"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 began, 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 disaporic 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.

[1]Teshome 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.

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

[3]Jacqueline 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.

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