WORLD RECORDS

Volume III: Documenting Blackness at the National Museum of African American History and Culture
Terence Nance’s films transform screen images into missives from the future; create passages to unthought fugitive gatherings; and offer layered debates on what might be possible in different worlds. From shorts *The Time Has Come* (2014) and *Swimming in Your Skin Again* (2015) to his feature-length fiction film *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* (2012), documentary *The Triptych* (2013), and current HBO show *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018–present), Nance’s oeuvre reimagines Black existence: its temporal dimensions; its tactics of visual and aural representation; and its ex/inclusions from what Afropitturist scholar and artist Kodwo Eshun has called “the category of the human” in the world(s) beyond the screens.\(^1\) Often refusing classical cinema’s continuities of space and time—and insisting instead on the structuring forces of only partially indexical and spatially or temporally dislocated sounds and images—Nance’s film worlds give us Black art and Black life otherwise: sometimes through multiple and unsynced forms of mediation (as in *The Triptych*); and others via oversaturated colors and impossible life forms (*Bet She Looks Like You*, 2017 and *You & I & You*, 2015). With such productions, Nance questions the nature of cinematic fidelity, rejecting not only the worlds of the cinema, and the world that has given us cinema, but also the ways in which knowledge and subjects are formulated, understood, and represented in these worlds.\(^2\)

So suggests Nance’s new tagline, featured alongside *Random Acts of Flyness*: “shift consciousness.” Through Nance’s commitment to transforming viewers’ state of being, to presenting Black people as what he has called “another thing,” and, necessarily then, to disentangling Blackness from traditional forms of subjectivity with their burdens of rationality and cohesion, Terence Nance delivers us a potent form of Afrofuturism.\(^3\) While for Nance, Afrofuturism signifies a more specific “set of aesthetics relational to science fiction” that he feels his films don’t depict, I believe it is nonetheless important to view Nance’s moving images in the broader terms of this proliferating cultural and political phenomenon.\(^4\)

Afrofuturism is not only an engagement with
the kind of sci-fi “technoculture” Mark Dery described in 1993 and which Nance believes he doesn’t address in his work. Afrofuturism also describes the world of Janelle Monae’s “emotion picture” Dirty Computer (2018), the sounds of DJ Spooky’s mixes, and the political imaginary of Black freedom movements. It is a phenomenon, as I’ve argued elsewhere, “expansive in its aesthetic, thematic, and political scope; a transnational, transhistorical, and continually arising form of Black art and expression tied to the political commitment to imagine Black life otherwise; and a world-making practice.”{5} This labeling matters because it enables us to connect Nance’s films, which otherwise might default into categories like Black avant-garde, experimental, or Black documentary tradition, to a more robust and wide-ranging, multimedia and political tradition of giving shape to Black futurities, modes of knowing, and forms of subjectivity that, at a fundamental level, depart from Enlightenment conceptions of the human.{6}

Put in these broader terms, we might describe Nance’s works as immersive presentations of what Ashon Crawley has called “otherwise possibilities,” “a break with the known”; and also, particularly in their sonic dimensions, “the joyful noise of tarrying”—a noise that “highlights . . . the intentional refusal to produce coherence, the intentional standing outside the circle of language consciousness.”{7} In other words, Nance’s “otherwise” expressions are holistically beyond that which is coherent, where coherence stands for “the circle of language consciousness” formulated in terms of a Cartesian, knowing and speaking Enlightenment subject emplotted in time and imperial/colonial space. I argue that Nance’s moving image works fulfill the most fundamental concern and labor of Afrofuturism: the creation of alternative Black existence(s) unbounded by the Enlightenment notions of time, temporality, and progress that at once structure and emerge out of anti-blackness.{8} My description of Afrofuturism here, which is predicated upon disentangling the texture and possibilities of Black living from the racist construction of categorical Blackness, brings together recent scholarship in the broader field of Black studies: essays by Sylvia Wynter; Kathrine McKittrick’s Demonic Grounds (2006); Alexander G. Weheliye’s Phonographies (2005); Fred Moten’s In the Break (2003); Ashon Crawley’s Blackpentacostal Breath (2016); and Christina Sharpe’s In the Wake (2016), which all also proceed from the same fundamental rejection of Enlightenment categories of the human and what Frantz Fanon famously called “the black” in Black Skins, White Masks (1952).

Without rendering “Afrofuturism” too capacious a term, I think that there are necessary expansions and collectivizations of categorical thinking within Black studies when Crawley’s Blackpentacostalism, Walida Imarisha’s speculative fictions, Sharpe’s wake work, and Sun Ra’s sounds are all understood as Afrofuturisms: all Black artistic, ontological, and political productions outside Western liberal humanist notions of progress and subjectivity.{9} By outside, I mean everything from in opposition to and excluded from to beyond. Following Sylvia Wynter, I also understand that starting in the early Enlightenment period and through to the present such progress and subjectivity could pertain only to particular forms of the human, with “all other modes of being human . . . instead . . . seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are ‘out there,’ but adaptively, as the lack of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.”{10} And so what I am calling Afrofuturism necessarily describes both a time-space/politics/aesthetics and also a formulation of a new ontology.

If here it seems that I draw on Crawley’s formulation more than others, it is not because I understand Crawley as either specifically Afrofuturist or even offering a more precise formulation of the kind of world-making in which Nance is engaged. Rather, I’m interested in how Crawley’s religious language, when understood through the imperative for Black political and imaginative struggle, yields “otherwise” ontologies—and in so doing becomes similar to Nance’s otherworldly film language that Nance himself understands in semi-religious terms, as “litany.”{11} For Crawley, as for Nance, the discourse of the church, with
its demands (or litanies) for future, past, and other-times/other-places, performs the work of Afrofuturism: rendering in Crawley’s and Nance’s visions free, future-bound Black worlds of being and meaning.\(^{12}\) And so in Nance’s feature documentary, where historically we might have expected more of an objectifying division between filmmaker and subject, we find instead new worlds, new categories of thought, and images and diegeses that themselves are world-making. We might also see Afrofuturism as the ecstatic spirited lifeworld of what Black documentary can aspire to imagine.

Though scholars from Trinh T. Minh-ha to Catherine Russell to Michael Renov have already carefully critiqued documentary’s objectivist tradition and hierarchical codes of realism, Nance’s efforts seem to at once delve even deeper into the underlying problems of how film and documentary might represent the Other, who must, of necessity, remain categorically unrepresentable; and, at the same time, to veer away, via Afrofuturism, from questions of documentary or even film ontology altogether by creating alternative modes of engagement embedded in Blackness and its fantastical flourishing. Nance’s creation of film modes, and the kind of incoherence Crawley theorizes, spans Nance’s work (Swimming in Your Skin Again and Oversimplification), which intersperse non-diegetic animated drawings, sonic litanies, and fantastical, collaged images into their only partially plot-driven-narratives; others (Jimi Could Have Fallen from the Sky [2017], The Triptych, The Time Has Come) are dominated by voiceovers that move in and out of indexical relationships to either/both the diegesis and the world of the filmmaker. Yet other productions (episodes of Random Acts of Flyness, You and I and You [2015], They Charge for the Sun [2016]) present more seemingly conventional plots but with characters from life-worlds only intelligible within the work; and some of Nance’s pieces, especially sequences from Random Acts, rely heavily on a form of resignification that at once hews to a standard mode of film satire (like that delivered in Spike Lee’s Bamboozled [2000]) and simultaneously departs from this reiterative process by refusing the full turns/terms of satire, inaugurating in their empty space new Black knowledge(s).

Such knowledge is created not only by Nance’s unconventional aesthetics but also by his mobilization of a collectivizing, community-building process—most evident in collaborative projects like The Triptych and Random Acts of Flyness (where multiple people together to script and direct episodes)—which is also fundamental to his approach. Thus, Nance’s creations must evoke for us the imperatives of what Sharpe has called “wake work,” in which care structures Black effort and “the orthographies of the wake require new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible.”\(^{13}\) By finding and sharing, across tiers of production and reception, such new modes, Nance illustrates precisely how, to quote Sharpe again, “we (might) understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures . . . . Much of the work of Black imaging,” Sharpe adds, “that those images do out in the world has been about such imaginings of the fullness of Black life.”\(^{14}\) Sharpe’s description of the results of Black struggle, rejection, and embrace—like Crawley’s and other artists’ I’ve noted above—renders a praxis at least partially outside the time and space of white hegemony.

So to whatever extent Terence Nance might himself be invested in traditional forms of moving image production, his work nonetheless emerges out of and produces the alternative aesthetics and existence of the “otherwise” that Crawley describes, and which I understand to be, among other things, a specifically spiritually invested rendering of the Afrofuture. I use the word “spiritually” both as reference to Crawley (and Sun Ra and also a whole strain of soul and post-soul musicians) and because Nance himself responded to my insistence that his fantastical sounds, images, and editing had to reflect some kind of alternative aesthetic and ontological commitments.
by invoking the term “litany.” He imagines the flow and associative quality of his works as a litany, he said, the kind he and his brother (who collaborated with him on Swimming in Your Skin Again) experienced in church in the South, during their childhood. {15} Attending to Nance’s own language, I strategically take “litany” here (a term Audre Lorde uses for one of her most famous poems, “A Litany for Survival”) to be an act of being-in-community and world-making that has everything to do with a Black future—one spiritually invested in the here and the beyond or after. Such a litany might inaugurate the future that, in the introduction to Octavia’s Brood, Walida Imarisha insists is constituted by the sheer existence of Black Peoples, with “each of us . . . already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.” {16} It might aim to inaugurate a community: a lifeworld. Though Nance’s involvement with AFROPUNK, for whom he produced his documentary The Triptych (and which itself aimed at, but also failed at, establishing a freer time-space for Black artistic and political expression), remains a complex and determining feature of the convergence of Nance’s production and aesthetics, it also signals Nance’s very direct engagement with Black collaboration, Black community, and Black transformation.

Consequently, the question of Nance’s potential Afrofuturism is one that matters, not so much because of nomenclature or any academic division of forms or fields, but rather for the sake of two sets of questions: 1) How is Nance’s body of work one that can help us to further understand the evolving art and scholarship focused on the practices of Black meaning-making outside Enlightenment structures?; and 2) How, given Nance’s aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, does his documentary impulse (as is so evident in films like The Time Has Come and The Triptych, as well as Random Acts of Flyness, where most episodes contain documentary segments and name the shows’ “documentary subjects”) direct us to one of the fundamental projects of documentary itself: using moving images of what is to explore a new world in common? {17} Can thinking together the documentary and the Afrofuture lead us to reformulate our engagement with Black documentary and broader Black film practice and theory—perhaps even to consider the mechanisms of moving image representation as more problematic and, however conversely, potentially more speculative than other forms of Black art?

Terence Nance co-directed and produced The Triptych with his friend Barron Claiborne, and mixed the sound with Sanford Biggers in 2012 for AFROPUNK, which at the time was in the process of evolving from a Black punk film and music festival into a more expansive Black artist and activist showcase and community project. Now AFROPUNK also functions as both an online and in-person community-based platform for Black arts, news, and activism, in addition to the associated yearly film festival. The festival, which began in 2005 at Brooklyn Academy of Music, initially focused on Black presence and work in the (majority white) punk subculture. Now featuring popular artists like Grace Jones and RZA, as well as lesser-known folks, the festival has since grown to include all kinds of Black musical artists and moving image works, and to have a major art following as it moves across the globe year by year. “The interesting thing is people just think of AFROPUNK as just a festival, but AFROPUNK really is a community of people that started ten years ago online, and now we are reaching about 9 million people a month across our social media channels,” Jocelyn Cooper, co-owner of the project, explained in a 2015 interview. {18} By 2015, AFROPUNK acquired another dimension as an Afrofuturist event with explicitly political and activist investments, and so we might think of it, for the purposes of this essay at least, as an event forum at once responsive to Black popular cultural trends and continually invested in both gathering and showcasing a historical Blackness that is out of sync—literally out of time—with white cultural hegemons. {19}

As such a forum, AFROPUNK becomes an important production context for Nance’s The Triptych, telling us about the cultural, political, and aesthetic commitments of the film’s intended initial audience as well as AFROPUNK’s
investment in recruiting Nance, and how they perceived the style and politics of the young but already significant director. We can also reconcile more readily, then, _The Triptych_’s seeming vacillation between an explanatory and a fantastical mode and we can understand the project as Nance himself did, as part of AFROPUNK’s effort to grow, document, and be a Black art community. The work exists at once within and beyond AFROPUNK, and has been viewed outside of these community connections, and thus also points to questions of what it might mean to perform documentary beyond the important context(s) of Black art and activism.

Such broader contexts are invoked in the opening of _The Triptych_, which delivers a series of discordant and distinctly ironic conversations with its three artist-subjects: Sanford Biggers, Wangechi Mutu, and Barron Claiborne. The film at once gathers and proposes a communal effort of Black creativity and rejects conventionally understood terms of art and indexicality in art. The film opens in a traditional explanatory, illustrative mode, with a voiceover about the subject and visuals that more or less match the narration. "Sanford Biggers is over six feet tall," Nance’s voice begins, as Biggers walks out of an almost fully dark shot of intricate, deep red wallpaper and into a brightening plane of light. "He smiles regularly," Nance adds, and then we see Biggers smile. The mode of the film begins to shift as the scenario described by the voiceover becomes stranger and the images no longer sync tightly with the narration. "He paints sculptures and quilts." Another shift, as Nance intones rhythmically and gently, "He occasionally fabricates drawings, trinkets," and then seemingly angrily, "mythology, fucking lies." There are fast cuts from shots of objects and artworks to one of Biggers’ back, and Nance’s voice grows harshly and mechanically distorted, "because he’s a fucking magician." The voiceover resumes its former even keel and, as we hear, "he melts his last idea and casts a newer, uglier, lovelier one,” we watch Biggers take off a distorted mask of a light-skinned, flesh colored face with phenotypically African-American features—thick red lips, cut-out eyes, and an open mouth. As this bit of opening narrative concludes, Biggers (sans mask) is at his computer, which is attached to a keyboard and a number of other music and sound-making devices.

While the above description by no means accounts for the only strange or sarcastic moment in the film, I want to pause here to consider the choice to depict as “fucking lies” the work of one of its featured artists, or the artist himself as a fucking liar, both; and, at the same time. Should we think of the film as announcing, at its opening, its avant-garde, reflexive intent, but also as critiquing the stability of the medium and/or any associated explanatory voice (such critique being also a prominent feature of much avant-garde work)? And should we read an antagonistic relationship between the director/voice and his subject, or are both subjects of the film and in some kind of battle for truth?

Entertaining these questions leads us back to the writing of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who famously insisted nearly thirty years ago, in the first wave of criticism of ethnographic documentary, that "there is no such thing as documentary, whether the term designates category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques."{20} Fundamental to her argument is that documentary replaces:

one source of unacknowledged authority by another, but not to challenge the very constitution of authority. The new socio-historical text thus rules despotically as another master-centered text, since it unwittingly helps to perpetuate the Master’s ideological stance . . . . To deny the reality of film in claiming (to capture) reality is to stay "in ideology”—that is, to indulge in the (deliberate or not) confusion of filmic with phenomenal reality.{21}

The debate Minh-ha inaugurated has, across the years, been most powerfully legislated by Catherine Russell and Michael Renov who have advanced a non-binaristic approach to
documentary. Their scholarship insists that experimental documentarians, with their necessary disregard for structural fixity (such as dualism), open documentary to a far more radical praxis of critiquing the social. And, as their (otherwise quite different) studies show us, documentary has increasingly become the moving-image site for resistance against hegemonic epistemologies. Theorizing a practice of "experimental ethnography," Russell argues for documentary as "a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation," and demonstrates how, through the experimental, "the politics of representation and the conventions of observational cinema are brought under scrutiny."{22} By her logic, then, The Triptych’s showcasing Biggers as a liar, and even visualizing, in and among the opening shots, a distorted mask that is a representation of a distorted mask (made by whites to represent Blackness) that itself was meant to be a representation of racialized reality and the means of producing visual-sonic media, renders a productive criticism of form, content, and their history as well. And in the spirit of Renov, we might say that by bringing the filmmaker into the world of the film as a distorted voice that acknowledges the lies of artistic production at the opening of The Triptych, Nance’s documentary presents (aesthetic and political) resistance through self-inscription.{23}

But both Russell’s and Renov’s arguments rely on conceptualizations of the subject (the experimenting filmmaker for Russell; and the self for Renov) in which subjectivity is possible and knowable. For instance, despite a careful consideration of subject/self as category of meaning, Renov ultimately proposes that autobiography is a vehicle for resistance and community building. Nance’s work, however, directs us beyond experimental ethnographies and self-inscribed film autobiographies by insisting at once on the collective and collaborative; and gutting the possibilities for representing selfhood in any Western sense. Nance moves us from concerns about perspective qua perspective and attendant notions of truth and objectivity—or even subjectivity—toward the creation of spaces of meaning defined by their escape from relations of antiblackness—which includes Western forms of subjectivity and the subject itself.

But Black documentary production had long before, of necessity, taken a different course. Because of critical filmmakers’ simultaneous investment in presenting lifeworlds that have not yet been conveyed through moving images (because of access and distribution) and in overcoming the impossibility of describing its subjects in any conventional film terms given their cinematic (if not also ideological) association with racialized aggression/condemnation previously, Black documentary work was always already engaged in projects of world-building. In fact, as Paul Arthur argues: "not only is the documentary regarded by experimentalists . . . as complicit in the propagation of bourgeois values, its conventional rhetorics of evidence, argument, and univocal explanation are deemed incommensurate with the exploration of identity as a bundle of multiple, overdetermined, and contradictory strands."{24} Thus, Black documentarians had to chart out an inherently experimental course. While such concern on the part of Black artists and critics about the documentary genre has applied to fiction film as well, the problem of documentary looms larger both because of the history and vernacular of mainstream documentary’s fifty-some-year investment in indexicality (as Hart describes above); and because of what editors Phyllis Klotman and Janet Cutler explain in their introduction to Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video: the abiding commitment in Black documentary practice to challenge hegemonic images of Blackness.{25}

Klotman and Cutler, attempting to account for a wide range of Black documentary practice (and writing nearly fifteen years before Nance directed The Triptych), offer a more conservative description of the project of Black documentary than Arthur does—and one that alongside Arthur’s poses essential questions about how we might read Nance’s world-making efforts with The Triptych, in particular its relationship to known and imaginary Black social spheres. They argue for the
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importance of the documentary form and embrace the genre's particular scope and ability intervene in conversations about purported "realities." Linking Black documentary practice to older, historical forms of Black literature, such as the slave narrative, Klotman and Cutler describe Black documentary as a genre that has sought at once to rectify absences and mischaracterizations in Black representation and to inaugurate a field of Black aesthetic production; in other words, as a project of truth-telling fiction that co-exists with an artistic endeavor not necessarily related to particular content. "The need to convey one's own reality," they write, "resisting definitions imposed by the dominant culture, is an important theme in both the slave narratives and lack documentary film and video . . . . Like their literary counterparts, African American documentaries offer testimony to the power of lived experience."{26} "If a single strand unites all of this work," they continue, "it is the 'struggle for representation' that characterizes virtually every effort—an urgent desire to convey black life in ways that counter the relatively uninformed and often distorted representations of mass media film and television productions."{27}

In this notion of "counter(ing)," there is a sense of making-up for absence with, on the one hand, (potentially problematic) indexical presence—and, on the other, with what Klotman and Cutler describe also as "counternarratives," ones which in a different register (of Afrofuturist scholarship) Eshun has argued are in and of themselves an entirely "otherwise" discursive terrain.{28} In other words, the same efforts to rectify misrepresentation might be at once accused of paradoxically submitting to the "Master's ideological stance," while also introducing a form of imagined history inextricable from the imagined futures of Afrofuturism. And so we might read many of the documentary efforts to recuperate the fundamentally contaminated Black image as contesting the terms of Black life and its presentation through an "emphasis on performance as a mode of expression and opposition, . . . interest in exploiting the possibilities of first-person narration, . . . creative insistence on capturing the speech/voice of documentary subjects, and use . . . of music as an agent for change."{29} Nance's work, in particular, seems to emerge out of this longstanding tradition, somewhere at the intersection of the avant-garde and Black works, providing Afrofuturist counternarratives and counterfutures.{30} While the kind of reflexivity, performativity, and focus on sound that Klotman and Cutler describe as resistant measures are not necessarily fully free of the problems of truth-value and the Cartesian subject-object divide, they do shift viewers' focus from the referent as a stable given that precedes the documentary encounter to the documentary itself as a site of co-creation between documentarian, subject, and audience. And this is a shift that The Triptych performs pointedly by staging a visual collaboration between Nance and Claiborne (who is listed as a co-director for two of the sections); a sound collaboration with Biggers (who is listed, along with Nance, as a sound designer for the film); and with the AFROPUNK platform and program—not to mention all three of the artists whose work is shown in the film.

This is also a shift that, according to Michael Gillespie's Film Blackness, ought to be understood as foundational to all Black cinema, irrespective of whether or not it seems to contain the kind of speculative imagery, sound, and attitude foregrounded in The Triptych. Responding to the prevailing belief that Black cinema must always in some sense rectify an error in representation, Gillespie argues that "belief in black film's indexical tie to the black lifeworld forgoes a focus on nuance and occults the complexity of black film to interpret, render, incite, and speculate." In other words, it is his belief that much (if not all) Black cinema engages the index—which is to say, the world—speculatively. And, moreover, "as art and discourse, black film operates as a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as a constitutive, culture fiction."{31} It is this negotiation—though I would suggest it plays out sonically as well as visually here—that Nance's The Triptych addresses, robustly and pointedly, across its diegesis. One potent
example of the film’s concern with unsituating hegemonic understandings of the relationship between art and race comes in the second of The Triptych’s three sections. These are divided rigidly by cuts to black and a stark transition to the next artist of focus. In this second section, after devoting nearly seventeen minutes to presenting both Wangeghi Mutu and her work in beautiful, visual detail, Nance’s voiceover proclaims, “In fact you do not know what she looks like. You cannot pronounce her name.” Even after showing Mutu in various settings—leaving her home; in her studio; in fantastical, futurist outfits in the woods; in focus and out of focus; and creating her collage—and even as his project is aimed, in part, to convey and explore the presence and impact of this important Black artist through film, Nance rejects the medium’s ability to do so. Rather, he insists on precluding his audience’s hopes of gaining any kind of stable, usable truth about the film’s subject.

In so doing, The Triptych draws its audience into a tension not just of the order Gillespie describes, between film as art and race as fiction; but also between a desire for a real (but necessarily illusive) referent and an absorption in the film’s—and its subjects’—otherwise possibilities. Nance develops this tension—attenuating it, soothing it, building it again—throughout The Triptych. As the film explores both the artworks and the narrator’s descriptions of the three artists, it presents a new kind of lifeworld far greater than the sum of its parts. We enter visually, sonically, and sensorially a multilayered time-space of Black transformation; a world in which Blackness’s alternative ontology itself produces new forms of knowledge and modes of knowing, ones that offer The Triptych as both a full world and a vehicle to yet other worlds. It is in this way that the film perhaps repurposes—perhaps strains against—documentary form, where for Fred Moten, the strain is Blackness sounding through and beyond its confinement in white time, identity, and meaning, “a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.”{32}

At the end of the film’s first section, Biggers delivers a performance that is illustrative of this straining, insisting on the simultaneous importance and instability of Blackness as image/sound/concept. In this lengthy scene, in which Biggers begins facing into the camera in racially-marked costume that references earlier work by the artist, Biggers nonetheless travels somewhere in a possible future in which Blackness might be anything. The shot opens with Biggers wiping off white body paint, which he has used in his recent installation Shuffle to costume himself as a kind of mime-clown and a figure in “white-face,” recalling a resistant tradition of passing while inverting a racist cinematic history of blackface. It soon segues from a description of his performance piece, to a visual of his performance, to Nance’s mash-up of Biggers’ performative possibilities.

While Biggers’ performance itself is important, specifically to the arguments about Black ontology and epistemology I’m making here, I want to note that across this whole section of the film, Nance deploys increasingly confusing temporal and spatial film language—in this way engaging in the straining I proposed above. Nance’s layered and anti-realistic presentation of Biggers’ historical, referential, but also highly stylized and experimental performance challenges both the mode and the medium of documentary filmmaking. If the sounds and images are themselves unrealistic then how can Biggers’ referentiality be preserved and conveyed? And if the history and world of Blackness itself has remained all but unrepresentable, then what more can Biggers or documentary itself do than expose such impossibilities—as executed in Nance’s filmic universe, particularly through straining against possibility by offering its “otherwise.” At the beginning of the section, Nance describes Biggers by using voiceover and showing his audience, at times in images unsynced with his voice, who Biggers is and what he does—including the fact that he “fucking lies.” By the end of the section, Nance leaves us where we began, but couldn’t quite believe we were beginning at the time: amidst a series of visually, aurally, and conceptually rich and productive deceptions. In other words, even as Nance develops a documentary subject, he undermines
the stability of that subject, of our ever apprehending him, and of Nance’s own capacity to reveal the truth. And so we are left no longer knowing how, then, to experience the film, except perhaps by letting go of any investment in knowledge. Rather than taking in the sound-vision, the viewer is being taken in by it.

Our first moments of being confronted with the necessity of self-abandonment—or perhaps transport!—come when Biggers describes his work and Nance’s narration insists that we let go of any secure place in time and history. As Biggers describes *Shuffle* as an exploration of how we each “wear the mask” (a phrase that references African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar’s famous anthem “We Wear the Mask”), the artist’s voice, along with an ambient soundtrack, begins to echo and take on the quality of a machine. Caught in overlapping aural and thematic echoes, we begin to lose track of time—of the “we” or “the mask,” even of the apparatuses determining our perception, understanding, and meaning-making (from the camera to the editing equipment to costuming and make-up to the African American literary tradition). The machinic echo operates sonically as the strain Moten theorizes, temporally and semantically by virtue of constituting an historic return to Dunbar’s lines, and, paradoxically, symbolically to the indexicality they too refute: “We wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes . . .”[33]

Quickly, as The Triptych cuts to a section it labels “Post-, post-whatever,” Nance takes us from a time/place of wandering through the always-present Black past (of masks, of poet Dunbar, of Biggers’ 2011 installation) to an insecure and impossible-to-label, yet labelled-nonetheless Afrofuture: the “post-, post-whatever.” There, in a close-up, leaning in toward the camera with his head out of focus, and standing against lush, red wallpaper, Biggers wears the obscene African American mask described earlier. “Black Black Black Black Black,” he clucks like a chicken again and again until a hand entering from offscreen knocks him in the head and he begins instead reciting “post-black, post-black, post-black,” the sound ricocheting as he moves his masked face in and out of focus. The camera cuts to a less frenetic shot of him, now still and fully in focus (though masked), explaining, “So my personal thoughts on post-black, it’s a beautiful sound bite, but in fact it’s a conundrum, ’cuz to imply black in the title further limits the notion of what post-black art can truly be. I personally am looking for art that doesn’t have color at all in it. Post-, post-, post-whatever. Anonymous. I’m just tryna make it.” Is this a truth, we have to wonder?

Can Biggers be invested in anything post-black when his work is a meditation on the impossibility of Blackness now, not the afterwardness of it? Is the point (as Dunbar says in his poem) that he is always wearing that mask, even when we don’t see it on him? The soundtrack’s echo, placing us in a reiterative and belated time, as well as an empty space; the insistent iteration of “black” and “post-black,” and the history of Blackness with its impossible construction; and the specific reference to Biggers’ *Shuffle*, which was itself developed as part of an Afrofuturist art showcase in 2011, entitled *Celestial Navigation: a year into the afro future*,[34] insist that we understand the scene—both Biggers’ role and Nance’s representation—as alternative presentations of Blackness, and also alternative time-spaces: a documentary movement through and to an Afrofuture.

It’s not entirely clear when/where Biggers would locate this future. Instead, what follows this section in the film is a cinematic interweaving of some of Biggers’ performance pieces, Biggers reflections on the art world, and imagery of Biggers moving around while ostensibly not performing (i.e. in “real” life). Nance concludes the section on Biggers with a montage of his installations set to the rhythm of the contemporary band Stew and the Negro Problem singing a cheery song about Black men skiing, ordering sushi, and doing other stereotypically non-black activities. The song, “Black Men Ski,” takes over the soundtrack and crescendos into an electronic mess of noise and something resembling a scream before Nance cuts it, seemingly mid-verse, to silence and a Black screen. At this moment, the Blackness, the post-blackness, and the
sonic, visual, and semantic disorientations of the film are one.

This concluding segment of Biggers’ section presents what will become a growing tension across the remainder of the film between the indexical and the otherwise, one I am suggesting that Nance reveals to be constitutive of the lived life and work of Blackness. In this life and this work, the tension is in fact within the indexical, and the possibility that it might index a something else than it is supposed to: an elsewhere or elseone or elsewhere that we can neither understand nor pronounce—like, for instance, Mutu and her name. This is a tension that invites us to revisit and revise even the understanding of index as Gillespie treats it in Film Blackness: a stable category of meaning to deconstruct via Black moving-image work. The tension urges us to consider the index instead as one way of naming what can be in particular worlds but cannot be in others—an act of naming that is always failing as such but nonetheless pointing like a magnetized needle in a cup of water to that problem of rendering Blackness itself. Asserting such incommensurability within the notion of the index, The Triptych here moves through and beyond the problem of Black film indexicality Gillespie identifies, past reflexivity and the "rhetorics of evidence" Arthur describes, and into a form of documentary produced by Black artistry that nonetheless indexes such artistry. Refuting "index" in its meaning-making capacities or its direct linkage to truth, The Triptych deploys the index as a way of collecting, gathering, and world-making. The index is seen as something like the undisciplined and "anagrammatical" documenting and theorizing Christina Sharpe insists is Black artists' work in the wake. "Blackness anew," she writes, "blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made . . . . As the meanings of the words fall apart, we encounter again and again the difficulty of sticking the signification."{35} Here Sharpe’s words remind us of the strain that is also Black sound; Greg Tate’s separation between signification and sign slashed by the Middle Passage; Hortense Spillers’ ripped flesh; or, in the Afrofuture, Sun Ra’s "vibrations" of a new, Black planet “after the end of the world/don’t you know that yet.”{36} Here is an otherwise Black lifeworld in which documentary subject Barron Claiborne can, in the final section of the film, lift off the ground, feet suspended some five inches up, as though floating while standing; and in which Mutu’s fiery movement through the woods at dusk creates its own logic rather than seeking one from the film. This Triptych world is a production impossible to know that nonetheless, however paradoxically, creates an episteme of non-knowing. And the non-knowing is the kind of joyful noise Crawley describes as a disruption (to coherent/consistent meaning) and also a new form of historicity at the limits of film, especially documentary, as a representational art. And so The Triptych is both a meditation on the collective work of Black artistry and a formal and thematic interrogation of the nature of representable reality in a Black lifeworld.

By way of conclusion, I want to give two more examples from The Triptych with the intent of first, reflecting further on the tension between indexicality and temporality discussed above; second, considering more fully the work The Triptych does to engage its three subjects; and third, returning again to this question of an Afrofuture and what—intentionally or not—The Triptych and the practice of Black documentary might tell us about this speculative time-space. As seems reasonable at this point, I’m going to address the examples from the film in reverse chronological order, with some thoughts about the final section of The Triptych, which focuses on Barron Claiborne, and then an analysis of Nance’s depiction of Mutu in the temporal midpoint of the film. The Triptych is non-linear, a collection of pieces (like many of its subjects’ artworks) that might just as well be watched in any order. My choice to write about it here, toward the end of this essay, without following its temporal organization, is not so much a prescription for viewing but a response to the way in which The Triptych seems to hold at its center its wildest imagery and least knowable/intelligible referents.

The third section of The Triptych focuses on Claiborne and opens with a shot of him
walking into his house through what seems to be the same door Mutu walks out of at the beginning of her section—the repetition creating, then, a sense not only of continuity but also of Claiborne as continuing the work of creating art and an artworld that Mutu speaks about at the end of her section. The heart of Claiborne’s section addresses his thoughts about making art as a Black man and his ideology about Black representation. In this respect, it is a compelling meditation on the film itself, and returns us to the first section’s rejection of particularized modes of indexicality, while also investing in a direct conversation about their import. Here, the film appears to be in its most explanatory or even expository mode. But it is also at its most transparent, sharing with its subject, who is at the same time one of its directors, the very questions about representation that subtend the project.

Across this final section, the film explores Claiborne’s thoughts on and photographs of women, including his mother; his ideas about moving images and music videos of Black singers; his memories of 9/11 in New York City; and his experiences of racialization as a Black man. While the cinematography and sound-mixing feel simpler than in either of the first two sections of the film, Nance demonstrates his explicit concern here about the limitations of moving images in conveying Blackness. As Claiborne insists that moving images draw on racial bias, *The Triptych* shows us a montage of Claiborne at his computer, distorted moving images from stereotypical music videos, and a profusion of Claiborne’s still photographs. The scene, like most of this section of the film, is without voiceover and appears to focus on the problem of mediation with as little mediation as possible. Claiborne says he “know[s] how people see me and I know I’m nothing like it” and that “blackness is an illusion anyway,” while Nance illustratively presents the artist walking down the street in a series of masks that obscure and transform his identity. As the film concludes, Claiborne talks about reincarnation and the burden and potential in having to work through living a Black life. He covers one hand with white body paint, photographs the camera that is recording him, and draws white circles on his face while looking in a mirror. Nance intercuts these penultimate images with eyeline-match reverse shots of an empty chair, presumably the place for the missing subject of Claiborne’s photoshoot. The film ends with ambient music and a lengthy rhythmic montage of Claiborne’s photographs, many of which, themselves, question the legibility of Black imagery and icons. A final sequence of Claiborne examining a large-format photo negative with a florescent light and waving what seems to be a laser-sword plays before the credits.

These final scenes together suggest that *The Triptych* itself is Claiborne’s last photographic subject and that its negative, the inverse image of the act of representing a collaborative lifeworld of Black art, is already going into production—even amidst what has been articulated clearly as its impossibility. Here, the negative of an absent photograph of a missing subject serves as the index of the film. This illusive but also analog photo negative references *The Triptych*’s material, physical, phenomenal documentary status; it reminds us of the film’s not-yet-finished-ness; and asserts again *The Triptych*’s categorical inability to achieve either a full collectivism (of, say, Black artists) or an accurate, unbiased experience. What persists, in these various negatives and negations, is Blackness as an object that resists, as Moten puts it, and the irruption and disruption that occurs in Moten’s sonic break and Crawley’s untranslatable noise. These productions of what Crawley calls Black study, following Moten and Stefano Harney in their seminal rejection of the university, show us the counterfuture in which Blackness lives and makes meaning outside of genre and mode and medium, and in the “undercommon ground that logistics knows as unknowable.”{37} This is a time–space impossible to document, like that of the hold of the moving slave ship (Moten and Harney tell us) and with its (to paraphrase McKittrick) demonic cartography, but one that the process and experiencing of Nance’s *Triptych* nonetheless enter and explore.{38}
And in search of that resistant counterfuture, we arrive back at the heart of the film, where Wangechi Mutu appears seemingly out of time, dressed in a futuristic outfit, out of focus, and wandering through empty, human-less woods with a magenta torch; behind lace and glass, underwater; in nature but as an unknowable being that constructs new meaning. “Ungoverned,” is what she calls her art, right after she appears in fast-forward and stop-motion taking down all of the pieces lining her studio. Mutu’s section of the film gives us The Triptych’s wildness, its unwillingness to conform to standard film-time (frame rates) or the knowable. As Mutu moves through nature, in and out of focus, while tracked by a camera that records her torch’s light rather than her (her image is fuzzy most of the time), her presence in this costuming and in these places is neither part of a performance piece from the past nor a particular exposition of anything in the film’s logic. Rather, it seems, retroactively, to illustrate a version of what Mutu offers as her understanding of creative work. “Being an artist for me is letting go,” she tells the camera from her gallery. And it is here, where she lets go, that we get to envision Blackness as production of its own logic, of its own ontology.

Without the rigidity of cinematic time, a photographic image (as with Claiborne), a sculpture (as with Biggers), or even an organizing sense of the heavily costumed Mutu’s continuity with the natural environments she moves through, Mutu’s section of The Triptych offer something otherwise. The temporal and ontological shifts here become, it seems, fundamental to the film’s effort to depict Black art and community. In other words, Nance’s documentary documents its incommensurability with the form and meaning of that which it would seek to express. And yet it also produces more: a lifeworld vibrating with an alternative ontology, in which the Black body and Black art create their own episteme. And so The Triptych compels us to be a part of this speculative film form.

The future—and our engagement with The Triptych itself—can be called Black study, what Stefano Harney in an interview on his formulation of the concept describes as a “time-space” of alternative knowledge production and being together.{39} “If there is study rather than knowledge production,” Jack Halberstam writes as a preface to Harney’s and Moten’s The Undercommons; “if there is a way of being together in brokenness, if there is an undercommons, then we must all find our way to it. And it will not be there where the wild things are, it will be a place where refuge is not necessary and you will find that you were already in it all along.”{40} This place, like those time-spaces through which Mutu and The Triptych move, is the strain of the document and its medium against their nature and a past where Black life was never lived; and it is also a future in the present that is, like Mutu’s art and artistry, unknowable, illogical, un gover ned. It is, finally, best described with a synonym for the Afrofuture and otherwise possibilities: hope. “Exuberantly metacritical hope has always exceeded every immediate circumstance in its incalculably varied everyday enactments of the fugitive art of social life,” Harney and Moten write. “This art is practiced on and over the edge of politics, beneath its ground, in animative and improvisatory decomposition of its inert body. It emerges as an ensemblic stand, a kinetic set of positions, but also takes the form of embodied notation, study, score. Its encoded noise is hidden in plain sight from the ones who refuse to see and hear—even while placing under constant surveillance—the thing whose repressive imitation they call for and are.{41} And with it, we go on The Triptych, through and to the other side of documentation, to ”trace the visionary company and join it.”{42}
Endnotes


2—Terri Francis has described it as “Afrosurrealist” in her article, “Close-Up Gallery: The Afrosurrealist Film Society, Black Camera, 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013).


4—Ibid., 279.

5—Reich and Nance, "Moving Images and Black Life- Worlds," 277.


8—For a cogent discussion of these Enlightenment constructions, see the introduction to Crawley, Blackpentecostal Breath; Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom"; James A. Snead, “Repetition As a Figure of Black Culture” in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York: Routledge, 2016), 71–92 ; and Alexander G. Weheliye, Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).


14—Ibid.

15—Reich and Nance, “Moving Images and Black Life- Worlds,” 281.

16—Or the future as what Kodwo Eshun describes as "the not-yet, the becoming," "concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional." See Eshun, “Further considerations of Afrofuturism,” 289-293; or, finally, what Sun Ra, quintessential Afrofuturist, describes in his film, Space is the Place (1974), as a planet vibrating with alternative sounds hospitable to black life after the end of the world,
which has already come to pass and is only waiting for our consciousness to catch up.

17—Here my instinct would be to say that it’s turning to Afrofuturist productions that enables us this vantage point, but for the purposes of this essay, I’m curious about how one, not even explicitly Afrofuturist body of work might offer us the opportunity to explore black worldmaking.


19—Antwaun Sargent. "AFROPUNK Fest."


21—Ibid., 89.


23—Michael Renov. The Subject of Documentary (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2004).


25—I read even the early work of filmmaker Oscar Micheaux as exploring this conundrum, with films like Symbol of the Unconquered in particular exploring about the impossibility of ever fully reading or representing race.


27—Ibid., xvi.

28—Ibid., xv; Eshun, “Further Considerations.”

29—Klotman and Cutler, "Introduction,” in Struggles for Representation, xxvi.

30—Black documentary has been world-making in this respect since its inception—I think of early films like William D. Foster's The Railroad Porter (1912) as illustrative. Historically, in black filmmaking, documentary and fiction have been more difficult to distinguish than in mainstream film production given black filmmakers’ commitments to depicting that which had/has yet to be shown.


32—Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.


34—Shuffle was part of the project The Black Radical Imagination 2014, curated
by Erin Christovale and Amir George, see https://news.syr.edu/blog/2014/11/03/urban-video-project-presents-sanford-biggers-shuffle-and-shake-72897/.

35—Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76.


37—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

38—Kathrine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). If we were to think specifically of a documentary black study, this aesthetic must necessarily trouble the index, and rely instead on a certain kind of collectivism/gathering. Within the undercommons Moten and Harney describe, is a condition out of place and time, beneath the university, that at once powers black study and provides a time and space for fugitivity/escape from the hierarchical knowing and logic of hegemony. It can’t be represented, therefore. But its resistance can—the way a black hole is evident by the bending of light as it disappears.


41—Ibid., 73–4.

42—Ibid., 94.
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