



CYCLES (DIRECTED BY ZEINABU IRENE DAVIS, 1989), FRAME GRAB.



Affect and the “Fluidity” of the Black Gendered Body in *Water Ritual #1*: An Urban Rite of Purification and Cycles

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“Give me a body then ... The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life.”—Gilles Deleuze¹

“My body, an object destined to move other objects, is, then, a centre of action; it cannot give birth to a representation.”—Henri Bergson²

The use of menstruation and urination in the films *Cycles* (Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989) and *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (Barbara McCullough, 1979) affectively engages with the cinematic image of the black gendered body to produce a body that moves beyond the appearance of blackness. I derive my use of affect from Kara Keeling’s conceptualization

of the same in *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*:

*Affect ... is a form of labor that is intrinsic to the body’s self-constitution. While one’s perception measures the possible or virtual action of a thing on one’s body, affection can be understood initially as the moment in which one’s perception ceases to measure an object’s potential action upon one’s body and begins to sketch out the object’s actual action.*³

To engage with bodily fluids on the level of affect illuminates the ways in which these fluids sketch out a temporal existence of bodily materiality. Through affect, these bodily fluids offer a perspective of the lived experience of the black gendered body; they extend the black body’s spatio-temporal existence and allow for the possibility

to view the black body as a lived body, because we see it as a body in time. As Gilles Deleuze elaborates in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, “It is through the body that cinema forms its alliance with the spirit, with thought. ‘Give me a body then’ is first to mount the camera on an everyday body.” Further, Deleuze states that “the daily attitude is what puts the before and after into the body, time into the body.”⁴ Thus, Zeinabu irene Davis and Barbara McCullough use bodily fluids to transgress the representation of phenomenal blackness, by making visible the “fluidity” that is the lived “daily” experience of black bodies.

Harvey Young defines phenomenal blackness, in *Embodying Black Experience*, as: “When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is

the creation of *the black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one.”⁵ This is the same black body that Frantz Fanon waited for in trepidation while viewing *Tarzan* (W.S. Van Dyke and Richard Thorpe, 1932) in an Antillean theater.⁶ It is this body that stands in for the lived black body and gives, in its stead, a shadow that devalues black humanity. For Fanon this was the experience of viewing the “savage” blacks in *Tarzan* that “represented” his body. As Kara Keeling clarifies, the “social reality” of the black body is one partly produced by cinematic processes so much so that “each appearance of a black image to an eye is an appearance of every black insofar as ‘black identity’ is a historical project predicated upon a substitution that implies an aporia.”⁷ It is an aporia insofar as each

“VIDATO’S BODY SOWS THE EARTH THROUGH PRAYER AND PHYSICAL LABOR.”

appearance of a black image always refers back to a previous appearance of similarly “black” images.

Thus, before the reel of *Cycles* and *Water Ritual #1* even begin, the black bodies within the screen exist in a temporal gap, between prior historical images of blacks and their impending cinematic appearance. Similarly, the bodies moving onscreen interact with past appearances of

their cinematic body. Both films cleverly address this temporal gap by using ritual as a way to conjure the historical, non-cinematic, black lived experience alongside the present one. It is important to note here that, as a concept, blackness does not necessarily refer to negative images of blacks or black culture. Rather, it describes a quality mapped onto the lived black body because of its phenomenal appearance. Both films use bodily fluids as a way to extend the black body’s (and the black image’s) spatio-temporal reach beyond the limited possibilities that phenomenal blackness might otherwise make available. In so doing, Davis and McCullough are able to situate the black cinematic body in the present to form new meanings beyond the appearance of blackness. While both films manage to accomplish this, they do so in different ways.

The Uncontained Body in *Cycles* and *Water Ritual #1*

Released a decade apart, *Water Ritual #1* and *Cycles* both deal with aspects of ritual, cleansing, and the black female body as a site for psychological healing. The filmmakers, McCullough and Davis, were part of the L.A. Rebellion, a movement of black experimental film art that was created by graduate students of UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television from the 1970s to the early 1990s.⁸ *Water Ritual #1*, shot on 16mm black-and-white film then colored to the appearance of infrared color film stock, features artist Yolanda Vidato roaming through the urban abandonment of the I-105 freeway construction site in Watts, California. During this brief but intense six-minute film, Vidato’s body sows the earth through prayer and physical labor. Vidato uses a

mortar and pestle to grind herbs for the earth. She proceeds to repeatedly blow the herbs in the air, before stripping bare and squatting down to replenish the barren earth with her urine. The infrared colored painting of the black-and-white film that McCullough used abstracts Vidato’s body as does the camera’s shot as it pans down to spotlight her act of urination. The camera abstracts Vidato’s body through a continuous tight shot that moves along her skin, rendering specific zones of her body indiscernible at times. Hence, its abstraction contributes to the removal of a sexual gaze once the

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Yolanda Vidato’s body confronts the audience’s gaze as part of her ritual to cleanse the earth in *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (Directed by Barbara McCullough, 1979), frame grab.



“COLOR AND BODILY MATTER SEEP FROM HER, SUGGESTING THAT THE AUDIENCE VIEW VIDATO’S BODY NOT AS A SITE FOR CONSUMPTION, BUT RATHER AS ONE OF PERCOLATION.”

camera pans to Vidato’s genitalia. Vidato’s body further loses its shape and stability as a fixed entity when the outline of her body blurs with the desert background—an effect that is heightened through the hypnotic coloring of the film stock. Through the use of color, which shifts between cool and warm tones and is present throughout, Vidato’s body extends its boundaries to blend with the environment as a body. The land is the body and the

body is the land. Color and bodily matter seep from her, suggesting that the audience view Vidato’s body not as a site for consumption, but rather as one of percolation.

If color was used to extend Vidato’s spatio-temporal reach, then the use of shadow in *Cycles* achieves a similar effect. In *Cycles*, Stephanie Ingram’s body is a body in and out of stasis as she awaits the arrival of her menstrual period; Ingram, now two weeks late, anxiously bides her

time by cleaning both the house and her body as a “ritual” to purify the self. Also shot on black-and-white 16mm film, *Cycles* deploys the use of stop motion technique in some scenes, quite similar to *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), to propel the film’s narrative. In addition, the use of natural light illuminates Ingram’s domestic setting and pierces partially closed rooms where Ingram’s shadows trace her movements. The shadows and stop motion technique

animate Ingram’s body as she cleans multiple locations within her home including the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom where she prepares her body for a deep cleanse (Figure 3). While the domestic setting certainly implies a ceremonial aspect to Ingram’s cleanse, it is crucial to note the ritualistic elements of the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom as rooms where Ingram eats, defecates, and fucks.

Ingram’s body exercises itself firmly within the confines of the domestic setting of the home before taking a nap to sleep away her anxious state. The film then cuts to a dream sequence, during which multiple women including Ingram can be seen roaming the city chanting, clapping, running, hugging; the black female body is thus presented as a force of action in both environments. The seventeen-minute film ends with

Ingram awaking from her roaming dream with menstrual blood staining her white sheets. Unlike *Water Ritual #1*, *Cycles* uses the stain to mark the appearance of bodily fluids. In a discussion on the ethics of dirty work and the body, Sheena J. Vachhani notes the distinction of the stain as a visible mark of bodily difference; the stain makes the hidden perceptible on the body while the materiality of the body also stains its spatio-temporal environment:

*The stain presents a way by which to demarcate and draw different zones of corporeality given the ‘horror’ or intense discomfort felt in response to the leaking, permeable and absorptive feminine body, in which boundaries between inside and outside and self and Other are constantly blurred.*¹⁰

Bodily fluids are socially inscribed with deeply gendered meanings, as Julia Kristeva’s groundbreaking

work on abjection has illustrated. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva argues that defilement is attached to excrement and menstruation much more so than other bodily fluids:

*While they always relate to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body’s territory, polluting objects fall schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value.*¹¹

Kristeva’s work on abjection sets the foundation for interpreting the social and hierarchical relationship of affective responses attached to particular bodily fluids; arousal with sperm, sympathy with tears, and disgust with excrement and menstruation. Kristeva is quick to address how abjection is socially



inscribed upon menstruation, which signifies reproduction, to give it the same “polluting” value as excrement, which is human waste. Kristeva says little else about how these reactions differ in relation to race. In most scholarly work concerning bodily fluids, finding the connections between the reaction to bodily fluids and race is all but absent. For example, Elizabeth Grosz’s exploration of bodily fluids in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* argues for a feminism that thinks through female corporeality and places an emphasis on biological determinism over culture, racial,

(LEFT) FIGURE 2:
Yolanda Vidato performs the water ritual for the earth in *Water Ritual #1* (Directed by Barbara McCullough, 1979). Frame grab.

and gender differences. This neglects to account for the ways in which social inscriptions on materials such as bodily fluids or the body itself in society might intertwine with our understanding of a body in the first place. Or, more simply put, how cultural, racial, and gender differences might take into consideration the lived experience of the body and the biological factors that induce bodily fluids as a *productive* social cinematic experience.

Through the use of ritual (watering the earth for *Water Ritual #1* and cleaning the body for *Cycles*) and the focus on the black female body in both films, the audience perceives bodily fluids as forms of expansiveness that result in a more liquid conception of the body. The audience sees the performers’ bodies exert themselves as forces

that do not seek to contain fluids but rather to expel them. This perspective is a critical response to the more common engagement with the female body as receptacle—something to be penetrated. I argue that with regard to the cinematic image of blackness, the fluidity of the female bodies in these films does not contribute to the dated metaphor of the “uncontrollable female body.”¹² Rather, the agency granted to the female protagonists of *Water Ritual #1* and *Cycles* in the act of releasing their urine and menstruation respectively illustrates the productive potential of theorizing the body as liquidity.¹³ This is to say that, in *Water Ritual #1* and *Cycles*, the black female body becomes something that is both fluid and unfixed, blurring the demarcation of its boundaries while proclaiming its vitality with equal assertion. As Vachhani states:

“THE BLACK FEMALE BODY IS PRESENTED AS A FORCE OF ACTION”

Bodily fluids have symbolic significance and can be said to mediate the realm between the sacred and the profane ... Bodily fluids become present, visible and matter out of place. Blood and sweat in particular accord a significance that marks the identity and viscosity of the [body].¹⁴

“THE AUDIENCE PERCEIVES BODILY FLUIDS AS FORMS OF EXPANSIVENESS THAT RESULT IN A MORE LIQUID CONCEPTION OF THE BODY.”

Similarly, in her work on photographic representation of blackness, Alessandra Raengo argues that visual elements associated with the black body might become extensions of the body in the photograph, “the shadow is the trace of a body’s extension beyond itself by means of light. The body is not in the shadow, in its projection, and yet the shadow doubles the body, extending its reach.”¹⁵ Likewise, the bodily fluids seeping from Ingram and Vidato blur the distinction of the boundary line of the body, extending its spatio-temporal reach, “and locating it in

two places at the same time.”¹⁶ For *Water Ritual #1* the viewer encounters the fluidity of the body’s materiality at the point of materialization. And while *Cycles* lacks the shot of liquid expulsion present in *Water Ritual #1*, the film’s high contrast lighting and its emphasis on the passage of time animate Ingram’s anxiety as she waits on the uncertain arrival of her menstruation, and anticipates the reassurance of its stain.

Conclusion

The cinematic image of a black woman bears the social markings of

the way her phenomenal blackness has been understood historically. This is the problem with the mere face value of representation: it cannot show us the lived experience of the body beyond its appearance. The fluidity of Vidato and Ingram’s bodies, however, offer a way of engaging with the cinematic image of gendered blackness that works through bodily affect as its basis for engagement. The use of fluids in an attempt to represent blackness draws attention to the ways in which phenomenal surface appearances and reactions fall short



of a more nuanced engagement. What is more present than the body leaking its own materiality?

The bodies of Ingram and Vidato in *Cycles* and *Water Ritual #1*, respectively, transcend the cinematic body. Having their bodies bleed into their environments through the use of shadow and color enables their narratives to continue outside of the body of the film. These uncanny bodies are everyday bodies, and their actions are never arrested in time.

(LEFT) FIGURE 3:
Stephanie Ingram turns her back to the audience as she waits for her period. The shadows cast against her back animate her body to visualize the stillness implied in this waiting in *Cycles* (Directed by Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989), frame grab.

**“WHAT IS MORE
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As fluid entities, bodies constantly emit a changing materiality. *Water Ritual #1* and *Cycles* ask audience members to relate to the films, to experience them, as fluid bodies themselves. Rosalyn Diprose defines this potential relationally as a corporeal generosity: an ethics of generosity that can see a body as lived experience:

*Generosity is most effective at a carnal level, rather than as a practice directed by thought or will, but the injustice that infects its operation is governed by the way social norms and values determine which bodies are recognized as possessing property that can be given and which bodies are devoid of property and so can only benefit from the generosity of others.*¹⁷

This affective response to bodily fluids highlights the distinction of an

“embodied encounter that begins to understand morality, or moral taint, in more expansive terms.”¹⁸ Indeed, the films’ experimental nature encourages an interpretation of these bodies that moves beyond binary categories of unclean/clean, good/bad, internal/external, pure/un-pure, etc. Both Vidato and Ingram complete their purification rituals before these fluids seep out; thus, they are already clean, with Vidato cleansing the earth and Ingram cleansing the home. Diprose’s claim for a corporeal generosity then echoes Fanon’s oft quoted declaration at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover the other?”¹⁹ The use of bodily fluids opens a dialogue to the lived experience of the body through their affective use of corporeality. While our initial reaction might seemingly be to

recoil, a closer examination proves that the assertion of bodily fluids in *Water Ritual #1*’s and *Cycles* is far beyond surface representation. These fluids are extensions of their

(cinematic) bodies, thus creating new meaning and opening up a dialogue concerning identity, the black body, gender, and the cinematic image. ■

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 189. *Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Stewart (University of California Press, forthcoming, November 2015).

² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011), 5.

³ Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 13.

⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 189.

⁵ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 131.

⁷ Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight*, 43.

⁸ See Allyson Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds., *L.A. Rebellion: Creating New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁹ Sheena J. Vachhani, “Stains, Staining and the Ethics of Dirty Work,” in *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identity*, ed. Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya, Patricia Lewis, and Heather Höpfl (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 71.

¹² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 203.

¹³ Zoe Sofka, “Container Technologies,” *Hypatia* 15, 2 (2000): 181-201.

¹⁴ Vachhani, “Stains, Staining and the Ethics of Dirty Work,” 38.

¹⁵ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁸ Vachhani, “Stains, Staining and the Ethics of Dirty Work,” 46.

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 206.