a new consciousness. These agent-centered works overturn the memory of *Man* to construct consciousness for and of Black womanhood against the near totalizing structure of patriarchal anti-Blackness.

### ***Dreaming Rivers* (1988)**

*Dreaming Rivers* is a thirty-minute experimental narrative by Martina Attille. The film centers the death of Miss T (Corinne Skinner-Carter), a West Indian woman living in England. *Dreaming Rivers* captures Miss T's memories or dreams, their exact status remain purposefully ambiguous in the film, and the material space of her dying present, surrounded by her three children. Voices, memories, music, and prayers make up the soundtrack and constitutes the film's rhythm. Spatially, *Dreaming Rivers* is contained to Miss T's bedroom where she lies in wait for death. When Miss T enters her dreams, she does not return home to St. Lucia, but rather carries the rhythm of St. Lucia in her room where she roams freely from her frail body living out experience and performing embodied rituals for the last time. Miss T's forced migration as a dutiful wife marks her class and racial position in the narrative. A ghostly voice affirms this, "She never wanted to come here!" Miss T lived a life of quiet acquiescence as so many migrant women do and was not rewarded for that behavior as her husband is not present to endure her

passing. Not because Miss T's husband could not bear it but because he had left some time before the start of the film alienating her from her self and children as a result.

Between life and death is where the film holds Miss T; chased and suspended between worlds and memories. Being on death's door gives Miss T the power to conjure her dreams to fruition in between her dying breaths. Attille purposefully constructs this third space with ambiguity for the audience. Ultimately, it matters very little if these are real past images for they are real, in that they are a conjured social reality, to Miss T and they help her construct her agency to the audiences—an agency her children are unable to grasp. Miss T finds consciousness outside of the codes of life where her negation reside in and brings that into a space to remake herself in the flesh in the film. The sixteen millimeter film was Attille's last project completed as part of the Sankofa collective in 1989. In this analysis, I read the film for its sequential engagements, the scenes, vignettes—sequences that shift our attention from what the film is representing to what it is doing with its aesthetics, citations, and rhythms.

The liminal space that Miss T transverse through is constructed temporally onscreen rather than spatially in that Attille frees the dreams into time and not space. As the central plot concerns Miss T's longing to return home, the director does not geographically construct St. Lucia for the camera but rather temporally brings the affective feelings of St. Lucia to the fore in Miss T's dreams. Attille herself was born in St. Lucia, and moved to Great Britain when she was two.

The audience's introduction to Miss T is through someone else's perception. As Miss T lies in bed with her eyes closed, we hear, "Who put her hair like that? She never wore it like that!" This statement immediately binds Miss T's personhood to her body, specifically her "unkept" hair. The remark causes Miss T to cusp her hair, she opens her eyes and the camera

shifts into place as she looks out to her onlookers. “Oh, Sunny Boy,” she whispers. We then experience the same scene again from the perspective of her onlookers: her children. We see three faces gaze toward the camera in the direction of their dying mother (Figure 5.1). Two women, one man, all possessing different symbolic statuses in the world due to their gender, skin pigmentation, and nationality as the film reveals through narrative and within this frame. The light skin daughter (Nimmy March) reveals herself to be the possessor of this crude remark, “Who put her hair like that? She never wore it like that! I really don’t like her hair like that, it looks much better plattered.” The first felt mark of difference is experienced through the daughter’s perception of her mother’s wooly (although still pressed) hair texture unrestrained. Miss T touches her hair, conveying to the audience how the perception of your body to others manifests as a physical response in oneself.

Miss T has three children. Two daughters and one son (Stefan Kalipha). The eldest daughter (Angela Wynter) bears a close resemblance to her mother who are both brown skin Black women with similar physiognomic features. Miss T’s youngest children take after their father and are both light skin, bearing more Eurocentric physiognomic features. The opening frame positions the children’s gaze against their mother. *Dreaming Rivers* navigates the impossible position of an “exiled” subject in the colonial “homeland” and the effects that position follows her and her children. Her children bear different statuses as first and second-generation British citizens. These effects reveal a host of social formations and belongings that are attached to the children’s skin pigmentation and cultural heritage. The eldest wears a *fila* and signifies her Afro cultural identification with her mother and the larger West African diaspora. She informs the audience that she was “sent for” at the age of seven, unlike her younger siblings who were born in Great Britain. By the time she arrived, “Britain has already lost its appeal in

Milk and Honey.” For Miss T, her eldest daughter’s arrival signals her desire for a return, of bringing St. Lucia back to her. It is notable that as Miss T canvasses her dreams the only person she makes contact with in the “material” realm is her eldest daughter. They exchange a glance as Miss T leaves her bed and calls her name (inaudible); the eldest turns to her mother and smiles. This moment is immediately followed by a formal tear in the film where “archival” footage of the past (not a memory) in the form of Super 8 B&W film emerges of Miss T with her children. We see the cultural and color difference on display as the eldest daughter wears her hair in twists unlike her sister’s lean and long ponytail. Miss T knew then—and she expresses now—a kindred relationship with her eldest, in that they have endured similar, although not the same, effects of their personhood based on bodily encodings in Great Britain.

“She was always over the top,” the youngest daughter remarks. Miss T’s excess is marked by her darker skin, kinkier hair curl, and the scrapes of trinkets that she carries with her. Her youngest two children’s commentary point to ways in which Miss T’s relationship with Great Britain was consistently beyond legibility, even to them. Miss T’s physical body carried a visible difference that defined and marked her personhood in the world and to her children; she was, as Hortense Spillers writes, a marked woman (Spillers 1987, 65).<sup>8</sup> “Who did her hair like that ... She looks like a country girl.” Or, “I was always embarrassed by the trinkets in the home,” the son states before the youngest daughter mockingly suggests that these trinkets are now “Quite fashionable. Nouvelle Negro.” The younger two children are aghast by the “nativeness” in their mother and seek to confine her back to the structure of the house. They inherit the value of their mother’s blackness without having to navigate the “excess” of Miss T’s marked existence under the structures of anti-Blackness. Only her eldest daughter confronts their attitudes of assimilation that are now hurled at their dying mother with contempt, reminding her

siblings that the trinkets in that room are her mother's biography. Cut off from the movement of Miss T's dreams unfolding for the audience, these elements of embodied life are the only way in which the children can carry their mother's history with them, a narrative often rendered unknowable or marked by silence in colonial discourse. A Saint Lucian voice states to the audience, "She kept all of her grief inside."

Attille uses the magic of cinema to stabilize the shadows of a mother's life. What would be a fleeting moment is now elongated in time onscreen. Avery Gordon writes that "Conjuring is a particular form of calling up and calling out the forces that make things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation. As a mode of apprehension and reformation, conjuring merges the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent" (Gordon [1997] 2008, 22).

*Dreaming Rivers* exhibits all of these traits of conjure culture in that it uses film to transform the troubling situation of an exiled Caribbean woman's life. We witness the analytical display of Miss T's memories brought forth in the film, the procedural narrative of children witnessing the death of their mother, and the effervescent nature of the third space that recode time as a life process Miss T travels through.

Attille accomplishes the aforementioned conjuring through the use of standard cross-cutting and parallel editing found in linear, narrative cinema that she then marshals to disrupt the narrative structure (not unlike Dash's use of the same formal device in *Praise House* when the mother is seen simultaneously praying and in search for Hannah). We frequently see two scenes unfold seemingly at the "same" time in that the camera switches back between two events. For instance, in the opening of the film, Miss T lies in wait while her children watch, switching perspectives to engage with this "simultaneity" from different authors (Cua Lim 2009, 7). However, unlike linear, narrative cinema, Attille plays with this editing technique to trouble our



recollection of the image. The film deploys a double vision to not only make audiences to look again but to challenge the representational stability of the image. Miss T carries the “perceptual feeling of the direct experience of time: a suspension of the present through the repetition of the past experienced as the potential of the future” (Thain 2017, 4; 138). Most daringly though, the double vision causes a change in tempo of the image. The frequency of the image moves differently according to a dream or the dying present of Miss T. The camerawork affirms this different tempo between the third space and the space of dying by using the fixed plane of the living to create temporal and spatial loopholes for Miss T via swoop pan angles and movements. This technique is used as a way to shift perspectives or to pull the audience out of Miss T’s dreams into the material world and vice versa.

Rhythm is utilized as a portal between the material world and the third space Miss T inhabits that brings St. Lucia to the film. The soundtrack incorporates voices from St. Lucia overlapping one another and at times the children’s commentary is spoken in Patois, a hybrid language produced through colonialization of Black and indigenous bodies in the Caribbean. Patois is a survival tactic to adopt the mandated language of French during the French colonialization of the Caribbean and to smuggle fragments of the Carib language along with West African languages into that then-present mode of assimilation. The sound of Patois in the film also signals another disruption of time, for here we have a language forged during the mid-seventeenth century French colonization of St. Lucia that was overturned by the British “acquisition” of the island in 1814.<sup>9</sup> The voices from St. Lucia offer a transitory bridge from the Antilles to England, a literal way to carry space and time with Miss T’s movements. This tactic is not unlike the strategy emerging in American Black musical production where we hear artists

incorporate the vernacular of the social into the structure of the song. Vernacular in this respect transcends mere speech but also refers to cultural life and engagements, including spiritual ones.

The use of rhythm as conjured through the voices, drums, wavelengths, vernacular, and more demonstrate that production of culture of invention by reinvented lives emerging through the racial violence of colonialization in the New World. The reinvented lives are making a memory of Black humanity within a system that negates their humanity in which these inventions act as rebellion. The use of rhythm divorced from the sounds producing its presence shifts our attention to affectively feel what that rhythm does in the film and how might it act a form of communal bonding for Miss T, where she can socially bond with others in time through these sounds that transport the feeling of St. Lucia to her and the audience (in the previous chapter, I called this a collaboration with the immaterial past of Black culture). This shift allows us to more distinctively focus on how Attille constructs affectively driven engagements around the immaterial, like rhythm that does not foreground the use of lyrics or speech in its inaudible presentation (because of the layering of voices) as necessary engagements that alter our cognitive schema of knowing and feeling in the world (McKittrick 2016, 81).

The title *Dreaming Rivers* refers to multiple symbolisms in the film. On one hand the title specifies Miss T's longing for a return to the water that would lead her back to St. Lucia in the West Indies. On the other hand, the title could specify the fluidity of dreams/memories' ability to move through time. This latter interpretation is solidified through the scholarship of Bliss Cua Lim's argument on fantastical cinema and the radical commitment to heterogeneity of time.

Immiscible times—the temporal disquietude provoked by supernaturalisms that are never entirely enfolded or assimilated into the ever-accelerating, preemptive forward push of chronology and capital—are indexical signs of strain, stress-fissures in homogenizing,

deracinating translations. They point to an ontological condition of temporal multiplicity that confounds the modern truism that obsolescent enchantments have been dispelled.

Like modern time consciousness itself, fantastic cinema is preoccupied with enchantment, beset by differences that beckon beyond and before chronology. (Cua-Lim 2009, 251)

Fantastic cinema, as Cua-Lim argues, reveals the ontological order of time in its way of pulling bodies and audiences outside of colonial time. Fantasy, here, can be seen to express a similar purpose as conjure cinema. A unified time collapses space and mobility to the structure of labor: the work-order. Similar to *Praise House*, *Dreaming Rivers* uses the immaterial world and its possibilities to affect bodies as a way to lure them out of a mainstream tempo “Logos” of the clock. This freeing of bodies into time or from colonial’s petrified, market-based timeline is the construction of consciousness. We are bearing witness to a woman who through the social reality constructed by colonialization has aesthetically been confined to the space of negation, and in that reality is representationally deemed absent or mute. Here, Attille powerfully articulates Miss T’s life force in time through those alternative forms of sense-making like, ritual, prayer, and hymns as they emerge in her dreams.

The third space is conjured by way of navigating and portraying that intensity of being that was not expressed to her children, and perhaps others, during Miss T’s life. It is a way of providing a symbolic structure to the dreams of Afro-Caribbean migrant women absent elsewhere in cinema. The symbols of Miss T’s dreams unveil themselves through disconnected vignettes. Miss T’s children’s inquiries about her body and life prompt an “awakening” in her spirit. Miss T’s spirit seeks to return to her origins by way of answering what will remain unanswered to her children but addressed to the audience. We see Miss T plait her hair (braid it)

to the acquiescence of her youngest daughter's demands in a mirror. Attila begins to play with the doubling structure of the film more frequently through the use of mirrors in the third space. Miss T finds herself gazing into the mirror to ordain her body for the afterlife.

The mirror presents Miss T with a fixed image, one that seemingly corroborates with the fixed position her children experience of her, however Attila troubles that fixity by keeping Miss T's dreams and memories in this space fluid and non-linear. Alanna Thain claims the mirror-image in cinema enables a filmmaker to point to the elasticity of a movement-image through the double image in a mirror. This gives way to self-referentiality. Building upon the scholarship of Brian Massumi and Henri Bergson, she writes,

Movement-vision, on the other hand, or self referentiality, involves the body as subject and object for itself, indeterminate; it is not reflective because it includes (many) other perspectives, producing a generative blur in the image as the perception of potential itself ... self-referentiality (otherness) concerns questions of relation ... [t]he viewer in movement-vision is neither subject nor object, but one with the movement. (Thain 2017, 25-26)

Miss T's life through this self-referential act allows her to inhabit and reanimate experiences to literally live through her past in her body, an experience activated by her dreams and memories. The opening shots of Miss T through her children's POV and then again through her POV conveys this non-reflectivity of the film for its inclusion of alternate perspectives. Again, this space of otherness and the inhabitation of otherness (when Miss T physically plunges in and out of time, between the material world and the liminal space of her dreams) is the space where Miss T can cull her sense of self into an embodied existence for herself and others.

Miss T's dreams possess the anarchic quality of cinema's "deceitful" origins. Her dreams enact a creative fabulation of time and space. Again, she does not envision herself in St. Lucia but constructs St. Lucia through its rhythm that produces the affective power of being there. The ambiguity of her memories as dreams similarly exhibits Miss T's refusal of time as a binary process past/present but rather one full of possibility. Attille becomes a conjurer, then, to manipulate time, space, embodiment, and identity as she experiments with the instabilities of these very descriptors that constitute migrant bodies in the Great Britain. The experimental aesthetics allow Attille to elude a direct representation of Miss T's life. Instead, she swerves the retelling of Miss T's history through movement, allowing Attille to exceed the binary structure of representation (us vs. them, past/present, etc.). The result is a cinema that is aesthetically always on the move enabling for a 'movement'-image that conveys multiple places, times, in relation to different questions. The boundaries of geography and identity are transformed and showed their differential points in determining 'being' as a sliding scale" (Hall 1992, 227).

*Dreaming Rivers* foregrounds embodiment in order to draw out time's affective register to the audience. While the camera tricks of swoop pans work effectively to send our protagonist and the audience in time, Attille pays close attention to the body after those transitions to convey time as a life force to others. Memory becomes embodied and gains a corporeal experience to the audience. The forces conveyed by the camera's movement convey time as a lived process rather than a market value fixated to financial value. Miss T is free from England's burdensome temporality in this space. In one of Miss T's interludes we see her dancing with her presumed lover; the camera lingers on her hands and draws out the haptic qualities of touch. We see her pour oil in a bowl of water alongside some herbs, her feet/hands dip themselves repeatedly in the bowl to anoint the flesh (Figure 5.2). This ritual practice (in that it is daily) structures Miss T's

corporeality, she remains socially and spiritually bound to her flesh, even in death, and this anointment may be the last time this experience can be physically felt. The camera uses embodiment as a part of its mise en scène and editing techniques, the haptics of Miss T make up our staging of the scene, as well as the narrative's ability to sequence shots together. Miss T's bodily actions carry the audience through the film. The trinkets take on the space as a recollection-object where they trigger memory and progression of the film in the same way that they are used as mise en scène to establish contextual information to the audience (Marks 2000, 81).

The anointment of Miss T's body bears a fruitful editing symmetry with the placards of Christ as they emerge alongside her trinkets (Figure 5.3). The image of Christ symbolically stands in for the prospect of assimilation into the colonized land or the image of the colonizer. The hand becomes a running motif in the film for it enables the audience to attach a haptic presence and signals her lived history, by way of marking its difference in its brownness and harsh lines that show a history of labor. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, 95% of inhabitants on St. Lucia, part of the commonwealth, practice Roman Catholicism with the state official language being English with little mention of native languages. The general perception of St. Lucia is that it was fully assimilated by Western culture in religion, body, and language (Simpson 1973). And yet, a film like *Dreaming Rivers* points to all of the ways in which elements of Afro-diasporic and native Carib culture, spirituality, and language are still intensely felt by Saint Lucians. These suppressed practices exist alongside the hegemonic practice of Catholicism and use of English through the trinkets, prayer cards, herbs, oils, and sounds bustling forth from the screen.

Again, Attille mobilizes the suppressed culture not solely through representational means but affective registers as well, where we more intensely feel what the film is expressing to its audience. The overlapping effects, like the swoop pan camera shots and use of rhythm, build and expand the tapestry of Miss T's dreams immersing audiences into that other space. For example, near the climax of the film we see Miss T engulfed by force as the room spins around her to convey her immersion into time itself. She begins to wail and cry and is affectively moved by time where her emotions and her screams become the evidence of time as a life process. She throw her hands up in the air and Attille switches the perspective by looking down on Miss T to fully capture the vertiginous flow of movement that Miss T is in. She tumbles down with palms outstretched, exhausted from her dance with time. While this extended sequence is at play, we jolt in and out of the material, we see her children lay Miss T to rest and we hear a chorus of sounds.<sup>10</sup> While some of the sounds appear to be a conversation, others feel drawn from a ceremonial, community practice. *These* sounds could be in reference to the spiritual ceremony of the Kélé. Kélé is a spiritual ceremony specific to the Afro-Saint Lucians of the islands whose origins point back to the Yoruba culture from West Africa and the *Djiné*.<sup>11</sup> The African and native Arawak/Carib culture exists in the cultural production of the people and permeates in all forms of social practice from the presence of Black saints that bear resemblance to the orishas in Catholicism to the yearly festivals (Hall 1992, 229).

Manfred Kremser writes in his studies of the Kélé that its enactments exists as an underground if not fully immersed into mainstream Eurocentric spirituality, for assimilation has helped preserve the suppressed religion (Kremser 1993, 96). What this underground practice reveals is the very immersive way embodiment carries forth the past to the present. The vernacular heard in *Dreaming Rivers* that constitutes its rhythm may not be specific references,

but immersive ones that convey a lived-ness of Afro-Saint Lucian culture both on the island and through its displacement in Great Britain. The majority of these sounds emerge during the climax and remain indiscernible unless viewed with subtitles on where some of the harmonies are deciphered for the audience, namely the voiceovers. The immersion of the culture alongside the hegemonic cultural production of Britain can render elements of St. Lucia as “unknowable” to some. *Dreaming Rivers* addresses this “unknowability” directly in a key exchange between Sunny and his eldest sister, “Too many secrets in our West Indian heritage,” he says. “Too much pain!” she retorts. The underground, secretive practice of the ancestral traditions exists because of violent repression. Acknowledging that some origins will never be returned to the body allows, then, for a culture’s continual survival in the present.

Miss T regularly remarks how much she hates England, “It is so cold.” As she drifts in between her memories and the dying present, we see her rummage through her belongings in search of her passport. “I want to go home,” she says repeatedly as the camera begins to swirl around her upending Miss T’s and the audience relationship to space sending her spiraling in time. Miss T becomes engulfed by time and unable to endure the full affective force of its movements, which the camera responds to in kind by removing the stability of a ground and having the full affectivity of the dream consume her, “England!” is all Miss T is able to yell out before her passing (Figure 5.4). Miss T’s final moments reveal the power of time and memory in that she becomes suspended in an unlivable state, she endures the traumatic break of migration repeatedly in order to show the horrors of repressed trauma for its audience. The dreams have their own power that exist beyond her control but they are ones that she submits herself to in order to “tell” her story, her memoirs, *even*, as her eldest daughter reminds her siblings.<sup>12</sup>



Before she dies, Miss T's children lay her body to rest by leading her from her state of wandering to her bed. Miss T manifests her consciousness to an audience of strangers to assert a life *lived* when all else, including her children, constructed the absence of such agency available to her while alive. In her essay, "Celluloid Documents: Migrant Women in Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* and *Twilight City*, and Sankofa Film and Video Collective's *Dreaming Rivers*," Ifeona Fulani writes that, Miss T's awakening to the third space,

invites us to consider the philosophical proposition of death as a dream, and Miss T's actions as emerging from a dream state ... [t]he dream narrative unfolds according to its own logic and its own symbolic scheme; access to the content of the dream requires decoding of its symbols. Miss T's dream walk thus implies a question, posed on behalf of migrant women of her generation: what has become of our dreams? (Fulani 2017, 8)

Fulani's statement here considers: what modes of rebellion have we lost by the silencing of creative actions and symbolics created by women in and through structures of misogyny? Put another way, the dreams of Miss T, as conjured by Attilie, necessitate a shift in relationality to demonstrate how aesthetically, Miss T is alienated in her home and social landscape where her children have adopted the aesthetic social kinship structures of *Man* that they then mobilize against their mother. Attilie creates a rebellious invention for Miss T's dreams, giving image and agency and in turn critiquing the social kinship structures that negate the memories and personhood of women like Miss T in the world.

*Dreaming Rivers* see Miss T conjure a social reality that troubles her, and by extension our, normative consciousness and temporality. The conjuring itself is culled from Miss T's memories and cultural activity of St. Lucia and uses rhythm to temporally usher in associated practices of cultural production to the screen via its aesthetics. Miss T forges her consciousness

to the audience and provides an experience of *feeling* that journey with the character. This experience enacts a mnemonic aberration as a result. In the following analysis, I shift my focus to video to draw out how director Leah Gilliam exploits video's capacity for playback time. Rhythm in *Dreaming Rivers* was expressed through the cultural activity of St. Lucia that we hear in the film, in Gilliam's *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* is expressed through the image as rhythmic-image. That is, I examine how *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* marshals music video aesthetics to transmit alternative memories of Black queer womanhood to the image.

### ***Sapphire and the Slave Girl* (1995)**

Leah Gilliam uses film and literacy citations alongside multiple "Sapphires" (doubles) to embody video's capacity to play back time in her twenty-minute short, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*. These citations and the Sapphire detectives carry out a purpose unknown to us but rather are utilized by Gilliam to illustrate how cinema is a series of image intersecting with one another creating sequences that have their own autonomy and purpose (Deleuze 1989, 26-27). We are denied any narrative, character, or aesthetic set up in the video, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* hits the ground running and expects audience to perceive the sequences of image as they emerge. This technical aspect contributes to *Sapphire and the Slave Girl's* experimentation and admittedly, difficult to navigate video structure that is a video driven by sequences of character non-causal movement rather than character causal action of events. However, once this challenging status is accepted by the viewer, the video opens itself up to a multitudes of interpretations and feelings that free the citations, stereotypes, detectives, and interviewees from the burden of representation. These images mirror each other as they independently work out agency or determinacy for themselves through playback time. I argue that by monopolizing playback time

in the video, Gilliam constructs a representation of consciousness by Black queer women that is temporally centered. *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* then demonstrates to audiences how video's ability to incorporate other images and films alongside quick edits can be utilized to remove the barrier of colonial temporality to expand the cinematic image of Black queer womanhood beyond its current limits. Gilliam links fragments of culture to craft a text of rebellious consciousness, which for Gilliam is explicitly framed as a queer one. Like Wynter's assertion that some memories can only be lived, Gilliam structures the video through an enclosure of paranoia to transmit the lived queer Black woman's paranoid consciousness to audiences. To have audiences live that consciousness demonstrates the uncertainty of these memories being accessed by the filmmaker, in that they will not always be pleasant memories but are necessary all the same.

Relying on the repetition of Black culture citations, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* uses figures and characters—from Angela Davis to Shaft—to articulate how the field of visibility has been constructed to oversee and restrict the mobility of Black women in society. Gilliam uses fabulation as a formal and narrative aesthetic tool to reanimate and reconfigure citations from Black culture into a document that exploits the video medium of playback time to multiply bodies. Gilliam, who now works as a computer programmer, was a key experimental director in the 1990s who foregrounded technology as a tool of cooption that could stress new representative possibilities for expressing Black life differently. Working with video and CD-ROM, Gilliam's examines how technology shapes and affect our interpretation of history and identity as evident in her other experimental short film and video works; *Now Pretend* (1992), the CD-ROM short *Spilt: Whiteness: Retrofuturism, Omega Man* (1998), and *Apeshit* (1999).<sup>13</sup>

The biggest defining characteristic for video lies in the establishment of playback control to the director and the viewer. With the invention of video, directors could now rewind the image, fast forward it, and more. No longer was there uncertainty over whether or not the shot was achieved; it was all live and readily available for instant playback.<sup>14</sup> Video art extended Direct Cinema's call for immediacy. The 1980s brought new transformations with televisual programming where images begin to aestheticize how they sell information. A drastic shift in editing techniques was formed to produce wired gazes following quick edits between images every three-seconds. The images would be transmitted rapidly and frequently alternating between set, perspective, person, scene, and content, an editing technique made infinitely more manageable with video than with film. Television programming was constructed as an opportunity to wire new information to the audience with this style becoming standardized as Coco Fusco argued in "A Black Avant Garde" (1988). Video artist Gregg Bordowitz's *Fast Trip*, *Long Drop* (1993) is a key cinema studies example in which we see an artist marshal video's televisual structure. *Fast Trip*, *Long Drop*, a documentary about Bordowitz's battle with HIV, aesthetically matches the tempo of late night programming. However, it would be the emergent music video that would help aesthetically alter artists' relationship with video and editing.

Many of the artists emerging in the New Queer Aesthetics, like Cheryl Dunye and Leah Gilliam, cite the music video as a major influence on their craft (Ferrera-Balanquet and Harris 2018).<sup>15</sup> I am interested in how queer videomakers' work amplifies music video aesthetics in their shorts, to mirror the way in which music videos construct a field of relationality with the moving sequences rather than through the representational focus alone. I emphasize this key tactic deployed by Black queer videomakers for the way in which it reveals the queer oppositional gaze Black women constructed by not following the representational meaning too

carefully in that it might either negate Black queer womanhood or not adequately fulfil a vision of queerness that affirms their existence.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the construction of images wafting through rhythm again shifts our attentions to the queer social affects and cognitive schema that flow through rhythm. Such rhythmic centered work conveys to audiences that a polyvalence of meaning is present, which itself is queering of the singularity of meaning that clouds film and video interpretation analysis.<sup>17</sup> The music video inspiration is very evident in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* as the video is not only rhythmically driven but the sequences shift in relation to the musical changes. A medium like video may render those practices “less poetic” than film but the manipulation of the mechanic eye into something more fluid, more queer situates it as an images ripe with determinacy and motion.

The video opens with an analogue color testing signal before shifting to the title card: *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, a video by Leah Gilliam followed by a computer screen appearing with the word “networks.” The video’s title card appropriates the book jacket of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) by Willa Cather, with Gilliam changing the *a* to an *e* and ushering herself as the author of this text with black cutout letters. These first sequences frame the video as a stylized mediated engagement with narrative, technology, and, potentially, the industries of symbolic power that make them possible. The title and narrative content of the video draws inspiration from a variety of texts. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* focuses on middle-age white plantation mistress who becomes jealous of her slave, Nancy. Sapphira preys upon Nancy until she escapes. Sapphire also refers to the 1959 British film of the same name which focuses on the murder of a young Black woman whose death reveals that she has been passing as a white woman. These intertextual citations signal to the audience how cross textual media histories have a material effect in shaping how society engages or surveys Black women’s bodies. Through

their repeated use in the video, the citations behave like the doubles, coming in and out of the image. The citations can be interpreted as doubles in that they materially become a memory-image of time passing through the present.

Out of the numerous texts to transform in the space of the video, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* emphasizes two: the British murder mystery, “social film” *Sapphire* (1959) and the stereotype Sapphire that emerged from the plantation as way to condemn Black women for being outspoken against their abuse.<sup>18</sup> *Sapphire* is a prime example in the way in which Gilliam revisits time to complicate meaning and queers the original citation in the process of “playback.” *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* incorporates the same grim opening of *Sapphire*, the discovery of the titular character’s body in a park.<sup>19</sup> In the film, Sapphire moves to London where she originally settles in with a large racialized community in taverns, underground juke joints, and jazz clubs in South London. As Sapphire never appears as a living character in the film, her life is reconstructed through others who speak on her behalf. While Sapphire is indexed by her heterosexuality (her pregnancy and finance), I imagine her silence and ability to pass for white enticed Gilliam to situate an alternative social reality for her in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*—not unlike Keeling’s use of the Black femme as someone who threatens to permeate queerness into the image of common-sense. There’s a key scene from *Sapphire* that I want to briefly pick up here to examine how Gilliam works with and troubles the various citations of passing in and beyond the film. During an interrogation at a jazz social club for Black and Brown elites, one former Black male companion of Sapphire recounts an encounter at a local diner in which Sapphire knew she could pass for white. A white waitress mistakes Sapphire for a white woman in that the waitress identifies *with* her appearance and questions Sapphire’s “accompaniment” with a Black man. This character describes the moment as a flash of recognition in Sapphire’s

eye for she understood that she can relate *with* whiteness and uses this mode of relationality as a survival strategy for upward mobility (she literally moves up from the racialized South London to the whiteness of Central London). Sapphire is ultimately killed for her ambition by a white woman—her would be sister-in-law. Sapphire’s pregnancy threaten to taint the bloodline of her fiancé’s family who were notified of her passing alongside the announcement of her pregnancy; Sapphire’s sister-in-law removes the threat from the family by strangling her to death. Gilliam’s employment of *Sapphire* situates to the audience a response to relating to the narrative differently, one that does not condemn nor foreclose Sapphire’s actions. Relationality can bring forth a sense of shared commonness and in Black feminist work, it is deployed as a transformative force rather than a unification that hinges upon the exclusion of others. *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* draws out the way in which queerness opens up those fields of relationality for the audience, we literally view different iterations, embodiments, and representations of “Sapphire” onscreen. These Sapphire doubles constantly shift our field of engagement with them in that we have to alter our sense-making with each appearance.

How we relate or rather what prescriptions of anti-Blackness affect our interpretation of these women is emphasized most pointedly thought in the citation of the stereotype “Sapphire.” The stereotype of the “ball-busting bitch” is reinvented in the video (hooks [1992] 2015, 120). Gilliam marshals the “music video” sequences to shift our relational aesthetics from representation of one’s personhood to that of their movement, their sequences in the video. Music video’s aesthetics are a productive way to convey the destabilizing attributes of time. Music in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* is located in the rebellious sonics of remembrance of the past and dictates the images and characters onscreen, causing aberrant movements. The aesthetic produces elastic images in that they carry a polyvalence of interpretation, opening them up to

become plurisignation texts rooted in the Black oral tradition. For, “[m]any of the meanings of music video lie in [the] give-and-take between sound and image and in the relations among their various modes of continuity” (Vernallis 2004, X). The rebellious images of Black feminist experimental video are forged through the free-form possibilities of a music video like production, a polyvalence of aberrant movements that place the image in time.

Audience’s intense engagement and fascination with music videos reveal that many already have access with reading images beyond their representational value and can accept images as mere sequences of a larger structure. This acceptance affirms the autonomy of those sequences and critically the agency of the citations within them. Gilliam uses video to construct her inventions for Black queer womanhood where negation, like the stereotype Sapphire was forged within, is altered for a reinvented life. The Sapphires exist within the motion of rhythmic sequence and use that passage space to construct their agency through a field of relations with other memory-images of Black queer womanhood in time.<sup>20</sup> Again, we see another aesthetic similarity to the process of ritual that I described in the previous chapter.

Throughout the video, we see CTV footage of a police officer riding a motorcycle spliced with shot footage following several different Black and white women, “Sapphires” as they are listed in the credits, through the city of Chicago changing their appearances. The Sapphires literally embody playback time through their capacity to make us look again in the video and revisit time through their presence. Gilliam uses the Sapphire to draw out a plurality of cultural meaning from the multiple temporal dimensions that they traffic or pass through in their appearance and vignettes. For instance, in one scene, a Sapphire freely switches out of their femme presenting clothes in an alley into more masculine presenting clothes and accompanying dildo to accessorize. *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* does not “mean” one thing but rather attempts



to reveal the processes in which meaning is made. The video not only refuses a flattening of colonial interpretation but allows the Sapphires to gaze back at their respective audiences. The Sapphires exist in a sort of queer multitude not in opposition to men—as the stereotype suggests—but come to inhabit a space of constant movement through paranoia, for they are literally on the move. Gilliam, though, expands this otherwise fugitive status by emphasizing movement as a free expression of the body outside of structures of enclosure and shows us the Sapphires in enclosed spaces to convey that difference.

The shots of enclosure are edited with footage from *Sapphire* alongside intercity maps of the Chicago area accompanied with a voiceover that details how urban planning can be used as an architectural tool for racial segregation (Figures 5.7 & 5.8). *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* is situated on the brink of an unprecedented technological change around computers, one that can only be compared/understood through the development of the city as ushered in with the skyscrapers of the early twentieth century. Gilliam uses video to architecturally work through cityscape, literally mapping out an environment through montage edits, multiple exposures, whip-pan transitions, staged scenes, interviews, repurposed film, and more.<sup>21</sup> Our narrators double down upon these potential interpretations of Black women as hunted figures in time through the evocation of memory in which one Sapphire states:

There are things that are facts in a statistical sense, on paper, on a tape recorder, in evidence. And there are things that are facts because nothing makes sense otherwise. I'd be lying if I told you that I saw it coming that my instincts kicked in that I heard the call of the ancestors that I knew it was shit. Instead I tell you right now that I believed what they wanted me to believe from the start. The first and the last time. Around here, if

you're eyes are open, you watch your back, you get paranoid. Keep them shut, things are positive.

This voiceover appears over a series of images of wandering, typing, pacing, writing, shots from a construction site, and the dialing of a rotary telephone. The Sapphire voiceover clarifies this affective construction of paranoia for the aesthetic fragmentations mirror and exemplify the hyper vigilance of being a racialized and tracked in society, “around here if you're eyes are open, you watch your back, you get paranoid.” Paranoia bleeds into the rhythmic structure and is used as an affective force that grounds the audience's viewing experience and the sequential movement of the video. We feel their fear moving from scene to scene.<sup>22</sup> This feeling as conveyed through the video's music video like aesthetics, we construct our relations with paranoid feelings. In this way, Gilliam constructs and transmits a memory of queer Black womanhood. The Sapphires in the video model what is at stake in their doubles that is this memory of fugitive queer Black womanhood needs to be lived to be remembered and bears valuable forms of how to resist paranoid living in the present.

The feeling of surveillance is heightened by tense musical cues and sparse dialogue as well as sudden musical genre shifts and styles that affectively throw audiences out of a loop with the video. The use of music aids in the production of building paranoia onscreen. It serves as the bonding glue for the video's counter-poetics of rhythm in that the paranoia gains a rhythm to drive its suspense and action. The audience is boarded up in the video alongside the confinement of the Sapphires and interviewees. This effect riddles the viewing experience with tension. Sharon Lerner's trumpet-based composition and performance drives the free-form imagery onscreen, frequently changing tempos, pitch, and rhythm to make the audience's association with the video appear more fragment. Of course, Lerner's style of playing is rooted in free jazz

experimentation which the video mirrors in its style. Lerner's trumpet is never centralized to the point where it actively provides a foundation for the video, rather it aids in the facilitation of moving us along with the images; it is the stimulant for movement.

With no central character to focus on, the audience instead are encouraged to relate to the movement of the video, the affection of its own disruption. Turning our focus to movement and its disruption opens our capacity to register the disruptive relations occurring between bodies onscreen. The chaotic structure signposts the chaos and temporal holds that bind the Sapphires. Gilliam uses texts by which we see white women lust after Black women to the point of violence. The novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* features Nancy escape her slave owner's lustful gaze and in *Sapphire* the titular character is murdered by it. These texts draw a parallel to Harriet Jacobs' account of fending off her mistress' sexual and physical terror (Woodard 2014, 156). In this queer video work, Gilliam troubles the gaze of Black women as not something that white men enact but something that white women do as well. We might think of Gilliam, Jocelyn Taylor, and Dawn Suggs' oral histories on the misogynoir they experienced in queer spaces in "Crafting a Collective Commons" as an example.<sup>23</sup> Gilliam draws out the cityscape as the premier area by which we see white people repeat plantation desire and control over Black women's bodies, even in queer environments and remains ambiguous about whether Black women transgress those spaces or simply pass through. The color line is only implied in the video through its citations but in its implication the imagery asserts that not all Sapphires are treated the same or occupy the same symbolics.

Towards the non-resolution end of *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, we witness interviews with inner city youths of Chicago discussing territory and zones they can travel in without being "suspect." The context for these interviews is unclear, in that they could be talking about police

presence, gang culture, or the suburbs, but the implication of death from being watched is evident. The video then cuts to a telling shot in which a hand rans over a bag of police-seized items featuring skin whitening cream, afroed hair, grease, and other beauty products specific to a racialized body. The Black body is rendered in its fleshly excess that “make” up the visual legibility of Black women’s body. Gilliam critically extends that gaze over to new technological computer programs and architecture. The programs, which are also segments in the video, move from “networks,” to “buildings,” to “open spaces,” Gilliam anticipates how computer technology will end up becoming a platform for surveillance of Black spaces and bodies. The gaze is an instrument of death in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, and the video aims to show the code of that power, refusing that system of legibility for the Sapphires in the video.

The Sapphires act as memory-images freed from time now lurking to disrupt the audience’s present experience with time. None of these images are contained and none of the narratives are represented clearly to the audiences, they are merely tangents running through the space of surveillance, city planning, film citation, and performance. The use of doubles of time give video’s playback time a corporeal effect to others. The effect registers as memory to the audience, instilling a mode of agency that repeats and returns its origins to name its enclosure this, like Spillers’s argument on ritual, empowers its audience in a bid to move beyond that enclosure of time. The effect is made possible by Gilliam aesthetically constructing *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* like a music video for “[the] viewer cannot predict the kind of function a particular element will perform or the degree of preeminence it will obtain in a video; nor can a viewer assume that its function or status will remain consistent over the course of a video” (Vernallis 2004, x). The citations are equally as important as the Sapphires; they similarly carry a corporeal

effect of playback time to the audience that not only names its origins to others but unmakes those origins to be freed in time. An enactment we are meant to follow.

*Sapphire and the Slave Girl* uses playback time as a way to disrupt colonial temporality, providing us a model of mnemonic aberration in action. Gilliam uses the Sapphire doubles to embody playback time and shift our perception of time and simultaneity, constructing alternative ways of sensing the video and relating with the Sapphires onscreen and their memoirs of paranoid living. In the next section, I continue with video but return to my analytical approach from “Kinship with the Dead” to examine how Jamika Ajalon’s *Memory Tracks* uses the specter to impart agency on our troubled protagonist whose mind rests in between life and death from the weight of her alienated status as a queer Black woman. Ajalon’s practice, I argue, mounts an expansive search and rescue of queer Black womanhood fugitive to time’s linearity. *Memory Tracks* reminds audiences of how memory from reinvented lives leaves a trace in our present, not materially visible but immaterially felt.<sup>24</sup> Ajalon’s turn to the specter in the video is to give that trace a body that serves to transform the protagonist and audience by extension.

### ***Memory Tracks* (1997)**

Jamika Ajalon’s *Memory Tracks* uses the specter of the revolution, alongside rhythm, to intervene on the life of a mad Black queer woman in order to help her overcome her alienated social reality. That is, to help her see herself as part of a larger genealogy of women in time to make kin with the living dead, to give herself a future in a world predicated upon the erasure of her existence. By the end of the seven-minute video, the lead character points her new revolutionary weapon—a handheld video camera—towards the lens as if it were gun. After finding herself in the memory-image of the Black revolutionary past/present, our protagonist

arms herself with the ability to create images, to submit her memories into the world. This final shot directly succeeds a shot of a white police officer pointing a gun to his head; the tool of choice for the revolutionary in opposing violence is that of the power of the camera. But this revolutionary tool is not without its consequences or faults. The video moves through the complications of the gaze in order to make sense of what role the camera plays as a revolutionary tool and the use of this tool by the individual, insofar as they must not replicate the representations of their oppressors.

Ajalon similarly recognizes the insurgent properties of cinema as a way of conjuring new images into the world and her search of the revolutionary woman may be her symbolic quest to restore the possibility of monstrosity in “Sapphire” that Spillers proclaims is necessary for our reinvention (Spillers 1987, 80). However, what *Memory Tracks* propels further is the tension of cinema to become a relational source of ritual for a collective audience. *Memory Tracks* traffics in the remnants of the representations of Black women revolutionary figures as a reflexive encounter for not just our protagonist but for the audience: what are we searching for in the image of the revolutionary figure? And in that search are we committing the same representational violence that petrified the revolutionary body? These are considerations that are raised in the title as to what tracks are we following in pursuit of memory and whose memory are we accessing? Moreover, Ajalon aesthetically raises these issue through the camera as evident when our protagonist initially picks up the apparatus and peers through the viewfinder our revolutionary figure runs in terror. In some ways, the revolutionary figure becomes a double for the affection of the protagonist to draw out, that is the sheer movement of time itself trapping you in a memory-image that the protagonist seeks to escape.

The video is structured like a jazz composition. We open with a lone repetitive beat and image: a woman (Delta) rocking to-and-fro while shaving her head on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She is alone in a closed room with that only of her gaze to accompany her. As she rocks, her (presumed) voice narrates her thoughts in rhymes that structure themselves to a beat:

I keep thinking I'm losing my mind  
They call us demented, deranged, hysterical, violent  
Women  
Ball-bashers  
Single, unwed mothers  
Lovers of sistas  
Lovers of brothas  
We go out loudly  
But then we're silenced  
In memory we fade  
We're lost  
Lost in battle, domestic wars, labor camps, sweat shops  
We're lost in history  
You know, just press delete

This particular phrase is repeated in full during the credits of the video. Here, the video lays out what type of woman she is considered to be: "mad." A woman in search of herself and in search of emancipation. "Ball-bashers," a coded term to refer to independent women as possessing a threatening force to the reproductive forces and apparatuses of masculinity, not unlike the stereotype of the Sapphire. To bust someone's balls is kill the possibility of reproduction and

threatens the “order of things.” Ajalon loops in sexuality or the “threatening force of her sexuality into the dialogue, “Lovers of Brothas, lovers of sisters.” If the protagonist is mad it is a madness caused by the “pregnancy” of liberation for her body, including her queer sexuality.

When she repeats the above refrain a different beat and style overlaps on top of the one established and we then hear her draw out her words to land accordingly, “mediation is med-i-at-ion!” She then states:

She came to me inside a meditation

I kept seeing her inside my reflection

She kept whispering to me, “Yeah, we bad”

Filling the blank spots of my memory and fragmented flashes

Taking this mind trip

Can you follow?

The voice doubles itself and Ajalon revisits the structure repeatedly to distort and challenge its original flow. Our protagonist leaves the confined room in which she emerged and begins to chase an apparition of an Afroed revolutionary woman (Debra Asante) who gazes at her through the aperture of a video camera. The revolutionary figure pulls her gaze from the viewfinder to confront the audience’s gaze. With this, the revolutionary figure sparks a chase from our protagonist through the tubes and streets of South London. During this sequence, we hear:

To find it, I only need to follow some kinetic wave or energy

Much like a jazz note

I can’t hold back

Leading me along these memory tracks

Trying to find where the revolution at?



## Where the revolution at?

Our protagonist, in searching for the revolutionary figure, is simultaneously searching for themselves. To find that past figure is something that cannot be seen, but rather something that exists as a felt occupation of her flesh and the flesh like those who like her were labeled deranged while they were on the precipice of feeling emancipation. This see-saw search demonstrates early on to the audience that the specter has agency; they are not just lifeless entities waiting for engagement or entrapment by the gaze. Our specter resists entrapment and only engages with the protagonist and the audience on her terms.

Ajalon, who now is an prolific interdisciplinary artist whose practices crosses mediums from rock musician/singer, poet, installation artist, lecturer, and visual artist, writes that her body of work deals with the search of the fugitives of chrono-politics across the Black diaspora (Ajalon 2019, 408). The London-based artist who attended Third World Newsreel production workshops in NYC in the late 1990s, searches for and reclaims fugitive archetypes as expressed in the pejoratives of a dominant culture's symbolics. In *Memory Tracks* that looks like tracking down the Black women who were fugitives to the law alongside the controlling images or stereotypes that house them there. In her contribution to *We Travel the Spaceways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions* (2019), "FAR SPACE-WISE – Without Edges a Center Cannot Exist in Stasis," Ajaon writes, "WOC cross and blur borders, simultaneously visible and non-existent in Othered places. We are multiple linguists; in order to cross borders, we must be like a secret agent. Our true voice is criminal. Our language, experiences, and articulations destabilize the dominant pejorative" (Ajalon 2019, 408). Criminality produces speech for Ajalon and it has the ability to stir the body to act to form its consciousness through modes of embodiment.

Similar to *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, the urban landscape is critical to the tapestry of the video's movement. *Memory Tracks* conveys this through the production of kinetic feeling that leads a character in search of a fragmented memory. "Much like a jazz note," (Ajalon 1997) it is a memory that is not completely linear but wholly present. This feeling and the apparition leaves our protagonist to be in search of "where the revolution at?" She begins to repeat the question and the beats become cacophonous; sonically they signal a freestyle emerging and ask the audience, "where the revolution at?" We move through South London's crowded tube, decaying buildings, and markets to find spaces that are cartographically mapped as Black. The specter kinetically moves our protagonist outside of isolation into a world of others, leaving the camera for her to pick up and use in her search of larger collective memory. When she picks up the camera and directs her gaze towards the revolutionary figure, the figure flees with a look of terror (Figure 5.9).

In this way, the camera is both the source of liberation and the enforcer of entrapment. Donna Haraway's "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" recalls the frozen bodies on display in the Akeley Hall at the American Museum of Natural History. She argues that the construction of those animals' eyes towards the audience is situated in a state of perpetual terror (it may have very well been the last expression they had before being gunned down [1984-85, 25]). The gaze alone is not sufficient to "find" the past but rather the way in which the gaze can become embodied as a lived past in search of a present and future. This tactic is aesthetically achieved in *Memory Tracks* through the shifting gazes, the jazz music, and the poetry in the video. In this way, we can see how the rhythm in *Memory Tracks* utilizes a counter-poetics of rhythm to aesthetically work through and trouble the memory-image of the revolutionary Black woman. Reiterative acts of cultural production produce a memory-image that drives the temporal engagement of the video.

We keep coming back to its image in the video and physically as a viewer. The repetition lodges itself as musical composition with accompanying images and thus shapes how we remember the image.

The specter, dressed in 1970s bell bottoms with a matching vest and collared blouse, vaguely resembles the revolutionary figures of the Black panthers in the United States in the 1960s and the Black British Movement in the 1970s. The memory-image cited and reworked is one that is felt for our protagonist; it is the over-use of an icon to represent Black women and how that over-use constitutes an absence of representation for Black women's lived experiences. It is the specter then, not the iconic image, who emerges to stir our protagonist to find the revolution within herself. To signal the rupture of the static iconic figure the camera begins to fragment its images during the jazz freestyle, where the fabric of the tape begin to glitch, scenes are repeated, shots are repeated, and the camera does several whip pans all to sync the discontinuity of the soundtrack with the image. In one of the repeated shots we see our protagonist move through the revolving door only now to find the apparition also in the revolving door with their hands pressed firmly on the glass pushing forward. The second revolving door scene emerges near the end where we see our protagonist finally catch up with the image of the past. The past confronts her by mirroring the protagonist's movements. They begin a mirror dance of one another. As they lock hands they then confront the gaze of the audience and acknowledge our presence as spectators. As Yvonne Welborn writes, "In that moment they see us, and we, no longer enmeshed in the fiction, see them. In that moment, they are not invisible" (Welbon 2018, 10). This final gaze breaks the fourth wall and in so doing acknowledges the structures of image and exhibition making and its power relationship with an audience (Figure 5.10).

Through this acknowledgement of eyes watching them, memory becomes something that you catch, a “kinetic energy” that leaves you in search of “where the revolution at?” As French historian Pierre Nora argues if memory is not experienced it becomes structurally dependent on archives alone:

The less memory is experience from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward ... Even as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof of who know what tribunal of history. (Nora 1989, 13-14)

To be clear, that dossier is integral to culture but the embodiment of that dossier is equally needed, if not mandated, in order to carry forth that history as something actually lived and experienced to a new generation as opposed to something that merely *was*. Moreover, the kinetic energy that brings the two together (the living and the dead) additionally aide in disalienation of Black women, specifically Black queer women here. If anti-Blackness is constructed through the negation of Black humanity, Black people must retain their alienated status to ensure *Man's* continuation. When communities and activities are invented that affirm Black humanity, the alienation of Black subjectivity is annexed. McKittrick describes these inventions, within a system of racial violence, as rebellious activity in their cultural production to affirm Black humanity; “One cannot reinvent the human without rebellious inventions, and rebellious inventions require reinvented lives” (McKittrick 2016, 81n6). As previously stated in “Kinship with the Dead,” the specter’s appearance imparts critical lived experience to us to help us as we navigate turmoil in our lives, which is precisely the state our protagonist finds herself in at the beginning of the video; on the brink of a breakdown.

During the jazz break, our protagonist names countries of emancipatory actions (“In London, I saw her do it”) and The naming of London, Brazil, Angola, and America (which is stylized phonetically as Amerikkka a long Black vernacular tradition of embedding the history of the KKK as constitutive of American values), situates the global poetics of Black emancipation. It does not only exist here in South London, long racialized as London’s Black “ghetto,” but it exists elsewhere and turning to the diaspora is necessary to conjure symbols of freedom by any means elsewhere. Ajalon’s filmic body of work continue to stress the value of the mnemonic as challenging what she frames as chrono politics. Her 2009 digital short *Locations of the M/othership: Black Women as Fugitive Archetype of Resistance* continues this thread as she resurrects a variety of Black women fugitives and builds a methodological practice of refusal through their lives.<sup>25</sup> *Memory Tracks* demonstrates the value of cross generational and temporal connections with other Black women in an effort to pursue the rituals, the hauntings, and the specters of Black queer women to refuse the alienated social reality in which we are prescribed within. Queerness is central to what kara lynch and Henriette Gunkel describes as Ajalon’s biomythography that “makes visible when we imagine our futures as queers of color, we are haunted and inspired by our ancestors of whom they are many” (Gunkel and lynch 2019, 40). Ajalon’s pursuit of queer Black women—the fugitives of colonial temporality—constructs the liminal spaces in which we come to define ourselves and exist in between in her video work, which reflexively inscribes our status of queer self-making in the world.

*Memory Tracks* ends by returning to the question of madness. The opening line “I keep thinking I’m losing my mind” is repeated as the protagonist then states “The news picks up on many lies/ Deranged black woman wanted.” She then proceeds to list the names of Black women who were fugitive, hunted, and perceived as “mad” for fighting for their emancipation. They

include Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, Angela Davis, Harriett Tubman, Lorraine Hansberry, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelo, Bessie Smith, and others. As she lists these names we see a newspaper headline of a police shooting overlaid with an image of Pam Grier as Coffy with the text “police death” in white text. Armed with a liberatory apparatus and the memory of the revolutionary figure—who aided in the reinvention of her flesh through the felt experience of a generation of other mad women—she takes her camera, aims it at the audience and shoots (Figure 5.11).

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding film analyses, I examined how consciousness was constructed through the aesthetics of the film and video works. I emphasized rhythm as the aesthetic ethic principle to move aspects of the film and video experience that would otherwise be deemed “background” noise (sounds, movements, effects, etc.) to the fore of my analysis. I did this in order to demonstrate how these film and videomakers embed the refusal of anti-Blackness in their work through affective means. The effect of this tactic shifts our attention to how anti-Blackness is constructed and mobilized affectively in the world. Thus, the use of rhythm as an aesthetic principle is a way to fashion affective registers, expressions, and practices around the production of Black humanity and Black womanhood, within a system of racial and sexual violence. The production of such film and video work constitutes as a rebellious invention by a reinvented people for its agent-centered work.

Mnemonic aberrations describe the tactical inventions by Black feminists that craft memories, what I have also described in this chapter as consciousness, from alterity, or spaces outside of our normative consciousness. The aberration of memory used here is that it does not

come from the symbolic order that constitutes and mobilizes the alienated status of Black life. Signaling its against the grain status is to situate the stakes of heterogeneity needed in film and video work. The film and video work in the chapter were examined for *how* they aesthetically portrayed a mnemonic aberration that is their counter-poetics of rhythm. A counter-poetics of rhythm instils refusal to anti-Blackness in its aesthetics and marshals how cinema generates affect to transmit that refusal as a feeling to its audience. Our normative consciousness thrives on the affective coding of Blackness as negation; as discussed in “Kinship with the Dead” our social, familial, and physical kinship has been transformed by this colonization. Thus, our refusal must equally inspire new affective relations with one another to transform and rebel against this system. My readings of *Dreaming Rivers*, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, and *Memory Tracks* focused on how consciousness were rhythmically conveyed to audiences rather than through representational material means. The effect is the production of a counter memory to that of *Man*, one that does not ascribe to material redemption as its aesthetic ethic-principle. This is a memory of the freedom from *Man*.

In *Dreaming Rivers* we see Martina Attille convey Miss T’s memories through cultural practices of embodiment, manifested to audiences through her lived experiences and rituals of remembrance. Attille conjures this space through the film to demonstrate that we need to develop another way of reading and relating to Miss T and the women like her in the world, lest we end up like her children, unable to see or relate to her agency. Attille positions normative consciousness as a hindrance in the film through the gaze of Miss T’s children, for it is framed as a blockade to our vision and sense-making skills. Pushing back against this blockade of *Man* further, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* uses film and literary citation alongside Sapphire doubles to queer meaning, in order to produce a multitude of relationality available to the audience with the

images in the video. Aesthetically structured like a music video, Leah Gilliam's short video uses rhythm to move sequences along rather than plot. This effect means that we relate to images as they appear rhythmically rather than expositionally. Gilliam marshals this technique to introduce a more ethical queer relationality with queer Black womanhood. Lastly, my analysis on Jamika Ajalon's *Memory Tracks* returns to the specter as source of agency for queer Black women in that specters not only impart critical knowledge to us through affection, but allow us to see ourselves within a larger genealogy of Black womanhood in time. For our protagonist in *Memory Tracks*, the encounter with the specter of the revolution was enough to instill a new memory of freedom from *Man*, one that inspires her to act through the creation of rebellious inventions in the world with the camera.

The film and videos in this chapter resist material redemption as freedom in their aesthetics and as such demonstrate how to craft images of rebellion that move away from (and do not reproduce) the ethno-class ethic principle of *Man*. The film and video art in this chapter and the work of other Black feminist film and video artists maps a production of emancipatory cinema through its centering of consciousness of Black womanhood. What we find in the Black feminist cinema is a strategic focus on the narrative/symbolic coding of Black women's bodies and the capacity for film and video to affectively situate audiences in planes of movement and time. This shift constructs and makes visible time as a life force to others that shifts how we relate to one another from representational images to affective, non-representational ones. Black feminist film and video art is a way to emancipate one's future by emancipating the image of the past through the production of a new consciousness, a new memory that frees ourselves from *Man*.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In Katherine McKittrick's "Invention/Rebellion/Groove" she constructs an argument for Black music through rhythm (which she thinks of expansively as the non-representational cultural production of a people, its wavelengths, sounds, beats, rituals) as a rebellious invention that refuses anti-Blackness. To do so, McKittrick largely pulls her sources from Sylvia Wynter's unpublished manuscript, *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World* available for research at the Schomburg Center in New York City. Direct citations from the manuscript, will be cited as name and page number (Wynter 199).

<sup>2</sup> Space does not permit me to say more about dance in this relation of embodied rebellion for grooving together can be transformative. See L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> *Do Not Call Us Negroes': How 'Multicultural' Textbooks Perpetuate Racism* (1992c) has been out of print since its initial publication by Aspire Books and Magazines. Only eight university libraries have a copy, with several libraries stating that their edition is lost. In the book, Wynter mounts a critique against the fifth grade U.S. textbook, *America Will Be* for the way in uses 'immigrants' as a status of nation-building in the United States, contributing to the specious belief of America as a unified melting pot. This argument for Wynter structures Black and Indigenous life as concomitant with Western *Man* and rewrites time as emergent with Western European's secular turn that underscores the violent actions that induced such 'beginnings'. Thus the argument on multiculturalism fails in that it accepts the terms that Western *Man*, begins and the *Other* contributes to the building of a national identity from their position of subjugation.

<sup>4</sup> In Kara Keeling's most recent study on Black cinema, *Queer Times, Black Futures* she argues that contemporary Black queer images emphasize technical manipulation as a way to frustrate the optics of a singular, fixed gaze on the body (Keeling 2019, 153). This is a strategy that does not refuse the gaze but rather aims to complicate the determinations of value and meaning produced behind it. In that—as we'll see in the film analyses below—Black queer women use stereotypes of Black women to challenge their memory-image status in the present in hopes of producing a gaze back to the audience and changing their meaning through the intertextual references in the film. This practice is true for contemporary Black feminist experimental cinema but has its roots in the technological transformations and adaptations made to video in the 1970s and 1980s that shaped the radical vision of video art that emerged in the 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> This essay acts as a companion piece to her foray into cinema studies with "Re-thinking 'Aesthetics'" where she turns her attention to African cinema more concretely as a central aesthetic practice of new memory needed to oppose the memory of *Man*. African cinema is powerful and remains a crucial battleground to situate otherness in the world. For my work, I affirm that centering, but as I have demonstrated throughout (using Wynter's work), I have examined the activities of Black life as they emerge through systems of racial and sexual violence to mobilize my argument which does not negate Wynter's centering of African cinema but builds off it.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am thinking of the widespread popularity of prosperity gospel in the Caribbean and United States.

<sup>7</sup> It is easy to assume that a counter-poetics of rhythm does not exist on the level of representation but it does exist in non-experimental representational work, *Losing Ground* (1982) by Kathleen Collins comes to mind of a work where we see such interesting aesthetic ethic principles deployed.

<sup>8</sup> Spillers writes,

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Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman as the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (Spillers 1987, 65)

<sup>9</sup> St. Lucia was is still referred to as the Helen of the West Indies due to the warring history between France and Great Britain over the island. Unfortunately, this term has been removed from the violence of its colonial history to now index meaning of great beauty (via Wester Eurocentric standards) to the island. See *St. Lucia: Helen of the West Indies* by Guy Ellis (1986), a travel brochure.

<sup>10</sup> I cannot help but recall the similarities this bears with how Julie Dash uses rhythm at the beginning of *Four Women*.

<sup>11</sup> "As a result of the abolition of slavery in 1838 St. Lucia — like the rest of the British West Indian islands — experienced the arrival of several immigration waves of liberated Africans. Those immigrants, who came directly from the Guinea coast in Western Africa, called themselves Djiné or Nèg Djiné ... On of these groups constituting the most prominent of the Djiné families on the island today, is said to have come from Yorubaland in Western Nigeria—nely from the Ekiti tribe" (Kremser 1993, 94).

<sup>12</sup> The particular conditions of Miss T's longing remind me of a very different narrative by which a migrant mother endures a life of longing so that her children might have a life. In a narrative about the passing of her mother, Yasmin Gunaratnam recounts the many things her mother said as she slipped in and out of consciousness while in hospice care, including one account about their passports. Gunaratnam narrates that growing up, her mother made no mention, no comment on the racism they endured in Great Britain as immigrants from Sri Lanka. In her mother's final days, her repressed trauma and fears of being an immigrant came to the surface as she was passing in and out of time. Gunaratnam adds a layer of poignancy to this narrative in that she believes her mother spent the last days of her life reliving the social pain and trauma of racism in Great Britian while longing to go home. Gunaratnam uses this narrative to define the expression of a social pain on the psyche and how the fluid nature of memory enables the effects of that pain to be realized to others. This hauntingly generous narrative was delivered to an audience as part of the 2016 NOISE feminist media studies summer school in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

<sup>13</sup> Here, I am thinking of Jaimie Baron's *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* where the author writes that technology has affected our perception of the past in that we view certain historical events through corresponding technological achievements. For example, Baron has a brilliant analysis on how some World War II color documents are rendered B&W in editing as audiences have a difficult time grasping the war in color and view B&W as providing a comfortable temporal distance from the then and now (Baron 2014, 124-127).

<sup>14</sup> A question of access was still pertinent in that video was unequally distributed across class and gender, so while we see a huge surge with video from white women in the 1970s, the bulk of Black feminist video art does not emerge until the 1990s as discussed in "Crafting a Collective Commons."

<sup>15</sup> The music video emerges in the 1970s as a commercial document to sell a song but does not gain much traction outside of airtime in specialty venues. With the switch to a pure video production in the 1980s, specialty programming could now cater to specific audiences as the affordances in technology, although quite expensive for the amateur, was mere chump change to the costs they would save in editing time and equipment for shows. This change enabled the creation of MTV. A television channel solely dedicated to broadcasting and discussion of music videos.

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<sup>16</sup> See Kara Keeling's chapter on the Black femme Ursula (girlfriend to Queen Latifah's Cleo) in *Set it Off* (1996), "'What's up with that? She don't Talk?': *Set it Off*'s Black Lesbian Butch-Femme" in *The Witch's Flight* (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Here, I am thinking of the work of Tania Modleski and Patricia White whose scholarship demonstrates how feminist and queer readings of film resist singular interpretation of a work. Sylvia Wynter's "Re-thinking 'Aesthetics'" is also useful here in her move away from David Bordwell and the SLAB theory analysis and towards a deciphering method (one as demonstrated in this study moves us away from what a film means to what it does [1992, 241]). See *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (1988) by Tania Modleski and *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999) by Patricia White.

<sup>18</sup> *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* is not cited as much as the film and the Sapphire stereotype and thus my analysis does not foreground the original citation as much as I do the others.

<sup>19</sup> *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* opens with video-recorded footage of the discovery scene of the deceased character, which features the detectives using her clothing as a way to mark that something is 'amiss' about her personhood (the camera zooms in on the embroidered S on her napkin and her petticoat). *Sapphire* is a British murder mystery "social film," written by Janet Green and directed by Basil Dearden that was used as a vehicle to confront white racism towards Britain's racialized population.

<sup>20</sup> As this study has demonstrated thus far, many Black feminists have dedicated criticism to recovering the figure of Sapphire and we should view *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* and *Memory Tracks* as part of that Black feminist recovery project. Spiller's "Mama's Baby and Papa's Maybe" and bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women Spectators" are two key examples of this work in scholarship.

<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to not see the connection between the surveillance shots of some Sapphires changing out of their afro and seventies attire and connect it with the archival footage of Angela Davis and the nationwide hunt put out against her by the FBI, which looked for a slender Black-haired negro woman who weighed 145 pounds and went by the alias "Tamu."

<sup>22</sup> In one brief shot, Gilliam repurposes newsreel footage of the Little Rock Nine's first attempt to attend classes in a bid to desegregate schools in Arkansas in 1957. Elizabeth Eckford, who was separated from the other eight, was physically denied entrance to school and had to wait for the bus as a crowd of a mob of white people descended upon her. Eckford calmly refuses to engage with anyone as reporters tried to interrogate her. The footage here is framed differently as feelings of survival and resistance bond its use in the video. Gilliam lays out in the video accounts for city survival while Black through this accumulation of information and cultural citations. These accounts of survival range from issues of gentrification, urban development/housing, racial discrimination, leisure, sex, sexuality, police brutality, gang violence, colorism, technological discrimination/racism, and more. At times these accounts are transgressive and, others, they are merely just individuals passing through as the lead character Sapphire did, much to her detriment. The city (here spatialized in Chicago) is the premiere site by which Gilliam seeks to unpack.

<sup>23</sup> Fellow experimental director, Jocelyn Taylor, aka Jaguar Mary, founded The Clit Club in New York alongside Julie Tolentino to create more racially and sex positive inclusive art and social spaces for queer women in New York City in 1990. It was a floating space that had numerous locations and pop up events during its twelve year existence, which ended in 2002. See *Clit Club: Reactivated* as part of *Dirty Looks, On Location* (2015) exhibition at Participant Inc., curated by Vivian Crockett and Leeroy Kun Young Kang.

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<sup>24</sup> Here, I am thinking of the way in which my project constructs Black womanhood as necessary outsider within a system for as Spillers reminds us, if Black women would be invented if we did not exist (Spillers 1987, 65). We may want to think of how this trace of the memories of reinvented lives follows the construction of the pharmakon and how it haunts language by deriving from the same etymological origin of pharmacy, which is understood as an institution of support. However, the purpose of a pharmakon was also in service of the support of a community and thus is not dissimilar to the role of a pharmacy. The point being is that such violent acts/rituals against humanity have often been coded as necessary evils for the community. See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63-171.

<sup>25</sup> Ajalon's earlier work experiments with the video interview format and bear similarities and themes with fellow TWN production participant Jocelyn Taylor, whom Ajalon worked with in Taylor's *Frankie & Jocie* (1994) and may have influenced. This is evident in the short *Intro to Cultural Skitzo-frenia* (1993) which incorporates interviews with Black bodies who exist at the boundary of gender, racial visibility, and sexuality. The camera matches the blurring of fixed identity that the mirror their testimonies, Taylor's *Bodily Functions* (1995) deploys a similar strategy to examine narratives of Black lesbian experiences with racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Both shorts bear the distinctive mark of video's hard cut and music video's interests in bleeding information together through music

## **Conclusion: “This is the Remix”**

### **Introduction**

When I started my research five years ago there was little public engagement with the question of Black women’s experimental cinema.<sup>1</sup> In the years since, I have seen a tremendous outpouring of interest and support for Black women’s experimental cinema, its exhibition, and histories. Since 2015, Madeline Anderson’s work has received several screenings in and around the New York area in ways that recognize her experimental legacy in the larger formation of Direct Cinema. The Sankofa collective from London also has received renewed interest from its founders who have spearheaded programs and screenings in and around the London area for their thirty-year anniversary. These renewed interests in Black feminist film experimentation point to the growing significance of their history and its legacies in contemporary film and video work.

This dissertation has contributed to the historicization of the field on Black women’s experimental cinema. It has done so through an expansion of Sylvia Wynter’s concept of the counter-poetics of rhythm, around which I created an analytic vocabulary that attended to the transformative effects these film and video works had and continue to have on my life. I saw the construction of a history of their work alongside a close analysis of their films were equally valuable and necessary parts of my dissertation. I felt a responsibility to both tell their histories and to reveal the forms of experimentation they pioneered in the field. In particular, I examined the ways in which this work brought memory to the fore in their aesthetics. As I have demonstrated, they do not merely portray memory but rather they strategically make and deploy it, bringing into being the temporal past of Black reinvented lives. We see this strategy at play with rhythm, which links associated cultural practices with beats in time. Aberration designates

the alterity of that cultural practice and where it is coming from. A mnemonic aberration, then, describes the agent-centered work of Black feminist experimental film and video, a practice they use to aesthetically liberate themselves and others from *Man*. Through the work of care, Black feminist experimental film and video employs an ethic-aesthetic refusal of anti-Blackness. The effect is a rich and expansive archive of social realities where Blackness is removed from its present status of negation and revived through trans-historical kinship relations and ways of embodying that relationality in the present. This is life affirming work.

Black feminist experimental film and video taught me an ethic-aesthetics principle of care. Inspired by that lesson, I constructed an argument that I culled through the available material of Sylvia Wynter's vast archive to create a vocabulary for others to use around the counter-poetics of rhythm. A counter-poetics of rhythm describes the ethic-aesthetics of care seen in these film and video maker's ability to recode time as a life process. This shift upends our normative status where time is perceived for its financial profit (time is money) and draws out the affective dimension of temporality to the fore (time as a life process). Through their work we can, like a ritual, enter a zone of movement that allows us to recode our kin relations to affirm life rather than financial value. This is heavy work. And while my analysis can never fully represent the heaviness of the work itself, I intend for my argument to provide a vocabulary by which we can make sense of the heaviness at place. In a Black feminist ethic the work must be heavy, for we are, after all, proposing the end of the world as we know it.

Because the story my dissertation has told so far ends in ends in 1998, I find it useful to sketch out the contemporary iteration of Black feminist cinematic practice, to gesture to where this body of work is heading and how the practice of remix signals a different engagement with film history. Briefly, I will sketch here some thoughts on the contemporary practice of Black

feminist experimental film and video through two contemporary artists, Ja'Tovia Gary and Onyeka Igwe before I formally conclude this project with an examination on the communal screening tactics available for Black feminist experimental film and video artists today.

### **Toward an Archival Remix: Aesthetics and Theory in the Contemporary Present**

Onyeka Igwe is a contemporary multi-disciplinary artist working in London.<sup>2</sup> *Specialised Technique* is the concluding short of a trilogy of shorts videos entitled *No Dance, No Palaver* which includes *Her Name in My Mouth* (2017) and *Sitting on a Man* (2018). The title of the trilogy alongside each film relate to the 1929 Nigerian Aba women's war against colonial taxation. The act of "sitting on a man" refers to public shaming that the Aba women do through dance to call attention to injustice. The primary footage of *Specialised Technique* is taken from archival film of the Igbo women in Nigeria produced by British colonial officer William Sellers in the 1930s that Igwe acquired from the BFI National Archive, British Empire and Commonwealth Museum Collection and the British Pathé. Igwe's trilogy of shorts draws out the tension of archival ownership of colonial images—revealing the troubling pathways and networks still felt and visible from Britain's brutal period of colonialization.

Igwe re-animates the archival footage from Sellers through an arsenal of means; projecting it onto her body in the film, hand drawn animation, and experimentation in editing techniques—reminding her audiences that these are not petrified images stuck in archive but breathing living bodies and lives. Igwe's Black femme body, then, stands in for troubling archival footage and challenges the ocular-centric focus of looking at bodies with one that shifts our attention to sensation, affective forces of relating with the image through movement, both physical and temporal.

What Igwe's practice signals for future scholarship is how contemporary Black feminist experimental film and video makers approach the archives with the intention of remixing that footage to create a conversation across time through various peoples, events, experiences, and memories. Igwe's archival remix not unlike Leah Gilliam's use of the doubles in *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*. I use remix here as a term to describe this contemporary present, if only in passing, for its sense of futurity. To remix is to create anew with past materials and here I am witnessing many Black feminists marshal memory as a way of not only shifting our engagement with the past but of smuggling fugitives of time to a future beyond coloniality, as can be gleaned from Igwe's remix of the footage of the Aba women.

Dallas born and based filmmaker, Ja'Tovia Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience* (2016) is compilation film not unlike the work of Madeline Anderson. *An Ecstatic Experience* utilizes several archival imagery that include; Assata Shakur's 1987 interview with Gil Noble as part of his "African American affairs" program *Like It Is* (1968-2011), Ruby Dee performing a monologue narrating a memory by Fannie Moore with the American Negro Theater, footage from the 2014-2015 Ferguson protests, and unidentified archival footage of Southern mid-twentieth century Sunday church service. All the footage is set to Alice Coltranes's "Journey in Satchidananda" (1970) as the soundtrack. Gary's work uses new forms of digital manipulation and editing to extend, duplicate, and cause glitches to the footage and frame of the film. This editorial remix allows for a more expressive engagement with the images that enable Gary to artistically intervene on the past.

*An Ecstatic Experience* creates a deliberate fissure of the archive between celluloid and the digital intervention. Numerous glitches emerge with in the film where clips, sequences, and images are interrupted and become erratic. For example, at various points Gary breaks an image



into three or four frames to repeat actions and subjects onscreen. A key glitch though lies with Gary's hand-drawn intervention on multiple frames of Ruby Dee. This two minute sequence expands the affective dimension of Dee's emotive performance of Moore's memory. Moore was an enslaved woman whose narrative was transcribed in the 1936 slavery oral history project *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Workers Project* (1936-1938). Dee's performance is too much to bear in both her body and the account, which critically we hear *in media res*. Her trembling voice, her tears, her quivering lip and body produce a melodramatic excess onscreen but with no beginning or end to suture that wound.<sup>3</sup>

In *An Ecstatic Experience*, Gary destabilizes the power of any one archival narrative by putting the image into motion a sequence of moments that account for day to day life. This shift to sequence re-establishes our engagement with time and history, shifting our focus from a singularity of events to more immersive heterogenic experiences in time. For Gary, this archival remix restores time to its lived-ness, its spirituality even. The film, like others analyzed in this study is a ritualistic aesthetic that seduces, entertains, and inspires us to recode time from value and labor to its life process. If the film is centered on liberation, then liberating the minds of the audience is key to begin to imagine alternative possibilities and ways of living time, especially for Black women. To image what Sylvia Wynter writes as the impossible task, creating a tomorrow (Wynter 1976, 89).

### **Conclusion: Contemporary Exhibition and Screening Tactics**

Over the past few years, several unexpected platforms, like film journals, have been instrumental in the exhibition of Black feminist experimental film and video work. The now defunct *cléo* journal's founder Kiva Reardon used the feminist film journal to only invite emerging voices in

film scholarship to contribute work but she also developed feminist programming at film festivals and traveling programs internationally under the journal's name. More recently, in light of COVID-19, feminist film journals alongside independently organized film programmers have developed online live streams of films by artists examined in this dissertation, followed by virtual conversations with key scholars and journal editors as way to experiment with new distribution formats.

The feminist film journal *Another Gaze* hosted several of West Indian French filmmaker Sarah Maldoror's films on their website in the days leading up to their virtual talkback with scholar Yasmina Price and *Another Gaze* co-founder and co-editor Daniella Shreir in May of 2020. In this vein the digital livestream site *cinephobe.tv*. has been leading independent digital livestreams of hard to find films in hopes that these films might reach a larger audience and be properly restored. I have participated in *cinephobe.tv*'s programming by organizing a three-hour block of films introducing audiences to Black feminist experimental film and video work, which included a prerecorded introduction by myself that contextualized the work for the audience. Platforms and programs like these marshal resources to reach wider audiences for Black feminist works that have been severely undervalued and ignored through more traditional distribution platforms of exhibition.

While these digital platforms are being utilized to "get the work out there," some would say that contemporary artists releasing their work online might devalue it. Yet it is here where we see one of the benefits of shooting films in digital formats or converting one's work to a digital format in order to reach audiences across a range of exhibition practices. Cauleen Smith recalled that her shift to video from film challenged her to rethink the exhibition and screening of her work beyond the one-to-one screen relationship found in the theater. With video, she

encountered numerous ways in which she could broadcast her work on different screens, in addition to the fact that she could both transform the work through the screening, and leave it open for further edits and remixes in different installations. Turning analog and digital video work into installations has further sparked interest among experimental film and video artists in the past twenty years. Installation lends itself to different audiences than the “traditional” cinema crowd and also give filmmakers, in some ways, a greater sense of control over how their work is framed and the aesthetics in which audiences watch their work. Speaking on the relationship between the arts and experimental filmmakers, Smith explained the following:

With experimental filmmakers the debate of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been: White cube or black box? Art world or microcinema? I want to do certain things with film right now that I still need a cinematic space for. I still need people to enter the womb, that secular cathedral of the movie space. The Kitchen doesn't have a problem with sound or high ceilings or with painting walls black—they understand theatrical space there. I didn't have to engage in a battle about blackness ... It's terrifying when you're dealing with a gallery and they want your piece on a flat screen with some headphones. You would never say to a painter, it would be so much easier if we could just show some digital slides. (Hewitt and Smith 2011, 94)

Smith's statement here shows how installation work in the right space can help extend the artistic vision of an experimental project, likening the work of experimental film and video artists to that of fine artist's work—a connection that is, still, infrequently made in both the art world and in avant-garde film circles (unless, of course, we are talking about Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, or Joan Jonas). Through the exploitation of video's capacity to adapt and change screen size depending on the projector, Smith emphasizes that a key difference in

thinking about medium specificity is an ability to foreground the exhibition of the work rather than the production of the film itself. In this way, Smith was able to give new life to her video work without going back to the editing board per se. This is something that is not possible on the same level with sixteen-millimeter or Super 8 film projection.

Black feminist experimental film and video work exceeds the confines of “pure” cinema, then, through its installations and exhibitions. In the process, it moves toward a more interdisciplinary context of Black feminist experimentation that renders the work more amenable to expanded cinema stagings, where live performance is incorporated with moving installation work. Tourmaline recently demonstrated this fluidity with a live screening of her short film on Marsha P. Johnson, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), at the Kitchen in New York City. It featured a live score by Geo Wyeth. Over the course of several intermissions between scenes, actors from the film performed monologues in character. Egyptt LaBeija also performed two lip synchs in drag. Black feminist experimental film and video is adapting and playing with new modes for centering the bodies of performers and creating audience dynamics beyond the forward-facing rows of spectators in the theater. Here, new screening possibilities provide alternative “lives” to the work and new interpretations of what Black feminist experimental film and video aesthetics do. Moreover, the movement of these films into the space of the museums calls out the otherwise uncontested space of whiteness in the institutions of the museum and art world. The works themselves provide aesthetic possibilities for seeing these structures at work, and challenging them at the same time. These different screenings—from online platforms to large scale installations—provide alternate ways of seeing the work of Black feminist experimental film makers and the world at large.

With these different screening platforms being utilized, there has also been a surge of interest in Black women directors, one that might also come at the expense of the histories that I have laid out in this dissertation. One of the things we see is how the history of Black feminist experimental film keeps getting forgotten and then discovered again (Juhasz 2001, 2). At the same time, white audiences still push out Black theater and museum visitors. While it has been a pleasant surprise to see more Black feminist experimentation film and video receive institutional recognition in museums and other settings, I am also critical of this uptake. For one, most of these screenings do not offer any education in the history of Black feminist experimental film nor offer a pedagogical framework by which to engage with the political aesthetics deployed by these film makers in their work. Screenings, rather, offer an opportunity to extrapolate value from the surplus of Black women's labor that is generated onscreen in the theater; we might think of Black women's filmmaking practices becoming the "nouvelle negro" for institutions.

A recent 2019 program of contemporary Black women's largely experimental film and video work revealed some of the tensions around contemporary Black women filmmakers presence in the museum. The inaugural "Black Women Film Conference" was organized by the New Negress Film Society at The Museum of Modern Art's PS1 location in March of 2019. In a staggering sold-out event, over 400 attendees gathered on a Sunday afternoon in the iconic dome of the institution to view contemporary short and feature-length films made by Black women over the span of eight hours. The collection of films that were screened featured a mix of experimental, narrative, and documentary works, with some overlaps. The New Negress Film Society, founded by Ja'Tovia Gary, Dynai Douze, Nuotama Bodomu, Stefani Saintonge, Chanelle Aponte Pearson, and Yvonne Michelle Shirley, is a collective that centers films and videos that "break boundaries in film politically and artistically" (New Negress 2013) through

the creation, production, screening, and discussion of films made by Black women. By structuring the event as a conference and not just a film screening, the New Negress Film Society emphasized the dialogical and didactic components of not just the films, but the space and the voice of the filmmakers—components that are usually shoehorned in at the end of a screening. Here, there was an attempt to amplify the filmmakers’ voices for many were on hand to speak directly about their work after their screening in panel discussions. Additionally, Ja’Tovia Gary—who was invited as a respondent for the conference—brought a rich Black feminist focus to her discussions with Cauleen Smith and Tchiko Omawale.

What astounded me though, was the rich tapestry of Black women in attendance of this conference. I would estimate that 90% of the audience were Black women. As a film theorist, maker, and curator of Black feminist work, I have to underscore the uniqueness of this conference as Black women are rarely the audience majority even at events that center their representation. Recent criticism from Black feminist critics have ruminated on the paucity of Black women film critics in the field and the lack of invitations they receive to attend film screenings compared to their Black male and white colleagues.<sup>4</sup> While much has been written about the way in which some movie theaters are racialized as Black due to their spatial and geographic demarcations, little has been articulated about the dynamics of attracting a Black audience for screenings outside of that framework.<sup>5</sup> What I refer to is the way in which the structure of a film screening outside of Black “identified” theater spaces are being racialized as white spaces. How institutions carry and normalize whiteness gravely affects who has access to those spaces.

Even when these spaces center voices and work of people at the margins—for the purpose of this argument, Black women—the expectation is that such work serves as an

opportunity to primarily educate white audiences and not to be in conversation with and to expand a rich focus on Black women's lives and labor. When Gary took the stage to speak with Omawale I was struck by the first question she asked of Omawale to comment on the audience dynamics: "What a beautiful crowd of Black women here and with that I would like to use this opportunity to ask you to say more about the process of shooting *Solace* (2018). So much of these discussions in other spaces want us to speak about our ontological position as Black women, and we can use events like this one to move beyond that." The remark was received with thunderous laughter from the crowd but was then immediately followed by a collective "ooooohhh." The tension of the laughter and unease came from a (somewhat) collective understanding that, to enter film screenings targeted to Black women *as* Black women is to run the risk of entering a space of marginalization as the audiences attending mainstream film and theater screenings are largely racialized as white. If you recall from "Crafting a Collective Commons," Shari Frilot's work as director of MIX was to combat this dynamic by moving the festival to the Kitchen in New York City. Sadly, spaces like The Kitchen, while still holding onto an outsider ethos, are being cannibalized by mainstream institutions for their difference.

The uniqueness of the "Black Woman Film Conference," for me then, emerged in its audience makeup and its interview-based discussions. The conference, while successful and impactful, is not without its critiques. I do not believe that the conference overall stands in for nor solves the lack of critical attention that emerges with imagining Black women as a target audience in the space of the screening, *nor should it be*. For instance, I found throughout the event, with the exception of the closing discussion, there was little interrogation of the film makers' labor and discussion of the class structures and backgrounds of the invited filmmakers. Many of the responses delivered during the panel discussions around film production suggested

some class identity around middle-class. I purposefully highlight the largely middle-class background of these film makers because the majority of Black women who live in the United States live in poverty or abject poverty. If we want to take the space of the theater seriously for all of its horizons of political possibility, we need to include their lives into existence in that space. I do think that centering class struggles more concretely is present across the women's work analyzed in my study, Anderson's *I Am Somebody* (1970) is a clear example. This tension is not the fault of any contemporary director's work but rather is emblematic of the shift in class distinction due to neoliberalism, where one's class status is individualized rather than thought of collectively. Moreover, the title of the event unintentionally carries an essentialist framework in that it suggests that Black women can be lumped together into a single category or genre of filmmaking.

More inclusive and pedagogical diversity is needed though to sustain the production, exhibition, and distribution of Black feminist experimental work. We need more individuals to become interested in pursuing the mostly unknown women behind so much of the significant film making by Black women. Working with them and their histories, we have some hope for building a critical vocabulary about their work and about Black feminist aesthetics. Much like past examples of exhibition and distribution, there is no fixed center for Black feminist experimental filmmakers but rather a network of people doing work and attending to each other's practices and needs; a network in which this dissertation also participates, alongside the work I have done as programmer, critic, curator, and lecturer over the past five years. Digital technology has the capacity to spread the work of Black feminist experimental film making into exciting new spaces, but this potential will never be fully realized unless it exists alongside the slow,



educational and organizational labor that is required to record, program and understand a longer history of a people and its experiments in film making and collective building.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Black feminist experimental film and video is having at “moment” in contemporary film and arts exhibition and criticism. This moment is largely driven by contemporary mainstream music videos and visual albums that have a large distribution. For instance, in 2019 Solange released her self-directed thirty-three minute experimental film, *When I Get Home*, to great acclaim, alongside her album of the same name. In this film, Solange not only cites contemporary Black experimental feminist directors but also incorporates their work into the piece. This is notably evident for the song interlude “Beltway” where Solange utilizes footage from Autumn Knight’s 2017 *Directions From Prairie View*. Knight’s six-minute short film experiments with form and structure to meditate on the ways in which mundane engagements with travel can come at great cost for Black women. Knight uses emails she wrote and received about the road to Prairie View A&M University when she was an adjunct there from 2011-2012. Sandra Bland was pursuing a job opportunity at Prairie View A&M University when she was pulled over for a minor traffic violation on her way to the university that local police escalated into her assault and arrest. Sandra Bland was found dead in her jail cell three days after her arrest.

Here, we have the work of an experimental artist working in performance and video, Knight, being referenced and represented in a larger network of art production and distribution. While Solange’s film is highly aestheticized and experimental, it fails to mobilize a discernible ethic-principle that films like Knight’s does. Rhythm in *When I Get Home* is instead used in a cursory fashion alongside citations to Black cultural production. Knight’s short, on the other hand, ruptures an assemblage of imagery that shifts viewers’ perception to the social realities of Black womanhood that are absented and negated through most forms of representation. This shift demonstrates the difficulty of Black feminist experimental film and video for its ethic-aesthetics of care is what constitutes its heaviness, its difficulty to master. Not everyone can do this work. In addition, as the main portion of this study ends in 1998, I do not have space to include the brilliant work of Akousa Adoma Owusu but wanted to make mention of her practice here as I conclude with a sketch toward the future of the field.

<sup>2</sup> I have been pleased to witness intergenerational support between older filmmakers and emerging filmmakers, curators, and scholars, in which I have been on the receiving end of those dynamics. I was able to witness Martina Attille work with and support several artists (including Onyeka) from the *Sorryyoufeeluncomfortable* collective for screenings and exhibition openings on their work.

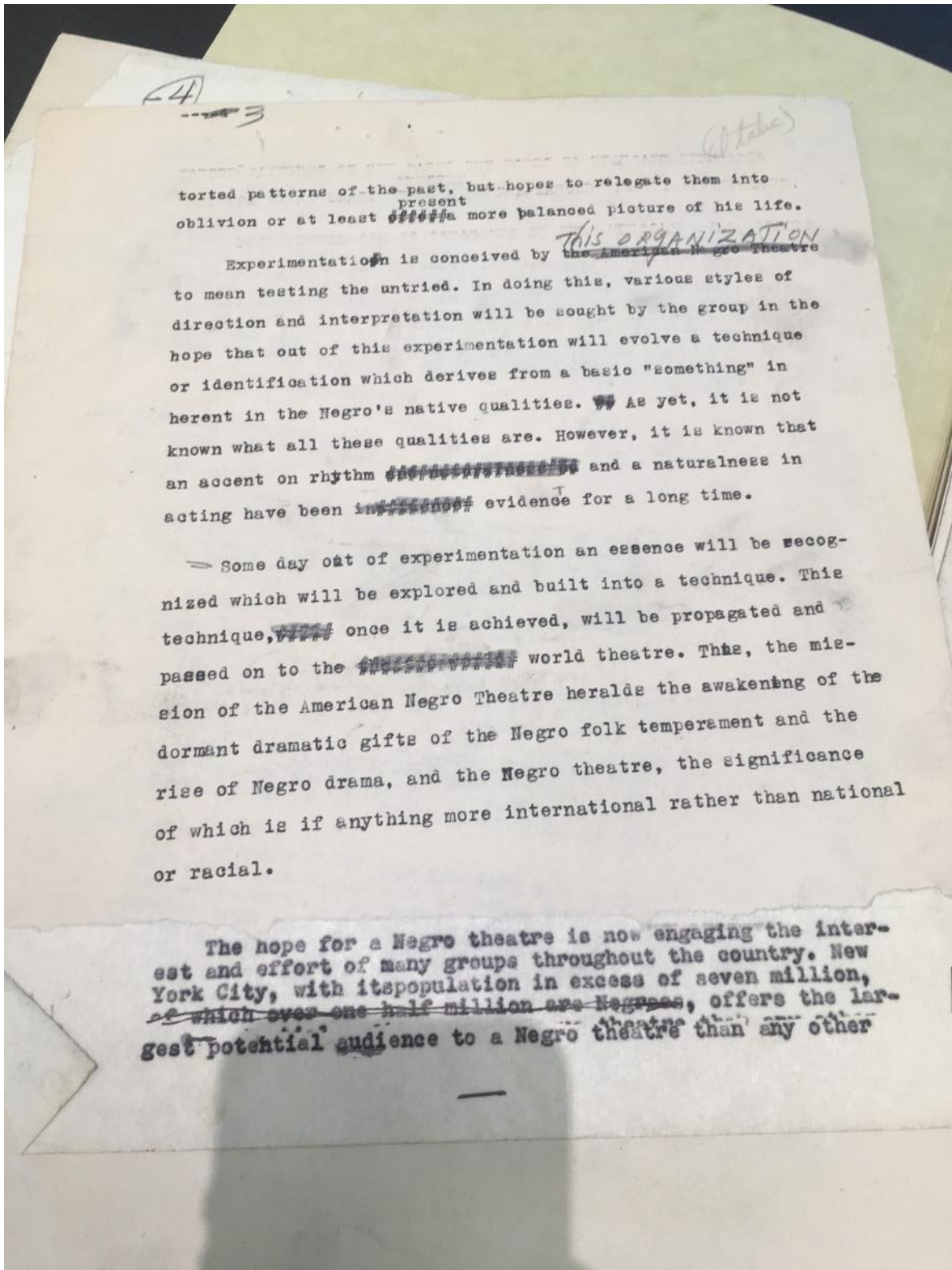
<sup>3</sup> With celluloid film there are twenty-four frames per second and the nearly two-minute sequence of hand-drawn animation thus features roughly 2,880 frames; the labor is time-consuming to say the least and took months to complete. What Gary’s animation signifies to its audience is the incommensurability of labor in time that can never fully be represented for the audience but *can* be suspended.

<sup>4</sup> I am specifically thinking of film critic Candice Fredrick, who criticized the audience dynamic and lack of Black women film critics at Cannes 2018. Fredrick’s criticism was largely informed by her viewing and critique of *Black KKKlansman* (2018), which seemed to profit off the silent image of Black women onscreen without situating any space for them to speak back, be that in the theater or in a film review.

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<sup>5</sup> See Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

# Appendix: Figures



torted patterns of the past, but hopes to relegate them into  
oblivion or at least <sup>present</sup> ~~present~~ a more balanced picture of his life.

Experimentation is conceived by ~~the American Negro Theatre~~ <sup>THIS ORGANIZATION</sup>  
to mean testing the untried. In doing this, various styles of  
direction and interpretation will be sought by the group in the  
hope that out of this experimentation will evolve a technique  
or identification which derives from a basic "something" in-  
herent in the Negro's native qualities. ~~As~~ As yet, it is not  
known what all these qualities are. However, it is known that  
an accent on rhythm ~~and a naturalness in~~ and a naturalness in  
acting have been ~~in evidence~~ evidence for a long time.

Some day out of experimentation an essence will be recog-  
nized which will be explored and built into a technique. This  
technique, ~~once~~ once it is achieved, will be propagated and  
passed on to the ~~world~~ world theatre. This, the mis-  
sion of the American Negro Theatre heralds the awakening of the  
dormant dramatic gifts of the Negro folk temperament and the  
rise of Negro drama, and the Negro theatre, the significance  
of which is if anything more international rather than national  
or racial.

The hope for a Negro theatre is now engaging the inter-  
est and effort of many groups throughout the country. New  
York City, with its population in excess of seven million,  
~~of which over one half million are Negroes,~~ offers the lar-  
gest potential audience to a Negro theatre than any other

Figure 1.1 Part of the Constitution for the American Negro Theatre, founded in 1940. Personal documentation from the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

(4)

(Hatch)

location in the world. Add to this the fact that New York City is the center of the legitimate theatre in this country, it is a logical conclusion that from this area a Negro theatre should emerge.

A detailed study and analysis of approximately one hundred community theatres in America; research and investigation of efforts in the past to establish a Negro theatre, has resulted in the organization of the AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE. The founders of this organization, by virtue of their study, training and experience in the theatre arts, assume the task of bringing to the people of New York City and the world a Negro theatre, which shall be known as the AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE, whose aims and purposes shall be:

**AIMS AND PURPOSES**

**THE AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE**  
is working to develop:

**1. AN ART**

A permanent co-operative acting company co-ordinating and perfecting the related arts of the theatre; eventually deriving its own theatre craft and acting style by combining all standard forms and putting to artful use the fluency and rhythm that lie in the Negro's special gifts.

**2. A VITAL THEATRE**

Calling for plays which furnish commentary, interpretation, illumination and criticism of our common lives during contemporary times, located in the Harlem section of New York City, with its theatre, workshop and school affiliated with Negro theatre groups throughout the country, and acting as the parent body of the Negro Theatre in America.

**3. PRIDE AND HONOR**

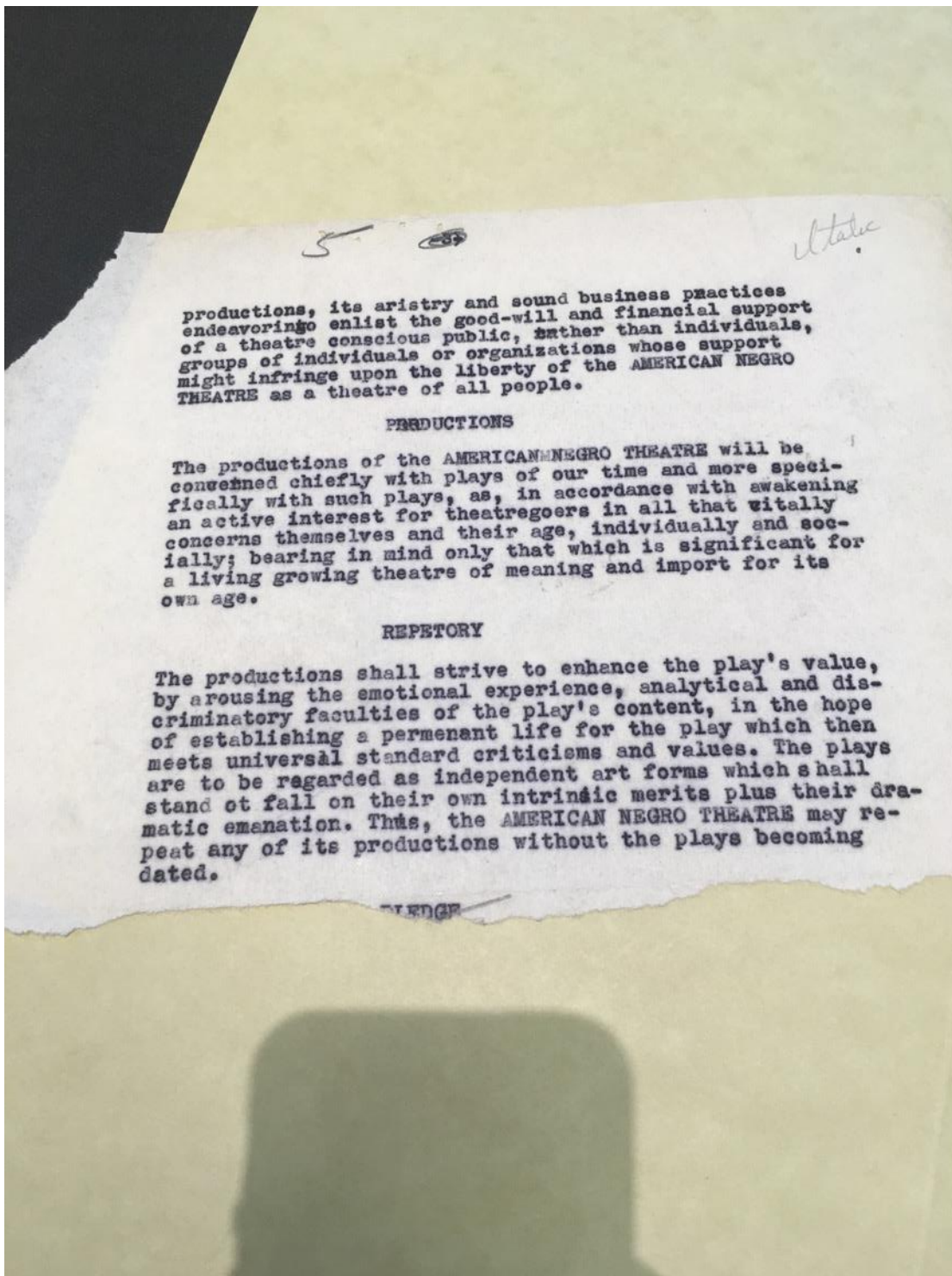
For a theatre which for too long has been unstudied and exploited; by being honest, yet unflattering, by being perfectionists rather than professional, and winning the pride of the people rather than their apathy.

**GENERAL POLICY**

The AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE is a non-profit co-operative theatre. Its financial support shall be derived from annual subscriptions, contributions and endowments. The policy of the organization is to remain independent of any financial support. The integrity of its productions, its

Figure 1.2. Part of the Constitution for the American Negro Theatre, founded in 1940. Personal documentation from the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA.





productions, its aristry and sound business practices endeavoring to enlist the good-will and financial support of a theatre conscious public, rather than individuals, groups of individuals or organizations whose support might infringe upon the liberty of the AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE as a theatre of all people.

#### PRODUCTIONS

The productions of the AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE will be concerned chiefly with plays of our time and more specifically with such plays, as, in accordance with awakening an active interest for theatregoers in all that vitally concerns themselves and their age, individually and socially; bearing in mind only that which is significant for a living growing theatre of meaning and import for its own age.

#### REPETORY

The productions shall strive to enhance the play's value, by arousing the emotional experience, analytical and discriminatory faculties of the play's content, in the hope of establishing a permanent life for the play which then meets universal standard criticisms and values. The plays are to be regarded as independent art forms which shall stand or fall on their own intrinsic merits plus their dramatic emanation. Thus, the AMERICAN NEGRO THEATRE may repeat any of its productions without the plays becoming dated.

#### PLEDGE

Figure 1.3. Part of the Constitution for the American Negro Theatre, founded in 1940. Personal documentation from the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA.


**Ethnic Studies Dialogue: A Critical Issue for 21st Century America**

This event is part of a series of speakers, seminars, films, and performances that examine the interlocking significance of race, class, gender and sexuality to the body politic in the new century.

**Black Women Filmmakers Series**


**Crystal Griffith**  
*Del Otro Lado (The Other Side) (1999)*  
 UCSB Alumna Crystal Griffith is an experienced filmmaker, director, teacher and scholar. *Del Otro Lado (The Other Side)* is one of the few feature-length films directed by a Black female.

Screening: Tuesday, January 11th / 7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Lecture: Thursday, January 13th / 11am / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Reception: Thursday, January 13th / 4pm / Women's Center




**Dianne Houston**  
*Tuesday Morning Ride (1995)*  
 Dianne Houston is currently the Executive Story Editor of the new television series *City of Angels* (CBS). She also received an Academy Award nomination in the directing category for *Tuesday Morning Ride*.

Screening: Tuesday, February 1st / 7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Lecture: Thursday, February 3rd / 11am / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Reception: Thursday, February 3rd / 4pm / Women's Studies Conference Room, South Hall 4703




**Camille Billops**  
*Suzanne, Suzanne (1982), Finding Christa (1991)*  
 Camille Billops is the recipient of the 1992 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize for *Finding Christa*.

Screening: Tuesday, February 8th / 7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Lecture: Thursday, February 10th / 11am / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Reception: Thursday, February 10th / 4pm / Women's Studies Conference Room, South Hall 4703




**Cauleen Smith**  
*Drylongo (1999)*  
 In 1999, *Drylongo* received the Grand Jury Prize for Best Feature in the New York Urbanworld Film Festival. Since then, Director Cauleen Smith was invited to the Sundance Screenwriters Workshop 2000.

Screening: Tuesday, February 15th / 7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Lecture: Thursday, February 17th / 11am / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Reception: Thursday, February 17th / 4pm / Center For Black Studies, South Hall 4603



**Michelle Parkerson**  
*Gotta Make this Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock (1983), A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde (1995)*  
 Michelle Parkerson was invited to the American Film Institute Directing Workshop for Women and is a recipient of the 1992 Rockefeller Foundation Film/Video Fellowship.

Screening: Tuesday, February 22nd / 7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Lecture: Thursday, February 24th / 11am / Isla Vista Theater 2  
 Reception: Thursday, February 24th / 4pm / Queer Resource Center, UCen 3rd Floor



Series Coordinators:  
**Claudine Michel**  
 Director, Center for Black Studies & Professor, Department of Black Studies  
**Jacqueline Bobo**  
 Chair, Women's Studies Program & Associate Director, Center for Black Studies

The Black Women Filmmakers Series is in conjunction with Professor Jacqueline Bobo's Women's Studies 142 class and the Critical Issues in America grant. For more information about these events, please contact the Women's Studies Program at 893-4330. Co-sponsored by: Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, MultiCultural Center, Women's Studies Program, Department of Black Studies




Figure 1.4 Poster for Jacqueline Bobo's "Black Women Filmmaker Series" featuring Billops. Personal documentation from the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA.



**Ethnic Studies**  
**Dialogue:**  
**A Critical Issue for**  
**21st**  
**Century**  
**America**

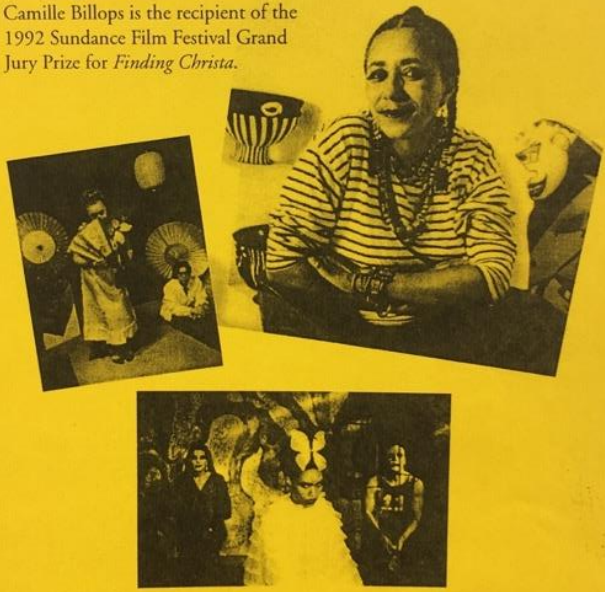
This event is part of a series of speakers, seminars, films, and performances that examine the interlocking significance of race, class, gender and sexuality to the body politic in the new century.

Series Coordinators:  
**Claudine Michel**  
 Director, Center for Black Studies & Professor, Black Studies  
**Jacqueline Bobo**  
 Chair, Women's Studies Program & Associate Director, Center for Black Studies

**Black Women Filmmakers Series Presents**

# CAMILLE BILLOPS

*Suzanne, Suzanne (1982),  
 Finding Christa (1991)*  
 Camille Billops is the recipient of the 1992 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize for *Finding Christa*.



**Film Screening: Tuesday, February 8th**  
**7pm / Isla Vista Theater 2**

**Lecture: Thursday, February 10th**  
**11am / Isla Vista Theater 2**

**Reception: Thursday, February 10th**  
**4pm / Women's Studies Conference Room,**  
**South Hall 4703**

The Black Women Filmmakers Series is in conjunction with Professor Jacqueline Bobo's Women's Studies 142 class and the Critical Issues in America grant. For more information about these events, please contact the Women's Studies Program at 893-4330. Co-sponsored by the MultiCultural Center.

2000

Figure 1.5. Poster for Jacqueline Bobo's "Black Women Filmmaker Series" featuring Billops. Personal documentation from the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA.



December 3, 1970

Mr. John I.H. Baur, Director  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue  
New York City 10021

Dear Mr. Baur:

Now that the 1970 Whitney Annual has been selected, we would like to pursue our researches concerning the attention given work by women artists. Since you have made what Stephen Weil has described as "a public commitment to give equal attention to the work of men and women artists in selecting the Annual and other group exhibitions", we are asking at this time that you do indeed make public, in detail, the process by which this year's Annual was chosen. We would like to know the following:

How many male artists, how many female artists, how many whites and how many non-whites were:

- 1) invited on the basis of studio visits specifically in regard to the Annual;
- 2) invited on the basis of photographs or slides submitted at your request;
- 3) invited on the basis of slides or photos or recommendations submitted or requested by/from galleries;
- 4) invited on the basis of unsolicited slides or photographs;
- 5) invited on the basis of previous knowledge of the work by the curators?

In addition, how do the three curators divide up their time and energy? Does each one have veto power on every artist considered by all three? Does each one choose the studios he/she will visit or is the list divided up impartially? How is that initial list arrived at? How many artists from outside New York are represented? How are these artists chosen? Which curators visited which cities on the Ford grant? How much time did they spend in each place? How are the places selected and who are the references to studios in each city?

We would like to know the number of men and women,

Figure 1.6. Letter from the Ad Hoc women's committee demanding more equitable inclusion of women artists into the Whitney's annuals (exhibitions on contemporary American art practices) drafted and signed by Camille Billops, Poppy Johnson, Brenda Miller, and Lucy Lippard. Part of the Whitney Museum's digital exhibition archive.

whites and non whites involved in the questions above, including a breakdown of sex and race of the referrers in and out of New York City. We would also like a list of names of all artists considered in any manner for the Whitney Annual this year. We trust that work or slides by the list of over 100 artists submitted by us in October were indeed considered and that reports we have heard of unqualified secretaries or assistants screening unsolicited slides for the curators are false.

Similar requests for information will be sent to the other pertinent institutions in New York. We would appreciate a prompt response so that we can continue our work with accurate facts and figures. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Camille Billops  
Poppy Johnson  
Brenda Miller  
Lucy Lippard

For the Ad Hoc Women's Committee

xc: Stephen P. Weil  
Marcia Tucker, James Monte, Robert Doty  
Flora Whitney Miller  
David Solinger

Figure 1.7. Letter from the Ad Hoc women's committee demanding more equitable inclusion of women artists into the Whitney's annuals (exhibitions on contemporary American art practices) drafted and signed by Camille Billops, Poppy Johnson, Brenda Miller, and Lucy Lippard. Part of the Whitney Museum's digital exhibition archive.



Figure 1.8. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Billie, Suzanne, and Alma (Left to Right) as they prepare for Alma's fashion show.



Figure 1.9. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Billie holding her photograph of the 1976 Mrs. America Pageant.



Figure 10. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Billie in the 1976 Mrs. America Pageant in Hawaii.



Figure 11. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Suzanne and Billie at the film's climatic confrontation.





Figure 12. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Billie with a young Suzanne.



Figure 13. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Suzanne and her siblings with Alma.





Figure 14. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne*: Suzanne at the end of the film.



Figure 2.1. Screenshot from *Just Like You*: Children playing at the playground.



Figure 2.2. Screenshot from *Just Like you*: repurposed photograph of a young boy staring directly at the camera.



Figure 2.3. Screenshot from *Just Like You*: repurposed footage of a church service.



Figure 3.1. Screenshot from *Water Ritual #1* (Restored): Milanda in a passageway of a structure.



Figure 3.2. Screenshot from *Water Ritual #1* (Restored): Milanda performing a ritual.





Figure 3.3. Screenshot from *Water Ritual #1* (Original): Milanda performing a ritual.

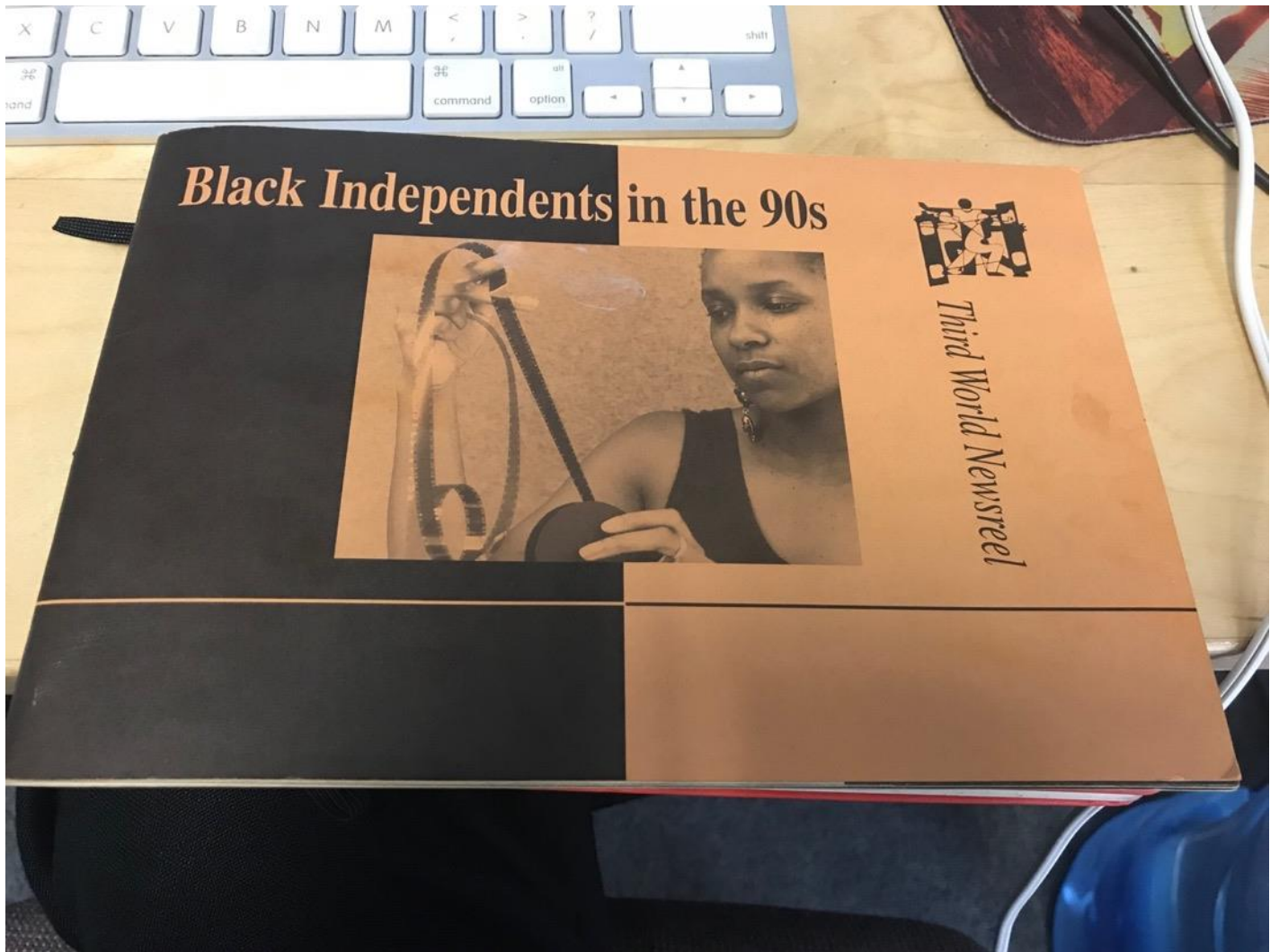


Figure 3.4. Third World Newsreel rental pamphlet, *Black Independents in the 90s* (1996). Personal documentation from the Third World Newsreel offices in New York, NY.



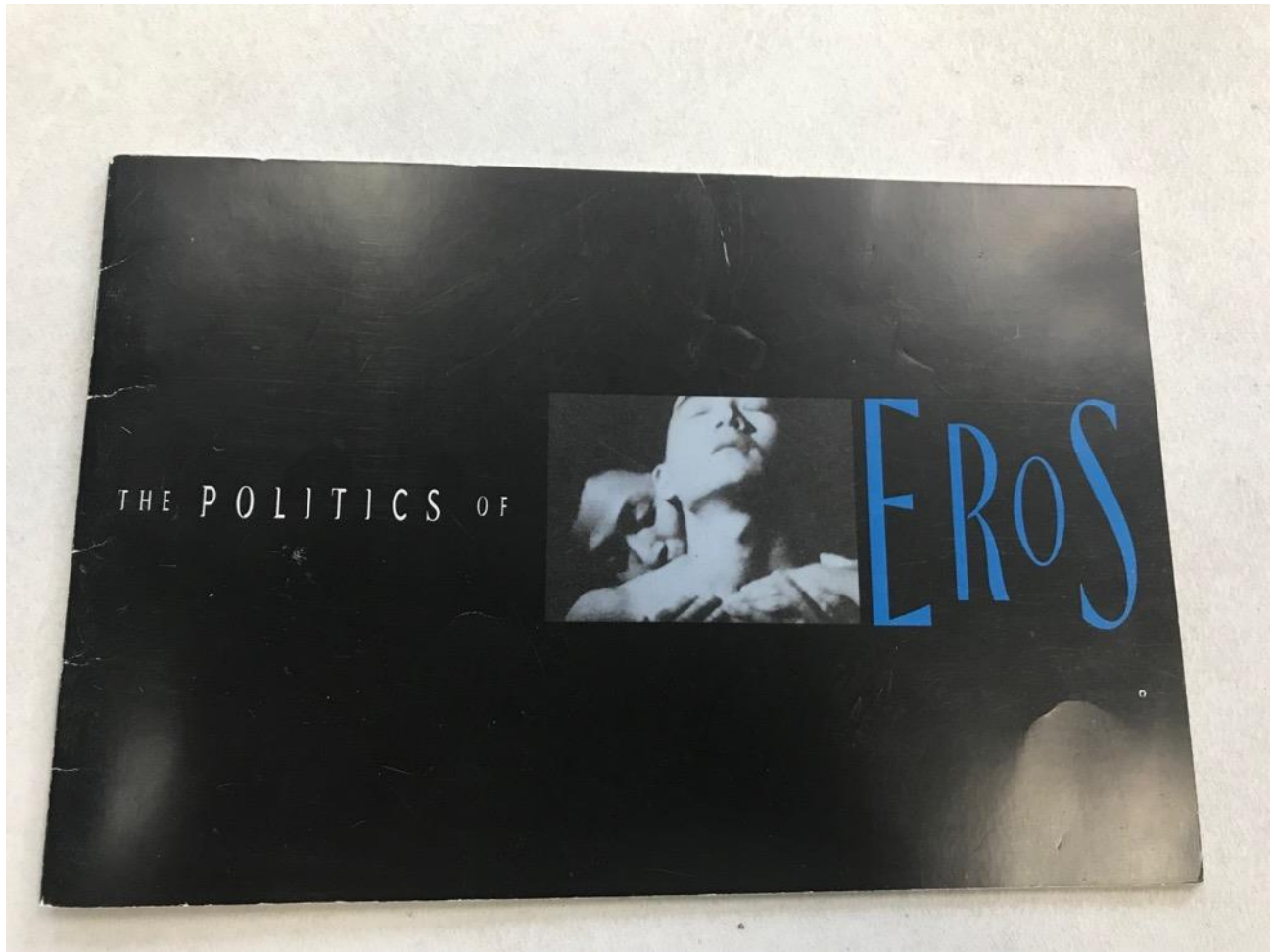


Figure 3.5. Third World Newsreel rental pamphlet, *The Politics of Eros* (1996). Personal documentation from the Third World Newsreel offices in New York, NY.

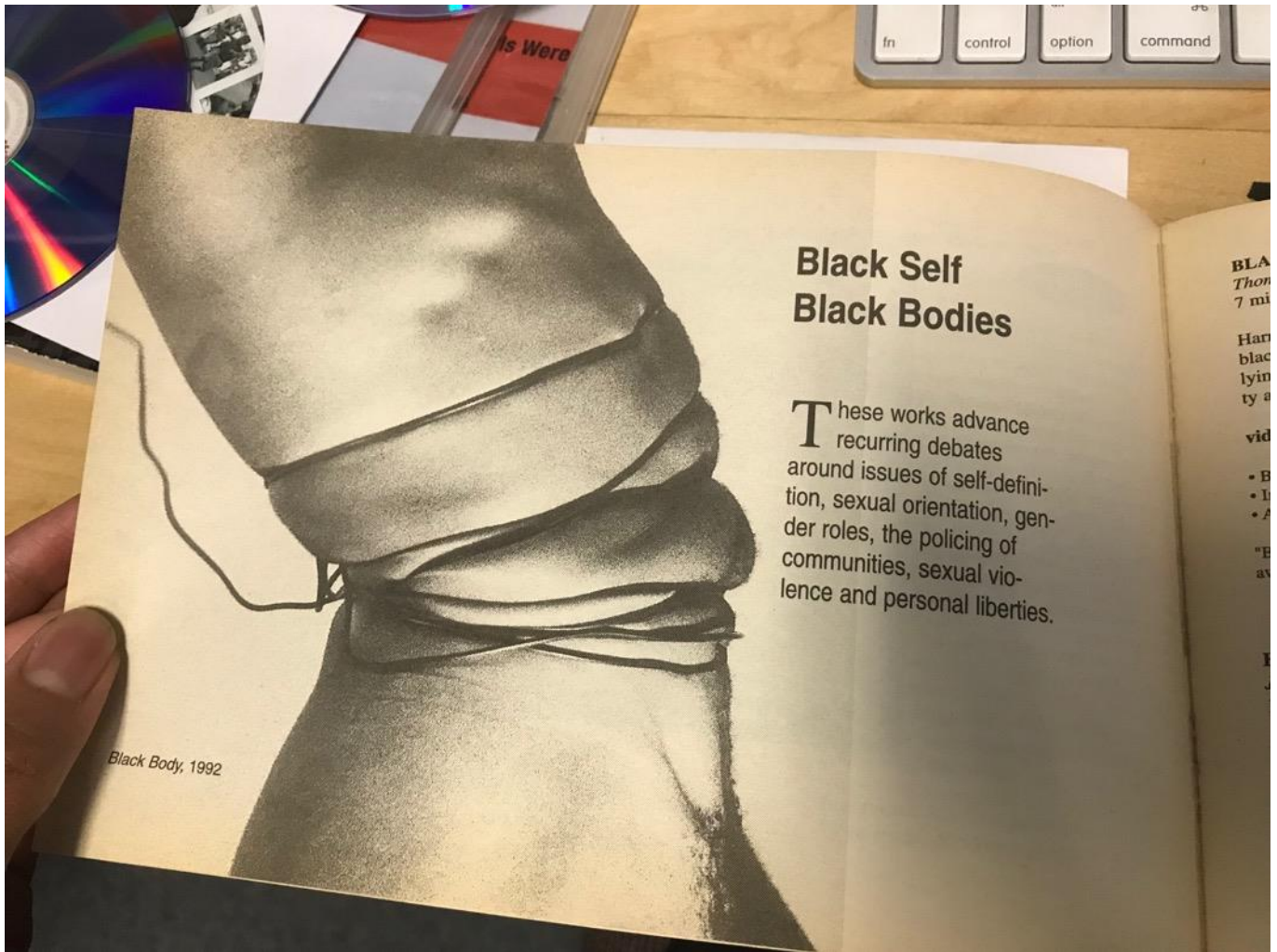
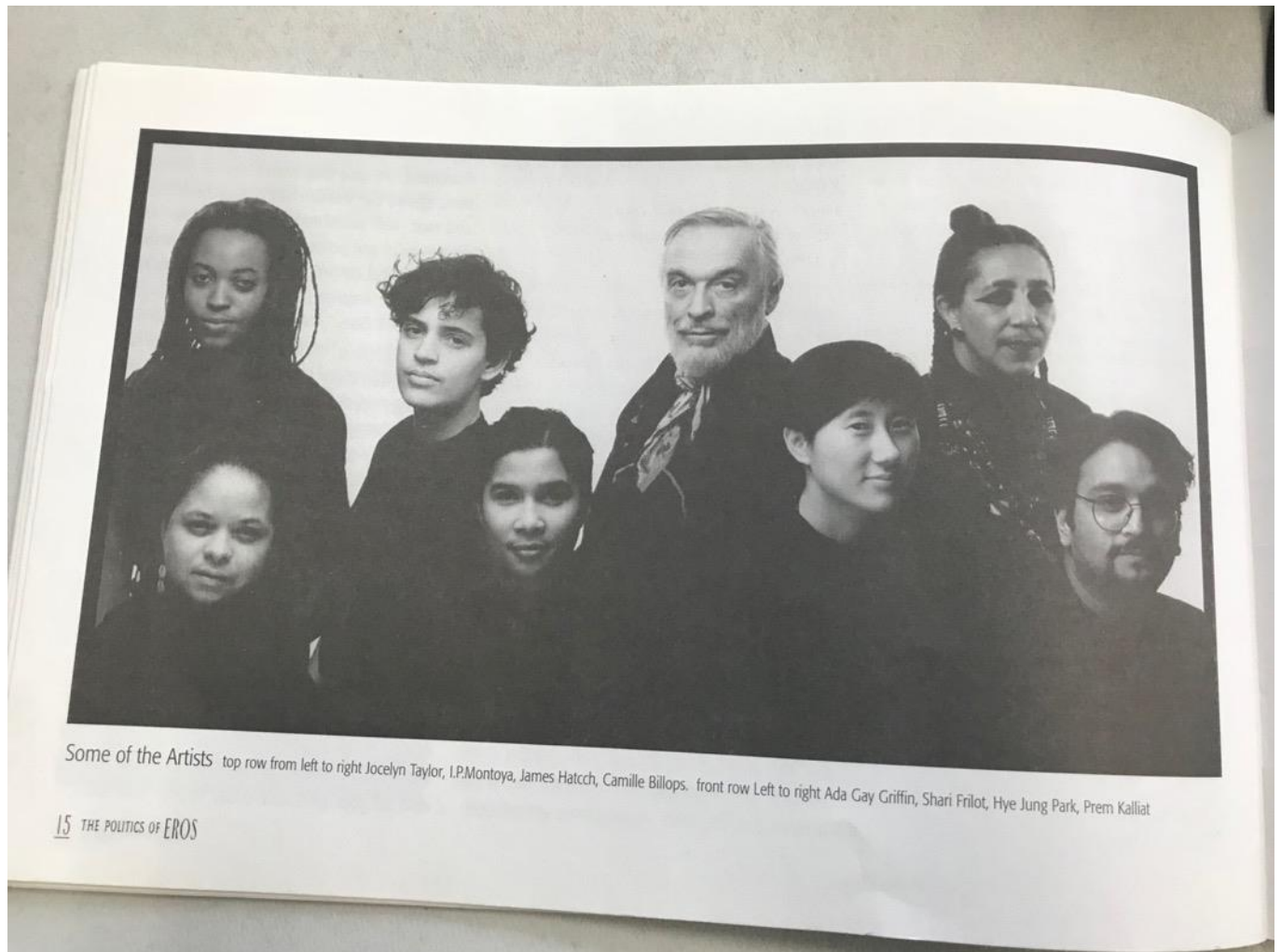


Figure 3.6. Third World Newsreel rental pamphlet, *Black Independents in the 90s*. Personal documentation from the Third World Newsreel offices in New York, NY.



Some of the Artists top row from left to right Jocelyn Taylor, I.P.Montoya, James Hatcch, Camille Billops. front row Left to right Ada Gay Griffin, Shari Frlot, Hye Jung Park, Prem Kalliat

15 THE POLITICS OF EROS

Figure 3.7. Third World Newsreel rental pamphlet, *The Politics of Eros*. Personal documentation from the Third World Newsreel offices in New York, NY.



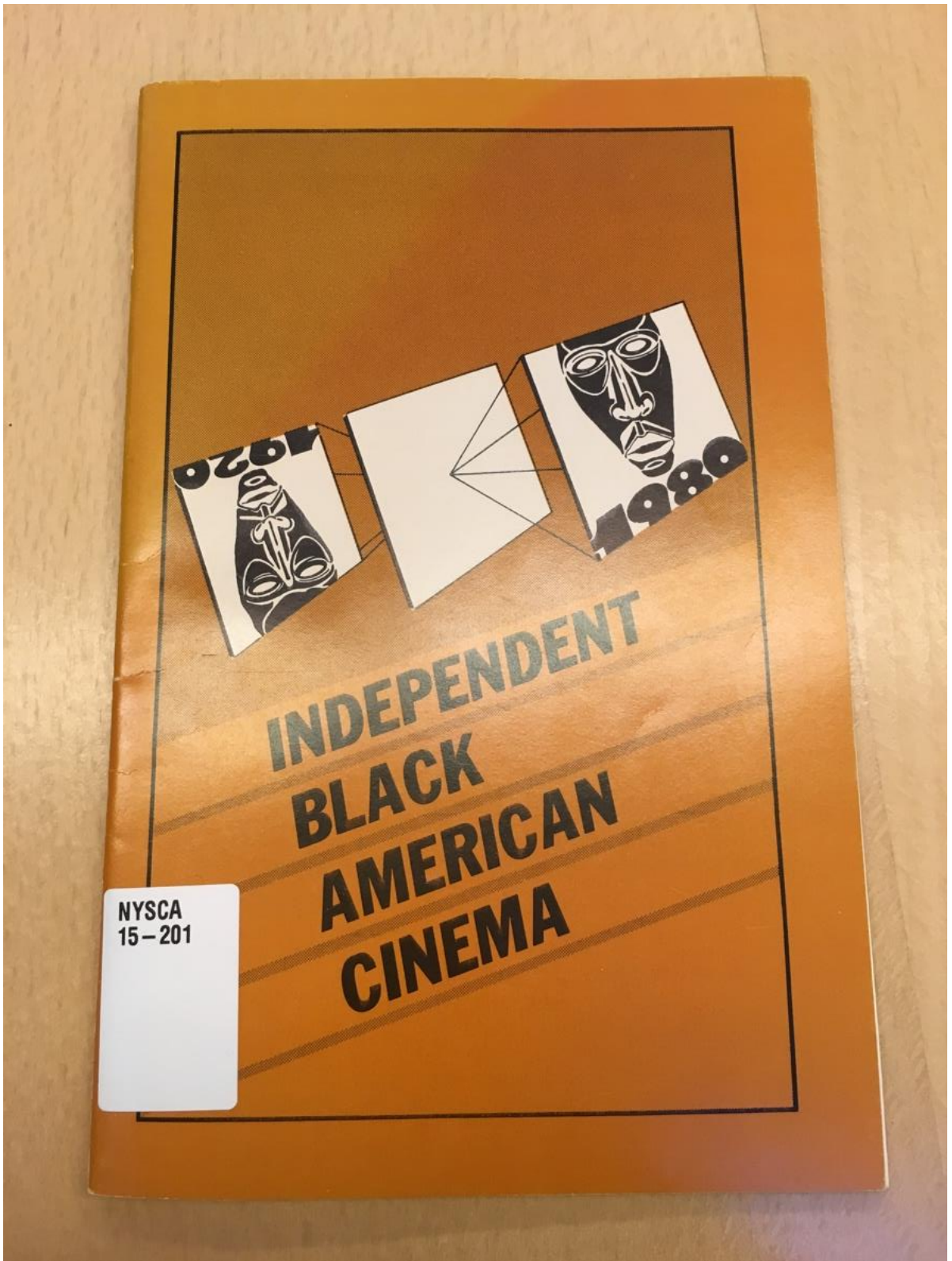


Figure 3.8. *Independent Black American Cinema* (1980) by Pearl Bowser. Personal documentation from the New York Library of Performing Arts, New York, NY.

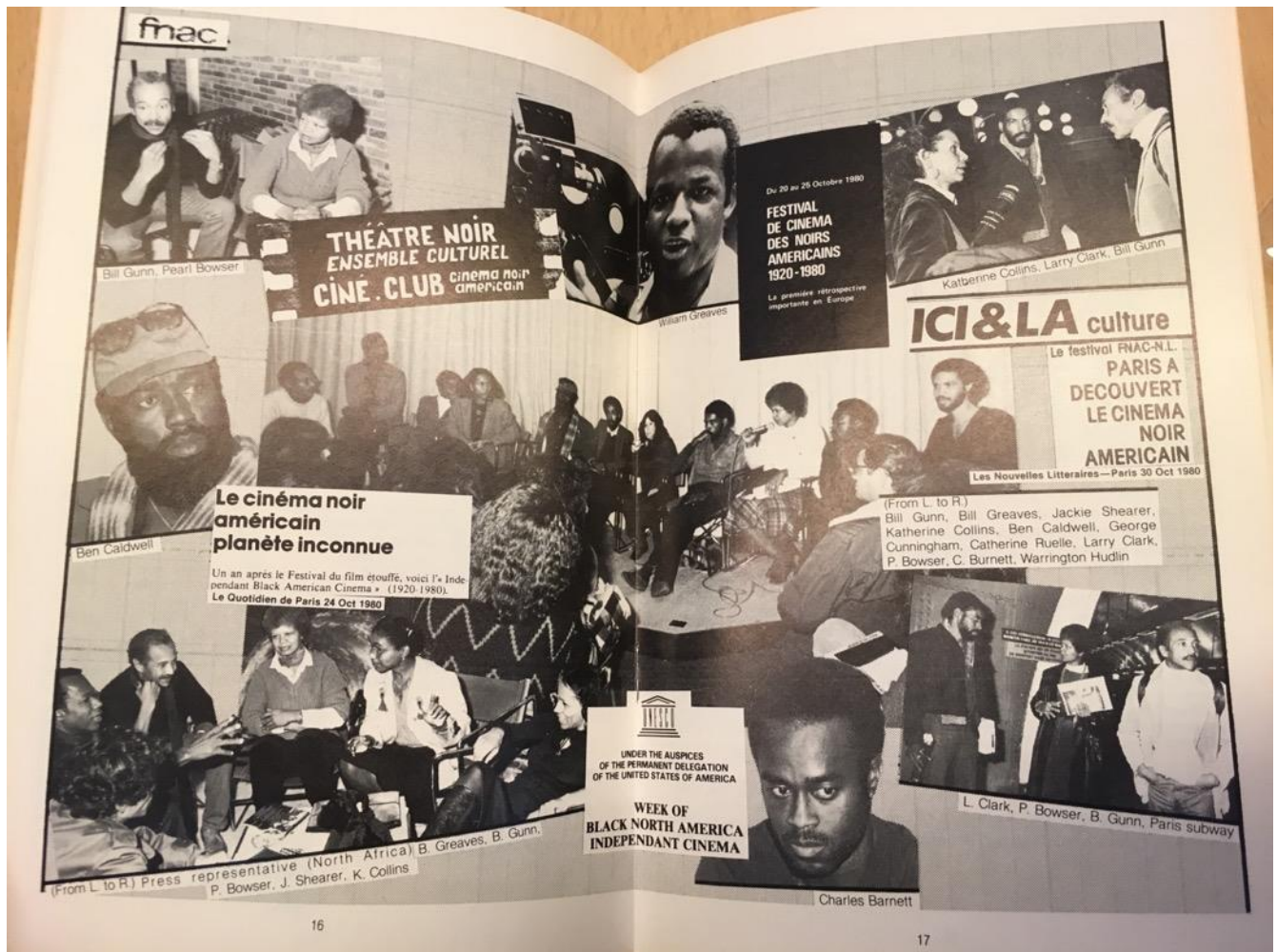


Figure 3.9. *Independent Black American Cinema* (1980) by Pearl Bowser. Personal documentation from the New York Library of Perming Arts, New York, NY.



Whitney Museum of American Art 34  
 The New American Filmmakers Series  
 EXHIBITIONS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

**The Black Woman Independent: Representing Race and Gender**

December 30–January 16, 1987

Gallery Talk, Thursday, January 8, following the 12:00 screening. Valerie Smith will be present.

Special thanks to the Black Filmmaker Foundation, Third World Newsreel, and the Black Film Center Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington, for their assistance in the preparation of this exhibition.

All films are 16mm, sound, except where otherwise noted.

**Program I. The Politics of Domestic Relations**

*Your Children Come Back to You*, 1979, Allie Sharon Larkin, black and white, 27 min.; *A Mother Is a Mother*, 1982, Lyn Blum and Cynthia Ealey, videotape, color, 27 min.; *A Minor Altercation*, 1977, Jackie Shearer, color, 30 min.; *Suzanne, Suzanne*, 1982, Camille Billops, black and white, 26 min.

**Program II. Power and Creativity: Black Women Working**

*Illusions*, 1982, Julie Dash, color, 34 min.; *Grey Area*, 1982, Monona Wall, black and white, 40 min.; *Fannie's Film*, 1981, Fronza Woods, black and white, 15 min.; *Gotta Make This Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock*, 1983, Michelle Parkerson, videotape, color, 58 min.

**Program III. Race and the Social Construction of Gender**

*Hair Piece: A Film for Nappyheaded People*, 1982, Ayoka Chenzira, color, 10 min.; *A Different Image*, 1982, Allie Sharon Larkin, color, 51 min.; *Four Women*, 1978, Julie Dash, color, 7 min.; *I Be Done Been Was Is*, 1984, Debra Robinson, color, 58 min.

The history of the representation of black women in Hollywood films is a narrative of absences. When cast in the manner of Louise Beavers or Hattie McDaniel as the ubiquitous servant, selfless, faultless, and uncomplaining, black women were portrayed as creatures devoid of desire. When, like Dorothy Dandridge, they were cast as sirens of sexuality, they embodied desire but lacked other features of character or personality. Singers, dancers, and musicians like Lena Horne, Katherine Dunham, and Hazel Scott, who made their way to film from nightclubs and concert halls, were denied integral dramatic roles. On screen they sang, danced, and played piano as themselves, in scenes that could be cut easily out of deference to less-than-liberal audiences. Although in isolated cases independent and studio-financed films of the sixties and seventies provided black actresses with opportunities for substantial, resonant roles, the emergent black women independent filmmakers and video artists of the late seventies and eighties have assumed primary responsibility for granting centrality to the voices and experiences of black women. These directors and producers take for their perspectives on domestic relations, politics, history, and contemporary culture characters who once served as little more than markers of empty space.

The artists presented here share a variety of concerns with the wider community of feminist film and video artists.



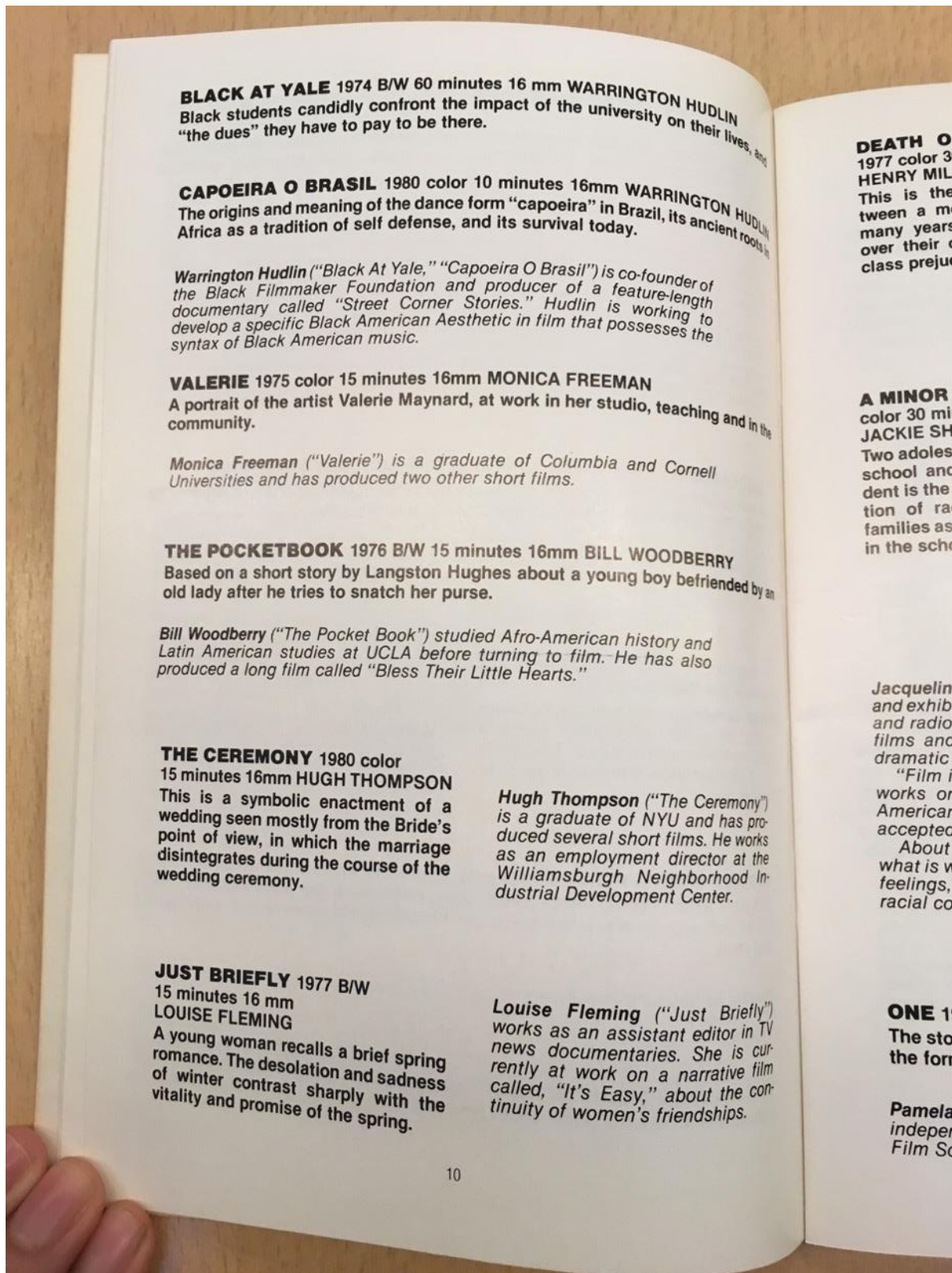
*Your Children Come Back to You*, 1979. Allie Sharon Larkin.

ists. As the conjunction of works in Program I suggests, several of them explore in their productions the complexity of the mother-daughter bond, a connection that has acquired increasing significance for feminists in a variety of disciplines as the most formative relationship in the lives of women. As critic-theorist Marianne Hirsch writes: "There can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture, there can be no theory of women's oppression, that does not take into account woman's role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women, and that does not study that relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society. Any full study of mother-daughter relationships, in whatever field, is by definition both feminist and interdisciplinary."

Black women independent film and video artists also search for the enduring, political implications of the kinds of private, domestic relationships that the mainstream has trivialized or ignored. And the experimental quality of much of the work calls into question the assumptions and formal conventions of narrative and documentary films and videotapes. Yet they bring to these feminist concerns a cultural specificity that derives from their particular racial and national position. Their work thus incorporates the critique of patriarchy and the examination of women's lives into an exploration and representation of black cultural practices and rituals.

The New American Filmmakers Series is made possible in part by grants from Manufacturers Hanover, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Figure 3.10. Personal documentation of Valerie Smith's program, "The Black Woman Independent: Representing Race and Gender" for the Whitney Museum of American Art *The New American Filmmakers Series* (1987) in the Whitney Museum's Education Library, New York, NY.



**BLACK AT YALE** 1974 B/W 60 minutes 16 mm WARRINGTON HUDLIN  
 Black students candidly confront the impact of the university on their lives, and "the dues" they have to pay to be there.

**CAPOEIRA O BRASIL** 1980 color 10 minutes 16mm WARRINGTON HUDLIN  
 The origins and meaning of the dance form "capoeira" in Brazil, its ancient roots in Africa as a tradition of self defense, and its survival today.

*Warrington Hudlin ("Black At Yale," "Capoeira O Brasil") is co-founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation and producer of a feature-length documentary called "Street Corner Stories." Hudlin is working to develop a specific Black American Aesthetic in film that possesses the syntax of Black American music.*

**VALERIE** 1975 color 15 minutes 16mm MONICA FREEMAN  
 A portrait of the artist Valerie Maynard, at work in her studio, teaching and in the community.

*Monica Freeman ("Valerie") is a graduate of Columbia and Cornell Universities and has produced two other short films.*

**THE POCKETBOOK** 1976 B/W 15 minutes 16mm BILL WOODBERRY  
 Based on a short story by Langston Hughes about a young boy befriended by an old lady after he tries to snatch her purse.

*Bill Woodberry ("The Pocket Book") studied Afro-American history and Latin American studies at UCLA before turning to film. He has also produced a long film called "Bless Their Little Hearts."*

**THE CEREMONY** 1980 color  
 15 minutes 16mm HUGH THOMPSON  
 This is a symbolic enactment of a wedding seen mostly from the Bride's point of view, in which the marriage disintegrates during the course of the wedding ceremony.

*Hugh Thompson ("The Ceremony") is a graduate of NYU and has produced several short films. He works as an employment director at the Williamsburgh Neighborhood Industrial Development Center.*

**JUST BRIEFLY** 1977 B/W  
 15 minutes 16 mm  
 LOUISE FLEMING  
 A young woman recalls a brief spring romance. The desolation and sadness of winter contrast sharply with the vitality and promise of the spring.

*Louise Fleming ("Just Briefly") works as an assistant editor in TV news documentaries. She is currently at work on a narrative film called, "It's Easy," about the continuity of women's friendships.*

**DEATH OF HENRY MILL** 1977 color 30 minutes  
 JACKIE SH...  
 This is the story of a man who has spent many years in prison for a crime that was a class prejudice.

**A MINOR** 1977 color 30 minutes  
 JACKIE SH...  
 Two adolescent boys from a school and their father are the victims of racial prejudice in their families as well as in the school.

*Jacqueline... and exhibits... and radio... films and... dramatic... "Film is... works on... American... accepted... About... what is... feelings... racial con...*

**ONE** 1977 color 30 minutes  
 The story of a woman who finds the form of her own life.

*Pamela... independ... Film Sc...*

Figure 3.11. *Independent Black American Cinema* (1980), *Just Briefly* description. Personal documentation from the New York Library of Performing Arts, New York, NY.



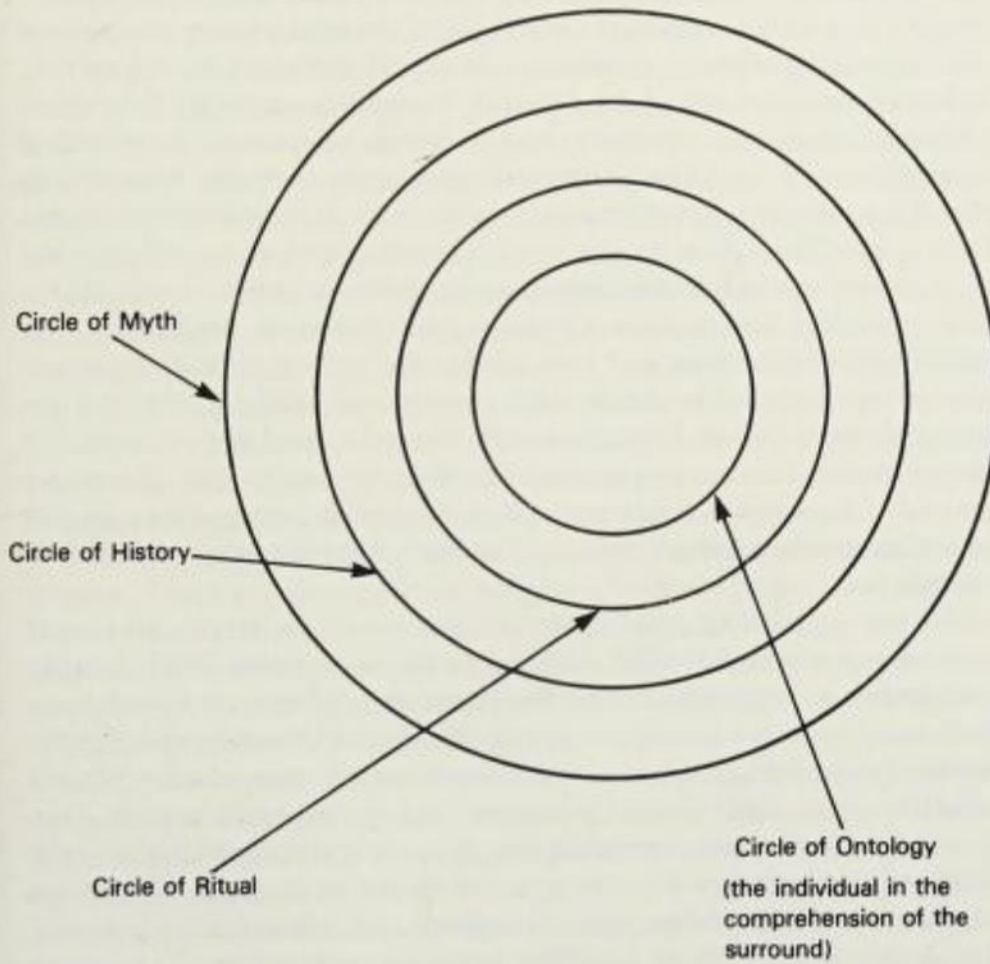


Figure 4.1. Hortense Spillers's Diagram of Ritual in "Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World," in *Conjuring* (1985), edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers.





Figure 4.2. Screenshot from *Four Women*: L. Martina Young dancing through the veil.



Figure 4.3. Screengrab from *Four Women*: Sweet Thing's corporeal intensity and its doubling effect via superimposition.



Figure 4.4. Screengrab from *Four Women*: The camera zooms in repeatedly on Sweet Thing to draw out her embodied feeling of sensuality.



Figure 4.5. Tight shot of Peaches drawing out her focused embodied actions and moves.



Figure 4.6. Screenshot from *Praise House*: Hannah conjuring an image from the spiritual world into our material world.



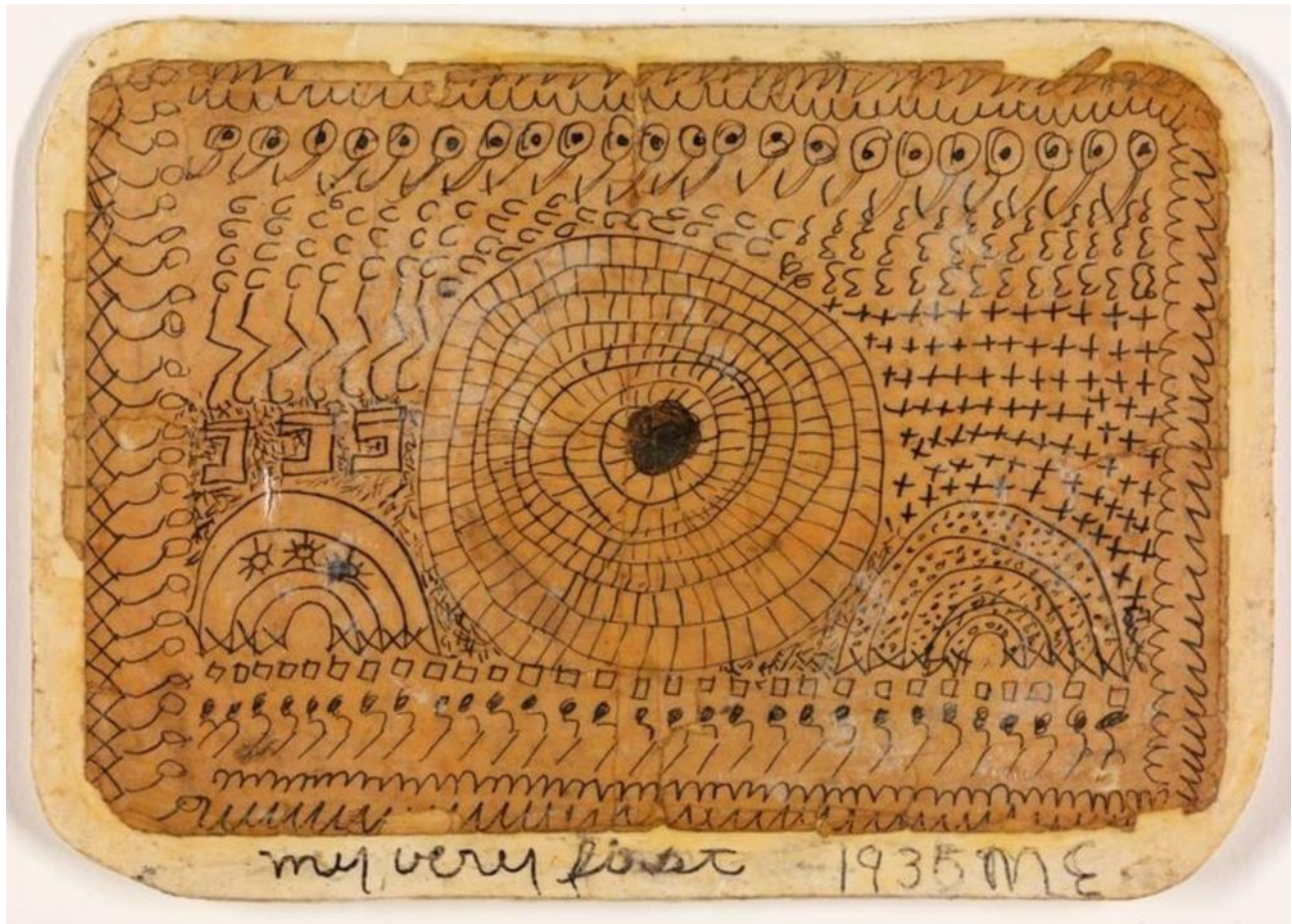


Figure 4.7. Minnie Evans, *My Very First*, 1935: Pen and ink on paper (Sheet: 5 ½ x 7 7/8 inches). Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.



Figure 4.8. Screenshot from *Praise House*: Hannah drawing in the style of Minnie Evans.



Figure 4.9. Screenshot from *Praise House*: Hannah brushing Granny's hair.





Figure 4.10. Screenshot from *Praise House*: example of how Dash uses editing to convey a feel of events occurring simultaneously.



Figure 4.11. Screengrab from *Praise House*: Mama and Hannah engaged in a conjuring fit.



Figure 4.12. Screengrab from *Praise House: The Guardian Angel* comforting Mama after her conjuring fit.



Figure 5.1. Screenshot from *Dreaming Rivers*: Miss T's POV of her children gazing upon her as she dies.



Figure 5.2. Screenshot from *Dreaming Rivers*: Miss T's hands anointing her feet.





Figure 5.3. Screengrab from *Dreaming Rivers*: Miss T's hands as she passes away.



Figure 5.4. Screenshot from *Dreaming Rivers*: Miss T swirling through time.



Figure 5.5. Screenshot from *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*: Surveillance footage.





Figure 5.6. Screenshot from *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*: A Sapphire (center figure) on the run.



Figure 5.7. Screengrab from *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*: A Sapphire switching out identities in a motel bathroom.



Figure 5.8. Screenshot from *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*: A Sapphire in confinement.



Figure 5.9. Screengrab from *Memory Tracks*: The Afro-woman/specter fleeing from our protagonist's gaze from her viewfinder.



Figure 5.10. Screengrab from *Memory Tracks*: The Afro-woman and our protagonist link up through time.





Figure 5.11. Screenshot from *Memory Tracks*: Our protagonist aims her video camera at the audience and shoots.

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