



liquid blackness
on the

L.A. REBELLION

From October 25 through November 22, 2013 *liquid blackness*, Emory University's Department of Film Studies and Media Studies, and the Atlanta Film Festival hosted the film tour **L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema** in Atlanta, GA.

The Tour was presented in association with UCLA Film & Television Archive and had been supported in part by grants from the Getty Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The Tour is curated by Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Shannon Kelley, and Jacqueline Stewart.

liquid blackness would like to thank the filmmakers, contributors, supporters, and collaborators responsible for the successful exhibition. In particular we would like to acknowledge:

David Cheshier, Chair of the department of Communication at Georgia State University

Matthew Bernstein, Chair of Film and Media Studies Department, Emory University

Chris Escobar and the **Atlanta Film Festival**

Curators **Allyson Nadia Field**, Assistant Professor, School of Theater, Film and Television, UCLA and **Jacqueline Stewart**, Professor, Department of Cinema and Media Studies, The University of Chicago

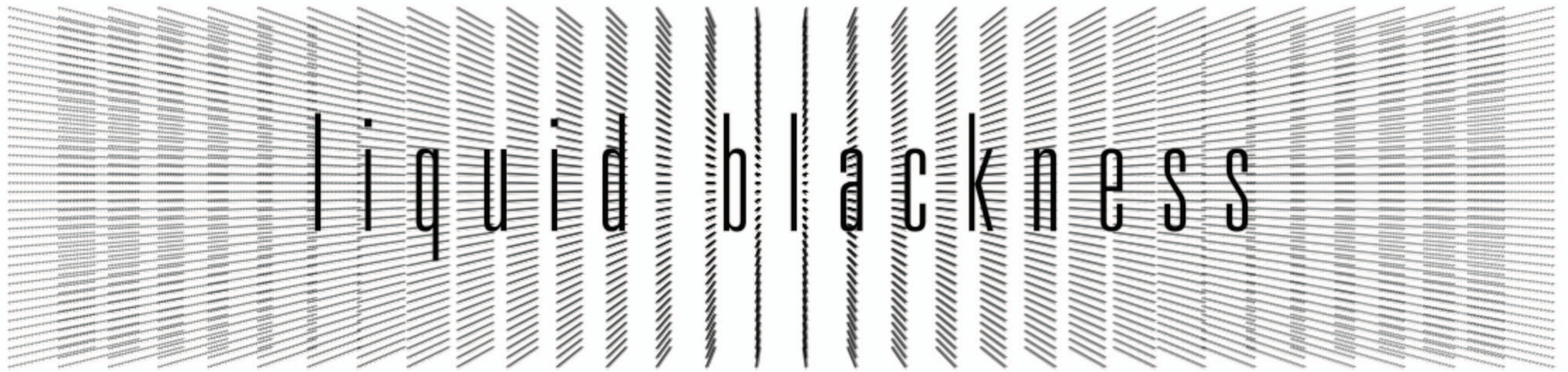
Filmmakers **Larry Clark**, **Zeinabu irene Davis**, **Haile Gerima**, **Billy Woodberry**

Panelists:

Makungu Akinyela, Georgia State University
Folashadé Alao, University of South Carolina
Michele Prettyman Beverly, Emory University
Cinque Hicks, editor and art critic
Carol Thompson, High Museum
Akinyele Umoja, Georgia State University

Community conversation collaborators:

Arnika Dawkins Gallery
Charis Bookstore
King & Spalding
The Sound Table
Wonderroot Community Arts Center
The Low Museum



liquid blackness

A Research Project on Blackness as Aesthetics
Department of Communication
Georgia State University

encountering and exploring the liquidity of blackness in
contemporary visual and sonic culture through **critical contributions,**
artistic practices, and **curatorial interventions.**

www.liquidblackness.com
liquidblackness@gsu.edu
www.facebook.com/liquidblackness
[@liquidblackness](#)

coordinator: Alessandra Raengo araengo@gsu.edu



1

The L.A. Rebellion Comes to Town

Alessandra Raengo

12

Daughter of the Rebellion

Michele Prettyman Beverly

16

The Children of the Revolution:

Images of Youth in *Killer of Sheep* and *Brick by Brick*

Dorothy Hendricks

19

Black Sister's Reality:

Black Bodies and Space in *Emma Mae*

Lauren M. Cramer

22

Purification Rituals:

Beauty and Abjection in *Cycles*

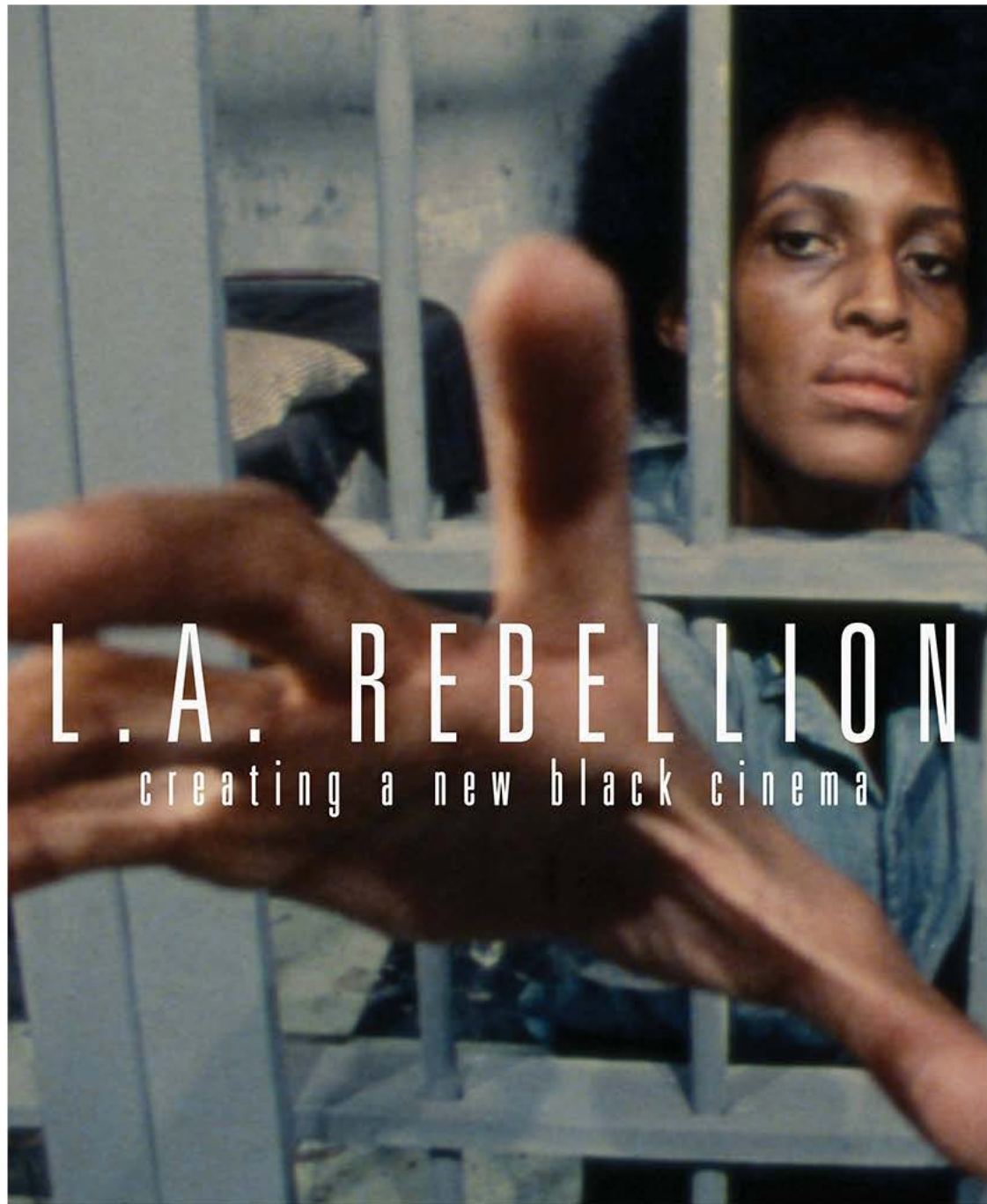
Joey Molina

25

Playfighting in South Central:

On the Everyday in *My Brother's Wedding*

Cameron Kunzelman



L.A. REBELLION

creating a new black cinema

Atlanta, GA 2013

Opening night screening at The Plaza Theater.
All other screenings at
205 White Hall, Emory University.

October 25-27 with filmmaker Zeinabu Irene Davis and co-curator Jacqueline Stewart

November 1-3 with filmmaker Billy Woodberry and co-curator Allyson Nadia Field

November 15-17 with filmmaker Haile Gerima

November 22-24 with filmmaker Larry Clark



For more information:
www.liquidblackness.com
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“There is a sense in which my generation [...] received most of our understandings of the politics of identity and race as a digital signal, as an upload, if you like, of an always-already marked set of structured absences: Fanon, The Panthers, Black Power and so on. So there is a sense in which the founding regime, the narrative regime that overdetermined everything we did, came to us as a set of digital simulacra; as traces of moments forever fixed as virtual references, but always deferred and always already there as a signal, a noise, a kind of utopian possibility.”

-John Akomfrah



The L.A. Rebellion Comes To Town

by Alessandra Raengo

In the late Summer 2013 I was contacted by Matthew Bernstein, Chair of the Film and Media Studies Department at Emory University, for a possible collaboration--bringing the L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema Tour to Atlanta. He told me that the Tour of thirty-six films, made by mostly African American filmmakers enrolled at UCLA from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, would no longer be available in this form after the end of the year.

If we wanted it we had to act fast.

Matthew's proposition came at a most propitious time, since I had been considering the possibility of constituting a research group on blackness as aesthetics that would comprise any interested student, within and without Georgia State University, as well as any interested local artist or intellectual. I envisioned the group as both the product and the motor for porous forms of crosspollination between the academy and less institutionalized centers of thought and creative production—a fluid structure inspired by the conviction that artistic, curatorial, and scholarly practices are only materially, but not substantially, different ways of generating critical thought.

Opening our doors to the L.A. Rebellion appeared as an ideal and provocative first project. Thus *liquid blackness*, a research group that has now taken the form of a quasi-collective, was quickly constituted in order to facilitate the unfolding of the Tour. As a group, we knew the value of this work, even though we had never seen many of the individual films, so we approached the Tour as a collective research project. We also knew that hosting the Tour would require strategies to involve a much larger audience, particularly outside academia, in keeping with the spirit of the L.A. Rebellion itself, as well as the dynamic impulse at the heart of *liquid blackness*.

We quickly established that:

- The L.A. Rebellion concerns everybody, benefits everybody, and has the potential to rejuvenate conversations about black creativity as well as more complex ways of understanding American film history. Many people in the larger film community commented that it made perfect sense that Atlanta would be the last stop of the Tour; yet, we quickly realized that this was not at all a self-evident proposition for our audiences and instead *sense had to be made*.
- Formed in a climate of political urgency in response to political, social, and cultural repression, the L.A. Rebellion successfully experimented with collaborative and community-based forms of production and can help us rediscover collective forms of artistic practice.
- The L.A. Rebellion was nourished by a transnational sensibility and nomadic aesthetics, and can therefore animate conversations about diasporic artistic forms of rendering of black lives.¹
- Despite its often extreme conditions of production, the L.A. Rebellion expresses a profoundly erudite cinema, which is radical in the very shape and modes of acquisition of this erudition: formed through a close study of different national and translational filmmaking traditions —most notably Third Cinema and African Cinema—it is nevertheless a type of cinema that comes from, and commits to, its local community. In fact, it is a cinema that finds *elsewhere* the artistic tools to articulate something very specific and tragically neglected about the *over here*. Especially, but not exclusively, in the case of Charles Burnett's and Billy Woodberry's films (*Killer of Sheep*, 1977, *My Brother's Wedding*, 1983, *When it Rains*, 1995, by Burnett and *The Pocketbook*, 1980 and *Bless Their Little Hearts*, 1984 by Woodberry, but I should also mention Allie Sharon Larkin's *Your Children Come Back to You*, 1979 as well), it is profoundly invested in portraying the fine grain of the community here and now—in making black communities live and breath, feel and suffer, laugh and wonder, all within the very grain of the film image.



Billy Woodberry, *The Pocketbook*, 1980. Film Still



Allie Sharon Larkin, *Your Children Come Back to You*, 1979. Film Still

Putting it more concisely:

The L.A. Rebellion is for everybody.

The L.A. Rebellion cannot come to town without notice.

The L.A. Rebellion cannot leave you unchanged.

The L.A. Rebellion cannot leave at all. It needs to stay and continue to resonate.

This is what instigated the creation of a multifaceted and adventurous outreach program. We created teach-ins to educate various segments of the Atlanta community. We organized events to celebrate the vision and resilience of the filmmakers. We facilitated post-screening conversations to foster more contacts between filmmakers and audiences, and to let the works reverberate and take hold in our ways of thinking about artistic production and, specifically, black production. It is also what inspires this short initial publication, which is very much a work in progress, the chronicle of a voyage that has just begun, and maybe a form of thanksgiving for insights we have received and have already begun to inform our scholarly practices.

What have we learned so far

I want to emphasize 'so far', since this is very much a still unfolding process and an on-going commitment which, for instance, will bring us to undertake an in-depth study of Larry Clark's film *Passing Through* (US, 1977) in the months to come. This is a film that strongly resonates with ideas of aesthetic liquidity in its construction of a jazz aesthetics, as well as in the composition of images that foster what Gilles Deleuze described as "liquid perception."²

To begin with, we discovered that, in many ways, the L.A. Rebellion is a concept still in the course of definition. There isn't yet a unified historiographical narrative. There is instead a vivacious plurality of voices, a polyphony of discourses, conversations, debates, arguments about what a "black cinema" should look like, what it should do, what it should be for. As Billy Woodberry put it as I was driving him to a post-screening event at the Low Museum, we all worked in each other's films, but if we had to write a manifesto or give a formal structure to these collaborations, then we would not have known who was going to make coffee or do the photocopying.

While the L.A. Rebellion involved community-based and collaborative modes of production, the term "collective" doesn't strictly apply to it, nor does the term "school," and even less, we feel, the idea of a "movement." Everybody we met (Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, and two of the Tour's co-curators, Jacqueline Stewart and Allyson Nadia Field) had a different version of what keeps this work together. Thus, at this time, the "L.A. Rebellion" might be describing fundamentally an archival project. In another sense, however, "L.A. Rebellion" is the expression of something that formed within specific, yet constantly evolving, circumstances: the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to have a formal education in filmmaking; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to develop a specifically domestic focus/aesthetics at the same time as they were articulating a translational film language; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to create urgently topical, yet timeless works; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to think of aesthetics as rarely, if ever, divorced from politics, and to think of aesthetics from the point of view of a commitment to envisioning new ways of being in the world.

Yet for us, the L.A. Rebellion is also inseparable from its Tour, and thus it designates a specific series of events we facilitated in which various Atlanta audiences, who do not normally interact, came together in the same room to look at some (however loosely conceived) form of "collective" production and more importantly, to the vivid testimony of the possibilities of an unrelenting black imagination.



Ben Caldwell, *I & I: An African Allegory*, 1979. Film Still



Haile Gerima, *Bush Mama*, 1975. Film Still

The expansiveness of blackness

One of the most compelling, and possibly contagious, aspects of the L.A. Rebellion might be what Jacqueline Stewart has described as the determination to preserve the possibilities of “black imagination.”³ In this sense, the L.A. Rebellion is expansive. In fact, it is a body of work that demonstrates the expansiveness of blackness: the tight fabric of lived communities, a variety of forms of Afrocentric imagination, the investment in seeking links, connections and interpretive schema from an ancestral past, alternative forms of historical consciousness, temporality and sense of space and place.... One might find, in *Water Ritual #1: A Rite of Urban Purification* (Barbara McCullough, US, 1979) and *I & I: An African Allegory* (Ben Caldwell, US, 1979), for instance, an Afrofuturistic sensibility in the exploration of forms of being in, but not belonging to, American culture. Many films share this sense that blackness comes from elsewhere and communicates at levels that do not necessarily belong to an earthly plane; the sense of the possibilities of reassembling disjointed fragments of a past no longer within reach; the sense of a beauty that can be constructed from a place of debilitation; poetry that can be fashioned in the midst of the most prosaic, depressing, and endangered environments.

Small gestures and landscapes of the mind

The lack of availability of so many of these films prompts a form of consumption that is decidedly cinephiliac. Since the films were screened over four weekends between late October and late November 2013, we now find ourselves holding on to gestures, moments, textures, and moods that profoundly affected us, and we are trying to piece together in these written reflections.

For instance, I am compelled by Pierce's grandfather in Charles Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* (US, 1983), who is stubbornly committed to keep his shoes on, even though he is not planning to leave the house. Among other things, he reminds me of my own father. I am amused by the moment in *Fragrance* (Gay Abel-Bey, US, 1991) when George, who is sleeping on the couch during his visit to his family before shipping out to Vietnam, is awakened by his aunt who wants to gift him a nice new button-down shirt. George is grateful, but also embarrassed because the aunt is catching him without his pants on.

Even more powerfully, I am profoundly moved by the moment in *Bless Their Little Hearts*, in which the father is readying the children to go to church and deposits—slowly, deliberately, and painfully—a coin in each of their hands. The moment is solemn as well as terrifying, since we know he has gotten the money from his wife, standing in the hallway, encouraging (and forgiving) him behind the scene. In this slow and drawn out action, in the lingering on the palm of each child's hand, we get access to something that the L.A. Rebellion has described so well: the landscape of the characters' minds.

Anybody who focuses on the use of locations in the L.A. Rebellion films will have to agree that they are reflective not only of the characters' living conditions but also of their mental landscapes. This is further compounded in the often discussed opening of *Bush Mama* (Haile Gerima, US, 1975) when we see the film crew being harassed by the police while we hear the unrelenting voices of social workers that keep layering on the sound track as if they were still echoing in Dorothy's mind. Throughout, the film employs avant-garde editing techniques to channel Dorothy's inner landscape, the difficulty of her choices, the daily oppression of which she is victim, and the psychological and systemic violence that is constantly directed at her as she begins to form a different way of looking at her reality.

At times the visual and material culture of the black radical tradition that punctuates the film sets feels as if it might be originating from the characters' minds. There are recurring iconic images, such as the seemingly ubiquitous poster of Angela Davis which constitutes the backdrop from a number of highly dramatic scenes, but also the picture of a female African freedom fighter, holding a child on one hand and a rifle on the other. This is the image that ignites a shift in Dorothy's political consciousness in *Bush Mama*, but I see it also on the nightclub's wall in *Passing Through*, when the musicians are discussing the possibility of recording independently from white music producers.



Julie Dash, *Diary of an African Nun*, 1977. Film Still



Gay Abel-Bey, *Fragrance*, 1991. Film Still

Importantly, in many of the films, access to the landscape of the mind does not occur through traditional channels: not through classical character identification, but through identification with characters' gestures and circumstances, as in the scene from *Bless Their Little Hearts* I mentioned earlier. The only (tentative, partial) access to the mind of Stan—the protagonist of *Killer of Sheep*—can be seen to occur in the slaughterhouse sequences. Or, the landscape of the mind might be embodied by camera movements: for instance, in the way the camera gives in to, reproduces, and magnifies Barbara O's painful pacing within her suffocating prison cell in *Child of Resistance* (Haile Gerima, US, 1972). In fact, one could say that, as a technology, apparatus, and archival practice, "film" becomes in the L.A. Rebellion a place where repressed dreams and desires can finally be manifested. I think of the desire for rightful retaliation of the hotel maid in *Daydream Therapy* (Bernard Nicolas, US, 1977), which is "acted out" only "on film," so to speak, and not in her diegetic world—her impulses, reactions, and aspirations are recorded and safely guarded only that way.

Half way through the Tour, I began to think about the films' ability to highlight the incongruities of American society. And I have to admit that the very term "incongruity" is incongruously mild when used to describe the state of war at which the black subject finds herself in these films. Yet, I also want to register the poignancy of some moments in which the viewer is jolted by the perception of incompatible forces being co-present in the same time, same place, and often in the same body. In *Diary of an African Nun* (Julie Dash, US, 1977), for instance, Barbara O's body is torn apart from competing alliances to the rigidity demanded by her religious habit and the riveting beat of the African drums heard in the background.

The immaculate whiteness of her dress clashes against the richness of her complexion, just like the melting snow of the mountains visible from her room slowly gives way to the dark and fertile African soil. In *Fragrance*, three brothers react differently to the choice the older has made to fight in Vietnam, and the weight and incongruity of this decision is powerfully captured the moment the youngest son is made to sing “America, My Country ‘Tis of Thee” in school, as punishment for talking in class. At the end of the film, when we know George will indeed go to Vietnam, we are left with a shot of Bobby, still at school, still expected to sing, but now standing silently, in a close up shot that frames his face next to the American flag.

In *Brick by Brick* (Shirikiana Aina, US, 1982), a documentary on gentrification in Washington, D.C., a woman who lives in an overcrowded basement apartment articulates a painful litany of incongruities. Her monologue is as arresting as it is eloquent: “... you’re the cause why there’s no grass, you’re the cause why the landlord stopped coming to fix the property, you’re the cause why you don’t have a care and why your children are fighting in school and come home with stitches in their head. You’re the cause why teachers are afraid in school. [...] the world resents you, the government resents you because you resent them. The system resents you because you don’t want to be a part of it. Your children resent you because you’re trying to live a better life for them and don’t give them just everything they want...”

There is no available respite. Only acknowledgment.

Forms of liquidity

We found a variety of forms of aesthetic liquidity in the films of the L.A. Rebellion. The most exciting discovery were the audacious Project One films. We were amazed by their uncompromising energy and commitment to creating new images, and by the diversity of artistic and cultural traditions, film techniques, and aesthetic solution harnessed in order to do that. We found liquidity specifically in the way many of these projects are invested in advancing and experimenting with the possibilities of a different historical imagination. I am thinking, for example, about Ben Caldwell’s *Medea* (US, 1973). The texture and pulsating movement of the clouds in the opening sequence sets the stage for a seamless transition to a foregrounding of the round shape of a pregnant body, while a woman’s voice delivers a quasi hypnotic chant punctuated by a recurring refrain: “to raise the race.... to raise the race.” The chant is overlaid on a montage of still images that encompass African peoples and black American figures, recapitulating the breath of the diaspora in the ontogenesis of every soon-to-be born black child in America. The montage moves rapidly, increasingly assuming the pace of the mother’s heartbeat, her breathing and her chanting all at once. The “impossible” archive evoked here is finally congealed by the delicate yet poignant image of a small child interacting with the spherical shape of a white balloon, which concludes the film.



Ben Caldwell, *Medea*, 1973. Film Still



Billy Woodberry, *Bless Their Little Hearts*, 1984. Film Still

Or I am thinking about Zeinabu irene Davis's film *Compensation* (US, 1999), which chronicles two parallel relationships between a deaf woman and a hearing man as they unfold in relation to impending death at the beginning and the end of the 20th century. The choice to focus on black deaf culture gives an urgency to issues of communication, reciprocity, and mutuality that extends to the film's formal choices. The diegetically motivated use of sign language creates the opportunity to linger on a series of poignant gestures which suspend the expected filmic flow, and consequently demand fulfillment, development, and existence beyond the here and now. Furthermore, the protagonists' investment in communicating across the "hearing line" brings up important questions about (forms of) segregation as something that is ultimately played out at the level of the human sensorium—a segregation that the film somewhat overcomes by being equally accessible to hearing and deaf audiences.

We also found liquidity in the way a number of films — I am thinking primarily, but not exclusively, about *I & I: An African Allegory*, *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification*, and *Passing Through*—display a commitment to working with texture, understood as a flexible, elastic, and plastic property of the image. Their use of superimpositions highlights the porosity and multiple temporalities of the image, while slow motion brings attention to its grain. This emphasis on the textural qualities of the image may render compatible within the same film highly disparate genres: Ben Caldwell's *I & I: An African Allegory*, for example, combines elements of experimental cinema with an oral history project.



Zeinabu irene Davis, *Compensation*, 1999. Film Still



Zeinabu irene Davis, *Compensation*, 1999. Film Still

Even more radically, we found liquidity in the way some of the most aesthetically abstract films fluidly incorporate images “from the world.” For instance, in Larry Clark’s *Passing Through*, which seamlessly and repeatedly transitions to newsreel footage of episodes of police repression (Attica, Birmingham, and so on) despite its highly abstract and riveting opening sequence.

Many films liquidly experiment with the commingling of black and white and color footage, for example, as a way to foster the possibility for the filmic medium to convey a double-vision. In *The Hour Glass* (US, 1971, a Project One film), Haile Gerima’s use of rapid alternation between color and black and white footage inserts a level of critical engagement with the image that can be regarded as the expression of its protagonist’s thought process. As the shots of the white patrons at the basketball game flicker between black and white and color, they also record the player’s progressive awakening to his own exploitation. Thus this alternation is used both for its potential to give plasticity to the image, but also as a form of Brechtian alienation effect.

Liquidity is also a way to regard how L.A. Rebellion films embrace their participation in translational artistic flows and to appreciate their reliance on aesthetic traditions developed in other countries, often in comparable political situations and conditions of production. Liquidity is also a way to describe their fluid relationship to time and consciousness. Many of the films create a sense of people who are in this culture but not of this culture, which, if one were to follow the historiographical framework that Zeinabu irene Davis establishes in *Spirits of Rebellion* (US, 2011), leads directly to the Afrofuturist sensibility permeating the work of Cauleen Smith.

Again, taken together the L.A. Rebellion films demonstrate the expansiveness of blackness: blackness is figured as a form of historical consciousness, blackness as forms of interaction between bodies, blackness as a bundle of affective forces, immersive experiences, forms of cultural memory, and so on. But also blackness as cosmic principle—“to raise the race.... to raise the race...”; chants the expectant mother in *Medea*—blackness as life force and truly vibrant matter.

The L.A. Rebellion and us

I want to conclude by addressing the choice of my epigraph. In his essay “Digitopia and the Specters of Diaspora,” John Akomfrah explains the “digitopic yearning” that the diasporic subject of his generation feels toward historical suturing moments of which she has not been part – “Fanon, the Panthers, Black Power...”. Whether it’s taking place in scholarly or artistic practices, her work of recollection, therefore, is unavoidably marked by a form of hauntology, by “that impossible gesture, a desire to cease and entrap the ghost.”⁴

This digital imaginary is appealing to us, because we are objectively removed from the formative moments that gave rise to the L.A. Rebellion. Yet, Akomfrah’s idea of digitopia has other fruitful connotations as well, i.e. the possibility of thinking about new ways of entering in relation with the past, by imagining different points of contact and freer ways in which it might speak to our concerns in the present. In fact, this is our investment, as well as the source of our excitement: not so much to entrap the ghost but to channel its continued resonance. We aim to contribute to the fashioning of critical and artistic possibilities for an indomitable black creativity to continue to fuel the expansiveness of blackness.

¹Teshome H. Gabriel, “Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and the Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York, N.Y.: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 395-410.

²Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 32.

³Jacqueline Stewart, “Defending Black Imagination: The L.A. Rebellion School of Black Filmmakers,” in *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, ed. Kellie Jones (Hammer Museum, University of California, 2011), 40-49.

⁴John Akomfrah, “Digitopia and the Specters of Diaspora,” *Journal of Media Practice*, 11 (2010), no. 1: 27.



Directed by Zeinabu irene Davis

Producer: Z. irene Davis, Andy Rice

Cinematographer: A. Rice

Editor: A. Rice

Digital video, color, approx. 60 min.

Daughter of the Rebellion

by Michele Prettyman Beverly

My involvement in the Atlanta stop of the L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema Tour provided me with some powerful moments of clarity and a renewed sense of inspiration. As the complicated history of the L.A. Rebellion unfolded with each screening, each discussion, and each interaction with filmmakers and audiences, it became clear that this history was being re-animated and propelled into a new future vibrating with new possibilities. While the impulses that inspired the work of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers were diverse, what was shared was a desire to create a more personal relationship with cinema, evident in the production styles (locations, training local actors and crew members) and subject matter, and also in the insistence on the creation of 'shared spaces' in which to experience cinema. It is appropriate then that this tour would also create shared spaces for dialogue between a range of social spheres, which, in turn, revealed powerful insights into the relationship between cinema and communities, and the discourses that emerge from such encounters. Thus it was not in my own discrete intellectual and personal space, but in these shared spaces, that powerful crystallizations of blackness, aesthetics, and cinema emerged.

This process began for me after screening a work-in-progress cut of Zeinabu irene Davis's film—*Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA*. Davis's documentary film provides rich historical and personal context surrounding the emergence of the L.A. Rebellion, which she describes as "a group of critically acclaimed black media artists. . . the first sustained movement in the United States . . . that aimed to re-imagine the production process so as to represent, reflect on, and enrich the day to day lives of people in their own communities." Members of the L.A. Rebellion were part of an Ethno-Communications Program, a short-lived UCLA initiative to train more Black, Native American, Latino, and Asian students in filmmaking.

In *Spirits of Rebellion*, Davis, herself a member of the second-wave of this cohort of filmmakers, reunites with classmates, mentors, and instructors, gently pressing them to retrieve their memories of learning about filmmaking and collaborating on each other's films. For Davis, her project is explicitly didactic and archival. Her intention is to educate audiences about the rich history of black cinema while also inserting these films into the broader narrative of film history. Davis's mission is equally cathartic and personal as she unearths the revelations and trajectories of her fellow L.A. Rebellion peers. In perhaps the film's most poignant moment, Davis recalls a gathering of some of the filmmakers and their families and the emotional reactions of the filmmakers who witnessed how their own children could now fully grasp the weight and significance of their parents' work.

While some who participated in this UCLA program have challenged the notion that it should be termed a "black film movement," or whether the term "rebellion" is an appropriate one, what became clear was the impact that the L.A. Rebellion films and filmmakers had on me, personally. What resonated as I watched Davis's film and spent time with both her and Haile Gerima—an important and internationally acclaimed figure of the "rebellion," yet one who precariously disavows Davis's position that it was in African American independent film

movement—was a question raised by a graduate student in the film history course I teach at Emory University who attended the screening of Davis's film. He asked, and I am paraphrasing here, "What was the point? What did this movement create?" He was unclear about the impact of such a "movement," one which he, as a young scholar of art and film from Serbia, had never heard of. His interrogations were in some ways legitimate. How can you quantify a film movement and measure its influence and worth when many of these films have never been seen, even by film scholars, much less by a broader academic and cultural public? Yet his questions also reflect the skepticism that pervades the mainstream, dominant culture vectors of studies of film, art, and visual culture. Why had Davis and other scholars audaciously endeavored to designate this unwieldy, contested group of student filmmakers "a movement" or "school" and who has been influenced by this work?

"This singular event had united the sometimes disjointed worlds that I cared about—the worlds of spirituality, community, art, and culture—and for a few hours a stage was set for us to have a uniquely intimate experience with cinema and with each other."

The short answer is me. I was profoundly impacted by my first contact with an L.A. Rebellion film, which was seeing Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* in 1992 at the Baltimore Museum of Art. (Dash had been a student at UCLA and was a prominent member of the L.A. Rebellion). At the screening event, I viewed the film alongside members of my church congregation, Baltimore's Bethel A.M.E. Church, some of whom had traveled in chartered buses across town to see the film. But it was not simply seeing the film; it was seeing *this* film with *these* people from my own life and community in *this* space that had been designated for the consumption of something that was both culturally relevant and 'artistic,' something we understood

to be radically different from what was available at our local multiplex. This singular event had united the sometimes disjointed worlds that I cared about—the worlds of spirituality, community, art, and culture—and for a few hours a stage was set for us to have a uniquely intimate experience with cinema and with each other.

A second series of memories and experiences occurred the following year with Haile Gerima as he transported his film *Sankofa* to theatres around the country, camping out in lobbies to greet and often console audiences who saw his groundbreaking cinematic treatise on slavery, memory, and survival. In *Sankofa*, Gerima courageously plows through the historical layers of slavery to create a searing, intimate account of black people's lives, deaths, and acts of resistance and healing. Gerima, his family members, and Howard University film students were the marketing and merchandising team, the promoters, and the distributors. My experiences with them and my contact with the audiences watching these films allowed me to experience cinema's power to connect people to both shared historical memories and very personal, visceral emotions.

“The processes of filmmaking—production, exhibition, and distribution—had forever been changed in my mind and perhaps also in the minds of countless other viewers who had never met, seen, or touched a filmmaker.”

Later, Gerima would help me get my first experience on a film shoot. In preparation, his wife, filmmaker Shirikiana Aina, gave me some of the best advice I had ever been given about life and filmmaking: “Whatever happens, let it roll off of you like oil off of a duck's back.” The processes of filmmaking—production, exhibition, and distribution—had forever been changed in my mind and perhaps also in the minds of countless other viewers who had never met, seen, or touched a filmmaker. It was not Martin Scorsese or Francis Ford Coppola (whose work I love and

admire) who made me want to be a filmmaker; it was these filmmakers, instead, as well as being able to experience films on these specifically grounded terms that lit that fire. In this context, filmmaking became real, personal, tactile, responsive, and accountable—a living, breathing exchange.

Contemplating the graduate student's question, these memories rushed to the surface and Davis' title became clear. *Spirits of Rebellion* was the title most appropriate in capturing how these new modes of filmmaking, aesthetics practices, stories, and subjects were disseminated into the cultural ether, conjuring the movement of a seemingly elusive presence, one that circulates, moving in, through and around us, changing us even when we may not be aware of it. The influence of the L.A. Rebellion films and filmmakers continues to have cultural resonance so long as it is connected to people and to our continued desire for work that speaks to us and for us. I am grateful for these filmmakers and their work and consider myself a 'daughter of the rebellion.'



Directed by Shirikiana Aina

Producer: S. Aina

Screenwriter: S. Aina

Cinematographers: Ellen Sumter, Norma Blalock

Editor: S. Aina

With: Lester Wakefield (narrator)

16mm, color, 33 min.

The Children of the Revolution: Images of Youth in *Killer of Sheep* and *Brick by Brick* by Dorothy Hendricks

Much has already been written about the aesthetics of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, and certainly there's much to say about the artistry of the films and the affect that viewing them affords. I'd like to focus on the recurring images of children in two of the L.A. Rebellion films, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (US, 1977) and Shirikiana Aina's *Brick by Brick* (US, 1982). While I resist positing that they create some kind of through line demarking similarity between artists and films, I'd like to think through the idea that these captured moments of childhood destabilize identity and consistently underline the fluidity of spaces, bodies, and time itself.

Charles Burnett's well known film, *Killer of Sheep*, offers riveting imagery of children playing on train tracks, abandoned yards, and against fences. These moments of free play are eerily out of place with the tone of the film and certainly out of step with the adult realities of looming despair. While these particular scenes read as symbolic in relation to the plot, it is imperative to note that these sequences serve no purpose in furthering the actual storyline; rather, they are marked by their offness and, at times, surreal qualities. Take for example a scene in which a young boy, standing against a metal fence, looks to his left, down a sidewalk, and watches a girl with a dog mask walk toward him. She gives no explanation as to why she's wearing the mask as she leans against the fence, her hand in the dog's mouth hole, and he barely looks up at her as she moves toward him. We might also look at the children running through the confines of their neighborhood and playing in the empty dirt yard as moments that are severed from the rest of the film by their surreal qualities.

“Politically urgent Watts falls away suddenly, and the children mark out a time that resists any kind of linear coherence.”

Free play has no real form and, in the diegesis of the film, it happens outside of any real time—outside of the diegetic time that governs the economy of survival that the adults are restricted to. Just as the train tracks are cruel reminders of the economic realities, the children playing on them call attention to the fact that this is a place outside of both the real time laid out by the film or the time of production as understood by viewers. Politically urgent Watts falls away suddenly, and the children mark out a time that resists any kind of linear coherence. Unlike their adult counterparts, the children move easily between inside and outside spaces as seen in sequences in which they descend staircases, ascend out of holes, underscoring their ability to bridge the two. Shirikiana Aina's *Brick by Brick* is a stark contrast in genre. Her film depicts the late 1970's effects and local reaction to the gentrification of Washington, D.C.

through interviews and footage from the actual time period. While her piece is a documentary, it is infused with artistry and a compelling use of sound. Voices overlap sporadically through the piece and the overlapping creates a texture of displacement and uncertainty. Aina makes her point of view on urban gentrification obvious, interviewing elderly women being pushed out through ever-increasing rents, families living six to a room, and residents losing their homes of twenty years because of the finely orchestrated corporate push to raise rents and make neighborhoods attractive to businesses. The film gives the residents a platform to voice their experiences and triumph in founding the Seaton Street Project, a movement that unified long-time tenants in efforts to buy their homes.

The ending of the film, while moving and hopeful, is hardly a bookend to the arguments over gentrification. In terms of our focus on *liquid blackness* and the problematic practice of separating blackness from actual black bodies, recent developments in urban gentrification seem eerily connected. Referring back to Henry Elam's description of the separation of “black cool”¹ from actual black bodies, we can't deny that this negotiation is in constant play across mediums, but recent reactions to gentrification uncover the same discrepancy being practiced in physical spaces. Poor black neighborhoods from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. are being remade safer, more attractive to the up-and-coming wage earners; however the aura of authenticity (Elam's “black cool”) is now an essential part of the attraction. Reflecting on this problematic piece of modern-day gentrification, Stephen A. Crockett writes on the recent rebuilding of D.C.,

In a six-block stretch, we have Brixton, Busboys and Poets, Eatonville, Patty Boom Boom, Blackbyrd and Marvin. All are based on some facet of black history, some memory of blackness that feels artificially done and palatable. Does it matter that the owners aren't black? Maybe. Does it matter that these places slid in around the time that black folks slid out? Maybe. Indeed, some might argue that these hip spots are actually preserving black culture, not stealing it.²

In a response to Crockett, Garance Franke-Ruta discusses corporate appropriation (and commodification) of black history and culture in her article, "The Politics of the Urban Comeback: Gentrification and Culture in D.C.," but she resists the delineation and implication of good/bad that Crockett lays out, instead articulating the positivity of safer streets and a more multi-cultural demographic.³ While the discourse surrounding this particular location is certainly rich and provocative, I think Crockett's commentary on a neighborhood essentially remade with "loving black cool without loving black people" as part of its motto might play an important role in the further theorizing and discussion of Elam's thesis.

Returning to Aina's film, which reads like a triumph against the recent machinations of gentrification, and also to the texture of displacement, the intent is not to outline the debate surrounding urban gentrification but rather to present the experience as a series of multiple separations between people and places and, perhaps just as problematic, the filtering of auras and bodies.

In addition to the political argument that her piece makes, I think there is also the possibility of reading youth as a resistant presence in her film. An interview with a woman living in a basement surrounded by her children who move uncoached in and out of the frame is particularly interesting. While the woman explains the hardships of displacement, her children's voices act as backdrop and soundtrack, unadhering to the main focus of the interview. Juxtaposing this first sequence with one in which children play in the Christopher Columbus Memorial Fountain set to sounds of soldiers, or another that shows them walking while "Ol' Man River" plays, it seems that even while they are a part of overarching meanings, their actions resist definition. The instrumental plays while a patriarch of the neighborhood talks and laughs while surrounded by children, but then we leave him and follow the kids as they play and chase each other around the pedestal of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park. While the struggles against the landlords reflect the song's despair, and we might read the circular motion of the play group

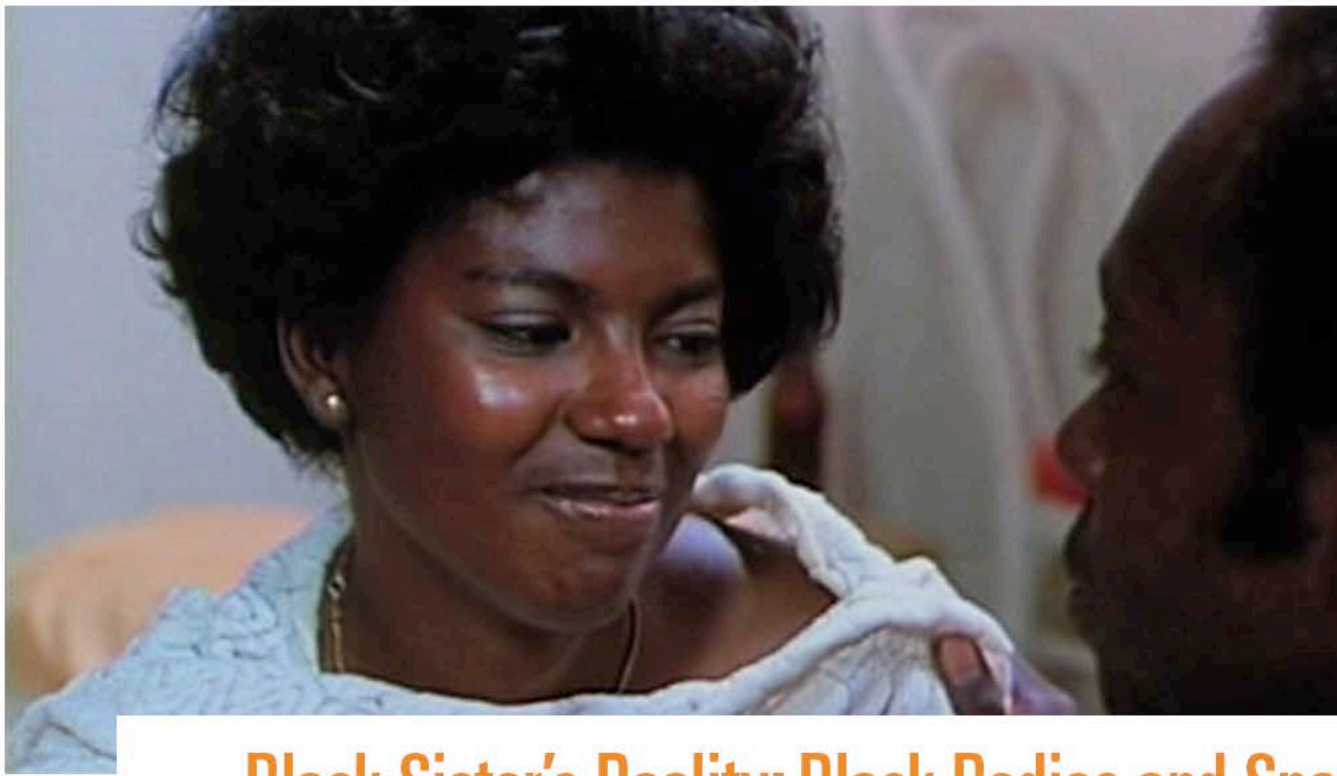
as another reminder of systematic oppression, the joyful ownership the children exert over the monument directly opposes the first reading in a provocative way that resists the tone of the scene. Time is unquantifiable in these scenes. Inside the small basement apartment there is no way to know if it is day or night, if the street is silent or busy. Similarly, in seeing the fountain, we cannot know how this scene fits in with the rest—it is a stolen moment, outside of the time of the film. The free play is in direct opposition to the stifling actions of the landlords and the housing regulatory policies in general. These images of the D.C. youth resist the shearing of aura from body, insisting that the two are one and the same.

All of these are lovely moments, certainly visually striking, but what I keep coming back to is the possibility that these sequences might speak to questions of fluidity and, ultimately, resistance. There is something inherently unknowable about these images, something that remains just outside, just beyond. The surreal quality of place and time is just one aspect of this ambiguity, but there is also the ubiquity of the children. *Brick by Brick* resonates with the soundtrack of children's voices; they are everywhere even though they aren't the film's focus. *Killer of Sheep* is grounded in the world of children and of play, always coming back to a perspective that is never seemingly driven by definitive motivations. Not only do these particular images disrupt the more central narratives of the films, but they also begin to suggest the permeability and fluidity available to imaging black bodies and experiences. Part of the importance of the L.A. Rebellion as a body of works resonates from these sequences focused on children, not only as visual reminders of the future, but also as visual possibilities for filmic blackness.

¹Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Change Clothes and Go: A Postscript to Postblackness," in *Black Cultural Traffic. Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Jackson Kennell (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 386.

²Stephen A. Crockett Jr, "The Brixton: It's New, Happening and Another Example of African-American Historical 'swagger-jacking,'" *The Washington Post - Blogs*, August 3, 2012, accessed 2 January 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/the-brixton-its-new-happening-and-another-example-of-african-american-historical-swagger-jacking/2012/08/03/b189b254-dcee-11e1-a894-af35ab98c616_blog.html.

³Garance Franke-Ruta, "The Politics of the Urban Comeback: Gentrification and Culture in D.C.," *The Atlantic*, 10 August 2012, accessed 2 January 2014.



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."

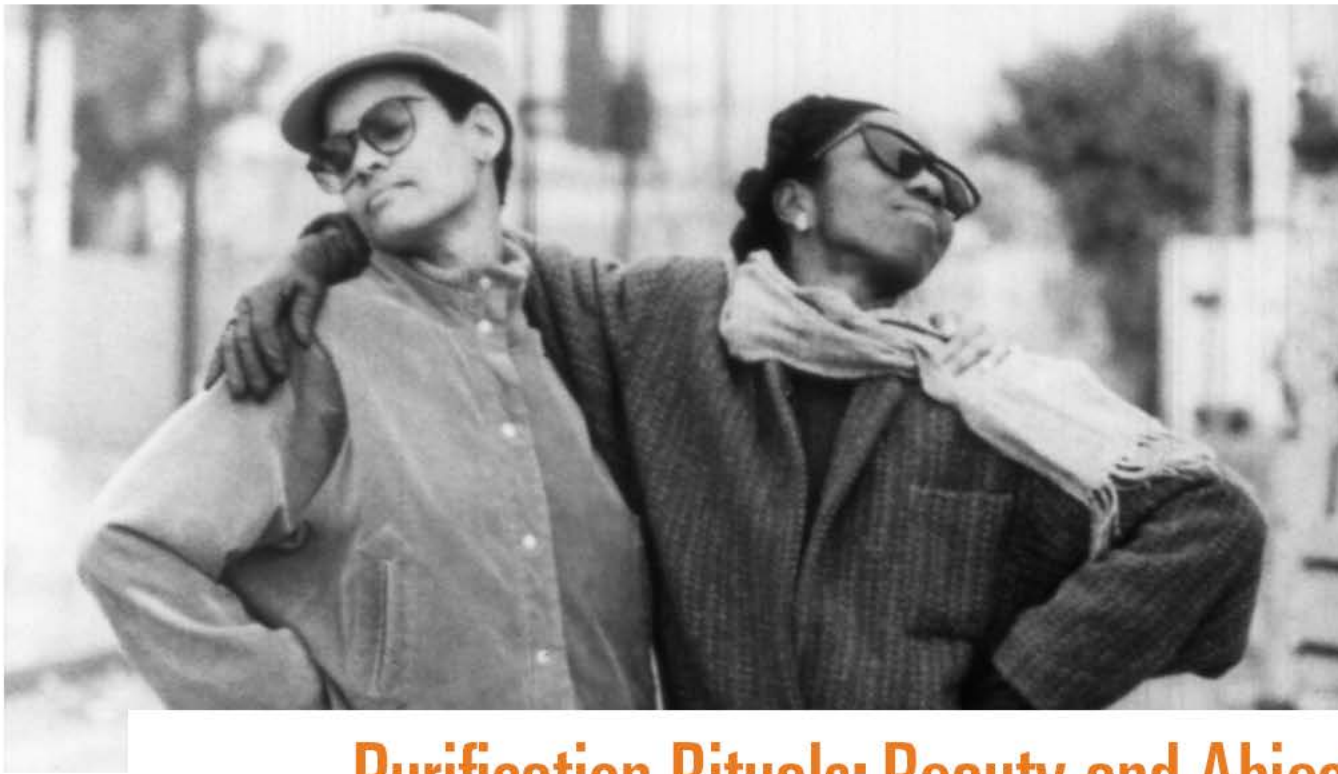
"Emma Mae not only transcends the forces that regulate her body, she also initiates new possibilities that move through the bodies of those around her."

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>.



Directed by Zeinabu irene Davis

Producer: Z. irene Davis

Screenwriter: Doris-Owanda Johnson

Cinematographer: Pierre Hermann Désir

Editor: Z. irene Davis

With: Stephanie Ingram, Darryl Munyung Jackson,
Marc Chéry, Doris-Owanda Johnson, Z. irene Davis

Digital video transferred from 16mm, b/w, 17 min.

Purification Rituals: Beauty and Abjection in *Cycles* by Joey Molina

Zeinabu irene Davis's short film *Cycles* (US, 1989) is a mediation on blackness in many of its alluring dimensions, particularly as it relates to Black women's experience. It does so by establishing a compelling tension between blackness as beautiful and abject. Shot in black and white, *Cycles* employs creative techniques, repetitive voice-overs and stop-motion cinematography, to capture blackness in its both intense and boundless dimensions. It is important to clarify that blackness functions as abject in the film, not in the sense of something horrid, but rather something that doesn't respect borders. Julia Kristeva describes the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."¹ In its exploration of black femininity, *Cycles* pays attention to the need of black women's liberation from negative images in media and in the social world, as well as the need for their bodies to be and expand unencumbered in a multiplicity of directions. In this way, the film helps us think about how blackness similarly exceeds boundaries and simple description.

The narrative is about Rasheeda, a woman anticipating her period, hence the title *Cycles*. The first shot immediately introduces the film's Afrocentric sensibility, as the camera flows by an African statue following its every curve and continuing to reveal a ceremonial space with a portrait and flowers. The music that accompanies the opening scene also functions as another signifier of African culture. As she waits, Rasheeda cleans her apartment and engages in African rituals of purification. These rituals emphasize the relationship between Rasheeda's body, her surroundings, and the borders that separate the two.

Then, we encounter Rasheeda sitting by a window, drawing attention to another kind of boundary—her apartment walls. The voiceover dialogue explains, "it had not arrived, she didn't know what to do, whether to prepare or not." This statement is left unexplained to the audience; yet, it creates a sense of intrigue as well as anticipation. As a result, the audience is sharing the main character's quest. The confessional tone of her voice expresses concern; perhaps her period is late because she is pregnant. A ticking clock, that marks the time while she does housework, emphasizes her anxiety.

Suddenly, Rasheeda is dressed in an African pattern dress. The film shows her doing routine chores like sorting laundry, vacuuming, and mopping. This obsession with cleanliness becomes much more apparent in the short stop-motion sequences. As she is cleaning a toilet, a voice exclaims, "Progress is being made," a line that will be repeated throughout the film. This is the first instance where Davis employs the stop-motion effect: she cuts back and forth between various images of Rasheeda face down into the toilet bowl with her hand scrubbing the inside. Throughout this scene Rasheeda's skin appears much darker and her body appears larger than in the other shots. This exaggeration of her features presents her body as a strange surplus of the film—like Kristeva's discussion of the abject—which has the ability to exceed narrative boundaries. While Rasheeda's chores position her body near toilets and other dirty items that should be cast off, the chores are conducted in

undeniably erotic ways. It's hard not to find this scene peculiar because the erotic movements of her body do not seem to match her mundane chores. The film repeatedly emphasizes the shape and contours of Rasheeda's body as she cleans. First, she is on her hands and knees scrubbing a tile floor. Later, in one of the stop-motion sequence, Rasheeda is cleaning the bathtub in various contorted positions as a harsh tenor voice moans in the background. In what appears as a fantasy scene, Rasheeda is cleaning the shower while wearing a swimsuit. As she lathers the bathtub wall, waving her hands in large strokes, Rasheeda's body gyrates from side to side. Finally, the camera fixates on a still image of her back. The lines of her bathing suit create a triangular pattern and the shot flickers until it fades to black. The erotic tone of some of the scenes suggests a coy (or is it flirtatious?) attitude about black female sexuality.

"These rituals emphasize the relationship between Rasheeda's body, her surroundings, and the borders that separate the two."

The attention on Rasheeda's form continues as she focuses on cleaning her own body. As she brushes her teeth, a voiceover declares, "time to attend to herself." Once again, Davis uses stop motion as Rasheeda's toothpaste suds overtake the screen. The use of cuts and stop-motion enables the film to speak beyond the narrative and blackness to overflow narrative constraints. Rasheeda stares into the mirror, unimpressed. The camera tilts down to her hands caressing her stomach and stays fixed on her belly as she wraps her arms around it. It seems she is considering the possibility of her pregnancy. This leads to the third erotic scene, when Rasheeda runs the bath to enjoy some relaxation. We see a close up of Rasheeda's feet in the tub surrounded by water as her toes play with the flowing water faucet, emphasizing its phallic shape. She also rubs soap on her hands and lathers her fingers individually. Rasheeda ebbs in the bathtub and finally it is time for bed, but not before she applies some lotion on her legs, and most notably on her toes.

The camera lingers in this moment of personal bliss.

Once Rasheeda is asleep, the viewers are allowed another moment of narrative excess in the form of a self-conscious dream sequence. As Rasheeda sleeps, an African chant fills the scene and the film cuts to graffiti on a wall. In the dream, Rasheeda is outside on the streets of L.A. She's with friends and is in an ecstatic mood; there is remarkable difference in this setting, compared to the confined space of her apartment. As the beats in the chant gets louder and faster, a voiceover exclaims, "Rasheeda, what is wrong with you?" She approaches the camera as she follows a man shaking a shekere (a West African percussion instrument) and her two girlfriends try to pull her back but are unable to restrain her. Then, a tribal song plays over a joyful montage of different scenes depicting Rasheeda and her friends. They are standing in the middle of a busy intersection, hugging, posing, and dancing in ritualistic manner. The most interesting part of the women's playful behavior is the way they stare directly at the camera, defying the traditional logic of film performance.

"The use of cuts and stop-motion enables the film to speak beyond the narrative and blackness to overflow narrative constraints."

Many of the spiritual references in the film relate to purification practices by the Orishas in the Yoruba tradition.² These scenes express a sense of liberation and happiness, especially when juxtaposed to Rasheeda's daily chores. Different voices with various accents repeat the phrase, "Progress is being made." The repetition becomes a mantra at the same time as quick shots of Rasheeda in movement appear on the screen. Her body in motion indicates that as a black woman, she can freely express herself in a multitude of ways.

The dream sequence ends and Rasheeda wakes up groggy from such a vivid dream. She walks into the bathroom and the camera follows her. Then it pans back to her bed to reveal a stain on her bed sheets. Her body has responded and not only answered her question about pregnancy, but also done something spectacular. The conclusion of the film and the credit sequence, a collage of women's voices describing what they are impelled to eat or drink on the eve of their period, expresses blackness as beautifully abject.

The film creates tension from the beginning. It creates a point of identification with a body that is considered abject in mainstream visual culture. Even when she is asleep, Rasheeda's point of view drives the narrative. Yet, the mismatching voices throughout the piece enhance that sense of disruption of identity that Kristeva mentions in the *Powers of Horror*. As spectators, we are encouraged to experience the same emotions as Rasheeda, including her moments of disruption—the stop-motion segments, her dream sequence, and eventually her period. This experience of the narrative, which is both confusing and alluring, illustrates the film's representation of the black female body as beautiful and boundless.

¹ Julia Kristeva and Leon S Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

² See Jacqueline Stewart's commentary in the UCLA L.A. Rebellion website: <http://www.w.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/films/cycles>.



Directed by Charles Burnett

Producer: C. Burnett, Gaye Shannon-Burnett

Screenwriter: C. Burnett

Cinematographer: C. Burnett

Editor: Tom Pennick

With: Everette Silas, Jessie Holmes, Gaye Shannon Burnett, Dennis Kemper, Ronald E. Bell

Digital video, color, 82 min.

Playfighting in South Central: On the Everyday in *My Brother's Wedding* by Cameron Kunzelman

The films of the L.A. Rebellion, even at their most abstract, are eruptions of the real into the filmic imagination of American cinema. These films focus on the lives, the social relations, the materials, the architecture, and the possibility space of black experience over a thirty year period. The movement was successful in presenting the United States as the radically pluralist place that it is, where the world of one person can, and does, appear wholly alien to anyone else looking in. In this way, the success of this literal rebellion of aesthetic sensibility is also its downfall; the films that make up the armaments of that rebellion have been denied their rightful canonicity in both the public and academic ecologies of consumption and appreciation due to how much they shake up what can be taken for granted or imagined in American experience.

Charles Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* (US, 1983) is one part of this broader movement in visual and auditory reconfiguration that we have chosen to call the L.A. Rebellion. The basic plotline of the film follows Pierce Mundy, a thirty year old man who is the victim of late 1970s labor policies that robbed him of his job driving a cement truck. Pierce's dedication and attention is split between two figures: his brother, a newly-minted lawyer who is marrying a nouvelle riche woman who Pierce strongly dislikes due to her class and class biases; and his best friend Soldier, who has spent his entire adult life bouncing in and out of the carceral system.

The central struggle of *My Brother's Wedding* is the push and pull between Pierce's obligation to his family—represented by the titular wedding—and his dedication to Soldier, whom he loves despite his extraordinary shortcomings and purposeful acts of violence against those around him. On the first night of Soldier's release from prison, he beats a man for no reason; later in the film, he sexually assaults a young woman. Finally, in an unrelated and seemingly random situation, he is killed in a car accident. The funeral is scheduled during Pierce's brother's wedding, and the final scenes of the film show Pierce attempting to cover both events, trying to respect and mourn his friend while also supporting the life choices that his brother has made. The second-to-last shot of the film literalizes what the audience already knows. Pierce, too late to attend the funeral and missing the wedding, stands isolated in the parking lot of the mortuary. A cut to his hands reveals the absolute incommensurability of these two commitments in Pierce's life; he holds a wedding ring in his hand.

Yet, the strength of the film does not lie in this grand narrative. Like Kierkegaard, Pierce manages to always be in the wrong in relation to the world, making him a stand in for all of us. That is the clear move being made, and while it is compelling, taking the larger narrative of the film as what delivers something to us is a mistake. Rather, it is the small moments, the incongruous ones, which force us into a direct confrontation with a lived realities of these characters. Some are obviously symbolic:

Soldier's father, lying in bed, never able to get comfortable and merely sleep on his own terms, always foiled by the materiality of the bed, or a statue of a lawn jockey, in focus and in the foreground, but facing away from the camera and never brought to light as something worth mentioning. Others speak to social relations: Pierce helping his grandfather use the restroom and take a bath, or chasing down a would-be assassin with Soldier. Others are merely reflective of reality: Pierce's grandparents taking a gun out of a drawer before answering a door, a man coming out of his front door with a gun to ward off the play-fighting Soldier and Pierce, or Pierce's mother in a hidden standoff with would-be robbers of her laundry shop. Finally, there are those moments that reveal the playfulness or surrealism of the everyday: a man who forgets his ticket every time he comes to pick up his laundry and cannot remember the alias he used to place the order, or the teenage girl who fixates on Pierce and wants to take him to prom in a few years, or the wrestling matches where Pierce's aging father repeatedly dominates the younger man by pinning his arms behind his head.

“The film proliferates windows, and it structures itself like the laundry that so many of the film's scenes take place in.”

These are all scenes that make very little sense in the context of a dark comedy about one man's indecision about who his life should be committed to. They force the viewer to ask questions of the world that the film presents. Why does everyone have a gun, and more importantly, why does everyone feel like they need one? What does the world around the content of the film look like? The film proliferates windows, and it structures itself like the laundry that so many of the film's scenes take place in. The laundry opens into itself over and over again—a cage of bars opens into a doorway, opens into a lobby, opens into a receiving desk; a receiving desk, which opens into rooms upon rooms, which the camera takes us through over and over again without exhausting the structure.

Each moment of life that *My Brother's Wedding* presents is nested within, or opens out to, another—rarely connected explicitly with another event or moment, but instead stitched together by the arrow of linear phenomenal time. The characters are products of a contingent social world, but we're begged by the film to reconstruct what that world might be. Could these disparate pieces of life have come together in another way? *My Brother's Wedding* does not give us answers or present political strategies. Instead, it wraps us up in doubt, denies us a ground, and forces us to address why things are the way they are.

Alessandra Raengo

is Associate Professor of Moving Image Studies, in the Department of Communication at Georgia State University. Her work focuses on blackness in the visual and aesthetic field. She is author of *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and coordinator of *liquid blackness*.

Michele Prettyman Beverly

is a scholar of film, and visual culture. Currently a Visiting Instructor at Emory University, her work explores race, aesthetics, and embodiment.

Dorothy Hendricks

is a PhD student at Georgia State University.
Her research and writing focuses mainly on youth culture and film.

Lauren M. Cramer

is a PhD Candidate at Georgia State University. Her work focuses on visual culture, hip-hop, and the racial encounter in everyday life.

Joey Molina

is an artist and writer who holds a BFA from Georgia State University.
His interest is in film and video with a concentration on gender and sexuality.

Cameron Kunzelman

is a graduate student in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University.

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