



Directed by Jamaa Fanaka

Producer: J. Fanaka

Screenwriter: J. Fanaka

Cinematographer: Stephen Posey

Editor: Robert A. Fitzgerald

With: Jerri Hayes, Ernest Williams II, Charles D. Brooks III, Leopoldo Mandeville, Malik Carter

35mm, color, 100 min.

Black Sister's Reality: Black Bodies and Space in *Emma Mae* by Lauren M. Cramer

The films of the L.A. Rebellion, a body of work that in many accounts spans three decades, are incredibly diverse. The films utilize radically different narrative and visual strategies, but like the most interesting black art, all of the films are invested in the ways we encounter black bodies on screen. One of my favorite films from the collection curated by the UCLA Film & Television Archive is Jamaa Fanaka's *Emma Mae* (1976). Although Fanaka's interest in theatrical distribution meant his filmmaking choices differed from other L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, the film still considers the ways black bodies move through space. *Emma Mae* is about a young Southern girl who moves to Los Angeles to live with her extended family. Emma Mae's family is afraid she will not be able to handle herself in the big city, but she surprises everyone with her courage and independence.

In fact, Emma Mae loves to fight and welcomes brawls with men twice her size and the LAPD. The film is reminiscent of Blaxploitation films, and was renamed *Black Sister's Revenge* by distributors to capitalize on the popular film cycle. Yet the main character's particular combination of naiveté and bravado makes the film stand out from similar films about strong black women. In the process of negotiating life in the big city, Emma Mae demands other characters (and viewers) renegotiate the possibilities of black bodies. Her presence in the film initiates a series of extraordinary events that defy Fanaka's naturalistic depiction of L.A., creating new spaces and expanded potential for black bodies.

From the moment she arrives from Mississippi, the "country cousin" is clearly an outsider who will disrupt the world of those around her. The film opens at a picnic in Compton Park. The park is full of people listening to musicians and playing basketball (only a few of the people in the opening are actually actors in the film). Fanaka explained that he opened the film with this unscripted scene in order to provide the "flavor" of the community. The looseness of the opening is in direct opposition to the next scene, when Emma Mae arrives from Mississippi. As she steps off the bus, the funk score that played over the opening credits is abruptly interrupted with the discordant twang of a harmonica.

Not long after Emma Mae arrives, she enthusiastically gets into a fight at a college party. In this first fight scene, Emma Mae shyly watches the other students dance when two men begin to fight. Without warning, she leaps out of the frame and enters the fight. The first shot of Emma Mae throwing the punch is followed by a shot of Emma Mae's punch landing in the middle of the brawl. This awkward cut emphasizes the sheer power of Emma Mae's body as it exceeds the frame. It is as if her speed and power is forcing the camera into a new position. Until this moment in the film, her aunt and cousins have clearly explained that Emma Mae's body (her bad hair, outdated clothing, etc.) will limit her in L.A. Yet, within these first few minutes of the film,

Emma Mae exceeds the film frame as well as the expectations of her family.

To ground Emma Mae's incredible story, the film is full of real-life locales like the opening scene in Compton Park. Throughout the film, L.A. exteriors and street signs work to mark specifically urban and precisely located modes of black experience in a particular place and time. Unfortunately, it is a racist reality that defines the lives of these characters. For example, although the film takes place in a sprawling metropolis, the characters are always aware of the watchful eye of the police and the segmentation of the city that divides Emma Mae's family's middle class neighborhood and the housing projects. Emma Mae's extraordinary journey challenges this "reality," particularly its naturalistic aesthetic. This resistance to the invisible restriction of black bodies is made clearest in a monologue by Big Daddy, an older man who serves as the spiritual guide for Emma Mae's crew. Big Daddy is known for spending his days mumbling to himself, but temporarily leaves his haze to warn the younger generation about accepting the current conditions of black life. He tells the young characters, "you facing time everyday, and you don't even know it."

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Emma Mae's accomplishments in the film are triumphs over the overdetermined discourses surrounding her body, and the spatial limitations placed upon it. Not surprisingly, the ability to easily transcend these obstacles is a source of pleasure in the film. For example, viewers can enjoy Emma Mae unexpectedly fighting her way to the head of her gang and, in the climatic scene of the film, robbing a bank to bail her boyfriend out of jail—freeing him from the seeming pandemic space of confinement. The most important example of "Emma Mae-as-force" comes at the end of the film, when she beats up

the boyfriend she worked so hard to free. This moment is gratifying because the boyfriend is not faithful or appreciative of Emma Mae's love. But I believe this moment resonates because the boyfriend's selfish behavior is the clearest threat to the power of the collective black body, the power that Emma Mae harness and channels with her own body.

In our writing on the films of the L.A. Rebellion, the *liquid blackness* research group illustrates our theoretical interest in blackness as aesthetic and the ways these films have affected each of us personally. In fact, we often find incredible overlap between these impulses. For example, my personal favorite moment from *Emma Mae* is the entire minute the film devotes to a black belly dancer that is inexplicably outside of Emma Mae's carwash. The belly dancer first strikes me because she is a beautiful black woman on screen. That surprise, and delight, is also an example of Emma Mae's disruptive force (on the world and the film). The belly dancer's fluid dancing seems like the perfect encapsulation of the unrestricted black body. Emma Mae not only transcends the forces that regulate her body, she also initiates new possibilities that move through the bodies of those around her.

¹ "Jamaa Fanaka – (TCM Featurette) On Emma Mae," *Turner Classic Movies*, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/196440/Jamaa-Fanaka-TCM-Featurette-On-Emma-Mae.html>.