An exploration of what documentary is, with an eye toward what it might become.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Introduction: Documenting Blackness at the National Museum of African American History and Culture</td>
<td>Jason Fox and Mia Mask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Conspiracies and Caretakers: Making Homes for African American Home Movies</td>
<td>Ina Archer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Throwing Punches: The Athletic Aesthetics of Kevin Jerome Everson’s Filmmaking</td>
<td>Jeff Scheible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Independents and Institutions: A Conversation with Stanley Nelson</td>
<td>Jason Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Documentary Strain, Black Artists, and the Afrofuture: Terence Nance’s <em>The Triptych</em></td>
<td>Elizabeth Reich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Documentary Says Amen!: St. Clair Bourne and Black Liberation Theology</td>
<td>Jon-Sesrie Goff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Discerning the Call: A <em>Let the Church Say Amen!</em> Corner</td>
<td>Josslyn Luckett, Jon-Sesrie Goff, Reverend Alisha Gordon, and Sam Pollard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>Ghosts and the Machine: When Documenting Past Black Life Haunts its Present</td>
<td>Franklin Cason, Jr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>On the Collection: Flashes of the Spirit: Images of Black Life as Spiritual Encounter</td>
<td>Michele Prettyman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>On the Collection: Debbie Allen—Dancer</td>
<td>Jessica Lynne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>On the Collection: #OscarsSoWhite and the Friends of the Black Oscar Nominees Award</td>
<td>Lisa Kennedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>On the Collection: Ways of Seeing African American Moving Images</td>
<td>Rhea L. Combs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the images and film clips discussed in this volume can be seen at worldrecordsjournal.org.
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The National Museum of African American History and Culture opened its doors on September 24th, 2016. The museum’s establishment, construction, and grand opening occurred 121 years after Booker T. Washington spoke in front of the “Negro Building” at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition, and 116 years after W.E.B. Du Bois addressed audiences at the “American Negro Exhibit,” which he organized along with Washington for the 1900 Paris Exposition. Devoted to the collection, study, and display of objects relating to African American art, culture, and history, the museum is the fifteenth and largest Smithsonian museum on the National Mall. A bold, bronze edifice, it sits in the center of a city sprinkled with lily-white federal monuments erected to memorialize a government which sought to prevent the realization of such an institution for nearly a century. The legacies of Dr. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington loom large over all manner of American museological undertakings, even if their political philosophies are more often divergent than complimentary. So which of their legacies shapes the new Smithsonian?

Washington’s photographic selections for the Paris Exposition emphasized African American students, industrious laborers, and leaders from Black communities across various Southern United States. These were photographs of reverends and teachers, doctors and nurses. They were constituent figures in what photography scholar Deborah Willis has described as “a new Negro visual aesthetic” at the turn of the 20th century. White America enjoyed seeing itself through the lens of a Protestant work ethic and disciplinary spirit of white capitalism. Booker T. Washington accepted that lens as a structuring reality. He believed African Americans could realize their ambitions of equal opportunity by participating in the American capitalist system. The dozens of photographs Washington selected for the exhibition were intended to reflect that reality to Europe through images of a rising African American middle class. If the newly built Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture inherits the spirit of Booker T. Washington, then its documentary impulse
might be said to represent an ideal whose value lay in historical documentation’s ability to stand in for and augment historical reality without upsetting it.

A museum shaped by the spirit of Du Bois, however, would approach nonfiction visual media quite differently. Du Bois, a master of granular histories, conceived of the Paris Exhibition initiative as an opportunity to transform African American representation. His rigorous preparatory research across the American South resulted in the display of sixty statistical charts, nearly 400 photographs, and a library that featured books by 200 African American authors. If for Washington photography was a mode of representation, then for Du Bois it was an instrument of intervention, offering a means to challenge the Jim Crow-era visual construction of African Americans as criminals. For example, Du Bois prominently displayed a series of photographs of African Americans that replicated the formal appearance of mug shots while summoning the iconography of the family portrait. Playing on the photographic tension between images of domestic tableaus and government documents, and between the codes of realism and formalism, his critical juxtapositions challenged the way white Americans constructed history out of a concept of whiteness in order to visualize power to itself. The photographs Du Bois displayed were documents of reality only to the extent that the reflexive viewing practices that his installation requested of viewers allowed for them to better see how images were used to naturalize existing orders of people and things.

Alongside the photographs, Du Bois staged a stunning visual array of statistical graphs that charted literacy and employment rates, and marital and landholding statistics among Southern African Americans. They were arranged in an aesthetic style that preceded the emergence of the De Stijl art movement by two decades. We aren’t the first to be struck by his provocative combination of meticulously gathered sociological data, rendered in dynamic color fields consistent with the aesthetic concerns of high modernist painting. This journal issue represents one more response to his inspiring and brilliant visual provocations. Du Bois, who coined the phrase “double consciousness,” understood well what it meant to see oneself through another’s eyes. He also understood the ways that data not only reports about people in the world but also has a way of managing them. Expressed in these vibrant charts is an insistence against irreducibility to an instrumental way of seeing. For Du Bois, the emergent disciplines of sociology and documentary photography were about registering the deviations that unsettle static representations of “the evident rhythms of mankind.”

That Du Bois’s graphs are evocative of the painter Piet Mondrian’s best work is not lost on the poet and theorist Fred Moten, another agile thinker whose influence appears in the background across this volume. In an essay on Piet Mondrian and jazz musician Cecil Taylor that Moten prefaces with a reflection on Du Bois, Moten riffs on Mondrian’s use of black pigment in his iconic, never completed painting (1944). He describes it as “the victory of the unfinished, the lonesome fugitive, the victorious rhythm of the broken system.”

In the same essay, Moten provocatively defines Blackness as an objective quality of paint, but that provoked is not without cause. With his assertion, he succinctly engages several dynamic forces in the Western construction of racial hierarchy. First, he links the transformation of people into objects with the artistic insistence popular among much of the mid-century modernist avant-garde that painting had escaped representation (and thus, social responsibility). Second, through a reading of Victory Boogie Woogie in which Moten sees black paint spilling across the boundaries of the painting’s grid system, he connects the black paint with Black-identifying people who refuse to participate in maintaining the normative order of things. In doing so, Moten extends into the 21st century Du Bois’s conviction that new representational strategies, unruly and analytic, are necessary to picture Black life on new terms in order to offer new terms for Black life. The inspiration for this volume began the
moment we, separately, visited the National Museum for the first time. Astonished by its ambition and scale, we found much to reflect upon in its curatorial juxtapositions, and we were struck by the feeling that the hum of the museum might resonate with the legacy of Du Bois more than it does Washington. As teachers of documentary and writers who reflect on it, we sensed that the museum invites a timely way of thinking about nonfiction media, and provides a space filled with case studies and questions through which to do it. In this issue, we have run with only a few of its provocations to energize conversations we wish to have about documentary practice and scholarship.

The first question: at a moment when Facebook and its younger social media siblings constitute the largest visual culture museum in the world, and when their expansive global networks dwarf more local identifications forged in and through the nation, why think about something so seemingly parochial as a national museum in the first place? One response is that announcing the failure of representation, politically or aesthetically, does not a post-representational world make. It has been fashionable of late, in some corners of Media Studies, to invoke social media platforms, both as material networks and as allegories for the way that contemporary power manages flows of people, information, and goods, in order to declare the end of representation. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, there are many compelling reasons to move beyond the paradigms of nation and representation. And there are even more stubborn reasons why we cannot. Still, representation is best understood here as challenging the burdened concepts of identity and respectability.

This issue challenges identity as a bounded concept because the articles, and the visual works that each of them engage, do not seek to represent essential, racialized, or gendered identifications. It challenges respectability because each of the authors and works under discussion begin from, or with, a refusal to participate in the construction of the myth of the universal spectator of photography, an imaginary position of power from which everyone and everything is made visible, knowable, and exploitable. Moreover, the promise that anyone can occupy a position of benign respectability no longer holds. Not because we are in a post-representational moment, but because representation was never benign in the first place.

“We suffer from the condition of being addressable,” Judith Butler says in a talk attended by the narrator of Claudia Rankine’s long-form poem Citizen. Yet, awareness of this condition does not liberate Rankine’s narrator to the afterlife of representation. Rather, it prompts them to conclude that racist forms of address are not about rendering the target of those addresses invisible. Quite the opposite. It is the speaker who gets to withdraw from view. A friend advises Rankine’s narrator to withdraw from and to stop absorbing the world around her, something the narrator finds rather impossible, because that would also mean withdrawing from social relations entirely. What kinds of social and physical spaces, then, must be built in order to mitigate such violence?

Reflecting upon the museum also returns us to some fundamental material questions. A museum is a poor place to assume a complete record, but it’s a good objective container in which to ask straightforward questions about what is included and why, how it is staged, and who is observing it. It also compels us to evaluate the social, institutional, and formal parameters into which the materials on display had to fit. Posing these questions succinctly, the artist and video maker John Akomfrah asks: “what constitutes a legend?” (See Franklin Cason Jr.’s article in this volume). That is, how do museums, and the publics they serve, decide what and who is worthy of remembering? How do histories become legends? How do they become central to cultural identity, and how are lived experiences pulled and stretched into the stuff of myth in the process? For Pearl Bowser, who donated a portion of her film archive to the Smithsonian, early American Black nonfiction film and photography must be reconstituted from discarded and scavenged fragments. They become legends in another sense, “standing as primary text(s)
for lost segments of that history” like keys on a map. The peripheral materials she preserved and researched continue to reveal the centrality of the works and people they reference, not just to Black historical experience but to American documentary at large.

In Bowser’s telling, her sharp archival eye for the resonant residues—newspaper clippings, editing exercises, sample reels, and diaries—of Black nonfiction media practices that she spent a lifetime recovering and preserving was placed in the service of activism rather than academics. In an interview with scholar Alexandra Juhasz, Bowser discusses the time she spent organizing an ongoing screening and discussion group for Black teens, explaining that she “realized that when you do something in a public space, in a community where you’re involved in attempting to share the history, you become something . . . you become a key or kernel from which people can be challenged, from which they can build other things, or from which they can see possibilities.” Bowser may have been referring to the new forms of imagination her screening series provoked, but the reference is equally material. Her early donation of materials in 2012 constituted one of the museum’s first moving image media collections, and one of the most lasting effects of this “kernel” is not the way it allows for speculation about the past, but in the preservation priorities and protocols it established as a guide for the museum’s future.

Thinking about the intersectionality of documentary filmmaking and Blackness is essential. It is impossible to make sense of documentary film history and practice without Black diasporic representational counter-cinema. Blackness is a term with a meaning that often appears self-evident, but in practice seldom is. As a form of consciousness, Blackness refers to at least two concepts in this volume. First, it signifies an Africanized experience of race in and through the United States. Second, because Blackness exists in relationship to Whiteness, it signals the Euro-American ideological and material effects that continue to sustain white supremacy. It also marks the role of the camera in legitimating the modern construction of racial hierarchies as the only way the world could be visualized. Blackness comprises past experience, individual and collective forms of agency, and the structures that police them. In disciplining documentary, structure has historically taken precedent. Tracking all of the manifold and evolving ways the structuring forces of visual culture have sought to render Blackness alternately invisible and hypervisible is beyond the scope of this issue. Here, a few examples will suffice.

In his examination of the athletic impulse that animates Kevin Jerome Everson’s “presentational aesthetics,” cinema scholar Jeff Scheible points to a scene of loss featuring overlooked and unnamed stars who appear at the beginning of the documentary canon. The names of the African American jockeys in the images of Eadweard Muybridge’s famous motion studies were never recorded. Yet the names of the horses—Occident and Sallie Gardner—were. Scheible references this absence in order to call attention to the need for a different kind of analytical discussion. The presentational aesthetics of Everson’s cinematic engagements with African American athletes, Scheible argues, are primary sites to address the ways they frame the thinnest of boundaries between labor and play and bodies and technologies. Nonfiction visual history has routinely denied African Americans subject status by reducing Blackness to the overlooked status of infrastructure—more often as ground, less frequently as figure.

The contributors to this volume redress the absence of Blackness from documentary history by drawing careful attention to the ways filmmakers, curators, and archivists have crafted films, engaged filmmakers, forged expressive and liberating opportunities from dominant discourses, and reimagined representational modes.

Archives are primary sites for addressing representational inequities because historical archives tended to preserve the colonial, imperial, and ethnocentric practices undergirding the capitalist marketplace from which they derived funding. Consequently, they often reflect the hegemonic or monolithic master narratives rather than the complex and contradictory
narratives of anti-colonial contestation, imperial discord, and politicized rebellion that have transpired. Confronting the erasure of people and events that were deemed as surplus to historical meaning, several contributors are drawn into the orbit of the photography scholar Tina Campt and the cultural historian Saidiya Hartman. Campt and Hartman demonstrate novel methods to craft new modes of agency—a loaded term that Campt defines straightforwardly as the capacity to imagine something different than what is—from the “differential or degraded forms of personhood” of state, colonial, and historical archives. Both Campt and Hartman view the “historical archive” as a verb rather than a noun. And for each, their settings are stages more than storage lockers to liberate African American figures from judgement, classification, and historical neglect.

Interrogating police mug shots of 1960s Freedom Riders in the Mississippi Department of Archives, for example, Campt asks two deceptively simple questions of the images in front of her: What is the pictured subject’s point of view? And, what had transpired for her (as a viewer) to encounter this person’s particular image? Asking these questions is a way of animating the meanings and unruly power of the African American subjects pictured. Moreover, similar questions inform artist and archivist Ina Archer’s contribution to this issue—Campt’s method works through the indicative mood, rescuing latent meanings in the images she studies through close attention to subjects’ postures and poses, as well as to the social conditions that produced the photographic encounters.

Campt’s writing extends and revises the writings of Allan Sekula and John Tagg, both of whom viewed museums and archives as spaces where historical conditions become naturalized, and thus invisible. But where Sekula was interested in analyzing modes of erasure, Campt would direct us to reconstitute the subjectivity of the erased by considering their own perspectives and positions, literally and figuratively, in such images. In considering their presence as a mode of performance, she suggests that one can acknowledge their presence and the sitters’ own methods for refusing the gaze of power. It’s not enough, she insists, to simply point to absence. For Campt, the real work involves restoring the presence of overlooked figures as a way to imagine the potential impacts, past and present, those figures might still have on our political imaginations.

Where Campt employs the indicative mood, focusing on what is overlooked in and around representational images, Hartman prefers the subjunctive, viewing archives as spaces from which to adopt speculative strategies in order to “tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.” For Hartman, representational strategies of writing and imaging have long been a form of enclosure, tied to the logic of the property form. Yet, she is committed to rehearsing the problems of representation rather than moving beyond them. That’s because for Hartman, her “own narrative doesn’t operate outside the economy of statements” and representations that she aims to unsettle. For her, possibilities for the future are inextricably tied to what continues to count as official history in the present. Those who claim otherwise—that our contemporary visual moment can be characterized as post-representational—confuse a regulatory fiction with a utopian aspiration. The claim lands with the same thud as that other claim that our contemporary moment can also be characterized as post-racial.

Most recently, this outlook has meant for Hartman assembling archival fragments in order to construct an anthology of Black women’s lives that coincided with the onset of the U.S. Progressive Era. In particular, she focuses on women who clashed with and bore the brunt of the Progressive Era’s embrace of reason as the intellectual scaffolding for social engineering. The years 1890 and 1935 are the bookends that frame Hartman’s Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments (2019), a time frame “decisive in determining the course of black futures.” Coincidentally, the same time frame was decisive in determining the course of documentary, shaped in no small measure by the progressives and pragmatists who are the antagonists of Hartman’s book.
Captions and wall text, filing systems and database naming conventions are the logistical interstices bridging viewers and the unruly meanings of the images and objects they describe. But the accompanying sign is frequently mistaken for the object itself, determining in advance the possibilities for engagement with images. This is likely why Hartman’s _Wayward Lives_ frequently omits accompanying credits and captions for the images that fill its pages, and also why the book makes frequent mention of the police officer and the sociologist in the same breath. Each occupation provides a direct means for controlling defiant subjects.

Hartman’s concern finds further support in the recent writing of Michael Gillespie, whose _Film Blackness_ (2016) provides a conceptual reference point for Ina Archer as well as Liz Reich’s engagement with the visionary work of filmmaker Terence Nance. Gillespie’s starting point is well summed up by Honoré Daumier’s infamous judge who exclaims, “You have the floor, explain yourself, you are free” to a gagged and restrained plaintiff that has been brought before him. Gillespie wonders why the violence of collapsing representation and referent, which was so clear to Daumier nearly two centuries ago, doesn’t extend to the frequent conflation of “race in the arts” with “social categories of race” in contemporary discussions of Black cinema. When this conflation happens, argues Gillespie, “black films” and their viewers are placed back in the role of Hartman’s progressive sociologist, diagnosing social problems and prescribing solutions. What if, instead, Black film and Blackness more broadly, indicated an investment in creative expression, critical capacity, and relational experience freed from exclusively embodied approaches to race?

The challenges that these provocations pose also point to one of the reasons we include a conversation with the filmmaker Stanley Nelson. A master of media archives, his Firelight Media produced many of the exhibition videos installed throughout the National Museum of African American History and Culture. As Nelson tells it, producing these installations meant being clear in his intended audience, and moving from there. For Nelson, this entails focusing first and foremost on addressing African American audiences, and then navigating the economic, legal, and content-tagging conventions of contemporary corporate media archives in order to transform their historical contents from static meanings to dynamic characters in their own right. For contributor Jon Goff, on the other hand, the social value of 20th century African American Christian theological movements have been defined not by African American consciousness but rather through those movements’ proximity to white-dominated religious institutions. This may also explain the lack of attention given to St. Clair Bourne’s _Let the Church Say Amen!_ (1971), a portrait of a young man who looks to Black liberation theology in his pursuit of a meaningful discourse of truth and social justice that might use Blackness as a force for structural change rather than assimilation.

The essays gathered here expand upon how we frame _Blackness_ as an operative term. And, the contributors play a more fundamental role in constituting new spaces for documentary. Documentary is what we make with it, it is who gathers under its sign, and it is the terms of agreement that are reached once people are gathered there. Wherever we gather, we create spaces of inclusion and exclusion, though seldom under conditions of our own making. Agency, the ability to imagine something differently, is thus chiseled out of the bedrock of material and ideological structures.

The fight for futurity, another term that animates these essays, plays out within already existing institutions and the representations that uphold them. The voices gathered in this introduction—W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, Claudia Rankine, Fred Moten, Michael Gillespie—and the contributors to this volume who follow, all make for more dynamic discussions of documentary in the classroom, at the museum, and in festivals and working groups of all kinds. They also pave the way for a more radical approach to the uses of documentary beyond these spaces. What unites all of these voices is their fundamental challenge to the
superintending status of the historical document as something that hovers over existing worlds, explaining those worlds in advance of the people who occupy them.

Du Bois, whose Black Reconstruction in America (1935) showed more interest in the undocumented, collective actions of striking abolitionist workers in the Southern US than the legislators whose bills and speeches are much better documented, demonstrated long ago how a more agile approach to the archive makes possible new forms of agency. We inherit the spirit of Du Bois, for whom history and sociology were pathways to imagining what self-determined and democratic futures might lie just ahead. The radical approaches to time that are explored in this issue reveal conceptual frameworks and artistic methods for organizing against racial structures of domination. And sites of historical memory offer Black visions for remaking the future outside of Western racialized infrastructures and outside of didactic and sober modes of address.

With an emphasis on make, Moten asks: "What are we to make of the fact of a sociality that emerges when lived experience is distinguished from fact?" That future isn’t made yet, but potential futures find flashes in the past and present.

ENDNOTES


10—Regarding Sekula, take for example Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s photograph of the Boulevard du Temple, dated to around 1838, which is frequently upheld as the first photograph to capture a human figure. Sekula, ever attuned to the ways in which productive labor is so often literally or figuratively left out of the photograph, noted that Daguerre’s image figures not one but two bodies if one includes the shadow of a bootblack shining
the shoes of the stationary man. Sekula’s criticism isn’t directed towards the image, but to the caption *Life* magazine affixed to the image, which directs viewers’ attention to the patron and away from the laborer at his feet. The caption appears neutral, and thus neutralizes its own power to condition viewers’ interpretation.


12—Ibid., 14.


15—Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness,” 188.
A Peoples Playhouse (circa 1947), presented by the American Negro Theatre, is a World War II-era documentary featuring a very young Ruby Dee alongside theatrical stalwarts of the era like Fredrick O’Neil and the playwright Abram Hill. Linking its fundraising plea to the war effort, the film reuses newsreel footage from a concurrent propaganda film, The Negro Soldier (1944). According to John Klasmann, an archivist at Anthology Film Archives, his late boss Jonas Mekas looked at the unidentified film—a bit of an outlier in a collection that focused on the preservation and exhibition of experimental and independent film—and said “that looks old.” With that declaration, he unwittingly initiated a collaboration between Anthology and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to preserve the short work. The film’s narrator connects viewers to the everyday citizens on screen—factory-workers, clerks, war-workers, and teachers—that they may have encountered on the streets of New York City. For me, it’s delightful to see that the people we recognize on screen are Black. Even more extraordinary, these ordinary African Americans on the streets of Harlem are professional actors!

A Peoples Playhouse is emblematic of The Great Migration Home Movie Project because it too situates the work of African American image-making in the hands of African Americans. And it demonstrates that many of the cinematic archives and histories we thought we knew are not as white as we tend to think them to be. The initiative reveals the importance of preserving and supporting African American creative self-representation, specifically from everyday family and community life, and it contains the capacity to counteract negative depictions of Blackness. It’s your story too and this is how you are part of it. I use this orphaned film to consider the continuities between my art practice, the Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA) film and media collection, and the Great Migration Home Movie Project at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, where I am a media archivist. This is how I am a part of it.
As an artist and an archivist, my work intervenes on representations of African Americans through re-making, re-editing, and re-contextualizing images of Blackness in early commercial cinema. When I began making work in the 1990s, academic film studies, Hollywood, and the burgeoning archival film communities—all communities that I wished to enter—were consumed by centennial celebrations of the cinema. Lists of the "100 Greatest Films" were named by the American and British Film Institutes. Their interest in registering hierarchies and granting canonical status imposed a restricting chronicle of cinema, and one that I needed to push back against. Since that moment, my practical knowledge of film history, production, and preservation has developed on a continuum. Using commercial, archival, and original footage as material, and by employing appropriation and montage as strategies, I negotiate the relationship between the frequently marginalized and their media representations. Thematically, I map contemporary practices of representation onto past footage using digital tools. As an example, I have investigated the "persistence of minstrelsy," and racial and ethnic masquerade at the inception of nascent technological moments in entertainment. The legacy of blackface continues to inhibit African American participation in film and has remained ever relevant, as evidenced by the tiresome revelations of collegiate blackface drag by Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, and his Attorney General Mark Herring ("Virginian Gentlemen, Be Seated!").

Mining a bottomless pit of film images, ranging from the bizarre to the utterly repellent, soon became exhausting. I love to attend repertory screenings and revel in Film Forum's exhaustive surveys of studio-produced early sound films, but throw a rock at a pre-code musical festival and you'll hit a minstrel upside the head every time. Every screening is likely to have at least one discomfiting moment of racial affront. As a cinephile, I experienced a kind of Stockholm syndrome; that uncomfortable moment repeated every time a character somehow ended up in burnt cork, mud, or makeup. I'd feel like a spotlight was being shone down on me in the middle of the theater, exposing my Black presence in order to ruin everybody else's fun. And yet I would keep attending. Something in the screenings that I attended felt visceral and pleasurable, but also strange and just plain wrong—undoubtedly central to the development of the musical comedy genre. I am intent on working with this material as a conservator and a programmer but as I get older my tolerance dwindles.

In response, if only semi-consciously, was the creation of my ongoing video and installation project The Lincoln Film Conspiracy (LFC). This work was inspired in part by my encounter with Pearl Bowser's film Midnight Ramble: Oscar Micheaux and the Story of Race Movies (1994), which was broadcast on public television in the mid-90s and which I first watched on a VHS rental copy when I was an employee at Evergreen Video store, located across the street from Film Forum, New York's incomparable, non-profit arthouse theater. These two institutions, Film Forum and Evergreen, were formative for me. The theater combined repertory with first-run independent films, and Evergreen's extensive VHS library specialized in rentals to academic film programs, which offered me free access to otherwise difficult to access early cinema.

Bowser's documentary introduces fragments of a lost film, By Right of Birth (1921), made by The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which produced five films in the early 1920s. The fragments are the only extant footage from the company. Bowser uses these fragments to introduce a record of Black filmmaking prior to that of Oscar Micheaux, whose distinctive work I was already well familiar with. In the silent sequence, actors Anita Thompson and Clarence Brooks "meet cute" when damsel-in-distress Thompson's horse bolts and heroic Brooks rescues her. Riding dressed in natty equestrian garb, Thompson accidentally falls from her white steed. Calling out for help, she catches the attention of Brooks, who is fishing nearby, equally dapper in a sweater, tie, and straw boater hat. Running to her side, he tries to capture her errant horse in a scene depicted through amusing cutaway shots framed by a circle vignette. After wrangling the horse
and helping her back into the saddle, Brooks tips his boater hat to her, his gesture pictured in a charming close-up seen from her high-angle point of view. The remaining unedited collection of shots that surround the edited sequence are stored and cataloged at the Library of Congress, now readily accessible for viewing online.

Captivated by the clip, I developed a story that imagines the travails of a researcher who is investigating the disappearance of the studio backlot and film catalog of an early, technically-advanced African American movie corporation named The Lincoln Film Company, as well as a subsidiary sound unit named Archina Studios. It is likely, I suggest, that the corporation was disappeared by extraterrestrials.

With the support of a Creative Capital grant and encouragement from Terri Francis, I further developed the project. The first iteration of the film, originally titled The Lincoln Film Conspiracy Prologue (2007, 16 min), screened as a short and exists as a trailer of a trailer within which is another trailer from a lost Lincoln/Archina production, Black Ants in Your Pants of 1926. In a way, The Lincoln Film Conspiracy has developed into a kind of movie "corporation" or studio, generating the foundation of my own artistic practice. It has become a self-generating archive.

The project is both a fantastic imagining of an alien preservation archive and a framework for the actually existing personal archive of my work. I draw from a collection of other pre-existing images to create the semi-fictional Lincoln materials. For example, my unfinished project from 1991, La Tête Sans Corps / The Head Without a Body, about the discovery, reanimation, and exploitation of a young Black woman’s disembodied head, is a sci-fi story that has been revived as a Lincoln Film Conspiracy horror/romance. Using material from this work, I crafted a series of lobby cards (small in-theater advertisements) with stills from key film scenes that are intended to be displayed in the foyer of cinemas. These sets of cards, modeled on those of the Reol Film company, are invaluable for speculating on the content of non-extant films. Family and friends are disguised throughout as characters in these films and as players from the company, thus archiving my emotional life as well. Consequently, its production has ebbed, flowed, hesitated, and restarted.

Essential to the themes of my LFC project is the creation of popular films and quotidian images, separate from but related to the genre of uplift cinema, as articulated by Allyson Nadia Field. Field writes about producer George W. Broome’s imaging of Tuskegee Institute in the 1910s:

Broome’s films’ model of uplift cinema consisted of a combination of actualities with the local film, a type of filmmaking whereby spectators were drawn to a motion picture exhibition by the possibility of seeing themselves and their communities projected on screen . . . Although no public accounts survive of Broome’s audiences or of the reception of his films, his filmmaking practice represents a significant attempt to reclaim the medium from its employment in the ridicule of the race.

In Broome’s exhibition, local African American spectators were shown an image of themselves as respectable and communal—a fully constituted social body. The footage is not extant and therefore we can only speculate on its representational capabilities but the very fact of the actuality footage—and its enthusiastic reception by the public—is an assertion of resistance to the dominant misrepresentations of Black people in cinema of the era. The lost Broome films are precedents to narrative films like By Right of Birth (1921), produced by brothers George P. and Noble Johnson, and the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

In Midnight Ramble, Bowser narrates over a clip of the By Right of Birth fragment, maintaining that the characters in the early films cast and produced by African Americans were “educated, well-to-do. They had a social lifestyle that was uplifting. They didn’t gamble,
they didn’t drink . . . in other words they were almost like morality plays.” For Bowser, Lincoln Motion Pictures’ productions exemplified the trend toward morally enlightening themes in Black film narratives. These themes were often made explicit in the films’ titles, such as *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition* (1916) or *The Burden of Race* (1921), the latter of which was produced by Reol, a contemporary white-owned company that featured the Black acting troupe from Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre. But Reol’s lobby cards (none of which have survived) also suggest less elevating fare. Titles such as *Jazz Hound* (circa 1920s) and *Easy Money* (circa 1920s) speak to an appetite for more salacious stories. The push and pull between uplift and indulgence in these early comedies and melodramas provided tension for my own Lincoln Film Conspiracy.

Retaining the name “Lincoln,” I also fabricated props and posters to blur the boundaries between my own project and the historical objects I was engaging with. Yet, I never attempted to create seamless technical effects that might render the boundaries invisible. I preferred to allow viewers to see around the edges, literally and figuratively. To give my work a handmade feeling, collaged and layered images allow viewers to see how the videos were constructed, and blue screens often remain visible around the edges of the frame. This method of working also proves a way of creating a visual archive of the technologies I have had access to at any particular moment.

But not everyone shared my passion for fooling the eye with speculative archives. In 2010, I was invited to show what existed of the project in a group exhibition in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood. The gallerist, like others to whom I pitched the project, was enthusiastic about the premise of the rediscovery of early Black cinema and the recreated lobby cards of disappeared movies, but nonplussed by the revelation of alien abduction. I was advised by one of the gallerist’s deputies to refrain from that story turn, for I would be considered a little crazy at best, and disrespectful of African American history at worst. This seemed like odd cautioning in an art world context. Nonetheless, viewers still occasionally express the desire for the LFC to be an actual documentary. Suddenly caught in the crosshairs of desire for historical certainty, I summoned courage from a mentor of mine, Cheryl Dunye, whose first feature film, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), engaged hidden archives of Black and lesbian images. As a faux documentary—an intriguing, emotionally resonant genre—it addresses artifacts that no longer, or never even existed. Conspiracy theories emerge from our need to understand untenable events and conditions. LFC is a conspiracy story that addresses my concerns about the invisibility of Black cinema and the conceivable reality that there has been an actual disappearance of African American quotidian filmed images. So, it felt a bit like predestination when I landed at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture just as they were launching the Great Migration Home Movie Initiative.

*The Great Migration* is a playful and hopeful contemporary play on the phrase so central to 20th Century African American history. The project offers an African American public the opportunity to “migrate” their analog media into a digital format. Films and videotapes long unseen could once again be accessed. Furthermore, the phrase *Great Migration* speaks to the need for the project to exist both as a way to retrieve images from obsolete formats and as a method to trace—through amateur home movie images—the resettlement routes of African Americans, documented due to the availability of affordable small-gage film formats and, later, home video cameras. The Great Migration grew out of Jasmyn Castro’s emergent archive, the African American Home Movie Archive (AAHMA) which was conceived of as a registry that would allow researchers greater access to African American home movies.\(^4\) The project quickly grew into a collection that would “promote a broader perspective of African American history and culture by encouraging access, research, and reuse of these films.”\(^5\)

Castro cites commercial cinema’s historically troubled (to put it mildly) representations of African Americans, and its lack of diversity in front of and behind the camera. Where
commercial media failed to responsibly picture African Americans or to empathetically relate to African American history, African Americans embraced amateur motion picture technologies to record home movies. Castro regards home movie documents as correc-
tives to failed commercial representation. She suggests that these records were made for entertainment within a family context and rarely intended for public exposure outside of the community. I argue, however, that the canny and intentional construction of so many of the films that we digitize reveals that many of their makers often also hoped for more than just private engagement. It is now up to the visitors of the Great Migration Lab to intuit these films’ significance, to discover the performances they contain and to contextualize and create their historical significance.

According to the museum’s media agree-
ment, films digitized in our lab belong to the individuals who brought them in (digital files are titled with their family name). There is then the option to allow the films to be added to the museum’s study collection. Recently, some archival researchers applied to CAAMA for travel images for use in an upcoming non-fiction film about The Negro Motorist Green Book. For the Green Book documentary, we advised the families to discuss the project with the filmmakers and to negotiate access to the clips including the possibility to charge a fee for usage. If an agreement is reached between the parties, we provide high resolution clips to the producers.

I mention the Green Book project because we encourage family members to have a say in how their images are being used to illustrate historical narratives in nonfiction projects (the majority of requests are for documenta-
ries) even if the financial transaction is merely symbolic, stressing that the families aren’t required to divest their media images as anon-
ymous documentary footage.

I remain curious to see how various film-
makers will use the footage that they have requested to represent “Black life worlds” or to stage new ones, even if they are situated in the past, like my own speculative works.6 Could the study of the Great Migration media circumvent racial fantasias perpetuated by films like the recent, Oscar-winning narrative film, Green Book (2018)? Can this archive inter-
rupt the pattern of filmmakers reducing African Americans to individuals in need of protection by white saviors, such as the reduction of mu-
sician Don Shirley as a unicorn isolated from his Black (middle class) family and community in Green Book? It remains to be seen.

In the early days of the initiative we need-
ed ringers to fill sessions, so we invited friends and employees at NMAAHC and other Smithsonian units to bring in their family films and tapes. Our media team also brought in their own home movies and videos to scan. Accordingly, one day I brought in a reel of Super 8mm film from home that I had never viewed. Practicing the same methods that we use for all of our public appointments, I ins-
pected the film (which could have used some cleaning), added head and tail leader, threaded it on the scanner, and ran the 200 foot reel. Later, when I was alone, I had the chance to watch the digitized footage for the first time. My interior narration was not so different from many other participants that had visited the museum’s lab or who came to our community digitization events in Baltimore and Denver:

It's the living room of our house in Panama! On the Canal Zone at Albrook, AFB. It's my birthday and we must have had an overnight or maybe will be having a sleep-over at the house (the one with the red tile roof) because I'm wearing my favorite quilted pink bathrobe (my mother sewed it) but why is my friend Margo, who wore oval glasses—one of the few kids I knew who wore glasses for real—wearing a party dress with fabric very similar to my flowery, sleeveless, dressy-dress that had pleats that fell from the shoul-
der and a white pique sailor collar? And why is Maggie there, the little sister of my best friend Barbara without Barbara being there?

(The group is having a cake, as per usual with African American home movies, where birthday parties, Christmas get-togethers, and Thanksgiving dinners predominate)
We’re around the oval dining room table that my dad’s sister Aunt Hilda (who owned a ghetto fabulous bar in the ‘70s at 136th and Lenox Ave called The Satin Doll) gave him to store when we moved to the house in New Rochelle. It was a big, ornate, gilt-edged thing (hence the tablecloth) and not mom’s (nor dad’s) taste at all. Mom preferred the Danish modernist furniture that they bought when we were living in Paris (where I was born) and shipped the furniture to the different air bases where we lived over the years. I remember the chandelier that hung over the table—it was there when we bought the house because we were a bit like snails, just moving into a preexisting home shell—which I was fascinated by. I would remove one or two of the crystals on the sneak to hide in my jewelry box and to create giant diamond accessories.

And mom is there, shy in front of any type of camera but chic as always, her hair up with the curled hairpiece that she would wear on special outings. Usually, she kept her hair in a neat bun very reminiscent of the 1960s—she always had “good” hair in my opinion, which she would still straighten slightly. I’m in my usual two pigtails. (Once our maid, Paulina, was trusted to fix my hair before school one morning while my mother dealt with an emergency, and she braided it into three plaits, two on the side and one in front to the side. I cried and refused to go to school until my mother returned. She quickly rebraided it so I wouldn’t have to go to first grade looking like a “pickaninny.” (But who said that? Did my father say that? Did he say that when she told him about it over dinner at the table, eyes twinkling; “Well, Junior, I guess she didn’t want to go to school looking like a pickaninny” and my mother pursing her lip in disapproval and my brother snickering).

And there’s our dog, Jag. Years later when we return to the States, I remember seeing my brother crying as Jag lay in the kennel weakly trying to eat a treat. And wow! I always liked tape recorders and radios! Oh man, I hit the jackpot that birthday! They are just like you, yet they’re giving to a city of drama, a drama all their own.

This is a true story, if not an actual one. Everything is projection and appropriation. That film was not, and is not, a film of me. It really is a filmed document of a Black child’s birthday, though not mine. I don’t have any childhood home movies. It is an orphaned film labeled “Deidre’s Birthday No. 8 with Skipper” that I had purchased on Ebay. And yet it could be me, my mother, my friends, and my dog evoking a stand-in for my missing girlhood (filmed) images. This small-gauge film, inadvertently rich in content, adopted me. I belong to the history it elicits.

The scarcity of images of African American daily life that instigated Castro’s project is being challenged by initiatives like the Great Migration. Professional organizations like the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) are giving greater attention to diverse media collections as the field expands via community archiving. The digital data we gather through public digitization echoes the LFC project of seeing quotidian life, portrayed in home movies shot by African Americans (and others) as acts of self-representation and self-projection.

The films, videos, and audiotapes that we digitize can become something larger than family documents. They become greater than naïve verité documents when we recognize that they display awareness on both sides of the camera—awareness of the film format, the lighting or lack thereof, who is being looked at, how they are being looked at, and by whom; an intentional Black gaze.

Sometimes, people appearing in the films we’ve scanned are more explicitly performers, such as in the case of “Iron Jaw,” a D.C. area celebrity who is depicted alternately lifting men by their belts with his teeth, chewing glass light bulbs, or running a razor across his inner lips (I cringe even now as I write this). The Montgomery family, captured on Super 8mm film by the families and friends for whom the family performed, are stars in their
own right. They never miss an opportunity to dance—in the living room, on the beach, in the park, walking to the car—which is mirrored stylistically with frenetic, rapid-fire, in-camera, trigger-happy editing.

In another set of recordings, we see the McQueen family road trip as a reverse migration (The Great Vacation you could call it), recording their East Coast road trip down south for a family reunion (another popular topic). Chyron titles are dispersed throughout the footage to identify locations and to note the camera operator’s musings (“I think I like city life”) en route. When they arrive at a roadside motor inn, burnt-in text exclaims “WE MADE IT.”

I empathize with this urge to document and preserve. My family belonged to the era when “Black People On TV!” was an event in itself and a showing of a beloved Black-cast movie like Stormy Weather (1943) was particularly exciting. No matter how late, and no matter whether or not I had school in the morning, my parents would always wake me up to watch the finale of the musical, which featured a spectacular dance routine by the Nicolas Brothers wherein, introduced by bandleader Cab Calloway wearing a tailcoat conducting a swinging orchestra and swinging his baton and his “good” hair, they do flying splits on a gigantic staircase. Calloway is remembered and loved for his excessive performativity, his scat singing, and his late career media comeback by way of the film the The Blues Brothers (1980). But Calloway is underserved in music, popular culture, and film scholarship as a focus of complex questions about popular African American representation.

In a series of reels that came to the museum, Calloway gazes at the familiar faces of his children and his wife Nuffie. He films fellow band members, colleagues, and friends (including Lena Horne), and he surveys the landscapes, hotels, racetracks, and people that he encounters on performance tours of Jamaica, the Bahamas, Argentina, Uruguay, and other sites that led to a revitalization of his career in the States. We also see glimpses of the Calloway family home. Viewing his home movies takes me back to special times with my family watching the Nicolas Brothers, Lena Horne, and Calloway on TV in what seemed like the middle of the night.

The core of CAAMA’s home movie collection includes donations like the Calloway family films, home movies of international travel from the Michael Holman Family, 16mm films from architect J. Max Bond whose firm worked on the museum’s design, and films shot in Tulsa, OK, by Rev. Solomon Sir Jones (added to the National Film Registry in 2016). Art Historian Suzanne Smith brought in matchless group, ¼ inch open-reel audio tapes and a treasure trove of 16mm Kodachrome color films to be scanned over the course of several public appointments. Washington DC’s own Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, who is featured in the films, established a network of churches along the east coast known as The Church of God.9

The 16mm Kodachrome color films were shot with wonderful cinematic style by Willie P. Jackson, whose films deserves further exploration. The footage mixes pre-Monty Python-esque cut out and collage animations with designed titles on cardboard and colored paper, with cotton balls, cut out type, sparkles, and trick lighting effects. These reels challenge the misperception that Black amateur films are atypical and thus extraordinary as they complicate viewers’ abilities to read them through a limiting sociological lens. The images shot by Black amateur film- and video-makers of homes, celebrations, and trips were intended to be shared, locally, in a sense, with family, friends, neighbors, and community without the burden of representing the race for those on the outside and of the painful pathological caricatures of commercial cinema.

In Baltimore, I sat through a real-time video session with a visitor as she murmured sotto voce expressions of suspicion about the digitization process. Would the images be stolen? Misused? I began to recognize these concerns of theft and misrepresentation as being characteristic of elder relatives from a different generation, one that is prone to be conspiracy-minded.

Even as owners agree to share their films as part of the museum’s study collection, they frequently assert the right to protect their
movies’ relatives. Even when participants have no connection whatsoever to their materials, or the individuals on screen, they often have specific editorial admonishments: *Don’t show my father smoking. Leave out the adults drinking, wearing party hats, or acting silly.* These editorial notes express a desire, I think, for a posthumous uplift narrative. The desire to sanitize the images carries with it a desire to be and to be seen as properly Black and upstanding for an imagined audience outside of the enclave. In this way, The Great Migration project allows African American images to be actively commonplace, providing mirrored portraits of Blackness rescued from denigration and obsolescence, but also sometimes distorted or remade by memories.

It’s a process of engagement. Archivists, whether inventorying a filmmaker’s elements in the basement or sitting with a client during a Great Migration appointment, as they point out their mother, their friends, or other loved ones, are performing a great deal of emotional labor.

My colleague AJ Lawrence suggested to me that we are like foster parents to the films. And for someone like me, and like many of us who are now orphaned, we protect and parent these films, and then we let them parent us in return.

As a conservator, taking care of actual artifacts, of essential evidence, and of primary documents allows me the openness to continue to speculate and to conspire.

The finale of the LFC narrative reads as follows:

Extraterrestrials examine their ethnographic documentation of the planet Earth, the Lincoln/Archina films: “Based upon our evidence gathered in the 1920’s, inhabitants of the planet exist in family groups consisting of a coupled male and female with two or three handsome offspring. They occupy extravagant habitats. They are often involved in social, academic, and business rituals, as well as adventures and romantic triangles. We conclude from our findings that the Earth is a paradise occupied by brown and black-hued beings.
ENDNOTES

1—See, for example, a trailer for one of the first videos I ever produced. Ina Archer, "Trailer for 1/16th of 100% (1996)." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rScJFSCQOw.


4—The name "Great Migration" was developed out of the graduate thesis work of Jasmyn Castro, when she was a Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) student at New York University.


7—In November 2018 we inaugurated our Robert F. Smith Fund Community Curation digitization vehicle, a 24-foot truck outfitted with analog and digital video equipment, a film scanner, and an inspection bench, plus additional computers and decks to set up audio digitization stations. The first outing was a trip to Denver, Colorado where the truck was stationed in Five Points, a historically Black community. The truck yielded 150 hours of digitized material—a volume that forcefully supports the efficacy and expense of designing and outfitting the truck, but the numbers also attest to the common occurrence of African Americans behind moving and still image-making equipment.

8—I've been enjoying South Side Home Movie Project’s website which makes the films in their collections searchable by tropes, styles, and camera techniques giving weight to the intentionality of the makers. For more on SSHMP, see: https://sshmpportal.uchicago.edu/.

9—An early, enthusiastic, and enterprising radio evangelist, Michaux starred in a television program on the now defunct DuMont Television Network. Michaux and his wife Mary, known as Sister Michaux, presided over the church from 1919 until his death in 1968. Widely known as the "Happy Am I" preacher, he opened his CBS network show "The Happiness Hour" with the eponymous hymn as an elated chorus jumped and clapped in unison.
While his name is not a Hollywood fixture, Kevin Jerome Everson is quickly becoming recognized as one of the most consequential filmmakers working in the US today. Defying expectations audiences have about genre, form, and representation, his films are particularly celebrated in the film festival circuit and contemporary art world. Mid-career retrospectives at Paris’s Centre Pompidou/Cinéma du Réel (2019), Harvard Film Archive (2018), Seoul’s Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (2017), and London’s TATE Modern (2017), as well as a solo exhibition at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art (2011) have highlighted work featuring many of the cinematic codes that are said to lend documentary its specificity as a mode, such as the use of archival footage, durational takes, and natural lighting. Yet many of his films stage scenes with non-professional actors such that they operate apart from conventions that have accrued around nonfiction filmmaking. His subjects are generally working-class African Americans, depicted engaging in quotidian activities. Critics who have written about Everson tend to emphasize the fact that his films circle back to a recurring theme of labor: his eight-hour film Park Lanes (2015) presents a day in the life of workers at a bowling equipment manufacturing company; Tonsler Park (2017) observes a community of people working at a polling station on the day of the November 2016 election; Island of St. Matthews (2013) shows a worker at a lock and dam in Columbus, Mississippi. Everson’s emphasis on labor, combined with his films’ often leisurely tempos, reorient us to the temporality of everyday work, work that lacks narrative momentum and as such is generally not portrayed in mainstream cinema.

In this essay, I wish to consider a related recurring theme across a range of recent films by Everson that has been less discussed than labor: athleticism. Like labor, athleticism foregrounds work, repetition, gesture, and skill, embodying a parallel cinematic repertoire of images. But more frequently than labor, athleticism crosses over into recreation, conveying what people do for fun precisely when they are not on the clock of capitalism. In turn, scenes of athleticism feel more joyful and carefree,
seeming almost uncontaminated by ideology, which can be reinforced by the fact that Everson’s films don’t editorialize or appear to advance larger arguments. Yet images are of course never politically neutral, and passing time with bodies moving in space affords an opportunity to reflect on irreducible irruptions and remainders of the histories and stagings of race, gender, stereotype, and performance that figures of Black athletes conjure, as well as the boundaries between work and play that they scramble. Everson’s cinematic field powerfully refuses to yield to a Black-brawn’s essentialism that persistently seeps through mediations of Black athleticism, often serving to uphold troublingly Darwinian accounts of the legacy of trans-Atlantic slavery. Instead, Everson’s repeated return to athletic gestures and sporting events, I propose, invokes an even deeper return to another pastime: cinema itself—and more specifically to the aesthetic, ontological, epistemological, and political roots of early cinema, fascinated as it was by the medium’s nascent potential to capture, record, and study bodies in motion.

Explicit allusions to and reworkings of early cinema can be found throughout Everson’s films, inviting viewers to consider his work more broadly against the context of late nineteenth-century visual culture. As Jordan Cronk writes, a program of Everson’s shorts “cast four otherwise unrelated films in something like a study of twentieth-century American consciousness, linking both industrial evolution with corporeal decline, and traces of early cinema with unknown reaches of a medium in flux.” Indeed, two of his films have been described as variations on the Lumière Brothers’ canonical 1895 silent film Workers Leaving the Factory. The Lumières’ films exemplify the observational potential lying at the heart of the cinematic enterprise, and have inspired a range of other artists, from Harun Farocki and Ben Russell to Sharon Lockhart and Andrew Norman Wilson, to remake Workers, as if to signal a rite of passage and a way to index changing times and concerns. Everson pays his respective dues to these early pioneers in his seven-minute-long Workers Leaving the Job Site (2013) and yet again in Rams 23 Blue Bears 21 (2017). In Rams, an eight-minute single-take film that documents a mostly African-American audience leaving a football stadium in Salisbury, North Carolina, we watch as a steady stream of people walk out, almost in a single-file line, some directly looking at the camera, some directly looking away. As with most of Everson’s films, because it feels so observational (the camera doesn’t move, nothing extraordinary happens), it is tempting to assume we are witnessing an unscripted unfolding of a real event. As with most of Everson’s films too, however, one must hold such assumptions in check. Everson’s spectator can never be sure whether the image onscreen is staged or observational or some place in between.

Rams’s update of early cinema offers a literal transferal from one of Everson’s favorite themes (labor) to another (sport): a silent film is reimagined in a local stadium setting and in so doing builds a conceptual bridge to consider a more far-reaching interchange between sports and early film history. Taking Rams’s nod to Workers as a jumping-off point, I wish to reflect on other less explicit encounters between Everson’s films and formative, canonical moments in early film history. One goal of this essay is to demonstrate how the artist’s work alerts us to the racial dynamics that have been constitutive of documentary form yet have remained largely neglected in standard histories of American documentary. Scholars have astutely observed how complex racial dynamics serve as structuring absences in the broad evolution of cinematic techniques and modes—from narrative and sound to color and animation—but in such accounts, documentary tends to be elided, a slight effectuated by the deceptively benign, presentational aesthetics of early documentary photography, exemplified by Eadweard Muybridge’s protocinematic motion studies. The looming mediation of athleticism across such work cuts to the heart of documentary’s contradictions, pulled between expressive and managerial functions, condensing relationships among labor and play, invisibility and visibility, bodies and technologies.

In his authoritative analysis of Alan Crosland’s The Jazz Singer (1927), for example,
Michael Rogin writes, "each transformative moment in the history of American film has founded itself on the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans stand for something besides themselves." Rogin pinpoints these shifts in American cinema through four fictional films: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edwin Porter, 1903), which "marked the transition from popular theatre to motion pictures"; *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), whose length, narrative form, and fluid cinematic vocabulary "originated Hollywood cinema in the ride of the Ku Klux Klan against black political and sexual revolution"; *The Jazz Singer*, which became the "founding movie of Hollywood sound" and featured blackface performance at its dramatic heart; and finally, *Gone with the Wind* (David O. Selznick, 1939), which serves as an "early example of the producer unit system that would come to dominate Hollywood" that "established the future of the Technicolor spectacular by returning to American film origins in the plantation myth." More recently, Nicholas Sammond has identified a further such transitional moment in the history of cartoon imagery, unraveling the ways in which the emergence of the animation industry is also irrevocably entangled with blackface minstrelsy—most clearly demonstrated by Walt Disney's introduction of Mickey Mouse, making his public debut in *Steamboat Willie* (1928).

The "surplus symbolic value" of African Americans that Rogin and Sammond identify is thus acknowledged in relation to early fictional American cinema, yet documentary's debts to such operations of racial exchange are largely uninterrogated. Since the mid-1990s, scholars focusing on nonfiction film have begun to envision a fuller account of how to place the practice within in a "desegregated" film history. Scott MacDonald’s *Adventures of Perception* delineates extensive synergies between the oppositional strategies of Black cinema and avant-garde documentary, while Fatimah Tobing Rony’s *The Third Eye* provides an indispensable critique of the racial imaginary at the heart of the ethnographic impulse, particularly insofar as the anthropological project has more generally relied on the savage, raced Other. To its credit, however, Rony’s wide-ranging account is not limited to the African-American context; some of her most compelling readings draw attention to other loci of race and early cinema, from the indigenous, titular, Inuit hero in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), represented as the archetypal "Primitive Everyman," to French physician-anthropologist Félix-Louis Regnault’s time-motion studies of West Africans in the 1890s. Nevertheless, Rony’s important insights about the racial machinations of early cinema’s documentary impulse in a global, neocolonialist context form an umbrella framework within which to view the narrower, displaced slice of the histories of representation that I recall here. Indeed, it is my argument that Everson’s filmmaking—particularly when viewed through the lens of athleticism—indirectly leads our attention to the context of early American documentary and in turn to our critical failures to fully reckon with the histories of antiblackness that lurk in its frames.

Everson’s historiographic interventions unsettle what Michael Gillespie diagnoses as the uneven critical burden whereby “the fundamental value of a black film is exclusively measured by a consensual truth of the film’s capacity to wholly account for the lived experience or social life of race.” Instead, Gillespie asks for a richer potentiality of the idea of Black film: “what if black film is art or creative interpretation and not merely the visual transcription of the black lifeworld?” Everson’s filmmaking needs to be viewed as more than “visual transcription” as it frequently participates in a politicized, imaginative project of revisionist historiography as much as it documents everyday communities. Everson’s films mediate Black lifeworlds, not only real but also imagined and hypothetical, deflecting expectations tied to social reflection. While many of his films put untold stories of local and national figures on the record—as with his short film *Round Seven* (2018), which I will turn to later—the “record” being corrected is, crucially, never ontologically secure. Everson never distinguishes the real from the staged, and in the context of longstanding exclusions of African Americans from official histories, his refusal to
formally settle for straightforward reflection becomes political.

One could understand Everson’s athletes—cowgirls, race car drivers, boxers, water skiers, foosball players, and so many more—as figures hidden in plain sight, representing the volumes of African Americans subjected to everyday practices of looking but not historical documentation. Importantly, the paradoxical encounter between the hypervisibility of Black performers (whether actors or athletes) and their symbolic exclusion from the historical record does not create an effect whereby the two extremes cancel each other out to leave us with flat indifference; they instead open up a charged field where the ordinary becomes imbued with uneven fluctuations among the hypervisible, the invisible, and the politics of the everyday all at once. Everson’s particular approach to filming sportive gestures and environments bears this point out, as American sports cultures have consistently staged dynamics of racial logics, offering scenes of displacement for their attendant anxieties. Persistent mediations of Black bodies “playing” configure opportunities for white spectators to make-believe the fantasy of a harmoniously integrated society, thus ignoring the racial injustices and embodied politics of “work” that co-exist with but are screened out by the virtuosity of athletic play. Rather than neatly packaging these lessons in narrative form or familiar documentary syntax, Everson prefers to leave these complexities aesthetically unresolved.

From this vantage point, Everson’s filmmaking invokes a cinematic past to help imagine a documentary aesthetics of Black film that moves beyond an embrace of representational realism to demonstrate how Black lifeworlds can offer more; they can form the foundation of art. Considering resonances in a feedback loop circling through a filmic span of over a century, I focus on the sportive ecology of images that cut across the present-tense moments of Everson’s films and the early moments of documentary cinema they conjure. The mutual imbrication of these early and late moments could be understood as a “new silent cinema,” characterized by parallel conditions in which short-form moving images circulate widely and the studio system is decentered as a mode of production.10

CONCEPTUALIZING AN ATHLETIC CINEMA

As much as athleticism is recast in front of Everson’s camera, it is worth considering how it can be located behind the camera as well. At the 55th New York Film Festival in October 2017, *Film Comment* hosted a filmmaker’s chat with an unlikely combination of moving-image practitioners whose work had just been screened at the festival: Everson sat on stage in Lincoln Center alongside French auteur Claire Denis and the relative up-and-coming Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier. Everson was on hand to discuss his film *Tonsler Park* (2017), a feature documenting workers and voters at a polling station in a Black neighborhood in Charlottesville, Virginia on the day of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Asked to discuss what new challenges each filmmaker took on in their respective films, Everson discussed the difficulties of shooting the film in a single day with a very tight turn-around for the edit. He explained, “that was the first time I’ve worked that fast and athletically before . . . I like that kind of approach to filmmaking—just have it all kind of muscled up in one day.” Everson’s sporty metaphors are suggestive and worth mobilizing a bit further beyond the immediate context in which he used them. But what exactly would an athletic cinema entail? Some general propositions follow.

An athletic cinema can refer to a process-focused filmmaking practice regulated by discipline and constraints—much like the rules of sports. It would emphasize filmmaking as a bodily skill, requiring practice and endurance, through which a filmmaker-athlete gains strength and perfects his or her form over time. A web search for “athletic cinema” retrieves very little, save for a 48-hour filmmaking competition; but this is useful in that it emphasizes the practice of filmmaking under pressure, reveals the temporal and formal constraints that shape the activity, and calls attention to its competitive nature, the ultimate idea being to presumably see which
The idea of athletic cinema might help us find resonances between filmmakers who one would otherwise not associate with each other. Werner Herzog, for example, is a filmmaker whose practice, like Everson’s, crosses the boundaries between documentary and fiction, and, perhaps more than any of his peers, his remarks have aligned filmmaking with athletic practice. As Herzog puts it, “Everyone who makes films has to be an athlete to a certain degree because cinema does not come from abstract academic thinking: it comes from your knees and thighs. And also being ready to work twenty-hour days. Anyone who has ever made a film—and most critics never have—already knows this.”

Herzog’s comment highlights how an athletic cinema would also point to a certain instinctual paradigm that could be conceptualized in contrast to an intellectual one. For Herzog, filmmaking requires bodily knowledge over academic expertise. When asked to describe his ideal film school, he replied, “at my Utopian film academy I would have students do athletic things with real physical contact, like boxing, something that would teach them to be unafraid. I would have a loft with a lot of space where in one corner there would be a boxing ring. Students would train every evening from 8 to 10 with a boxing instructor: sparring, somersaults (backwards and forwards), juggling, magic card tricks.”

Herzog has described feeling a special affinity with Buster Keaton, who was famously a baseball fanatic—playing the sport in makeshift fields after lunch breaks on set, and wrapping up productions “in time to go to New York for the World Series,” as Keaton recalled in his autobiography. Herzog notes that Keaton “is one of my witnesses when I say that some of the very best filmmakers were athletes. He was the quintessential athlete, a real acrobat.”

Like Herzog, Everson often displays an aversion to academic theorization when discussing his work. When Terri Francis asked Everson to discuss elements of Afro Surrealism in his work, his response was representative: “y’all keep coming up with this stuff . . . you and Michael Gillespie. Y’all be wanting to talk to me, bringing up some new shit. Make me look bad. What the fuck is this? What’s Afro Surrealism?”

Everson displays a marked preference for keeping discourse grounded in the nuts and bolts of artistic practice: formal techniques, material support, the value of the lives of the subjects he records and the histories he uncovers.

Aligning Everson with a Herzogian conceptualization of athletic cinema perhaps disorients as much as it distills. The two filmmakers’ divergent gender politics, for example, differently inflect their athleticism: Herzog’s totalizing, “ecstatic” machismo imagines intensive, competitive training so vividly that one can almost smell the pheromones of the young men his film school would be training to box. This is at odds with Everson’s mode of athletic filmmaking, which is more processual than goal-oriented and which interiorizes discipline more than pushing it to its extremes. These qualities that one might locate in Everson’s creative practice could also help to describe the nature of athleticism as a thematic tendency within his films, which refract stereotypical representations of Black male athletes as superhuman (think of Michael Jordan’s gravity-defying pose in hang time, forever iconographically imprinted by Nike), reorienting athleticism as environmental and phenomenological—revealing it as materially manufactured (in Park Lanes), as something we look away from (in Home [2008], a single take of a scoreboard in Northern Ohio), as something we walk away from (in Rams), as an historically obscured event (Round Seven), or even as a gesture to be reinterpreted by dancers (The Release, 2013, based on an American football tight-end move).

**RIDING HORSES, TYING ROPE**

Everson’s moving-image studies thus summon and challenge an intertwined history between sports and documentary cinema, stretching back to the first moving pictures, which are particularly resonant with several of Everson’s films, especially in terms of their observational qualities, short duration, and frequent absence of synchronized sound. The spectacle
of movement central to sports was particularly well-suited to the hallmark appeal of the new medium of cinema in the late nineteenth century: its ability to record motion. Indeed, Eadweard Muybridge’s innovative 1877–78 experiments using photographic sequences to document motion are generally agreed to be key predecessors in the development of cinema. These images depicted jockeys riding race horses to determine for ex-governor of California Leland Stanford whether equines ever keep all four legs off the ground while running. The animals, named Occident and Sallie Gardner, have been so overwhelmingly the focus of discourses about these images that it has hardly ever been remarked that the jockeys riding them were African American. The names of the horses in the studies are remembered while the names of the Black men riding them are, revealingly, all but forgotten to history. Racetracks might have been one of the few public facilities not governed by Jim Crow segregation laws after American Reconstruction, yet by not documenting the names of the Black jockeys, broader racial hierarchies override details of this history’s narrativization.16

In contrast to this, Everson’s quiet thirty-two-minute Ten Five in the Grass speaks volumes. Shot on 16mm film in 2012, the same year Fuji closed its film manufacturing facility, the film thus embeds in its very materiality a look back upon the history of the medium in a key moment of its transition. Not quite silent, the film contains very little audible dialogue, favoring subdued environmental sounds. It depicts Black cowgirls and cowboys as they prepare for rodeo calf-roping events. Shot in Lafayette, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi, the film’s images emphasize repetitive gestures—swinging lasso, tying rope, grooming horses, taming bulls—what Everson would refer to as his subjects’ “internal language.” 17 Program notes for Ten Five often highlight the way in which the film re-envisions the folklore of the Western genre. Michael Gillespie’s comments about the film expand upon this significance:

The black western richly provokes the mythology of the American West and the idea of film genre as a historiographic imagineering by tacitly revealing how the narrative form has covertly borne a racial and cultural ideal. The genre’s classical themes of nation-building, the civilizing of savage lands, utopianism, and the discreteness of good and evil become refabulated as Everson draws attention to absences, disavowals, and the difference of a culture other than pale riders. Everson’s Ten Five in the Grass examines the craft of the black cowboy.18

I would suggest there is yet another layer of cinematic reflexivity at play in Ten Five that forms a mirrored inversion to the film’s relationship to the Western. If Ten Five points to the overwhelming absence of Blacks in clichéd, recycled cowboy iconography developed by classical Hollywood, it simultaneously seems haunted by the unnoticed presence of African Americans in Muybridge’s proto-cinematic studies of animal locomotion to which the film arguably bears an even stronger resemblance.

Beyond their shared captivation by the rhythms of bodily kinetics and their composition of repetitive, non-narrational gestures, Everson’s films, here and elsewhere, display a marked interest in the medium-specific elements of form—exhausting the length of the reel of film, for example, is often the constraint that determines what is included in a given shot and phenomenologically relays the passage of time. This athletic principle of duration structures Old Cat (2009), a single-take black-and-white film that depicts two men leisurely riding a boat on a lake in Virginia, as well as Erie (2010), a mesmerizing feature composed of seven eleven-minute scenes of different activities, such as krumping and fencing, each shot on a 400-foot roll of 16mm film. Situating Everson’s work against a longer American documentary tradition thus helps one discern the reciprocation of athleticism, discipline, and leisure that one finds both in front of and behind his camera. Indeed, viewing Everson’s practice as engaging in this kind of reciprocal exchange with the people he films ethnically
levels the set of looking relations so that—in contrast to many other works of contemporary art and nonfiction—the artist neither condescendingly regards nor uncritically celebrates the documentary subject.

**THROWING PUNCHES, SHOOTING FILM**

Everson’s focus on boxing in films like *Ring* (2008), *Undefeated* (2008), and *Round Seven* demonstrates how the legacies of early cinema might enrich our understanding of the reciprocity between the technical and the thematic, and in turn, the subject and the filmmaker. In discussing *Round Seven*, for example, Everson has noted the perfectly matched duration of a reel of film with the length of a round of a boxing match, and thus this confluence becomes an occasion to reflect on the connection between the materiality of film and the photographic inscription of athletic movement. Yet this is not nearly as coincidental as one might at first assume. As Jesús Costantino has argued, fight films were in fact constitutive of the evolution of film form. Boxing matches leave a palpable “trace within the structure of cinema itself, which continues to define the boundaries of film form to filmmakers, filmgoers, and film critics alike.”

Given the wide popularity of filming matches during the pre-narrative, cinema-of-attractions era, the sport “directly motivated the increased length of a single reel in order to simulate the length of a round.” Costantino refers to Muybridge’s famous studies of boxing in the 1880s, after Muybridge had relocated from Palo Alto to Philadelphia, which, he suggests, more than any protocinematic experiments (or even the cinema of attractions) facilitated in “naturalizing” cinematic spectatorship. In the late nineteenth century of course, cinema was a new medium and cinematic spectatorship was a highly unnatural process, as the notorious account of the Lumière’s screening of *Arrival of a Train* (1896) at a Parisian café so usefully illustrates, regardless of its veracity. Extending familiar conventions of boxing spectatorship to his photographic sequences, images in Muybridge’s boxing series display varying camera positions to imitate “the many possible vantages from which a person attending a boxing match might see the action in the ring” and thus established a conventional mode of spatial orientation in narrative cinema.

Formally, this is racially inflected on multiple levels. As Elspeth H. Brown notes of Muybridge’s boxing locomotion studies, “although the other ninety-four models were white, the anthropometric grid first appears behind the only model who was African American. It is as if the non-white “other” cannot be understood, scientifically, without the anthropometric grid, a technology for mapping racial difference.” The grid had been used widely in nineteenth-century ethnographic photography in misguided attempts to quantify racial difference in non-Western bodies, and it is instructive that Muybridge first introduces the grid with his single non-white subject: Ben Bailey, a multi-race identified boxer based in Philadelphia. Not only was Bailey racially coded by placing him against this anthropometric backdrop, but he was also racially differentiated in Muybridge’s framing. Unlike the other photographs in the series, Bailey boxes alone and is visually isolated in the center of the frame. Constantino observes, “in the two series of Bailey, the frame no longer corresponds to presumed ring boundaries, but instead to a technological consciousness with a form and function not unlike Laura Mulvey’s account of the fetishistic close-up.”

The inferentially racist spectatorial gaze of anthropometry that informed Muybridge’s experiments, coding its Black subject as an object of scientific scrutiny, manifested much more explicitly in another key flashpoint in the history of early documentary practices: with the Johnson vs. Jeffries prizefight match of 1910. Its reliance on what Rogin calls the “surplus value” of Blacks cannot be overstated. Filmed by an unprecedented number of cameras, with special lenses developed for the event, for a Fourth of July audience of tens of thousands, it was a cinematic event that as Dan Streible notes, “became as widely discussed as any single [film] production prior to *Birth of a Nation*.” Rather than excluding the white opponent from the frame as in Muybridge’s images of Bailey, this media
spectacle was the “event of the year,” staging a racialized clash between the Black heavy-weight champion Jack Johnson and retired champion James Jeffries, nicknamed the “Great White Hope.” Jeffries’ defeat, as many others have argued, mobilized racial anxieties that prefigured those soon to be unleashed by Birth of a Nation, including the nationwide eruptions of race riots and violent deaths that followed in its immediate aftermath. It also led to the first instance of government-enforced motion picture censorship in the US, the Prize Fight Film Act of 1912, which forbade interstate shipment of fight films.

I recall these histories to underscore cinema’s deeply racialized relationship to boxing and its impact on the future of the medium. Whether or not they are intentional frames of reference in Everson’s films, they recast his films’ significance, which are already characterized by a commitment to historical consciousness. Round Seven perhaps best exemplifies the ways in which these issues of race, film form, and history are cinematically triangulated. The film finds Everson revisiting his hometown of Mansfield, Ohio, a location to which his camera often returns. His Mansfield films often feature what he refers to as “re-representations” of incidents from or related to his hometown, testifying to his interest in telling stories of people from there. The film’s central concern is a famous 1978 boxing match between celebrity boxer Sugar Ray Leonard and Mansfield local Art McKnight. Leonard was in the beginning of his professional career, having just won an Olympic gold medal in 1976. McKnight was not a household name, making this a significant event for residents of his Ohio hometown.

Round Seven’s images cut back and forth between black screens; color shots of a woman walking in circles, holding up sequentially numbered round cards above her head in different parks and public facilities in Mansfield; current-day color footage of a young shirtless Black boxer with boxing gloves on, throwing punches solo; and black-and-white footage of a presumably present-day boxing match. The boxing images tend to be tightly framed to the point where the movement depicted often becomes abstracted. The different sets of images are held together sonically by McKnight’s narration of memories of the match, round by round, forty years later. These images disjunctively reinforce the temporal disparity between McKnight’s present-day narration and the event he is recalling—invariably tainted by natural memory loss and selective recollection that occurs with the passage of time. Yet at the same time McKnight’s delivery resounds with the sense that the match has certainly been recalled on more than one occasion in the forty years since its passing.

McKnight begins by recounting how Angelo Dundee (Leonard’s boxing trainer, who also trained Muhammad Ali, George Foreman, and over a dozen world boxing champions) tried to keep him up the night before his match by phoning McKnight’s room multiple times. McKnight says, “I probably stopped counting at four times. . . . but what he didn’t realize is he wasn’t keeping me woke because I don’t sleep at night, no way.” McKnight recalls but graciously understates this foul play, before proceeding to reflect on being incarcerated in Ohio, and how fighting kept him out of prison: “I wasn’t interested in going to school, I was interested in doing anything to keep out of prison. . . . I could see fighting, that was going to be my way out. . . . Even then . . . would cost more to incarcerate me than educate me.” This is one of very few moments in McKnight’s narration that connects past to present, reminding the spectator of the historically constant racial discrepancies amongst those who are incarcerated in America, while framing boxing not as a leisure pursuit but an economic opportunity. Indeed this passage stands out in McKnight’s otherwise very detail-orient ed, round-by-round recollection of his fight with Leonard. It is symmetrically closed by recalling how, in round seven, Dundee yelled across the ring to stop the fight, and then in a very controversial and unprecedented move, the referee proceeded to stop the fight. As McKnight puts it: “Never saw a fight stop—no standing eight count, no knockdown, no warning, nothing. Referee just walked in and stopped.” McKnight displays dignity and resignation about the situation, saying he doesn’t...
want to complain about something that’s forty
years old and that he believes the person who
deserved to win won—even though the fight
was clearly called too soon and against the
standard rules of the game.

Everson has explained that this is one of
only three Sugar Ray Leonard fights for which
archival footage does not exist. It had been
telecast on ABC’s Wide World of Sports but
was cut in round three. Thus McKnight’s rec-
collection provides a first-hand account for the
historical record in the absence of any known
surviving footage of the event. The distinc-
tion between the film’s poetic imagery and
the account described thus further registers
as an index of audiovisual histories that have
been lost, and more specifically of racial injus-
tices that have been swept from the record,
given that the Italian-American Dundee effec-
tively interfered in letting the fight finish as it
should have. In revisiting these lost histories
while framing their erasures, the importance
of Everson’s project within cinema’s vexed
relationships to boxing and race comes into
focus—asserting the humanistic value of
representation while always simultaneously
accommodating doubts about documentary’s
epistemological foundations and limits.

This history also reverberates through
Everson’s two short boxing films from 2008,
Ring and Undefeated, only to be refracted,
recalibrated, and perhaps ultimately set aside.
Ring is one of several films Everson has made
with found footage, in this case silent foot-
age of young Black boxers practicing moves.
Monica McTighe writes, “there is an aware-
ness of the quality of images and the grain
of the film. The beautiful young men’s bodies
become moving works of art as they are lit
by the film crew and move in balletic motion.
Like his fellow filmmaker Steve McQueen’s
work, Everson’s film speaks to the eroticiza-
tion (but also the fear of) the powerful Black
male athlete’s body in the context of spectator
sports. In this film, the boxers’ bodies become
dancers.” The description included in its
DVD packaging, presumably written by Everson
himself, is short and sweet: “Ring attempts
to exhibit the ‘sweet science’ of boxing in an
elegant way.” What strikes me about these
two descriptions is their resonance with box-
ing and early cinema: from the scientificity of
Muybridge’s anthropometric documenting of
Ben Bailey to McTighe’s description of watch-
ing bodies in motion to the eroticization and
fear of the Black male athlete that were so
integral to the Johnson-Jeffries match. The film
itself features certain punches in slow motion,
changing the "real" time of the image, much
as one might say early experiments in chro-
nophotography did. Yet it’s not so much that
Everson is making a concerted effort to bring
these fraught histories back to our conscious-
ness; it’s more that in Ring and elsewhere
he is trying to propose we have a different
relationship to these images, images which
over the years have been assimilated within a
cinematic vocabulary that takes stereotype for
granted. Critic Emmanuel Burdeau observes,
“Everson can film boxing, baseball, car races .
. . but competition isn’t what interests him. His
eyes are not on the prize. . . .The athleticism
of numerous films of Everson, the athleticism
that is complacently associated with Black
Americans, is therefore no doubt a ruse. His
cinema doesn’t have that conquering vitality,
his images don’t have that facile positivity.”

Perhaps this appeal for a different rela-
tion to the image is most neatly staged in
Undefeated. In this one-and-a-half-minute,
black-and-white, 16mm film, we see two Black
men in front of a chain-link fence that is no
longer standing upright, a visual signifier that
this is an environment that care forgot. One
man, on the left side of the frame, is throw-
ing punches and lightly jumping in the air, as
if practicing boxing moves. The second man,
in the right side of the frame, has his back to
the camera and has his hand in the hood of a
car, of which we see the front half. The man
on the left seems to be smiling as he jumps
and punches, before he stops and looks down
into the hood of the car. Both of these men
are depicted in acts of doing things—one
is practicing moves, one is presumably re-
pairing a car. The film’s subjects occupy two
separate sides of the image, each engaged in
respective activities. As such, boxing has been
displaced both from the ring and from the
anthropometric grid (though the beaten-down,
chain-link fence serves as an inviting metaphor for what has become of it). Both men are getting by and seem sure of what they’re doing. The spectator, on the other hand, is offered no such certainty and can only be left with questions. Are these two men friends who were trying to get somewhere when the car they were driving broke down? Is the man only throwing punches to keep warm in the Midwest cold? Is he smiling because he is happy, or is the smile a trace of a subject who knows he is being filmed? Is this a scenario Everson has stumbled upon or is it one he has staged? The film’s title would seem to suggest that the two men are keeping a positive attitude in the face of adversity. It could easily have also been the title for Round Seven, offering a succinct description of McKnight’s good spirits about his match against Leonard. But the title invites us to realize too that one is also “undefeated” even if one was never competing in the first place.

Consideration of Everson’s films from the perspective of athletics—as theme, description of process, and link to a longer history of the cinematic treatment of antiblackness—threws into focus the abiding fascinations and anxieties related to performance, movement, and competition that sporting events animate across American culture. At its most elemental level, athleticism identifies a thematic preoccupation in Everson’s work, serving as a connective tissue to think across a range of the artist’s films. A large number of his films shift, and quite literally un-frame, the terms of athleticism and their deep entanglements in histories of Black American representation in popular culture. Sporting in Everson’s cinema sidelines raced, gendered ideologies of competition, as well as the thrills and let downs enabled by teleological schema that divide athletic performers into champions and losers, instead opening up a constellation of gestures, social worlds, and unresolved meanings. The frame—and unframing—of athleticism expands upon Everson’s own provocation to consider how his approach to filmmaking reciprocates the qualities of athleticism that are emphasized in the scenes he records. In doing so, he models an ethically leveled generosity to his subjects, seeing them as worthy of representation and even more crucially as worthy of a cinema that isn’t formally constrained by the legacies of its misuses.

Thanks to Michele Pierson, the editors at World Records, and Madeleine Molyneaux for their insightful feedback on drafts of this essay.
ENDNOTES


9—Gillespie, Film Blackness, 5.


12—Herzog, Herzog on Herzog, 15.


14—Herzog, Herzog on Herzog, 138.

15—Terri Francis, “Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit: An Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson,” Black Camera 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 205.


19—Jesús Constantino, “Seeing without Feeling: Muybridge’s Boxing Pictures and the Rise of the Bourgeois Film Spectator,”


27—Kevin Jerome Everson in discussion at ASAP Conference, New Orleans, LA (October 2018).


His films are fixtures at the Sundance Film Festival, on public television, and more recently, accompanying permanent installations at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. Over the course of more than three decades, Stanley Nelson has demonstrated a singular commitment to using the documentary mode to challenge dominant discourses that tend to shape American historical memory. His films have chronicled twentieth-century African American social movements and historical figures, both prominent and underexplored. This conversation with Nelson occurred at his Firelight Media offices in Harlem, NY, where he has at least three new projects in various stages of production. The offices also play home to the Firelight Media Producers Lab, a significant incubator for emerging documentary filmmakers of color. In our conversation, I asked the filmmaker if we could step back from discussions of the choices that comprise particular films and instead engage with the social, political, and commercial registers in which his films are always entangled.

**INTERVIEW**

**JASON FOX**

I want to start with a broad question about your outlook on your own practice. In your *Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2015), you interview a journalist who says "the Black Panthers used us." He was referring to the savviness of the Panthers in understanding how to make use of the commercial media at large. That was a really poignant line for me, and it makes me wonder how you would relate it to your own work. On the one hand, I see you making boundary pushing work, getting engaged discussions about the Black Panthers, for example, into spaces where those discussions usually don't happen. On the other hand, you have made a career partnering with public institutions like PBS and the Smithsonian Museum that aren't immediately associated with pushing boundaries. How do you think about your own films in relationship to the channels through which you distribute them?
I tend to think that all outlets are pretty much the same. I wouldn’t say that Netflix is any more revolutionary than PBS. I think almost all outlets with a wide reach, at this point at least, are owned by corporations with money. Netflix started out little, now they’re huge! So, I think of my approach less in terms of where it’s going to be broadcast, and more about audience and trying to reach as many people as I possibly can. In the case of Black Panthers, I could’ve made a film about my relationship to the Black Panthers. I was 15 or 16 when the Panthers came into being. I lived in New York City. I was their target audience. I could talk about that, I could talk about me and my best friend—we went to the Panther headquarters in Harlem, stood across the street and said, “Uhhhhh, no! I don’t think so. I don’t think this is what we want to do.” I could’ve made that film, but I think it’s much more important, to me, to make a film that’s not about me, and not about my personal stories.

JF
Can you say more about intended audience?
In the context of your Tell Them We Are Rising (2017) about historically Black colleges and universities, for example, those who attended HBCUs are the last people who might need or want to see the film because they’re thinking “yeah, we already know!”

SN
That’s always the trick with that convention. Especially historical documentaries that I’ve done. There are people who see HBCUs and know a lot about HBCUs. There are people who see HBCUs and they’re like, “Whatttt? Oh my god!” Especially internationally. We showed the film in France and they were like “What? There are Black colleges? I didn’t know anything about that!” You have this variation of people. One thing I’ve said before, I’m not sure how true it is, but in some ways I’m looking to tell Black people something new. I’m looking to tell African Americans something they don’t know. I feel if I can tell African Americans something they don’t know, by its very nature I’ll tell white folks and people in other countries something they don’t know. I’m trying not to be that guy in the Tarzan movie, you know, drums are beating, and Tarzan says, “What are the drums saying?” And they say the drums are saying the Black folks are mad up in Harlem and they’re going to form an organization called the Black Panthers. I’m not trying to do that, I’m trying to make a film that tells Black people something new.

JF
I imagine that for you, your reuse of archival photographs in new contexts different from the ones in which they originated means having to navigate how they will be reinterpreted in contemporary contexts by new audiences. For example, Black Panthers uses a still photograph of Huey Newton from 1967, one in which he’s been handcuffed to a hospital gurney after being shot by Oakland police officers. So, he’s been shot, then taken to the hospital by a friend where he is arrested, and then someone photographs him while he’s lying down on the gurney. At an immediate level, it’s an image that depicts real subjection, someone without control over their body. Do you worry as a director about re-contextualizing an image like that into one of agency, or at least into an image that can circulate with a different understanding of what’s going on there?

SN
I’m not sure if those questions are in the front of my mind. I’m trying to tell a story. In the Black Panthers film in particular, I grew up with the Panthers. The history that came down today about the Black Panthers is very different from what I remember, how the Panthers were thought about and what I remember at that time. So, I wanted to make sure that the story I remembered was the real story. When we found that it was, that was the story I wanted to tell. Somebody might look at Huey Newton handcuffed to the gurney and say, “that motherfucker”—I look at it and say, there’s a guy who looks like he’s about to die, and you handcuffed him to a gurney. Like, what do you think he’s about to—get up and run? He’s about to die. And they thought he was going to die. So that’s what we saw in the picture. Those films, and the last bunch of films we made,
were made without narration. We’re not telling you what to think. We’re just showing you the picture. If you think that’s a motherfucker who deserves to be handcuffed to the gurney, you’re free to think that. We just thought the picture was very powerful.

**JF**
You made the powerful short video about Emmett Till that is installed in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. If I remember correctly, the video is installed on a partitioning wall just outside of the Till memorial, but also immediately adjacent to where the museum has installed a guard tower from the Angola prison. When you were making the video, did you have any sense of how it would be contextualized by the objects around it?

**SN**
No, it’s not like we had a schematic of the museum. They would just tell us, this is how big the screen is, whether or not there are going to be seats, and they would say that they want the video to be six minutes, or a minute and a half, or whatever. And we just had to go from there.

**JF**
I wonder if your relationship to how you use images surrounding Emmett Till shifted from when you first made the *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003) for PBS’s *American Experience* 15 years ago? That is, in thinking about the posthumous agency individuals or their families and cultures might want in how media renders them.

There’s a popular narrative that says the circulation of Emmett Till’s image was a catalyst for the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. On the other hand, every time we see one more image of an African American child or parent murdered, the counter argument is that it reproduces the logic that this is just what happens. This is just the way things are. We don’t need to see these images. We need the events to not have happened, which is a very different thing.

**SN**
I think unless we know that these things happened, and the importance of them happened, then how can we say that these things can’t happen again? I think those images are really important. Somebody could make a film or write a book about that image, which has basically been kept alive by *Jet* magazine, which publishes the image every year. Emmett Till was killed in 1955. I was born in 1951. I thought that I remembered his killing. But I couldn’t have. I remembered seeing that image in *Jet*, and the discussions it started. The editor of our film on Emmett Till was born in 1957. He too is a Black man, and he too remembered the killing of Emmett Till. I think those images are incredibly powerful and are needed. How can we say that this stuff has to stop unless we know what it is? We can’t get out of our mind, “I can’t breathe.” We can’t get that out of our mind.

These images are incredibly important in trying to force these things to be stopped. But we can go too far . . . An interesting story is that when we were editing *Emmett Till*, we became desensitized in some ways to the image of Emmett Till’s bloated and beaten body. So, we would actually invite people into the edit room, the mailman or the FedEx guy, and say, “Hey, can you spare us two minutes and watch this sequence?” We would show the sequence where he showed his body and say, “Whatcha think? Is that on too long or is it too short?” And we really used that to figure out how long to show it so it didn’t become an obnoxious moment of just rubbing this monstrous crime in your face. But you had to have an idea of what actually happened to Emmett Till, because that’s why his mother wanted to leave the coffin open. That’s why people were fainting at his funeral. It’s important that we give you that sense, without being manipulative of your emotions. Although we were, obviously.

**JF**
When you’re scripting a project, do you start with the archival materials, and say “Ok, this is what we have . . . this is the history that we can tell. Now we need figures who can come in and contextualize it?” Do you do it the other way around?
SN
In the Panthers, we realized before we even started, without even thinking about it, that there was a lot of material. That the Panthers were darlings of the media. A lot of times we don’t know what the material is going to be, but we start to find more and more and more. We think about archival early, because it’s how you tell this story. We try to use every moment we’ve got. I look at archival footage and stills as a character in the film.

JF
You can correct me if my perception of the industry is wrong, but it seems like another major shift is the significant growth of the business models of media archives like Getty archives or NBC archives. History has become a lot more expensive to acquire as its aggregated and leased by fewer and fewer.

SN
Yeah, it’s more expensive. It’s harder to work deals—they’re just in it for the money. You get stuff faster, that’s the one thing, they’re efficient. But it’s getting more and more expensive. Some of these archives are buying up all the smaller archives. They understand that this stuff is evergreen. It’s like Michael Jackson’s estate buying a Beatles catalogue. How long are people going to listen to the Beatles, you know? Sooner or later, you’re going to be making lots of money.

JF
Your response sounds like a necessarily practical one. I wonder if you have a philosophical response that butts up against the practical one, like . . .

SN
Like fuck you?

(laughter)

JF
Like fuck you, or, what are the stakes when important cultural materials are kept behind gates?

SN
It’s rough. More and more. The answer is that people are fair use-ing material, and maybe that wouldn’t happen if people weren’t so greedy. When I’m negotiating with people I’m working with, my attitude is that you should try to get it for free. The archive is just pressing a button. They have some intern in there that’s pressing a button. We’re talking about, for The Black Panthers, we might’ve spent $300,000 on just footage. And basically, it’s them going through the archives and copying it over and sending you a link. That’s what it is, and we’re literally paying $45,000 to one source. $35,000 another source. And they’re just pressing a button. Who owns history? They own history because they have this footage. They own it because they have it. There’s been suits where they can’t prove that they own it, but they’re like, “Prove that we don’t. We have the only source, and you had to have gotten it—it has to be ours.” The last project we finished, this film called Boss, a lot of footage was off of YouTube, and it was a real headache. We had to source it. That’s the problem of YouTube, it’s all there, but . . . you’re making this film, you’re trying to cut stuff, but then you have to go back and figure out who owns it. It gets very complicated.

JF
Just to get a sense of this scale, you mentioned if you’re making a film now you can spend $45,000 or $35,000 on one source; when you were making films twenty years ago, was it dramatically different?

SN
Some people I didn’t pay. Hope they’re not after me! (laughter) But you know, it’s just an escalation. Part of it is, you know, rising tides raise all boats. It’s harder for me, standing in a visible position with Firelight to take film and use it, so we have to source everything. But with a lot of our budgets, in our first crack at a budget for a ninety-minute film we put in $270,000 just for footage. Maybe another $70,000 for stills. That’s just for stills and footage. Stills and footage that usually doesn’t belong to individuals, that usually belongs to
big corporations, and all they have to do is press a button to get it to us.

JF
My understanding with the Smithsonian is that when they were commissioning videos for the museum, they largely insisted that almost all of the footage came from NBC archives.

SN
I don't how much to get into this, it was a weird contract because it was through Smithsonian TV, and I don't know if they knew what they got themselves in for. But they did it that way, and we were like "no," this is going into this thing. That's going to be the most important thing that's ever been done that tells African American history, and so you can't say you can't buy this shot of Emmett Till's funeral. You've got to figure it out. And I think the great thing for us was that at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, they understood that. And they backed us on that. I mean, we tried to be reasonable, but there's only so much you can do.

At times we had to go around the Smithsonian Channel and go right to the museum, and the museum up and down supported us, from our program officer to Lonnie Bunch, who I'm sure people have told you is a genius. It's true. He is.

JF
When you were first starting out, you worked under the great Bill Greaves. What did you take away from working with him?

SN
I worked with Bill. Well, I actually worked for this program called CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), which was a government program. So I got to work with Bill and Bill didn't have to pay me. That was the only reason he gave me a job, and he was very clear about that. "I don't have to pay you? Okay, you can work here!" He didn't pay me for six months, and the government paid me when I worked with Bill. I learned a lot from him. Bill worked hard, hard, hard. Bill worked hard. I learned that. He was also independent.

I saw a Black man, who was independent, who was raising a family with two young girls. He had a house in the country, and he was doing this from making films. He knew every piece of making films. He knew editing, sound, he would shoot some of the stuff himself. I saw that. It went into me by osmosis. It wasn't like Bill said anything, it was just what I saw.

JF
Was it an economic necessity for him, that he had to be self-sufficient? Or an artistic desire to control everything?

SN
I think at that point, when I went into it, we knew in our guts that that was the only way. I wasn't going to get a job as a producer at NBC or CBS. That was just not going to happen. I wasn't the type of person who could get a job as an intern at CBS and then ingratiate myself and work my way up through the ranks. So what's the other way to do it? Be independent and figure out how to make films in that way.

JF
What was the original impetus for creating the Firelight Documentary Lab?

SN
It was created out of the fact that, when I got into filmmaking in the '70s, there were a bunch of different programs to help people break into film. WNET had a program, among others. The country that we have now focuses on scarcity instead of the abundance that we really have. All of these programs have gone away. I realized all these filmmakers were calling me to be a mentor to them and filmmakers were calling other people to be mentors for them. I made a film years ago about academics of color in major institutions. And one of the things they all talked about is how they're asked to be mentors in a different way than white professors are, and that they're expected to be mentoring. You don't get paid more, it's just one of the expectations that you have. I think it's the same with filmmakers of color—you're expected to be a mentor. It's not on me, it's any filmmaker. We felt that maybe there's a
way to institutionalize that and give it a home. That's where we came up with the idea for the lab. The thought was that there's enough filmmakers of color with great projects and the chops to get it done, and there's money to raise that we can help support this. Both things have proven to be true. We've been able to do this for ten years, and I think there's eighty graduates of the lab at this point.

What we are forming is a community and that's really important to people. That they're not by themselves, that there are other people they can talk about cuts to. We try to be very clear because people talk about this golden age of documentary all the time, and it's a golden age for a few. It's a golden age for us here at Firelight, because I've been doing this for many years and I've got this track record. We have this place which we love and it's beautiful. But we have people in the lab who have done their first film, they win Peabodys and duPonts, awards at Sundance, and they can't get in the door with distributors. Because they don't have that name. And again, these are big corporations. It's a business for them, so they . . . what's the word? They want to limit their liability. So how do you limit your liability? You hire Stanley Nelson. You hire Alex Gibney. That's how you do it.
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 Afrofuturist 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 insistent 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 Monáe’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.” 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.

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.” 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. 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; Katherine 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. 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.” 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.” 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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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. Attributing 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 Iamarisha 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.” 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? 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. 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.

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. "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. Images come faster than the sentences that reference them, and we see Biggers first outside and then suddenly holding an instrument in front of a quilt. "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." 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." 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.

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." 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.

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 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.”

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.

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 contested (by histories of representational racism) 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.” 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. 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.” 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.”

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 “whiteface,” 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 invest-
ment 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 de-
scribes 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 deter-
mining 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, symboli-
cally to the indexicality they too refute: “We
wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our
cheeks and shades our eyes . . .”

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 la-
belled-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 wall-
paper, 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 after-
wardness 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 show-
case in 2011, entitled Celestial Navigation:
a year into the afro future, insist that we
understand the scene—both Biggers’ role
and Nance’s representation—as alternative
presentations of Blackness, and also alterna-
tive 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 inter-
weaving 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 elsewhen 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 indexicity 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 arts’ 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.” 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.” 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 photograph 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), she is neither post-black, nor clarifying, nor intelligibly diegetic. 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, ungoverned. It is, finally, best described with a synonym for the Afrotfuture 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.”


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 film-making, 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
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.
In the absence of a singular set of shared rituals, communities of descendants of enslaved Africans birthed, instead, a creolized style of storytelling that privileged symbolism, synchronization, memory, and the spoken word. One of the primary sites for the reclaiming of these narratives is a selection of amateur and professional films that have been overlooked and largely remained outside of popular discourses and canonical records of cinema. In the 1960s and early '70s, the interiority of African American lives was overwhelmingly neglected in popular representations in favor of the repeated tropes of reportage surrounding the civil rights movement and other reactions to white supremacy. These dynamics left little room to visualize practices of everyday life or to engage with institutions that protect and nourish Black culture. As the museum specialist for film at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, one of my main goals was to make sure that our film programs created opportunities for individuals to see themselves as part of a community and a lineage of ideas.

The Smithsonian’s mission to explore American history through an African American lens echoed my own aims to reconcile the disparate parts of “remembering” that jolt the principles upon which American ideas were built. At the same time, I felt the need to expand on the museum’s mission by asking: Who does the production, participation, and exhibition of a documented experience benefit if remembering isn’t a bold enough objective, if the intention of the program should be closer to liberation?; What role does religious life play in this dynamic?; What role does documentary play when it is documented or viewed outside of the experience and space it depicts? These questions challenged me to consider how programmers can re-present cultural moments, especially to audiences that see their culture represented in the cinematic works on screen. African Americans have struggled to create a theology of liberation within the larger practice of Christianity, which has been used as a tool of oppression. This same liberatory struggle for transformation continues to occur in the realm of image production as a way of repairing the
visual trauma of decades of misrepresentation in the media and reinserting lost or forgotten works into the contemporary discourse of African American visual culture production. Designed to engage both cinephiles and religious communities alike, Cinema + Conversation was the second interdisciplinary collaboration I developed between the National Museum of African American History and Culture's (NMAAHC) Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA) and the museum's Center for the Study of African American Religious Life (CAARL). The first program, celebrating the remastered version of Daughters of the Dust (1991), sought to reimagine depictions of African spirituality. The second program titled “Let the Church Say Amen!” presented works by James and Eloyce Gist, and St. Clair Bourne, with the objective of highlighting the intersection of film and religious vocation. James and Eloyce Gist were evangelists who made films to accompany their sermons. St. Clair Bourne’s documentary, also titled Let the Church Say Amen! (1973), amplifies a number of narratives presented throughout the NMAAHC galleries in exhibitions. For example Power of Place examines ten distinct African American communities, and A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond illustrates the activation of liberation ideology in daily Black life. CAARL’s director Brad Braxton noted during the post-screening discussion of this program that Verdict Not Guilty (1933) illustrates a desire for inclusive religious communities that embrace progressive ideology. We paired these works to contradict the stereotypical depiction of 20th century Black Christianity as either performative, as was the case in King Vidor’s Hallelujah (1929), or inherently conservative, as was the case in the 1944 US government propaganda film The Negro Soldier. The films we screened situated Black spiritual experience within the historical forces and social movements of their time and embrace archetypal characters that can be considered to be social outcasts. The link between the Gists’ and Bourne’s films, I suggest, is an investment in a radical Black theology that seldom penetrated the secular entertainment genres of early African American cinema and was all but erased through dominant-culture-created images of civil rights era respectability politics. These prolific filmmakers, whose work sits between fiction and nonfiction and between art and activism, remain largely outside popular cinematic discourse, and as a result they are relatively unknown to most audiences.

For many people of African descent in America, Christianity has always been radical, and the presence of Africans fundamentally transformed the nature of religious expression in the Americas. For theologian Howard Thurman:

The conventional Christian word is muffled, confused, and vague. Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.

The most common examples of the radical potential of Christianity are evident in the traditions of Black music, from the spirituals used by the enslaved as a tool for communication as people escaped along the underground railroad to the protest songs of the civil rights era. Yet cinema too contained the potential for, if not always the realization of, radical politics on a mass scale. As Thomas Cripps writes, "no other genre, except perhaps the American Western, spoke so directly to the meaning and importance of shared values embraced by its audience" than the race films of early cinema.2 The films of the Gists’ and Bourne upset the power dynamic of cinema and Christianity. Film allows for a form of synchronization in African American storytelling. The desire to speak directly to the shared consciousness of an African American audience, within the context
of their respective eras, usurps the need for translation. It also contributed to its neglect because the core issues in their works weren’t explicitly translated for general audiences. S. Torriano Berry, who reassembled the Gists’ work from fragments at the Library of Congress and began screening the works in 1996, felt the religious subject matter made it difficult to assert their importance as pioneering filmmakers. The program and discussion elicited a number of “call and response” engagements from the audience. Mostly comprised of members of the ecumenical community, this was an interplay between speaker and audience. This is one of the retained Africanisms in Black culture and a hallmark of African American storytelling and church tradition. In the context that they were exhibited at NMAAHC, much of the intended interplay between filmmaker and viewer remained intact.

In preparation for our collaboration, we mined the canon of African American works that explicitly intersected with African American religious experiences depicting the organized, communal practice of faith. Rather than only relying on documentary films about African Americans and religion, it was important for us to examine works produced and directed by African Americans. (If we were to consider the impact of African American spirituality on African American secular culture, just about any film that engages African American experience would have been a viable option.) Throughout the African diaspora, religiosity has been a lens for the expression of racial identity. Additionally, Black churches played a vital role in the exhibition of independent Black films, from Oscar Micheaux and the Gists’ to Haile Gerima, providing exhibition venues when movie theaters were inaccessible (or inhospitable) to African American filmmakers and audiences. Verdict Not Guilty, for example, was frequently screened in churches by the NAACP in support of the organization’s efforts to reform the criminal justice system of the 1930s. However, our focus remained specifically on ways that filmmakers were critical of religion because we sought to provide ways of imagining African Americans as both Christian and radical.

In the wake of the civil rights movement and out of the ashes of urban uprisings across the nation, a young St. Clair Bourne found himself, among seminarians, challenging the very ideas of theology for people of African descent in America. Bourne attributes his desire to be a filmmaker to his coming-of-age during the civil rights movement and to his father’s profession as a journalist. Bourne said that he would:

Look at the reality of what was going on and observe what was being represented on television was incorrect. While most of the network documentary units weren’t, say, sympathetic, they at least were interested in telling the story. The problem though was that they were telling it from a different culture. They didn’t understand the people and just got it wrong. I felt that . . . I could tell the story better than the networks could. So I had to learn the tools of documentary filmmaking.

In the same 2006 interview with Black Camera, Bourne explained that it was imperative that, along with many of his fellow documentary filmmakers in the late 1960s, we “identify with and are a part of the subjects we are filming. . . . We spoke out on behalf of them and us at the same time. I call this critical stance the ‘internal voice’ of our documentary filmmaking. Thus, one of the characteristics of my films is to express the internal voice of my subject, whether it is black or otherwise.” Bourne’s commitment to situate viewers within the cultural context of subjects is evident in the opening title cards and early sequences of his Let the Church Say Amen!, which reprises some of the principle tenets of liberation theologian James H. Cone’s writing. They also evoke the critical thinking birthed from the practices of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, both of whom were at the fore of American consciousness and the margins of pervasive African American ideas of respectability that dominated most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a new generation sought to redefine the role of the church in the Black community:
Religion has been one of the basic elements of Black life in the United States and a foundation from which many progressive Black movements have sprung.

In the following film we hope to involve you in the Black religious experience and explore the role of the contemporary Black church.

The film is based on actual events and the characters are not actors but real people.

These lines capture the ethos of Black Liberation Theology (also known as Black Theology) as defined by Cone in his 1969 text *Black Theology and Black Power*:

This work . . . is written with a definite attitude, the attitude of an angry black man, disgusted with the oppression of black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be "objective" about it. Too many people have died, and too many are on the edge of death. Is it not time for theologians to get upset? 

If "theologian" was replaced with "documentarian" perhaps we can access the frame of mind with which St. Clair Bourne approached his documentary work in the 1970s. *Let the Church Say Amen!* is a subjective look at the crossroads young people in the Black Power era were faced with when choosing a vocation and the various places where their ideas of social transformation could take root. Bourne’s life experience aligns with the protagonist here, who is forced to reconcile his identifying as a student, a militant, and a parishioner. Bourne’s film stages the urgent issues of Black identity in a changing America by confronting both a small, rural town and a middle class urban community, exploring their varied articulations of spirituality and ministerial vocation. The systemic challenges that each community faced may have been shaped by white supremacy, but they also extend beyond to negotiations of intra-community aspirations and political differences. For Cone, Christian theology intervenes on these dynamics by creating a space in which Black people can actually see and be seen with complexity and agency. For Cone, the Bible insisted upon approaching social questions from below, through the lens of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, in order to determine how communities can move together from those positions. He believed that the Gospels were instructive in this regard.

In *Amen!* Bourne establishes a typical weekend for the film’s protagonist Hudson “Dusty” Barksdale, first introducing him lighting a cigarette in a classroom at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), a seminary in Atlanta, GA. The lecture he attends calls for "a fourth rhetorical element needed in sermonizing for delivering the word of God to desperately needy men with effective healing power." His opening statement is punctuated by a *mezzo forte* "well" from the students. The idea that one’s vocation has the ability to heal "desperately needy" people appears here as an animating conviction for Barksdale and Bourne both, an idea Bourne spent a career exploring his relationship to.

Further exposition can be gleaned from the choice of the seminary itself. ITC is part of the Atlanta University Center (AUC), the largest consortium of African American higher education institutions at that time, which also included Atlanta University, Morris Brown College, Clark College, Spelman College, and Morehouse College. The presence of an interdenominational seminary was important because all the other institutions were primarily divided based on denomination: Methodists at Clark, African Methodist Episcopalians at Morris Brown, Baptists at Spelman (Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary) and Morehouse (Atlanta Baptist Seminary). The ITC allows for...
intracommunity dialogue, developing a cultural and theological language that diverges from the parochial beliefs aimed primarily at white approval, and more particularly, at preserving white patronage. Students at ITC responded to the immediate needs, secular and religious, of activating the legislative advances of the civil rights movement into material gains for Black people in America.

Bourne and his crew of filmmakers would have likely blended into the student population at ITC. He was thirty years old at the time of the production in 1973, allowing him to move with relative ease and familiarity with the subjects throughout the film. Bourne was not adhering to the constraints of filmmakers who preceded him that documented Black life. The lecturer concludes, “if you ain’t got no pre- position, you ain’t got no sermon neither” and following brief bouts of light-hearted responses, the class disperses with a hymn. This is not the seminary of the African American theologians that preceded them. With large beards, afros, and casual clothing, the men on screen share their thoughts on the role of Christianity in Black communities with the filmmakers over lunch. Later, on a basketball court with friends, Barksdale questions the relevance of his vocational training, trying to relate it to a future career focused on the liberation of oppressed Black people. Bourne wrestled with similar questions and strategies as a filmmaker, claiming that “I try to define the problem that my subject is experiencing and suggest a solution in the way the subject tries to resolve the problem. Even if they don’t solve it by the time you’ve finished the film, you’ve exposed the problem and shown how it did or did not work.”

Bourne links further still twinned pursuits that animate religious and documentary commitments. Evoking the spirit of Cone, Barksdale admits that the Black church is an institution with an evolving relevance, but that it remains the most meaningful space to pursue absolute transformation of self and society. Similarly, Cone wrote in *God of the Oppressed* (1975) that:

\[
\text{Indeed our survival and liberation depends upon our recognition of the truth when it is spoken and lived by the people. If we cannot recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth. To know the truth is to appropriate it, for it is not mainly reflection and theory. Truth is divine action entering our lives and creating the human action of liberation.}^8
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For Bourne, Barksdale becomes a proxy through which he negotiates how best to place transformational, if transforming, discourses of truth in the service of social change.

For Dr. Braxton, the film challenges viewers to confront what it means to live a life of calling. In the post-screening discussion, he suggests that,

\[
\text{The film is raising these boundary-tran- scending questions. What's sacred, what's not sacred. For me what's sacred was the marvelous, rather brief, but inti- mate depiction of emerging black love. This couple walking in the park after a day trying to figure out the meaning of their lives as religious people. So the question of what it means to live a life of calling, what it means not just to render one's life's meaning by what feels good to me, by what's convenient to me, but [with] some sense that we have something beyond us that's laying a claim on us.}
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Like William Greaves, Madeline Anderson, and Stan Lathan, and other filmmakers making work for the WNET series *Black Journal* in the 1960s and 1970s, Bourne took formal risks in a deliberate effort to connect with Black audiences and reflect the cultural nuances of African American communities. Bourne describes their collective work as innovative because “editorially we took the position of the Black subjects in the documentaries we made. We tried to capture what they thought and what they did, and very rarely was that done by other filmmakers.” This approach aligns with what folklorist Michelle Lanier termed a “Spirit-centered ethnography,” which is described as "an ideology that intentionally
moves the ethnographer through vulnerability (as defined by Ruth Behar) to a place of reciprocity and service.”

This mode of filmmaking serves a purpose beyond documenting or exhibition: it is an important tool in instigating thought within a community, and propelling and exposing those ideas to audiences outside of the community.

I can imagine St. Clair Bourne struggling with his own calling as a filmmaker during the production of this film. In a 2006 interview, Bourne spoke of his life’s work as “trying to take the form somewhere. Much like African Americans did with music, I’m trying to do with documentary.” Because of how prolific he was, making over forty films in his thirty-six-year career, Bourne occupies an important space between his mentor William Greaves and African American documentarians of his generational cohort. After leaving Black Journal, where he worked with Greaves, he formed his own production company called Chamba in 1971; Let the Church Say Amen! was its first independent feature production.

It’s not a coincidence that that production featured a young man in conflict with his chosen vocation, searching for a new language that adequately represents both the realities of being Black and the radical push he was hungry for. After all, the late 1960s represented a critical moment in Black documentary film, as the Kerner Commission Report was published in 1968. The Commission recommended that the media “integrate Negroes and Negro activities into all aspects of coverage and content,” and recruit more African Americans into broadcasting. In media, as in religion, would African Americans use their own agency to confront and change ideas of Blackness as a way to propel society beyond the racism that dominated the majority of the 20th century? Or would they, as the Kerner commission compelled, simply integrate into an existing broadcasting industry without transforming its structural logics? Echoing Bourne’s own ambivalence about the field in which he worked, Cone, in an interview with Blackside producer Valerie Linson for the PBS series This Far By Faith, stated that he was “within inches of leaving the Christian faith, because that faith as I had received it and learned it no longer explained the world to me satisfactorily.”

How could these fields adequately address the agency of the oppressed in their struggle for justice? These questions still remain.

In the post-screening discussion, Dr. Braxton suggested that:

we often have this myth of progress, but at least in [Let the Church Say Amen!] it's harkening back to that particular moment of: what does it mean in a counter-public to have multiple generations engaging in the dance of sharing power and learning how to talk with one another? . . . How [do] traditions relate to one another and generations relate to one another as we try to create counter-publics that are pushing against dominant narratives?

Bourne’s lasting legacy, I suggest, can be located in his commitment to shattering the contemporary myth of progress. Before documentary can communicate information, it must first focus on building spaces, in form and material, in which people feel comfortable congregating. In the final scene of the film, a preacher warns them against “becom(ing) too mystical that we forget about the realities of life.” It’s a lasting message to end the film with, one that those entering the fields of documentary and ministry both would do well to heed.
ENDNOTES

1—The film program at NMAAHC, led by CAAMA, offers an opportunity to enhance a film screening by connecting works to historic and cultural objects in the museum’s collection. Objects are animated in new ways through their relationship to cinematic works. Programs are developed in relationship to the permanent exhibitions, items for the museum’s collection are printed in the program notes, and curators lend their expertise to the program discussions. This is important because of the dearth of African American history taught in most public schools.

2—Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 42.


7—Ibid.


Like the expression itself, St. Clair Bourne’s first independent film, *Let the Church Say Amen!* (1973) lives somewhere between sacred invitation and political charge.

For the documentary’s central and migratory seminarian in training, Hudson “Dusty” Barksdale, the call to discern his ministerial path—from Atlanta to rural Mississippi to Chicago—requires much demographic and denominational grappling. And for the viewing congregants gathered either in the 1970s or now, the film asks not for a unanimous response, but it insists with an MLK-like urgency that Black people across faith traditions, across class and regional backgrounds listen to one another and co-creatively come to terms with the most productive path forward, away from chaos and toward community.

“He was always about community,” Sam Pollard repeated several times about “Saint” in our recent public conversation following an NYU screening of *Let the Church Say Amen!* Pollard, who deems Bourne one of the three most important people for his own filmmaking career, offers: “as a filmmaker of color, (Bourne) kept the community energized and kept us focused on our mission to tell our stories.”

Born in Harlem, St. Clair Bourne’s four-decade career began as an associate producer under William Greaves on the groundbreaking public affairs television series, *Black Journal* (1968–1977). His productions included documentaries on legendary African American figures such as Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, Paul Robeson, and Amiri Baraka. Yet, to hear it from those who knew Bourne, a key aspect of his own legend was his commitment to mentoring young filmmakers, offering personal guidance as well as institutional support through his founding of the Black Association of Documentary filmmakers (originally boasting branches on both coasts, BADWest is still thriving in Los Angeles).¹ The motivation and inspiration Bourne offered generations of filmmakers was, to crib from the title of his Baraka documentary, in motion throughout this conversation, energizing the panelists and the audience gathered to reflect on Black independent filmmaking and Black theology in ways not often encountered in academic settings.
The experiential testimonies on Bourne that were offered by Pollard were matched by the grounding presence of Reverend Alisha Gordon of The Riverside Church and Jon-Sesrie Goff, who offers ways to bridge the historical and theological questions Let the Church Say Amen! provokes.

—Josslyn Luckett

This antiphonal party was made possible by Faye Ginsburg, Pegi Vail, and the Center for Media, Culture, and Religion at New York University, the NYU Department of Cinema Studies, Icarus Films, and Joshua Edwards who transcribed this conversation.

JOSLYN LUCKETT

The first thing I think about when I watch this film made in 1973 is this East Coast versus West Coast of Black independents. We have this group at UCLA that’s also coming up in this late ’60s early ’70s moment. And I see both camps taking on similar issues of Black spirituality in relation to Black nationalism and where those two threads come together. We have films like As Above, So Below by Larry Clark, which is within the same year, in 1973. And it’s on the surface a film about a group of Black insurgents, but there’s a really important scene in the Black church in that film. And one of the most evangelical, hand-waving people ends up being one of the insurgents later in the film.

It’s interesting to see that both of these groups of independents are grappling with these issues. But also of course in Black theology, James Cone is writing Spirituals and the Blues (1972), and he is also grappling with this sacred and secular piece and how it impacts our lives in this moment, right after the assassinations and when people are dealing with so much loss.

We have all the Black women writers coming up and talking about spirituality; Alice Walker, all those folks. So, it’s just such a fraught and amazing time. And Bourne’s Amen!, which on the surface feels like, “Wow, what was he doing?,” in that it seems kind of different from other stuff that he did, really is of a piece with so much going on culturally, spiritually, politically at that moment. That was my first thought, to bring some context.

But I would love to know from each of you . . . I would love to know from you, Sam, since you knew him and worked with him, do you have memories of what this film meant to him?

SAM POLLARD

I knew Saint from 1980. I knew about this film. I find this film in keeping with Saint’s philosophy, both politically and socially. You know, he was always challenged to look at the community, the Black community, in so many different ways. We had done The Black and the Green where he went with some African Americans to Northern Ireland. Saint’s always challenging the perspective. He is looking at this young man who is going through theological seminary and trying to understand how to grapple with religion at the same time he’s looking at the notion of the old versus the new, the young man in the church, the young man challenging the older members of the congregation.

For me, this is in keeping with Saint’s approach to filmmaking. He never had just one single perspective. It was very complex perspectives. When you talk about the spirituality, it reminds me of the first film I worked on, as an assistant editor for Bill Gunn, which was dealing with the same thing in another level, you know, spirituality and sensuality at the same time. That was in ’72. So, Amen! was in that same milieu. So Bill Gunn and Larry Clark and Charles Burnett, they are all in that same milieu where they never had one sort of defined perspective. It was always very complex and layered and that’s what I see when I see this film.

JON-SESRIE GOFF

I’m incredibly biased. (laughter)

I’m looking at the film from the perspective of the present. I find considerable overlap between theology and independent documentary filmmaking. And I think that in the same way that Black liberation theology demanded that Christianity speak to people living in the margins, speak to oppressed people, speak to Black people, I think that we are now in 2019, after the pendulum has swung towards
prosperity in independent filmmaking that we need to demand that our independent and nonfiction films speak to people on the margins of life who are often the subject of the works.

In this work, I see something amazing colliding. I see this impetus and from my research, St. Clair Bourne speaks about there not being any sort of lineage of Black-born documentary that he had to be beholden to. So everyone of this era for me is breaking new ground. There’s not as many ties, whereas within theology we see a conflict around: “what does it mean if your ultimate purpose is liberation of people?”

What does that mean in your work despite what industry you may find yourself in? Often when I watch this film, I replace the calling to ministry with filmmaking. Or whatever other space I may find myself in. And really questioning, how in this moment can I use these tools to not become so mystical and detached, but to really speak to people, to be amongst people? And that’s the way this film is shot. I feel like it’s a very interactive experience, which by the way is the buzzword for grant applications now. So make sure films are interactive. It’s something that can’t be disingenuous. It has to emanate from a space that serves someone else.

JL
Alisha, you might want to say something about that. I’m so fascinated with this film in terms of our protagonist’s call to ministry, his pastoral encounters, I think both in the South and the North, how did that strike you watching it?

REVEREND ALISHA GORDON
It is really interesting to watch as a clergyperson. Barksdale says in the film, "ministry is not what I thought it was." (laughter)

"It’s not as utopian," and we are, like, light bulb!

But I think that was what is important about Barksdale’s narrative. In the film we see him going from this place in Atlanta (I’m an Atlanta native), and going to Mississippi, going to Chicago, and it was the exposure to different theologies, even different sounds, different spaces that helped him better understand what was happening, and which ultimately helped him better understand how Black people were connecting to larger movements, or the absence thereof.

I thought it was really interesting that the Pastor who picked him up in Mississippi said something like “we have always been Black.” That’s a different context than when you talk about people who have been Black and they are fighting for—they have a constant civil presence in their day-to-day lives. So, I really took to him as a character as someone who is clergy, someone who has been in seminary, someone who has heard a call and then you get exposed to all the things that it means to answer that call and then begin to question.

And not questioning to move away from, but a question that actually draws us closer. It makes us more refined in thinking about what we are doing as people of faith, whatever that means for you.

JL
Jon, can you talk a little bit more about why you suddenly became so drawn to this film?

J-S G
I became drawn to this film in my previous job at the Smithsonian Museum for African American History and Culture. I was the film specialist, and I worked in the curatorial department. This was one of the films in our collection. Although there weren’t that many moving image works, I equated myself with the 300 or so titles we had. This one stuck out because my father is a minister who went to seminary around this era. He actually went to undergrad in the Atlanta University Center in the late ‘60s. So when I watched it, I’m like, “was that you, Dad?”

I’m always challenging the status quo in terms of Black faith and even with my film that I have been in production on for the last five years, After Sherman, there’s continuous questions around, “is Christianity speaking to the modern needs of Black and oppressed people?” And “is participation within the institutional constructs of religion sort of passé and not radical?”

AG
That’s good. That’s good. (laughter)
JL
That’s beautiful.

SP
Alisha might know the answer to that.

AG
No, that’s a really good point. And I think he is wrestling with that, because there’s this conversation when they are at lunch—how do you reconcile being a marginalized person, a person who is experiencing oppression, and who is deeply engaged in a Christian faith which is filtered through this white lens, talking about what it means to be part of this white religion?

A marginalized person who is oppressed on every side, who is engaged in a Christian faith which has been interpreted to oppress you further, and engaged in an institution that by name is a Black institution, should be about liberation of people and often is. But in order for you to thrive in the institution, you have to subscribe to white ideals.

So there’s this whole thing you have to reconcile as a person of faith, as a Black person. I think that is conveyed really well in the film. I think what Jon is getting at about the modern understanding of the Christian church that proclaims to be liberatory—how can you do that and live into capitalistic ideas? You see this play out with the pastor in Chicago in the film. He wants to feed the hungry, and do all the stuff. But he doesn’t have the capital or resources.

Our members . . . this model of membership-driven giving is responsible for ensuring that the church has what it needs to do its job. But our members are oppressed, marginalized people who can’t find work, who are rubbing two nickels together to make ends meet. So how do we reconcile those things? I don’t necessarily . . . well, I have some answers. But I think the most important thing is we actually lift those questions up and wrestle with them.

JL
Jon, can you do some exegesis on the incredible scene that transitions from the club into the church?

J-S G
I think it’s become so common now that we don’t even recognize that juxtaposition as being something radical, and hearing them grapple with Barksdale’s presence in the nightclub as a man of faith in the subsequent scene.

For me what’s exciting, going back to St. Clair Bourne not being beholden to a particular filmmaking legacy, is that within the opening scene Bourne is already breaking all the rules. He breaks that 360-degree rule out of the gate to give a full view of the space. How that makes you feel as a viewer is important. Someone talks about this as Black storytelling not using the same Anglo or European language of cinema, because it’s not the language of the people you are trying to connect to. I think that in many ways, he’s honoring traditionally Black or African styles of storytelling out the gate. Even in the music and some of the tonal qualities of it with the Mississippi group, I think those things are really important. You even hear it in the high church in Chicago when they are trying to emulate the more Episcopalian performance of singing, and yet you can still hear the blues. I think even Bourne’s selection of music is so on point throughout the film. That’s what’s in the frame for me.

JL
Do you have questions for each other?

J-S G
I have a quote from Sam.

It’s from Bourne’s obituary in the Los Angeles Times, where Sam says that "[St. Clair Bourne] re-energized and refocused what my mission should be as a filmmaker to document the African American experience and make people aware that it’s an important part of the American experience that can’t be denied." Those are your words.

I am just curious in what ways Bourne has energized your career and your practice?

SP
I think it goes back to what you were saying. When I think of Saint, I think of him being a
trailblazer in terms of shaping how films can be made from the African-American perspective. And I would put into that same category Bill Greaves. Where, again, these are filmmakers who are saying “we are going to challenge the perspective of how you see us and we are going to layer it.”

When I was first introduced to Saint in 1980, I had been in the business seven, eight years and I had basically thought that as a person of color, I should not have that apply to my filmmaking. I should negate that and if I were asked “do I want to be a Black filmmaker or a just a filmmaker?,” I would respond that I just wanted to be a filmmaker or an editor at the time.

When I met Saint, we were working on Big City Blues (1986), and we would have these long conversations about responsibility as persons of color and as African-American filmmakers to our communities. I’m sitting there editing this footage with all these blues musicians like Billy Branch, and I started to understand that my agenda was the same agenda that Saint had. Every film I touched from that point on had to be about our experience and figuring out a way to articulate it in a similar way that Saint was trying to do.

He became a major personal and professional role model for me as a filmmaker in his helping me understand that. It’s interesting what Jon was saying about that 360-degree shot that Saint does in Amen!. That’s what he was doing all the time with his films. Saint was always grappling with and breaking down these norms of what filmmaking should be. As an independent filmmaker, understanding the struggles to make independent films, the struggle to finance films, he was always dealing with that, but he was always dealing with how to always find the next layer and the shaping and telling of stories.

I worked on Black And Green and Big City Blues. Paul Robeson, which I didn’t work on . . . even his film In Motion: Amiri Baraka, that to me was a breathtaking film and looking at a man who was very complex, a phenomenal poet, but also had levels of contradiction. Saint was always dealing with that in his material. He’s the pinnacle for me in terms of what I always aspire to, and what I still aspire to as a filmmaker.

J-S G
I took this statement by James Cone and injected filmmaking into his theology statement. Cone says in the preamble of Black Theology and Black Power that “this work is written with a definite attitude. The attitude of an angry Black man disgusted with the oppression of Black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be objective about it. Too many people have died and too many people are on the edge of death. Is it not time for (filmmakers or) theologians to get upset?”

I think that’s something that I’m constantly grappling with, and that my colleagues are grappling with. It’s this desire to exist within the academy, to exist within this filmmaking industry, and then to maintain a level of professionalism that requires you to be objective around suffering. Often the suffering of, you know, your people, your family, your community. I don’t think that’s fair. I think that we know in this day and age 100-plus years after the invention of the camera that every film is subjective. The second you point your camera, all objectivity is out the door. So why can’t young Black filmmakers be upset in their practice? Beyond the funding issues, why can’t you just be upset about the content that you are forced to engage with? I think that using the very powerful tool of the camera that other people have manipulated for their own means, I think we can continue to be radical as St. Clair Bourne was and using it as a tool of empowerment and liberation.

JL
That’s beautiful. Like all of you, Bourne was a filmmaker, a film educator, a mentor, you know, with his Chamba Notes, I guess there was the BADEast and the BADWest. All of these organizations, the curating and community-gathering that they did, it’s so multidimensional. It isn’t just about the filmmaking, but all of that gathering work is what I think he seemed to be about.

SP
Well, he was always about the community. That was the part of his mantra. As you were saying, he had Chamba Notes, he started BADEast,
BADWest. He was always about community. He wanted to make sure as a filmmaker of color, he kept the community energized and kept us focused on our mission to tell our stories. He was always about that. Even when he was struggling, and sometimes Saint was in the ’90s—he was struggling to get films made and get funding, but he was always, always committed to the mission. Always. Always.

AUDIENCE
I find the connection between the filmmaker and the theology such a beautiful metaphor. I find that as a filmmaker, I have to stop and ask myself questions about how I feel about filmmaking and what I’m trying to show. And it took me years of asking myself questions whether I was thinking like they wanted me to think and create, or whether I was thinking the way I wanted to be angry.

SP
The only thing I would say is that for young people who are growing up in this industry, they sometimes struggle to find their voice. And sometimes your unique voice is angry, and being able to express that takes some time. Now some people find that immediately. Saint . . . Saint had that. He had that when he was at Columbia. He was at Georgetown, when he was in the Peace Corps. Saint had that because he grew up in an environment where that was part of what he was learning in terms of his sense of self. For me, it took until I was 30 to start to grapple with that and get that, because I had bought into the notion of the American melting pot, which Saint had rejected. It took me until I met Saint to realize that I needed to reject that, too. Some filmmakers have it immediately and sometimes you have to grapple with it and find it.

AG
Just to theologize this a bit, I think you are absolutely right. There is the connection between the two words filmmaker and theologian. But I think it’s important for exactly what is being said about the shared experience. Using our experience—theologians talk about this all the time. Experience is often the first thing that we have to connect to God and connect to our faith. To not do that, to resist using our experience is actually inflicting violence on ourselves and to the people who are waiting to hear our stories. How do we think about how our own personal faith formations or even our moral formations when we are often told we have to parse ourselves apart? I think good filmmaking and good theology causes that stuff to meld back together.

AUDIENCE
I’m just so impressed with the camerawork. It’s so intimate and it is hard to believe it’s nearly fifty years old. It’s just so fresh and you feel like people are just so comfortable. The intimacy and the engagement really comes through the camerawork, and also the attention to sound between the cadences of the prayers and the music and conversation.

SP
I’ll say this. I know all the people who shot that stuff. Doug Harris and Leroy Lucas did the camerawork; Lucas and Ron Lovell did the sound. What’s fascinating is Saint had worked with all of them before. And as we all know, filmmaking is a collaborative process. These were very good cameramen. And Ron was a very good sound person. So they were able to be there in the moment and capture it. But the other thing that documentary filmmakers know is that you need to be able to have the people that you are shooting trust you, trust you and believe in you and give you access.

Obviously there was a tremendous amount of trust that developed. I don’t know over how much time. But it was there so they could get intimate, because that’s really good camerawork.

AUDIENCE
People felt free to be in conflict with each other.

SP
They could be themselves and the sound quality is excellent for a film like that, which is something that young filmmakers should learn from. But it’s that kind of thing you need to be able to have your subjects feel comfortable
with you. I don’t know what Saint did, how long he spent with them, but they felt comfortable and gave them the access and the ability to feel like they could be in there. And the people being shot didn’t feel like “Oh my God, there’s a camera there.” You don’t feel that at all which is amazing. Even back then, that’s amazing.

AUDIENCE
Could you elaborate on that for a minute? What was it about his personality? It made me wish I had known him.

SP
Well, he could be very gruff, you know. I’m not sure. Saint could be pretty intense. It might have been the fact that, you know, when you are directing camera operators, when you are shooting documentaries, sometimes you can have two styles. One style can be right over your camera person’s shoulder, and be speaking in their left or right ear telling them how to get the shots, or the second style you can have a little distance from them and let them shoot.

Now, Saint could do it both ways. He could be in your ears and he might have been in their ears telling them how to get coverage. He knew these guys a long time, he understood what they wanted and how to get it. I would have to be on the set to see how it worked. When I was on the set with Saint, I thought that as an interviewer he was very intimidating, which is the opposite of my style. Because sometimes you felt like it wasn’t the person being interviewed. It was Saint saying “I’m the interviewer.” He didn’t act like that in this, so I don’t know.

AUDIENCE
On the films that you worked together on, how much time would he spend beforehand getting to know either the situation or the people or the community?

SP
Well, when he did The Black and the Green, he knew these people really well. When he started shooting that in New York, he was pretty close to all those people before he shot. And they knew Saint well. They felt very comfortable with him. He was sort of like a fly on the wall. They just trusted him.

It was the same when he did blues people in Chicago. They all knew Saint and they felt comfortable with him. But he was a big presence, six feet, five inches. He would come in the room and just take over the room. He would swallow up the room. But he knew how on the film set to sort of dwarf himself and let the subjects do their thing.

J-S G
Do we know who Icarus Films credits? Either way I think it’s great that either Madeline Anderson or Kathleen Collins cut the film. Do you know who actually cut it? Was it both?

SP
Kathleen cut this one.

J-S G
But on Icarus, they credit . . .

SP
Might have been the supervisor, then. Anybody who has seen Losing Ground (1982) knows Kathleen was a phenomenal filmmaker in her own right and you can feel her sensitivity there with the editing. The director/editor relationship is complicated. Saint gave you a lot of room. He gave you the material. He let you edit and then he would come in and he would critique and ask you to make changes. But he never sat over you. None of the films I ever worked with he ever sat over me. So that’s why I enjoyed the experience. I know with Kathleen, he probably didn’t do that because she was a filmmaker herself.

JL
I want to go back for a second to a question about the intimacy. I’m stunned especially in the Mississippi scene at the pastoral walk with that pastor. There’s something that does feel so natural. But we also know that that’s such an intimate conversation between a pastor and a seminary that wouldn’t happen in front of a camera, probably not while wearing a suit.
I sort of challenge that one.

Yeah? With the camera?

Yeah, I shot a lot in Mississippi. And my family is from Mississippi.

So is my family! (laughter)

You are asking the question because you know, Mississippi Black folk are real natural. (laughter)

They are real natural.

They want to discern a call to preaching in front of a camera, on camera? I don’t know.

They are natural. I grew up in churches like that. These people are natural.

Well, I think that the Mississippi pastor answers your question. He says, "we don’t just do church on Sunday." . . . It is who we are, every day of the week we doing church. That’s what I thought about when you guys were talking about this sense of the natural. I think it has something to do with the subject matter, too. If you are a person of faith growing up in Mississippi, then that’s embodied in your blood and DNA, talking about Jesus.

24/7.

That’s why my shirt says "churchy." I do church all the time. That’s part of the genius of the film. Church is a part of who they are. I think it’s a fair pushback to say, “yeah, this guy is discerning his call,” but that moment is so intimate because they live and breathe this church experience.

Okay, I will be pushed. That’s all right.

It’s like if you are a musician and that’s what you speak and you live, you don’t feel uptight. It’s the feeling deep inside.

Thank you. Any last words before we wrap up?

I’ll say this. When Faye [Ginsburg] asked me to do this, there was no way I would say no. I would never say no to talk about anything, or screen anything, about St. Clair Bourne, because there’s three people most important to my film career, and Saint is on that list.

ENDNOTES

1—See https://www.badwest.org/.


It is a hard thing to live haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream . . .  
—W. E. B. DuBois

I am ready for the phantom, I welcome it.  
—John Akomfrah

In 2012, British filmmaker John Akomfrah’s first solo exhibition *Hauntologies* opened at the Carroll/Fletcher gallery in London. It featured five installations: *Allegories of Mourning*, *Psyche*, *Peripeteia*, *At the Graveside of Tarkovsky*, and *The Call of Mist (Redux)* (all 2012). Akomfrah has long been interested in how documentary forms can speak simultaneously from multiple temporalities. Yet, *Hauntologies* marked a new stage in Akomfrah’s career in which his work is now increasingly seen in galleries and museums. As I turn to Akomfrah’s films and their relationships to the art spaces in which they circulate, it is this “haunting” motif I wish to explore. Explaining the title of his London exhibition, Akomfrah elaborated on a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre. Borrowing Jacques Derrida’s idea of hauntology from *Specters of Marx*, he feels “gripped by the idea of ghosting, of how the other invades and structures the self.”

For Akomfrah, this haunting “alludes to questions of mourning and memory, to subjectivity as a scene of being possessed by the past and what he [Derrida] also called spectrality: the way in which the past haunts the present.”

*Hauntologies*, like many of Akomfrah’s recent installations, engages the ephemeral traces of ghostlike memories, politically latent histories, and meditations on death. This essay investigates Akomfrah’s need to reinvent the documentary format at particular historical conjunctures, in the context of 1980s British public television and again with his entrance into the gallery worlds of contemporary video installation. I argue that conversations between artists and the spaces in which they exhibit encourage viewers to consider the presence of Black subjects (with “Black” here representing an African diasporic designation) in context. The essay culminates in an analysis of his documentary/installation, *Precarity* (2017).
HAUNTOLOGIES: IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

For many diasporic Black filmmakers caught between what has been lost and the future that modern progress had promised but has never delivered, documentary reflections often look backward, and the past follows as a ghosting in the present, a reappearance of that past. Akomfrah’s 2017 work Precarity offers a meditation on the figure of Buddy Bolden, a cornet player often credited as one of the inventors of jazz, yet left little material trace in sound or image. Precarity is explicit in its references to African American ghost figures moving through time with the impeccable choices of period costumes, jazz, New Orleans’ rural and industrial architecture (including the reoccurring, stylistically exquisite shot of Bolden’s dilapidated home), and the city’s historical and contemporary landscapes. Yet, while the film grounds itself in the textures of New Orleans, the installation remains an African diasporic story relayed by a Ghanaian Brit.

Beginning with his work in the mid-1980s as a founding member of the London-based Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), Akomfrah’s moving image essays have resisted fixed aesthetic strategies or default modes of exhibition, demonstrating a flexibility of form and format that is shared by the work of his contemporaries Salem Mekuria and Isaac Julien. Each of their works, and their complementary stylistic formats, offer a challenge to think more dynamically about how one recognizes the erasure of diasporic Black history and the range of its reference points, expanding conventional notions of documentary practices outside of technologies of mechanical reproduction. In the context of these artists’ work, I take the following as a given: a document is the transference of a reality to its reproduction, while a documentary is the interpretation of past subjects and documents. For Mekuria, an Ethiopian-born documentarian, the range of formal reference points that documentaries work through is culturally situated. She describes her iconographic interventions as “undoubtedly informed by the fact that painting in triptych is a traditional Ethiopian art form to which I have had much exposure.” For each of these documentary artists, the question lingers: what marks their practice of representing the complex subject of Black lives as a project of documentary, particularly when the reproductions they produce are based on realities that are nowhere to be found?

It is in this context that documentary filmmakers involved with something like the BAFC have often felt compelled to break from the burden of representing the African diaspora as a whole by making self-reflexive, culturally specific, or “relevant” historical connections with their contemporary Black constituency. For artists like John Akomfrah, who choose to work both inside and outside institutional venues such as galleries, television, and theaters, moving between these venues is a strategic, albeit fraught, means to confront history’s erasures of Black subjectivities, and bridge the concept of “hauntology” with documenting Black presence in such spaces. This lack of presence is knotty. Evoking Derrida’s pun on “ontology,” “hauntology” defies the nostalgic “untimely” presentness of ontology, the concept of being. As Derrida puts it:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.

Akomfrah’s work has a history of creating spaces for specters and soothsayers with particularly close relationships between biographies and ghosts. Shifting between documenting lived experience and death (symbolized by the past), a range of filmmakers from Renée Green and Sammy Baloji to Isaac Julien, have produced a body of documentary-infused installations that seem like intrusions. Galleries and especially museums (a specifically haunted physical space I explore later) portray their transitory images of Black lives as undetermined, unreliable, unfinished (or even not properly started), or, put differently, futuristic.
Akomfrah’s portraits of Black subjectivity suggest that a “legacy” is frequently dependent on a present that projects the future, inflating expectations from existing material and ideological conditions. Describing his intention to focus on the historical figure of jazz musician Buddy Bolden, Akomfrah relays that Precarity is “an attempt to try and make sense of what constitutes a legend.”⁹ The question of what is instructive here. The late critic Mark Fisher, who also described BAFC’s interests in terms of hauntology, laid out two hauntological paths in which intangible pasts seep into the present. The first being “that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat,’ a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern).” Fisher cites Handsworth Songs (1986) and The Nine Muses (2010) as examples of a past structure lingering in the present through archival footage and audio samples. Fisher identifies the other hauntological path as “that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).”¹⁰ In an essay titled “On The Borderline” published by the photographic Journal TEN.8, Akomfrah imagines that

In the future there will be a Black photographic exhibition on the theme of displacement. It will be about a particular body [later identified as “The Black body”] burdened by an excess of signs; a body literally framed as a figure of torment and bliss, of dangerous knowing and celebrations.¹¹

This imaginary exhibition, for Akomfrah, would be conceived to evoke the legacy of past exclusions. Haunted by the Middle Passage and colonization, representations of past Black life are, almost by definition, marked by histories of trauma. Under the sign of such histories, the familiar cliché that you can’t understand the present without knowledge of the past becomes increasingly fraught. Still, this tension has animated Akomfrah’s work from the start.

Founded in Britain in 1982 (the official associations ending in 1998), the Black Audio Film Collective’s multimedia artists—Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George, Claire Joseph, and (from 1985 onwards) David Lawson—assembled projects that interrogate the conditions of and for Black life and balance the collective accumulation of trauma with the differentiation of diverse, lived experiences that gives shape to how individuals relate to a collective history. From the early politically and contextually responsive audio-visual documentary experiments that they described as the “Slide-Tape-Text”—performances such as Expeditions One: Signs of Empire (1982-84) and Seven Songs for Malcolm X (1993)—the collective recognized that from the perspective of a displaced subject, the question of “Who am I?” is only marginally different from “Who was I and why am I here?” (a second or a decade ago). To engage these questions, and to register the gap between them, the collective turned to the essay form of filmmaking, working through “aesthetic clarifications” that reimagined “facts” as narrative forms of exposition in reflexive modes of address.¹² BAFC’s approach to reflection is not just piling figures upon figures, and facts upon facts, but reflecting in half-light and avoiding detached “first-person” uses of expression to tackle complex issues as mere shadows. For Fisher, this mode of production honored, rather than challenged, a fidelity to the past because it leaves the gaps and losses of historical memory intact, as they were found.

The form of the relationship between present influences and remembrance of the past is key for Akomfrah. In his view, the past’s relation to the present is “spectral, it’s the way that the present is over-determined by a series of absences, which are not necessarily tactile, but they are active, they have agency.”¹³ His interests have both propelled and collided with art institutions that are eager to define their contemporary ethos by opening arenas for documentary artists like the BAFC, and in the process, sought meaningful engagement with documentary conventions through avant-garde institutional critiques. The industrial oppositions between different contexts that museums and galleries who turn to
documentary have sought to embody (particularly as they involve critiques of conventional British television culture) provided Akomfrah and the collective an immediate discursive and material context.

In the 1980s, Britain’s documentary industry surged, challenging the limits BBC and ITV had set on documentary forms and conventions dating back to the 1950s. Even early racially conscious television programs like Ebony (beginning in 1982), produced by the BBC and featuring Black journalist Juliet Alexander, were designed to diversify programming. But there was no such diversification of form, as the show was intended to be made for non-challenging, easy to digest programming. In contrast, Channel 4 was created in 1982 to challenge their restrictive positions by providing broadcast venues for independent production companies and opportunities for regional productions. Collective like BAFC and the Ceddo Film and Video Workshop found homes for their work on Channel 4 as a result of the station’s outreach to increasingly diverse audiences with new, specific issues, including representational demands to address political and personal marginalization in the U.K. For example, BAFC’s experimental, reflexive documentary Handsworth Songs, which engages race riots in London and Birmingham’s Handsworth district, was first broadcast on Channel 4 and stands in sharp contrast to Police, the BBC’s 1982 utterly conventional documentary series about the Thames Valley Police.

But there is something intriguing about BAFC and Akomrah’s vacillation between broadcast documentary forums and their art exhibitions and installations, both of which blur the lines and interrupt the respective idiosyncrasies of the competing frameworks. Their refusal to dichotomize these sites is apparent from early performances like Expeditions One: Signs of Empire to their installations at exhibitions hosted by the Whitechapel Gallery in London beginning in 1983 and Akomfrah’s later solo installations, which included Precarity. Their tracking back and forth does not simply reflect a desire to exhibit their inventions and interventions wherever they please. Rather, as Akomfrah has made clear, being site agnostic made possible the increased circulation of their work to meet rising demand for African diasporic artistic work in general. Akomfrah recalls that “very few of the early single-screen BAFC works stayed in one space, whether I wanted them to or not. That wasn’t a choice we were making. That had a lot to do with the dearth, as well, of ‘black stuff,’ to put it crudely.” For members of BAFC, that fluidity had less to do with site specificity and more to do with the increased mobility it allowed.

The incorporation of specific expectations of documentary practice, including the gathering, re-presenting, and exhibiting of documents, into museum works is a testament to Akomfrah’s agility because it requires more than just a leap of faith. It also requires the ability to master institutional expectations. As a broadcast documentary filmmaker in Britain, Akomfrah had to navigate expectations about what cultural documentary is and what it should do that were established decades earlier. Producer John Grierson and filmmaker Basil Wright’s 1930s and ’40s documentaries on social conditions in the U.K. set certain standards and expectations for progressive non-fiction films. Even as late as Grierson’s 1953 production, the drama/travelogue Man of Africa, one can find an unmistakably exotic and colonial approach to representing Black lives. Tom Rice situates Grierson within the colonial purview in Britain at the time: “John Grierson argued that Man of Africa ‘attempts to enter into the mind and spirit of the negro people as normal beings, subject to the ordinary problems of the condition humaine.’” For Rice, he complicity “encourages its predominantly non-African audience to identify and empathise with the Africans [sic] on screen.” This approach was anathema to Akomfrah, but the early years of Channel 4 allowed enough space to take another route. In contrast, many Black documentarians working in and out of institutionalized art scenes had to navigate a more complex set of responsibilities and expectations to reflect Black life.
Though it may be playing out in a different form, gallery and museum spaces at large have shared public television’s (like the BBC) identity crisis. One of the problems with many gallery spaces is that they are aware of their lack of diversity yet fail to correct for it.

Daniel Trilling, writing about Akomfrah’s exhibition at the British Film Institute’s gallery in London in 2010, critically notes that “unlike in the 1980s, Britain’s diversity is now widely celebrated, to the extent that it has become a brand to be traded on.” The fact that white-identifying administrators and curators, who still dominate the field, recognize this problem and increasingly believe that the mission of galleries is to diversify both the artists whose work they show and the audiences in their spaces is captured in The British Museum’s “Equality and Diversity Policy.” The statement, typical of a wider institutional perspective, states that the museum “is wholly committed to the principles of equality and diversity and the benefits of these both for visitors to the British Museum as well as for those who work there.” Though the statement is rather banal in and of itself, it is telling that it needed to be formulated at all. The easiest path towards this goal of diversity is simply to exhibit a more diverse array of artists, something that has occurred in the US and the UK over the past five years. But that does not solve the issue of broadening audiences. Despite such expressions of altruism, art institutions tend to misunderstand that changing whose work is exhibited doesn’t necessarily change who comes to view it. This troubled framework arises wherever Black experience is prioritized as an aesthetic but not as an active agent of cultural production. Ghostlike, Black subjectivity haunts, in the sense of present absence, in the art institutions whose missions only highlight the specter of the past exclusions without fully addressing the absences surrounding the present.

Tracking the shift in exhibition venues as a way of tracking changes in modes of address only confirms the limits of both broadcast and installation settings to present/reveal Black experience as present/not present. The past, unfortunately, does not always adequately prepare us for the future. Lindiwe Dovey considers how difficult it is to situate the work of politically inclined British filmmakers like Akomfrah and Isaac Julien, a founding member of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, in a contemporary art context. Akomfrah’s videos and Julien’s series of large-scale installations share aspects of formal and political confrontations, especially works including Fantôme Creole (2005), Western Union: Small Boats (2007), and Ten Thousand Waves (2010). Dovey wonders “what are we to make of the fact that they are expressing themselves through the rather esoteric and inaccessible form of installation art?”

Fantôme Créole offers an evocative triptych set in rural landscapes and urban Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso and home of the FESPACO Film Festival, the premier venue for continental and diasporic African cinema. In Fantôme Creole, phantoms lie in the city’s ruins alongside architectural, archival, and choreographed explorations. Western Union: Small Boats elaborates on many of Fantôme Creole’s political and visual concerns, with the use of projected movements and dance to revisit the traumas of migration and meaningful, immersive relationships to water. Ten Thousand Waves’ nine-screen installation is both a strategic, politically grounded statement as well as an experientially fragmented aesthetic challenge. For Dovey, it seems that the sites of exhibition for these thematically connected works overshadow the spatialized modes of elliptical, dialectical, and fragmented telling that those sites make possible. For Julien, multi-channel installations make possible the mobile spectator, a way of engaging works that de-emphasizes a set position from which to watch his videos and a set order in which to do it. He says that:

In works like Fantôme Creole, Western Union: Small Boats, and Ten Thousand Waves, I want to address these issues, through the use of multi-screen projections. This is not about the question of
number of screens—four screens, five screens, and now nine screens in *Ten Thousand Waves*—but about breaking away from the normative habits we have in the exhibition of, and also the viewing of, moving images.²¹

Both Akomfrah and Julien’s meditations on migration extend a confrontation between historical reflection and trauma into the space of viewership. For Dovey, those meditations remain indigestible, though it remains clear if that is a problem or a potential. And if it is a problem, does fault lay with the videomakers, or with the institutions that exhibit their work?

As a form of address to these questions, Akomfrah’s speaks about his imaginary exhibition, *On The Borderline*:

There are things which should not be spoken of lightly and one is that displacement is about empowering. It wants to arm itself with the ability to make tangible that which elided expression in the earlier debates on black representation. And in that sense it is the “worlding” of a particular form of awakening in which the body placed under duress by willingness to construct it anew yields other potentials but in doing so also gives rise to stress. It is through this putting into flight such a monstrous double that will come to recognize the works in displacement. Welcome to the exhibition.²²

The move into gallery spaces may be risky given the perceived politics of elitism that so frequently bracket work exhibited inside them. As Akomfrah explains, “there is a spatial challenge, how one houses a set of questions, how one migrates a practice which has been single-screen based and showed in one particular platform, such as film and television, into the gallery space in its discursivity.”²³ Similarly, Isaac Julien suggests that “the gallery rather than the cinema, has become an important space for interventions that re-view the differing cultural, political and aesthetic perspectives that make up ‘moving image’ culture from around the world.”²⁴

Akomfrah and Julien’s gallery work serves as a bridge between hauntology and the documentation of traumatic histories, particularly slavery. Such trauma, not always visibly present, marks the daily life of African diasporic experiences. But these films should not be seen as a refusal to be truthful so much as an invitation to understand truth through newly expansive cinematic forms. How can gallery installations possibly do such histories justice, to make visible anything outside locations generally perceived as elite (museums have been previously thought of as semi-private spaces, while galleries have prided themselves as being self-contained public spaces)?²⁵ Inside or outside, neither space is likely to definitively reveal trauma. The question Du Bois posed over a century ago, “how does it feel to be a problem,” is in and of itself a documentary issue, a rhetorical question.²⁶ As Elisabeth Loevlie reflects on Toni Morrison’s characterization of trauma in *Beloved*, the dilemma lies in “how to remember what the present cannot bear? How to live on when every moment is caught up in the unspeakable shame, pain and inhumanity of the past?”²⁷

**PRECARITIES—OF MOURNINGS AND MEMORIES**

An attraction to that which cannot be erased or forgotten, romanticized or reconciled returns again and again in Akomfrah’s videos, writing, and interviews. Diasporic ghosts are woven into decolonized subjects who are “two warring ideals in one dark body,” as W. E. B. Du Bois articulated in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In “What Is Hauntology?,” Fisher reads the structure of warring ideals through BAFC’s documentary *Handsworth Songs*, arguing that the film “can be read as a study of hauntology, of the specter of race itself (an effective virtuality if ever there was one), an account of how the traumas of migration (forced and otherwise) play themselves out over generations, but also about the possibilities of rebellion and escape.”²⁸ Fisher could have extended his analysis to the meditations on loss that permeate Akomfrah’s *The Call of the Mist (Redux)*, which was at least in part, a meditation on the death of his mother; At the
Graveside of Tarkovsky; Psyche; The Genome Chronicles (2008, three-channel video installation); and finally Precarity.

Upon entering the three-channel installation space it is the immediate beauty of the imagery and audio in Precarity—the way figures move, the tableaux vivants, the sound of shallow water washing over rocks—that pulls the viewer in. The frame, as a material, compositional, and conceptual question, is one of Akomfrah’s driving aesthetic challenges. As he puts it, “I’m trying to make figures and subjects walk into a frame, and rendering both of them and the frame complex through the process in which they do that.” The installation juxtaposes fragments—images from different perspectives and different frame sizes (long-shots, extreme long-shots, and close-ups), without any explicit narrative justification for their differences. In keeping with Akomfrah’s recurring interest in simultaneously celebrating the epic stature of the image while troubling the boundaries between the screen and the social space outside it, his formal strategy here points to an insistence that viewers extend figures, subjects, and indeed, their precarity, outside the boundaries of the three channels of images.

The barely-there narrative of Precarity takes on epic proportions with a three-channel triptych format recalling one of the Western art tradition’s religious frames (or Mekuria’s culturally specific evocations of Ethiopian Orthodox religious iconography). Precarity, once again, approaches African-American history as an essential diasporic location, with Seven Songs for Malcolm X (1993) and Dr Martin Luther King: Days of Hope (1997), as important precursors. Ostensibly, his film is a biopic of the ethereal New Orleans cornet player Charles “Buddy” Bolden. Bolden was eventually admitted to the State Insane Asylum in Jackson, Louisiana in 1907, and left only one extant photograph of himself. Presented with a triptych format, this figure walks in and out like a ghost, through memories, images, and sounds as they vanish and reappear. Taking on the guise of a time traveling documentarian, Akomfrah sifts through multiple time periods using archival photographs, music, landscape cinematography, and found footage—an archive of shared histories. This film’s reflection through archival material, which haunts the film’s present (the viewer’s here and now), produces an expansive echo. Many of the archival images are re-photographed through flowing water, which reflects and refracts the light across its surface. This recurrent visual trope is evocative of historian Elliott J. Gorn’s writing: “Past, present and future flowed into each other, as ancient biblical acts of redemption offered paradigms for the future.”

Thus, reflecting on the future, the home of historical subjects, ghostlore tells stories from positions of what Claire M. Holdsworth calls “pluralized hauntologies . . . numerous images and sources, as opposed to the singularity of linear narrative and depiction.”

The film is filled with visual evocations of absence, permeated by superimpositions and composited images which feature wandering ghosts and seem to lack diegetic sound. This lack of presence is the essence of Bolden’s legend: jazz performances without audio, movements without sounds, sound without recordings. But, listen closely and the slight sound of a cornet playing emerges in the background. Archival photos of unnamed Black subjects drowning in shallow water is coupled with a washing sound that comes in and out over the course of the film. Nora Alter notes Akomfrah’s “indirect” motivic use of water (especially images of streams and the sea) functioning metaphorically and metonymically: “As a metonym the sea stands prosaically as a vast zone of human movement, a crossroad of migrations between territories. As a metaphor it operates as a reservoir of memory, a place where stories of the past, present and future are suspended and preserved.” The abundance of tracking shots, shifts in lens focus and image size, voiceovers, and various texts that keep biographic stasis at bay underlie Akomfrah’s self-reflexive refusal to fetishize Bolden or the music by providing viewers with immediate access to them. The photos drift beneath the panning camera; unnamed figures from the past, flowers, a top hat, lace, and a cornet rendered silent appear in conjunction with the stills. Everything is background,
historical recreations of lost records. The narrative re-creations are meticulously designed costume dramas and period pieces, exemplified by shots of two turn-of-the-century women who stand silently. Costume dramas “offer this idea, this fiction, that one can have unmediated access to the past,” yet Akomfrah’s frequent use of juxtapositions maintain the sense of distance and loss. The triptych juxtaposes tableaux vivants, locations, scenes, figures, and found footage, simultaneously combining facts and fictionalizations. Factories, sharecroppers, urban ruins, and contemplative close-ups of Bolden act as different signifiers in groups of images than they would alone. These juxtapositions function like a montage of remembering—documentary biopics are by nature narratives of documentation, recovery.

Ironically, the film’s slow methodical movements seem to belie the frenzy associated with New Orleans jazz improvisation. The tracking shots emphasize slow movements, producing a quietness which accentuates the form and intimacy of the film. Compositional symmetries between the triptych images ensure this intimacy remains precarious, as the self-reflexive format creates complex combinations of images that pull the viewer out of moments of identification. The slowness of the figures’ movements also contribute to the tableaux vivants appearance. The actor portraying Bolden moves so slowly and silently that he appears to be standing still. At one point, he is shown from three different angles in each of the three screens, and in each he is situated in different environments. The image on the right shows him looking off frame with an industrial site behind him; the center image places his silhouette in the center, looking out into a colorful, cloud-filled sky; in the left image, he looks off to the left with the Greater New Orleans Bridge as the backdrop. The images, I suggest, are meant to be read as simultaneous, rather than images representing different locations marking different days. Though the backgrounds seem distant, they nevertheless overwhelm the silhouetted figure. The silhouetted center image of a solitary figure facing away from camera offers up a surrogate viewer, thematizing the act of witness. It is a recurring motif for Akomfrah, appearing as well in Digitopia (1998), Mnemosyne (2010), Vertigo Sea (2015), and Purple (2018). It is the placement of this figure in the midst of multiple screens that provides the perspective for the viewer as a witness of the witness, disengaging the more conventional empathetic identification so often found in documentaries that frame cross-cultural representation, and that Salman Rushdie famously criticized Handsworth Songs for eliding three decades prior.

For over a decade, Akomfrah has used the triptych (and diptych) to interrupt recovery by keeping the broken pieces fragmented. These interruptions cut straight to the heart of documentary film practice, reconstructing materials and constructing anew imagined documents to bring his subjects back to life. Combining representations of Bolden from different periods of his life (the rare photograph, Bolden with the bowler hat, and Bolden in the asylum wearing a straitjacket) in the same triptych offers up the image of appearance, reappearance, and disappearance all at once.

The diasporic installations by Akomfrah use reappearance to predict a future that by nature remains unseen, incomplete, and never arrives. Derrida writes:

In general, I try and distinguish between what one calls the Future and “l’avenir” [the ‘to come’]. The future is that which—tomorrow, later, next century—will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l’avenir [to come] which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So, if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is l’avenir in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.34

It is this constantly unpredictable disappearance of present moments (the never arriving
“now”) that makes the remnants of presence (the “something’s still here”) all the more difficult to see. Where is it? Where was it? What will it be? Each are essential questions for documentarians. Akomfrah persists in questioning history’s claim to a past that seemingly erases the present by forgetting the future. With *Precarity*, Akomfrah activates the displacements of the installation space to undo simple stories by heralding the haunting, there/not there, present/reappearing relevance for contemporary Black lives to come to light. If Black subjectivity remains to be seen, the displacement of any ghosts in the image-making machines—those screens that broadcast or project fantasies of black presence—will be obligated to reinterpret how Black life remains a haunted subjectivity. For Akomfrah, the cross-pollinations of cross-platforms and spaces help distinguish the subjectivities of Black life from an undetermined, hauntological “brand to be traded on” called Black subjects. But ghosts never really disappear.

**ENDNOTES**

1—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1989). This is part of his discussion of the early, promising racial developments and dynamics in a utopic Atlanta.


3—Ibid.

4—Ibid.

5—Exemplified by the “Black” in the Black Audio Film Collective.


8—Ibid.

9—See Akomfrah’s interview for the *Precarity* exhibition at the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CCbrGu_AzU.


22—Eshun and Sagar, *Ghosts of Songs*, 199.


24—Gaafar and Schulz, *Technology and Desire*.


29—Eshun and Sagar, *Ghosts of Songs*, 41.


ON THE COLLECTION

IN APPROXIMATELY 1,000 WORDS, WE INVITE YOU TO CONFRONT A WORK OF VISUAL MEDIA (FILM, PHOTOGRAPH, PAINTING, OR OBJECT) IN THE COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE (1950 – PRESENT) AND REFLECT UPON A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE FUTURE THAT THE MAKER(S) OF THAT PIECE ENVISION, HAVE ENVISIONED, OR A FUTURE THAT MIGHT BE IMAGINED THROUGH YOUR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PIECE.
Amid thousands of works of art, artifacts, photographs and elements of material culture archived in the NMAAHC, I became enthralled by a handful of photographs that foreground the potent persistence of Black religious and spiritual life. Drawing from a subset of several dozen vernacular photographs, a central theme that emerges is the power of Black life as a sacred encounter. Through these images, I bear witness to Black bodies in the postures of reflection, quiet, meditation, prayer, worship, and fellowship. These images create space for reading Black life as an encounter with the love and power that moves in and through the individuals who are pictured.

Robert Farris Thompson's groundbreaking book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983), charted "visual and philosophic streams of creativity and imagination." Inspired by Thompson, I use the term "spirit" to imagine Black visual culture as the embodiment of a set of metaphysical qualities, yet my objective is not to produce a superficial aesthetic theory. Instead, I am invested in the affective capacity of these images to transmit to their viewers the spiritual experiences of the people captured in the photographs, particularly when these images are recontextualized by the spaces of museums, galleries, and the cinema.

We need ways to demarcate images that depict Black spiritual experience from the familiar, deformed depictions of Black religious experience which film, television and popular culture have often deployed to mock and misrepresent Black life. Black religious experience has become a meme, a set of visual clichés used for comic relief, which often reduces a vast and complex set of experiences to a series of archetypal figures: the elderly woman "catching the spirit," the church songbird, and the dim-witted preacher, for instance. These figures not only misinterpret Black religious experience, they also fail to capture the profundity of Black spiritual traditions. While Black life is often framed through the lens of religion, these photographs capture bodies that were not simply practicing a religion, but which are tapping into an unseeable presence and power: bodies moving in praise dance, held
captive in the throes of worship, or taken over by an inward peace and contemplation. The bodies in many of these photos communicate both power and humility as inward (and outward) movements of consciousness. Bodily practices that demonstrate a deference to the Divine, such as the bowing of a head, the closing of eyes, or kneeling, which we see in many of these photos, perform more than mere humility. A bowed head can be conjoined with a raised fist (recalling Tommie Smith and John Carlos). Quiet and calm can be acts of refusal, and that kneeling can also signify defiance and intractability. Many of these photos affirm some traditional readings of the body in a religious posture, but they also typify what we might consider a more spiritual kind of power in the broader archive of Black visual embodiment, connecting complicated notions of resistance, freedom, and joy as they capture individual power within a larger context of social liberation.

One photograph in particular encapsulates the metaphysical expression of both pain, ecstasy, and this “inward movement." [fig 9.1] Given the generic title of Carolina Baptist Church and taken by photographer Milton Williams, the photo plummets the viewer into a moment that is familiar to some and perhaps unrecognizable to others. Williams’ photo centers on a Black woman who is taken over by the spirit. Her hand stretched upward, head thrown back, mouth open, she is flanked by women fanning her and others having their own experience. While this woman’s singular experience is powerful, this is also a moment of communal intimacy, a shared encounter and viewers of this photo are given access to this sacred space and a small glimpse into the mysterious inner lives of Black worshipers.

Processes of archiving, displaying, and viewing images that index black spiritual life are sacred and the experiences that they bear witness to deserve a special kind of care and attention. They are photographic evidence of Black triumph over the tribulation, despair, and trauma of the material world. In other words, in the archive of photos of Black spiritual life, we are given access to how bodies experience transfiguration—the mystical movement between human, body, soul, spirit, and the cosmos. As viewers, we can observe the vulnerability of human life, but also sense the boundless power of bodies that are conjoined to unseeable and unnameable sensibilities. In this framework, museums, curators and patrons each participate in creating a more sacred space, function, and relationship to how we experience art and culture.

My articulation of this more sacred function of museum spaces and visual culture runs counter to the norm, as spaces devoted to archiving and displaying artifacts about Black life typically function rather pragmatically. Scholars Melissa Johnson and Keon Pettiway describe the traditional role in which spaces like the Smithsonian have performed, saying:

These institutions were founded to educate Americans and other visitors about Black history, art, and culture. Typically, the stated goal is to project African American culture, with missions ranging from maintaining positive relations in the local community, to attracting regional or U.S.-wide tourists, to serving the Black global diaspora. While the project that Johnson and Pettiway describe remains admirable and significant, I want curators, scholars, and patrons to re-imagine these spaces and Black life in visual culture beyond the boundaries of education, social relations, and tourism to consider other ways that we might be affected by this archive.

Expressions of religious ecstasy in musical performance were seen recently in the long-awaited documentary film Amazing Grace (2019), featuring a legendary performance by Aretha Franklin, gospel icon James Cleveland, and the Southern California Community Choir. It was recorded at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Watts in 1972 and directed by the late Hollywood veteran Sydney Pollack. The film provides a kind of access to the power of worship, music, and the ecstatic performance and interior lives of Black Americans; one which is always haunted by the pain of racial oppression, inequality, violence and terror.
The power of both Williams’ photograph and the images of Franklin and Cleveland onscreen are particularly poignant because they bear the weight or the burden of Black life, while also embodying ethereal transcendence to a place beyond human suffering. As a viewer, I can bear witness to this flight and imagine that it is possible.

Arthur Jafa’s recent akingdoncometh—as—part his 2018 exhibition at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures—also engages this weight and transcendence.

Described by critic Lauren Cramer as “a montage of filmed sermons and gospel songs performed in Black churches from the 1980s to the 2000s,” it features dozens of preachers and performers, including Al Green, T.D. Jakes and singer Le’Andria Johnson. Several of Jafa’s peers and collaborators from the Ummah Chroma Collective (Bradford Young, Terence Nance, Jenn Nkiru, Marc Thomas, and musician Kamasi Washington) joined to create a moving twenty-two minute experimental film called As Told to G/D Thyself (2019), conceived as a visual counterpart to Washington’s 2018 album Heaven and Earth. Through a series of animations and supernatural vignettes, the film stages cosmic, mundane, and transcendent moments of spiritual expression and power, imagining Black life as a future unbound by the weight of racial oppression.

Taken together the photographs of the NMAAHC and several works of contemporary documentary and experimental filmmaking continue to bridge the past and future lives of Black people carrying their agonies, but perhaps more importantly, the transcendent ecstasies, forward.

**ENDNOTES**


fig 9.1
The first time I saw Debbie Allen dance, I was sitting in the living room of my late aunt’s home, outside of Richmond, Virginia, watching *Fame*. Allen played the role of Lydia Grant, the iconic dance instructor at the New York City High School for the Performing Arts. My aunt had the series box set, and I—her awed eleven-year-old niece—was hooked. I can’t recall why we binge-watched the show, but it remains a singular afternoon in my childhood memory. With each episode, Lydia Grant doled out new wisdom and a seemingly impossible choreographic routine unlike any I had ever seen. *Who’s that*, I asked my aunt. *Debbie Allen*, she replied, *she’s a legend*. It was non-negotiable: Debbie Allen, a legend.

I conjured this exchange with my aunt when I encountered Anthony Barboza’s 1977 black-and-white portrait of Allen. The acclaimed dancer/choreographer bends at the waist while holding a large feathered fan. She is wearing a beaded bikini and headpiece, complete with tailfeathers and high heels. Her hair is slicked down in large finger waves. Her smile is radiant as she poses for Barboza in front of a large white backdrop. Words are written on the backdrop, though Allen’s body largely obscures them from view. The spirit of Josephine Baker looms. Allen’s pose and costume hark back to Baker’s grand legacy of dance and fashion as one of the most significant Black performers of the first half of the twentieth century. Baker’s death precedes the image by a mere two years—a reference, I imagine, full of weight for Allen, who is not yet thirty years old. Looking at the photograph causes me to smile almost as widely as Allen.

This is what I have come to realize about Barboza’s images. You cannot just pass them by. They beckon to you. Like Allen, like Baker before her, they radiate.

As a member of the Kamoinge Workshop, Barboza was among a cadre of Black American photographers who intervened in the medium by imaging Black people ceaselessly and creatively. Founded in 1963 in Harlem, the Kamoinge Workshop established itself as the antithesis to a photography ecosystem that was largely white and male and which made little room for the exhibiting of images by
photographers who were not. While the mainstream largely ignored Black photographers or trafficked in narrative tropes about Black people, Kamoinge members—including artists such as founder Louis Draper, Ming Smith, Adger W. Cowans, and Roy DeCarava—wanted to ensure that a complexity and beauty of storytelling surrounded the representation of Black life. This meant imaging Black folks in their own communities—in the U.S. and at times abroad—resisting the sensational, and insisting that the resulting photographs exist within the framework of the emerging field of fine art photography. They created narratives about the “beauty of everyday Blackness,” as Ashawnta Jackson tells us in her 2018 essay on the collective.² Moreover, the collective became a vital space for mentorship, critique, and exhibition-making in the wake of the US civil rights movement and subsequent Black radical movements. Barboza undoubtedly, like many of his comrades, understood deeply the enduring impact of these practices.

Barboza’s portrait of Allen is part of a series of artist portraits, made throughout the 1970s, entitled Black Borders (though it should be noted that he did not exclusively work as a portraitist) that includes Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, and Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela. Through them, we trace diasporic lineages, grounded in myriad forms of cultural production. What remains enchanting to me about this gesture of posterity is not just its technical mastery but the way it envisions a future. I love the way a single photograph becomes a record of time’s magnanimity. It’s almost as if Barboza knew that we would be here, learning from them still. Not just their words or compositions, but from their smiles, their joy.

At its best, portraiture is an intimate process, an act of care. And here is Allen, not yet in her prime, a few short years after graduating from Howard University, having just landed a role on the short-lived NBC show 3 Girls 3, all while slowly becoming part of the canon of Black Dance herself. Baker, Katherine Dunham, Carmen De Lavallade. The list could go on. Barboza sees this, and Allen, smiling, is sure of what awaits her.

ENDNOTES

1—Debbie Allen - dancer (Anthony Barboza, 1977) can be seen as part of the media-rich version of this essay available at http://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/03/10.

At the end of the 89th Academy Awards ceremony on February 26, 2017, Bonnie and Clyde nearly robbed *Moonlight* of its Oscar for Best Picture. When Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty opened the envelope and called out *La La Land*, it was a televised blunder that signaled to some Hollywood’s racialized anxieties writ large. Although the flummoxed pair were not to blame—and the mistake was corrected dramatically by one of the producers of Damien Chazelle’s musical—the moment felt like a rebuke to the evening’s wave of Black nominees and winners. Among them: Viola Davis for *Fences*; Mahershala Ali for *Moonlight*; and Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney for the *Moonlight* screenplay.

The mix-up also shifted focus away from one of the more intriguing facts of the evening. In 2016, four of the five feature documentaries nominated were made by Black filmmakers. As the National Museum of African American History and Culture expands its collection, these works will help shape the museum’s use of documentary to underpin historical subjects like James Baldwin. As well, these four nominees give additional spin to Wilbert Rideau’s “Friends of Black Oscar Nominees Award” (included in the NMAAHC collection), given to the incarcerated prison journalist, Wilbert Rideau, to acknowledge his integral role in the 1998 Academy Awards Best Documentary Feature nominee, *The Farm: Angola USA*.

In order of their theatrical release into theaters, they were: Ezra Edelman’s *O.J.: Made in America*, an exhaustive and nuanced look at the journey of Orenthal James Simpson from an incandescent athlete in San Francisco’s Potrero neighborhood housing project to prime suspect in the murder of wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Brown to an inmate in a Nevada penitentiary; Roger Ross Williams’ *Life, Animated*, about a young man whose autistic silence was pierced by Disney animated films; Ava DuVernay’s *13th*, which argues boldly but not without wrinkles that one sentence in the 13th Amendment not only helped support Jim Crow laws but also lead to the ongoing mass incarceration of Blacks; and Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro*. In his elegiac gem, the Haitian-born director utilizes letters,
newsreel images, as well as feature film clips as a tribute to Baldwin’s searing intellect but also as a way to honor a project the writer never completed: a book about his friends Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I want these three lives to bang against and reveal each other, as in truth they did,” Samuel L. Jackson says in a transfixing voice-over, reciting a letter Baldwin wrote his agent in 1979.

More than the YouTube video of the ceremony’s gaffe, this cohort of documentaries will offer cinephiles and scholars reasons to return to that Oscar year in the coming decades. Not only because of the historic number of Black nominees and their stylistic variety but because of the subject matter and execution of these films. Three of them link questions of communal trauma to ongoing abuse and insult, especially by the police. 13th and I Am Not Your Negro reference protests around the police killings of unarmed men and women of color. After introducing Baldwin in black-and-white, Peck cuts to grainy, nighttime video of Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of Michael Brown. In a vitally sensitive move by DuVernay, cell phone video of the deaths of Oscar Grant and Eric Garner appear with captions stating that each man’s family granted the filmmaker permission to use their loved one’s final moments.

Each filmmaker employs unique directorial gestures. DuVernay returns to the word criminal as a graphic element to emphasize the theme of the criminalizing of Blackness. And she introduces a compelling roster of experts, some who weren’t especially well known before the film’s appearance on Netflix. Chock-full of facts but also interpretations, DuVernay’s film tries—at times too hard—to be a unified field theory of everything.

With its potent juxtapositions, Peck’s film is a work of vigorous and visual elegance that complements Baldwin’s rhetorical force and flourishes. (It’s hard not to get a kick out of seeing talk show host Dick Cavett—one of the best—looking out of his depth talking race with Baldwin.) Even so, Peck’s choices have left him rightly open to criticisms about marginalizing Baldwin’s homosexuality in order to bolster his own views on Black masculinity. One gets the sense that Baldwin’s culturally savvy activism resonated, too, with Peck’s own work as Haiti’s minister of culture (from 1996 to 1997).

But it’s the moments of overlap, the way these films share images that underscore that each is reckoning with our current moment—one characterized by Black Lives Matter activism but also influenced by a storehouse of vexing images from Hollywood and the nightly news. It may not be a surprise, but it is damning and telling that DuVernay and Peck use clips from the film that birthed the movie industry: D.W. Griffith’s ode to white supremacy The Birth of a Nation. That deserves its own essay.

Clocking in at nearly eight hours, O.J.: Made in America, produced by ESPN, won 2016’s Oscar. On the heels of that triumph, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences changed the rules so that multi-part and limited series docs—despite a theatrical release—would no longer be eligible for consideration.

It’s too cynical to imagine that Academy voters went for the documentary because the company town—its glamour, its violence—was the star. Edelman treats Los Angeles as an actual place with a history of beckoning but also marginalizing Black folk. The case he builds around police violence and civic repression and its relationship to the response to O.J.’s acquittal is impressive. The evidence of the violent devolution of O.J. and Nicole Brown Simpson’s marriage is methodical and compassionate.

Still, what remains vivid is the story of the Los Angeles Police Department’s decades-long disregard for Black citizens, captured perhaps most memorably in footage of the utter decimation of an apartment at the corner of 39th and Dalton Avenue in 1988, during a drug raid by the cops. The cumulative effect of LAPD abuse and overreach is part of the reason O.J. was allowed back into the fold of the Black community during the murder trial.

For film folk of gravitas, the Oscars are a hinky measure of the art. The best designation has proven vulnerable to time, to the
tango of art and commerce—not to mention the come-hither campaigning of studios and distributors. Still the awards (and that bedeviled televised event) continue to be a telling reference point. The Academy Award provides a way to read the many moods of Hollywood—how it sees itself, how it wants the world to see it—and often of the nation.

The nominations that year came after two years of the hashtag activism of #oscarsohwite and on the heels of the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States. As a then New York City real estate magnate, Trump makes an appearance in 13th calling for the death penalty for the five young men—later exonerated—accused of the rape of a jogger in Central Park.

Given the hazardous terrain that 13th, I Am Not Your Negro, and O.J.: Made in America traverse, it’s tempting to treat Life, Animated as an outlier. To be reductive: It features a well-to-do, white family navigating their son’s demanding condition. If there is any racially essentialist point to be made about Williams’ place amid his fellow nominees, it might hinge on notions of empathy and how growing up Black in the U.S. can build an exquisite sensitivity to being outside the norms.

One of the ways filmmakers and filmgoers can track whether a watershed moment is an authentic turning point is to keep track of the progress of the filmmakers. Are they working? Are they continuing to tell stories? DuVernay—a prolific and disciplined filmmaker—has seen three projects come to screens big and small: the TV series Queen Sugar; Disney’s A Wrinkle in Time; and When They See Us, Netflix’s rending drama about the so-called Central Park Five. In April, Williams’ documentary Apollo—about the storied Harlem theater—opened the Tribeca Film Festival. Peck followed I Am Not Your Negro with a drama, The Young Karl Marx. In 2018, Edelman inked a deal to direct a biopic about baseball player and humanitarian Roberto Clemente.

O.J.: Made in America, 13th, and I Am Not Your Negro will continue to doggedly offer context, as if insisting, “this is how we got here, America.” Black filmmakers are especially deft at measuring the waves of history and how we as a nation navigate them. They have seized—or created—opportunities to ask questions of us all.

For decades to come, the 2016 nominees will stand as evidence of the obvious: there isn’t—and should never be—only one representative of Black vision at work in the arts. Watched separately, each of the 2016 nominees has plenty to offer by way of aesthetic choices and craft.

Watched in concert—to repurpose Baldwin’s note to his agent—“they bang against and reveal each other.” In doing so, they reveal us.
Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, photographs, and electrotypes, good and bad, now adorn or disfigure our dwellings ... Men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all.¹

—Frederick Douglass

The Smithsonian Institution opened its 19th museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), in Washington, D.C. on September 24, 2016—nearly a century after politicians, veterans, and everyday citizens began advocating for its establishment. While the bipartisan Act of Congress established the museum in 2006, that was it. There was no location nor was there a collection. The museum’s founding director, Lonnie Bunch, and its curators, however, were committed to telling “unvarnished truths,” as historian John Hope Franklin espoused. One way we have honored this commitment is through the discovery and recovery of moving images made by African Americans, about African American experiences. Concerted efforts to catalogue and preserve documentaries, home movies, and other time-based media works have made film and video by and about African Americans a significant part of the museum’s growing collection, ensuring that historically overlooked works are placed within the pantheon of critical media studies.

The power of the camera to create a new way of seeing society and its citizens was something American statesman Frederick Douglass wrote about in the late 1800s. It is in this vein, approximately 150 years after Douglass’s comments, the museum has made lens-based media part of its collecting priority. NMAAHC’s permanent collection includes over 37,000 objects. More than 1,500 of those items are film, video, and audio recordings. Materials range in date, format, topic, and subject. The collection includes a trove of materials donated by archivist and film collector Pearl Bowser, for example. There are also films by documentary filmmaker St. Clair Bourne, such as Let the Church Say Amen! (1973); selections
from NET’s award-winning television series *Black Journal* (1968 – 1970), produced by William Greaves; and Madeline Anderson’s groundbreaking *Integration Report 1* (1960), to name just a few. A particularly special highlight of the collection are nine reels of film by minister, entrepreneur, and amateur documentarian, Solomon Sir Jones. Presenting images of everyday life throughout Oklahoma from 1924–1928, the reels reveal thriving, socially and economically vibrant communities three years after the horrific Tulsa race riots ripped through the city’s Greenwood business district in 1921.

As a curator of film and photography, it is important to make work like polymath Lebert Sandy Bethune’s *Malcolm X: Struggle for Freedom* (1964) accessible to scholars, filmmakers, and artists. Creating exhibitions that focus on the history of Black cinema, developing programs that offer media makers access to the moving image archives of artists and scholars, and producing public screening opportunities promotes richer discussions around larger socio-cultural topics like, race, global politics, and civil rights.

Three films directed by Bethune—*Malcolm X: Struggle for Freedom*, *Jojolo* (1966), and an unfinished Pan Africa project—became a part of the museum’s permanent collection in 2018. Bethune, an unassuming man born in Kingston, Jamaica, emigrated to New York with his parents in the 1950s. An accomplished writer, poet, political activist, and protégé of Marxist and Pan-Africanist scholar C.L.R. James, Bethune also served as the assistant to artist and writer Langston Hughes for a brief period. Inspired by artist-activists like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and others, Bethune moved to Paris in the 1960s and trained at the University of Paris. During his time there, he received a special assignment to be a guide for Malcolm X. As Bethune has explained, it was “quite by chance” that he invited Malcolm to speak to a group of students from the African diaspora. Bethune recorded the conversation and narrated the film. The film’s co-director is photographer John Taylor. It opens with a montage of Taylor’s photographs and newsreel footage depicting international struggles for people of African descent. Made in 1964, three months prior to Malcolm’s death, *Malcolm X: Struggle for Freedom* shows the leader at a time when many of his ideas about race and politics were expanding outward toward a more global and inclusive perspective. This twenty-two-minute film contains some of the last interview footage of him prior to his death.

It was critical to make Bethune’s work accessible to the public at the National Museum of African American History and Culture because his portrait of Malcolm X sends historical reverberations forward. Viewers bear witness to a leader during a critical period of personal, political, and historical transition and the film provides a basis from which to expand and complicate popular knowledge and awareness that surrounds this significant figure.

Preserving and collecting works like these, supports the priority of protecting overlooked histories from falling further into obscurity. It also shows how images of African Americans in documentary film, particularly works made by African Americans, often deviate substantially from the flat, one-dimensional images that proliferated by many of the ethnographic and anthropological travelogues of previous eras (the relationship between subject and maker is not to be underestimated). The museum’s diverse collection of nontheatrical, time-based media reveals intimate, nuanced portraits of Black life and asserts ways of seeing that honor Douglass’s arguments a century and a half ago.

**ENDNOTES**

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