liquid blackness
fluid radicalisms

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Introduction

This fourth issue of *liquid blackness* was planned in conjunction with the Black Audio Film Collective Film and Speakers series, which *liquid blackness* hosted at Georgia State University on September 26-28 and October 3-4, 2014. The series brought for the first time to Atlanta (and in some cases for the first time in the US) the entire available output of the Black Audio Film Collective (1982-1998). Like most *liquid blackness* initiatives, this too was conceived simultaneously as a research project, an event, and as the impulse for a body of scholarship sampled in this issue. Here, *liquid blackness* members and other contributors begin to interrogate some of the ideas of “fluid radicalism” that inspired our interest in BAFC’s films. This project is part of a larger investigation of trajectories of radical thought and art practice across the Black Atlantic that began with the work showcased in the “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black American Cinema” we explored last Fall.

Initially, our working concept of “fluid radicalism” indicated two things: first, an encounter between artistic experimentation and political radicalism that does not follow prescribed paths but magnifies the expansive possibilities of both; and second, the malleability of both the idea and “stuff” of radical politics.

While the idea of the “black radical tradition” has an established place in critical race studies, from Cedric Robinson to Fred Moten, we claim a particular investment in the concept of fluidity, because we are interested in investigating not only the aesthetics, but also the politics of black liquidity. In the contemporary moment, black liquidity captures the mobility, plasticity, and pervasive qualities of blackness, in ways that might offer a new ground for our collective social and cultural interactions; yet, we recognize that these same qualities license seemingly unbound trajectories of appropriation, affection and eroticization that dramatically undo this radical potential. We therefore need to ask, as Cameron Kunzelman puts it in this issue, how black liquidity might concretely affect the ability for people of color to act in the world. This and similar questions prompted us to seek resonance

between our inquiry and forms of radicalism developed in historical contexts that demanded an urgent definition of the question of political, artistic, and social representation.

The format of our engagement with BAFC's work is central to our investigation: screening all the films in the space of two weekends allowed us to see a complicated artistic and political vision unfold and to witness the collective's unwavering commitment to formal experimentation. BAFC work exploited the possibilities of audio-visual media (from the tape slide shows originally presented as live performances, to the early adoption of DigiBeta technology, which afforded the deployment of hallucinatory aesthetics even within traditional documentary formats). The collective's experimentation is also clear in its hybrid approach to genre: from the investigative documentary to the lyrical essay film, from the haunting political memoir to the sci-fi narrative. This intensive viewing has exalted how BAFC's aesthetics of sampling and collage embrace the productive friction between existing archival and original, on-the-ground footage in order to eschew facile and one-sided historical explanations. Finally, it has highlighted the fluctuating authorship inherent in BAFC's collective practice in the context not only of similar developments in Black Arts in Britain at the time, but also of the possibility for art to afford experimentations with alternative forms of sociality.

Other examples of fluidity came to the fore:

The charged **malleability** of the idea of blackness at the time. The way the designation "black" in Britain was seized as an identity marker and a claim to political and artistic visibility for a whole generation of diasporic communities from the Commonwealth did not prevent the mobilization of ideas of "blackness" in the opposite direction: to perpetuate the marginalization of the spaces and identities it was desired to describe. Unavoidably, this flexible idea of blackness put pressure on the very idea of "black" art and black culture, which comes to index an "unknown territory," the possibility of "an infinity of traces without... an inventory."[1]

The **permeability** between theoretical innovations and artistic practices deployed in pursuit of strategically "unfinished" concepts of both identity and representation: BAFC's dedication to voicing various elements of the heterogeneous migrant communities, while avoiding the "indignity of speaking on behalf" of these same people, as well as its commitment to an antirealist filmmaking style, are evidence of its absorption of the scholarly debate advanced by black British intellectuals around the politics of representation and the pitfalls of "authenticity."[2]

BAFC's **immersive** "logic" of plunging available historical and artistic archives in order to "poeticize," and inject with an epic gravitas, images originally produced and mobilized within the debasing logic of empire. As Chip Linscott argues in this issue, BAFC leveraged sonic flows as models for a plastic recombinatory logic of temporal and spatial relations within social, cultural and temporal geographies of the diaspora. Through the leaks and seepages he identifies, sound offered also the lead to a quasi-necrophilic immersion in the stifled, mummified monumentalism of the imperial archive in the hope that, as David Lawson put it during the series, "if we looked hard enough, we would find black lives."[3]

This very tension—between black filmmaking's purported necrophilia and the commitment to find an image that can both render and safeguard black lives—pushes, at least for me, the idea of BAFC's fluid radicalism even further. While BAFC's pursuit of absent ruins, and the spectral narratives that are interlaced with the very archival practices that silence them, has been described as the "ghosts of songs" and understood within an hauntological view of history, BAFC's overarching melancholia also works in a different direction. Rather than seeking an impossible suturing within narratives that repeatedly construct blackness as lack, BAFC's work *makes space* for lack; indeed, it seizes it and claims it as a potential, and poetic, dwelling place. In the process, the diasporic subject too transforms from a subject perpetually out of sync, to a vessel of futurity; from a subject confined to the "belly of the photochemical beast" to one that

thinks and imagines "digitopically," along culturally and geographically fluid trajectories of identification; from a subject marred by the diasporic lack of origin to one that indexes enactments of cosmopolitan citizenship.[4]

This issue of *liquid blackness* has a primarily historical focus, but the idea of fluidity that runs through the essays highlights how its approach is grounded in concerns of the present.

Approaching the centrality of the sonic and the musical in BAFC's practice as "both affective implements of memory and structural-theoretical scaffolding for cultural production," Chip Linscott reads the figure of the ghost mobilized to characterize BAFC's relationship to the archive and the history of repressed presence of blackness in Britain as a sonic configuration that productively haunts some recent films by John Akomfrah. Kristin Juarez's focus on Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, two pivotal visual artists in the 1980s Black Arts Movement in Britain, locates BAFC's output within its larger artistic and intellectual context. Her discussion of images of the outstretched hand as a fold between the inside and the outside of both the body and the archive highlights the political stakes of art-making for diasporic artists at the time. Clint Fluker directs his attention to the concept of history mobilized in the canon-defining and canon-producing Afrofuturist film *The Last Angel of History* by attending to the way the figure of the "Mothership Connection" guides the film's fluid movements across musical and intellectual trajectories of the Black Atlantic to catalyze an idea of futurity the diasporic subject attempts to both envision and negotiate.[5] Cameron Kunzleman retrieves forms of "fluidity" in the way the very idea of "black radicalism" was mobilized in wildly disparate directions within a series of discourses and practices that coalesced around the 1970s and 1980s race riots in Britain. Focusing on the figure of Michael X—the subject of the stunning *Who Needs a Heart?*, a film that, through a disjunctive use of sound, poetically emphasizes its own inconclusive conclusions about the enigmatic "black radical" figure—Kunzelman's essay shows how "radicalism" could be deployed as a token of exchange in the British celebrity scene. Abbas Barzegar's essay, which concludes the issue, analyzes the rhetorical strategies employed in the cover images of *Al-Islam*, the newspaper of the Islamic Party of North America, in order to mediate the tension between its internationalist Islamic commitment and the need to address the specificity of racial oppression in the US. This case study, which emerges from an archiving project on African-American Islamic movements in the US—the After Malcolm Digital Archive hosted at Georgia State University—indicates how the necessity to maintain ideological fluidity might impact the material and visual culture practices of radical groups. ■

Alessandra Raengo
Coordinator

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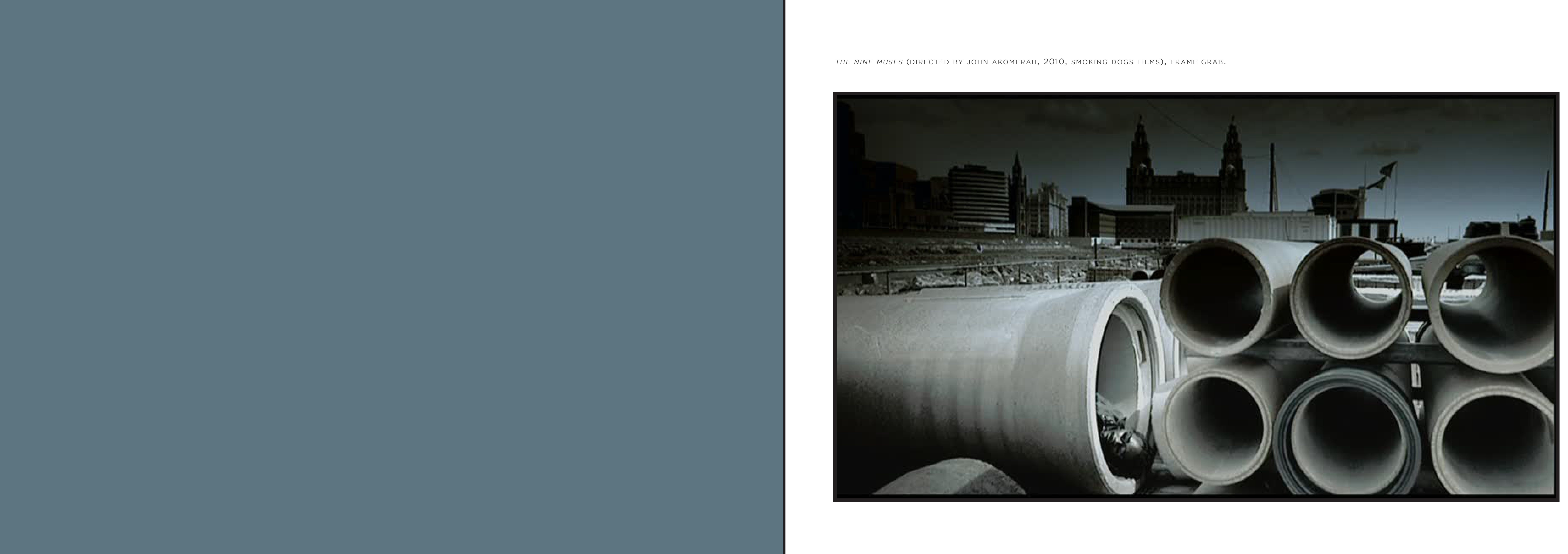
[1] John Akomfrah, quoted in Kodwo Eshun, "Drawing the Forms of Things Unknown," in Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, eds., *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective* (Liverpool University Press, 2007), 78.
[2] David Marriott, "Inheritances," "Specters of History" Symposium at Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, Oct. 3, 2014. I use the term "unfinished" to echo John Akomfrah's homage to Stuart Hall, in the three-screen video installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2013), who was central in these debates.
[3] The idea of black cinema as necrophilic is advanced by John Akomfrah, quoted in Kobena Mercer, "Post-colonial Tauerspiel," in *Ghosts of Songs*, 46.
[4] John Akomfrah, "Digitopia and the Specters of Diaspora," *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (2010): 21–29.
[5] The comment about the Afrofuturist canon was voiced by Kara Keeling, in her introductory remarks to the screening of *The Last Angel of History*, Black Audio Film Collective Film and Speakers series, Georgia State University, September 26–28 and October 3–4, 2014.



The Nine Muses (directed by John Akomfrah, 2010, Smoking Dogs Films), frame grab.

The Ghosts of John Akomfrah

CHARLES P. "CHIP" LINSCOTT

The work of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) has been poetically recalled as "the ghosts of songs" in a gallery retrospective and subsequent critical anthology.[1] These titular "songs" vastly exceed their primary denotation; hence, they are also stories, forgotten histories, diaphanous traces of memories, and, especially, images and sounds quarried from the impossible archives of the black diaspora. While the collective disbanded in 1998, such ghosts continue to vex the work of pioneering director John Akomfrah, who, along with co-producers and former BAFC members David Lawson and Lina Gopaul (Smoking Dogs Films), consistently generates groundbreaking experimental cinema. In this piece, I will probe Akomfrah's recent work at several fundamental nodes—sonic/musical, archival, and historico-temporal—all of which are grounded in iterations of the black diaspora.

Specifically, I argue that films such as *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfrah, 1995), *Digitopia* (John Akomfrah, 2001), *The Nine Muses* (John Akomfrah, 2010), and *The Stuart Hall Project* (John Akomfrah, 2013) engage the sonic and the musical as both affective implements of memory and structural-theoretical scaffolding for cultural production. While sound and music are constitutive flows within the archive, they also leak through its seams. This seepage results from both sonic/musical representational ambiguity and the irregular attention paid to archival sonicity. Regarding the former, sound and music are representationally abstruse; they thus allow for a vigorous, recombinant logic that incites the undoing of archival codification and encourages myriad regenerations. Hence, funk, hip-hop, and techno provide inspiration for an Afrofuturist remixing of history in *Last Angel*, and Miles Davis' jazz operates as commemorative filament throughout *The Stuart Hall Project*.

Further, Akomfrah's work posits radical philosophies of history and time founded on the present-absence of Africana peoples within the archive. The director's oeuvre treats history and time as disjunctive, imbricated and nonlinear; therefore making them available for remixing, improvisation, and reconfiguration. To put it differently, the future is in the past is in the present, and all are open to, or in dire need of, re-vision. John Akomfrah undertakes nothing less than a reimagining of the aesthetics, epistemologies, and ontologies of African-descended peoples—such are the specters that haunt his art, and which he haunts in return. This essay feels the ghosts as they pass.

I understand Akomfrah's work to take ghosts seriously, if not exactly in the way popular culture typically understands them. Avery Gordon writes: "If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place."[2] Thus, ghosts haunt us—they *do* things—affectively marking their presence and founding modern social life by pulling us "into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition."[3] Ghosts, then, come in myriad forms, and this essay looks at a few that persistently flit through Akomfrah's art.

Digitopia sets the stage, outlining a number of key concerns. Smoking Dogs' website describes the film as a "drama about a man who lives in an analogue world but seeks to fulfill his desires in a digital world."[4] The man in question is haunted, in part by his generally unfulfilled desires for a prostitute named Tanya, and in part by broader affective and conceptual states—tensions between analog and digital, the socius and the collective, humans and nature—that constitute the dense combination of history and subjectivity that Gordon characterizes as modern social life. *Digitopia* uses sound—ticking clocks; blowing wind; street noise; and especially phone conversations, which are the primary, technologically distanciated mode of interaction between the man and his unrequited lover—to express the alienation and loneliness of contemporary existence. The film juxtaposes images of natural sublimity (mountains, lakes, the sky) and magnificent cityscapes with the spectral life led by a man who, despite his "connectedness" through modern technology, is estranged. Repeated shifts of *Digitopia*'s dominant chromaticism—ruddy,

aquamarine, sepia, jade, and ashen tones—do little to alter the somber and unsettled tenor. At several points during the voiceover, the man muses philosophically on the potential effects of universal contraction on personal history: "If the universe was contracting, she would be in my past." In the end, neither the deep time of the universe and the natural sublime, nor the humanist technological "conquest" of nature, provides solace for a man who merely wants to be loved. Time haunts him, but he cannot truly mitigate its

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
The frustrated lover holds time in his hands
DIGITOPIA
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2001, SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

ravages, even as his understanding of universal temporality interpenetrates his quotidian longings. He holds time in his hands, but fails to grasp it (Figure 1).

In these ways, this short video epitomizes a concern with time and history that is the loam of much of Akomfrah's work, especially insofar as his films and writings unsettle linear temporality in favor of time travel and the rewriting of history. In particular, Akomfrah wants to shatter the archive for its historically racist exclusions and erasures, while also mining its images and sounds for shards with which to piece together history anew. This is sometimes an understated procedure. *Digitopia*, for example, interweaves black American blues music from the early 20th Century (by Ramblin' Thomas, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Charley Patton) to convey the affects of the forlorn lover and signify a diasporic circulation from Africa to America to the United Kingdom. The film gestures at blues form in that it is haunted by sorrow and desire. Yet, *Digitopia* reaches back into the archives of the black Atlantic diaspora for historically important American blues music, using these songs to configure its filmic structure, affect, and signification. The film depicts the intense, emotionally charged unraveling of a relationship—the subject of much blues music—through multiple iterations of "call-and-response" structure, or antiphony. With strong roots in Africa, antiphony is of signal importance to most black popular musics, including blues, jazz, gospel, rock, and hip-hop. The film's narrative is in fact anchored by a telephonic call-and-response, as the male lover pleads with Tanya and is repeatedly rejected. While causal connections can be discerned, the relationship's trajectory is depicted nonlinearly—calls and responses cut-up and remixed. Not coincidentally, the man's final desperate plea is a proposal for the two of them to flee their lives in the United Kingdom for a fresh start together in America. This fraught attempt at transatlantic expatriation—a return to the birthplace of the blues—is brutally rejected. There will be no shelter, no solace. In these ways, Akomfrah locates a trace of what is to come in the past, and a trace of what has been in the future, a move that he repeats in a number of other works.

The brief haunting enacted by archival blues songs in *Digitopia* becomes a grand gesture in *Stuart Hall*. Previously, in *Nine Muses*, Akomfrah employed graphic onscreen titles marking different filmic sections, one for each of the nine Greek goddesses of inspiration. That graphic practice continues here, but marks periods of Hall's life in

> **"WHEN I WAS ABOUT NINETEEN OR TWENTY, MILES DAVIS PUT HIS FINGER ON MY SOUL..."**

synchronization with periods of Miles Davis' music, which accompanies various filmic sections. For example, Miles' *Filles De Kilimanjaro 1968* appears onscreen, announcing a segment of early BBC appearances and bits from Hall's young career. Such titles also tell us that the film is composed "entirely from [Hall's] film, television, radio, and photographic archives [along with] musical fragments from his lifelong listening to Miles Davis." This musical accompaniment—the ghosts of songs, again—is a signal element of both the film and Hall's life. Hall poetically intones: "When I was about nineteen or twenty, Miles Davis put his finger on my soul...the various moods of Miles Davis matched the evolution of my own feelings...and some of the nostalgia for what cannot be is in the sound of Miles Davis' trumpet." Hence, the film is haunted by "what cannot be"—lives not lived, histories unrecorded, opportunities denied, promises broken, homes forgotten. This haunting is, in part, an affective mnemonic marked by Miles Davis' music. Music, to be sure, has such power; as Kodwo Eshun puts it: music maintains a "despotic drive to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps, to eclipse reality in its willful exorbitance, to put out the sun."[5]

Together, the diverse elements of *Stuart Hall* form a dense orchestration of different tracks that accrete into a deceptively complex polyphony; it is, in other words, a film that demands careful and repeated close analysis. What Akomfrah and his partners have done is to raid a variety of archives in order

(LEFT) FIGURE 2:
Imbricated Layers: A photograph of young Stuart Hall is placed in front of a record player, which is spinning a Miles Davis album; both objects sit before a dreary cityscape viewed through blurry windowpanes
THE STUART HALL PROJECT
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 2013, SMOKING DOGS FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

to glean raw materials for a long-playing remix of personal biography, wide-ranging history, political and cultural theory, and race—all intercut with the affective and significatory powers of Miles Davis' music. We are thus tasked with simultaneously unraveling a number of different strands—or, if you will, of carefully attending to several competing melodic lines at the same time. The film frequently cuts together archival images, Hall's voiceover and interviews, archival sound recordings, Davis' music, and textual graphics, with no single element necessarily predominating. *Stuart Hall* makes us aware of this intricacy within the first few minutes of the film, as it juxtaposes various visual and sonic elements, each with differing affective and significatory valences. In Figure 2, for instance, personal history (Hall's photo) forms a façade in front of musical affect (Miles Davis' record), and both guard the way to murky urban geography (the drab city outside the window); note that both the photograph and vinyl album are archival means of preserving ephemeral slivers of pastness in mediatic form.[6] Put differently, they both try to capture ghosts.

Nine Muses is constituted by many of the same elements that found *Digitopia* and *The Stuart Hall Project*. It is haunted by the ghosts of the archive, like the latter film, but includes a great deal of new footage of fictional characters silently pondering tremendous natural scenery, like the former film. And, like most Akomfrah works, *Nine Muses* is experimental and complex, and can seem oblique at first. The film makes frequent allusions to Homer's *The Odyssey*, and is divided into sections corresponding to each of the nine muses, as mentioned above. The primary tension derives from exploration of the émigré's experience of diaspora and interminable transoceanic voyages to and from various "homes." History is, as usual, chopped and reorganized, with African-European and African-American emigrations and diasporic archival images/sounds at the fore. Ancient Greek history and myth nestle beside this archival footage, which in turn nudges the contemporary shots of mysterious, largely obscured spectral figures, covered head-to-toe in winter-proof attire, including mirrored ski goggles.

Akomfrah's characters here are keenly observant of the movements

(right) figure 3:
Vexed by Time and Distance: The mysterious émigré stands alone, contemplating diminution, during an ocean voyage
the nine muses
(directed by john akomfrah, 2010, smoking dogs films), frame grab.

"AKOMFRAH'S WORK DEALS WITH A MOURNING OR MEMORIALIZATION OF AN IMPOSSIBLE PAST..."

and circulations of capital, commerce, peoples, and natural forces. They sit, look, listen, and feel as these rhythms occur; yet we get the impression that they, like the man in *Digitopia* before them, are dwarfed in the face of such heft (Figure 3).

Alluding to the long transoceanic voyages that initiated portions of the African diaspora, the mysterious figures spend much time on or near the sea, but they never seem to speak. Their embodied voicelessness is a structuring absence in *Nine Muses*, particularly in comparison to the loquaciousness of the other films examined here. Of course, this is not to reduce all Africana culture or subjectivity to a vestigial experience with slavery, but to call for acknowledgement of the marks and scars that many individuals and communities bear, explicitly and implicitly; it is to remind of the persistence of lost or deferred histories, from both enslavement and diasporic dispersal, and how those forces work in concert with the cultural, political, and economic legacies of slavery, segregation, and anti-black racism. After all, Mnemosyne, who gets her own section in the film, is the personification of memory. We are called to remember—to remember unheard voices, to remember things that have yet to occur, to remember even that which we have never experienced in the first place, to remember ghosts.

These "impossible" acts—remembering the unknown, hearing the unspoken, seeing the invisible—pervade Akomfrah's films. Accordingly, I want to suggest that several of the elements we have been exploring—ghosts, haunting, missing or absent histories and people, interpenetrating temporalities—may be thought through the notion of the cenotaph. The etymology of the word "cenotaph" can be traced back to two ancient Greek words that together mean "empty tomb." Constructed all over the world for the last two thousand years or more, cenotaphs take a variety of architectural and artistic forms, but share common purpose in their public commemoration of the absent or missing dead. Here, this matters because much of Akomfrah's work deals with a mourning or memorialization of an impossible past in the midst of an uncertain future. That is, Akomfrah's films frequently mine the archive to explore what so often remains hidden, or that which is assumed to be "lost," namely, Afro-diasporic lives and histories put under erasure by white hegemony. Akomfrah creates art that marks, and then thinks through, the present-absence of blackness in modernity. In this sense, his work is *cenotaphic* in that it attempts to memorialize—to call attention to—bodies that are perpetually absent in both senses: lack of physical presence and erasure from the dominant archives. I maintain that this tendency memorializes bodies that may not be found at all, if they were known to begin with; thus, Akomfrah's work erects cenotaphs to an absent, if not lost, referent. Yet, this cenotaphic tendency is differently inflected in Akomfrah's work than it is in global monuments. This is especially the case insofar as Akomfrah creates audiovisual works (films, videos, installations) that are by definition ephemeral and reflect the aforementioned reconceptualization of time, contra the monumental attempts at permanence and fixity found in granite and limestone cenotaphs. Indeed, much of Akomfrah's output explores monumental ideas through the quotidian. As Akomfrah himself writes, the films of both Black Audio and Smoking Dogs often pursue an "impossible gesture, a desire to cease and entrap the ghost... to reconcile the facsimile and the real, history and myth."[7] These are monuments to ghosts of the past, and to specters yet to materialize.

Finally, *The Last Angel of History* is an experimental DigiBeta video essay (and the only film in this article produced by Black Audio) with both a fictional narrative arc and copious use of creatively treated talking head interview footage, primarily of figures associated with the Afrofuturist canon (if there is such a thing) including George Clinton, DJ Spooky, Greg Tate, Octavia Butler, and so on.[8] Following the adventures of a time-traveling hero from the future known as the

> **"HE WANTED RECOGNITION THAT BLACK PEOPLE WERE THE FIRST ASTRONOMERS..."**

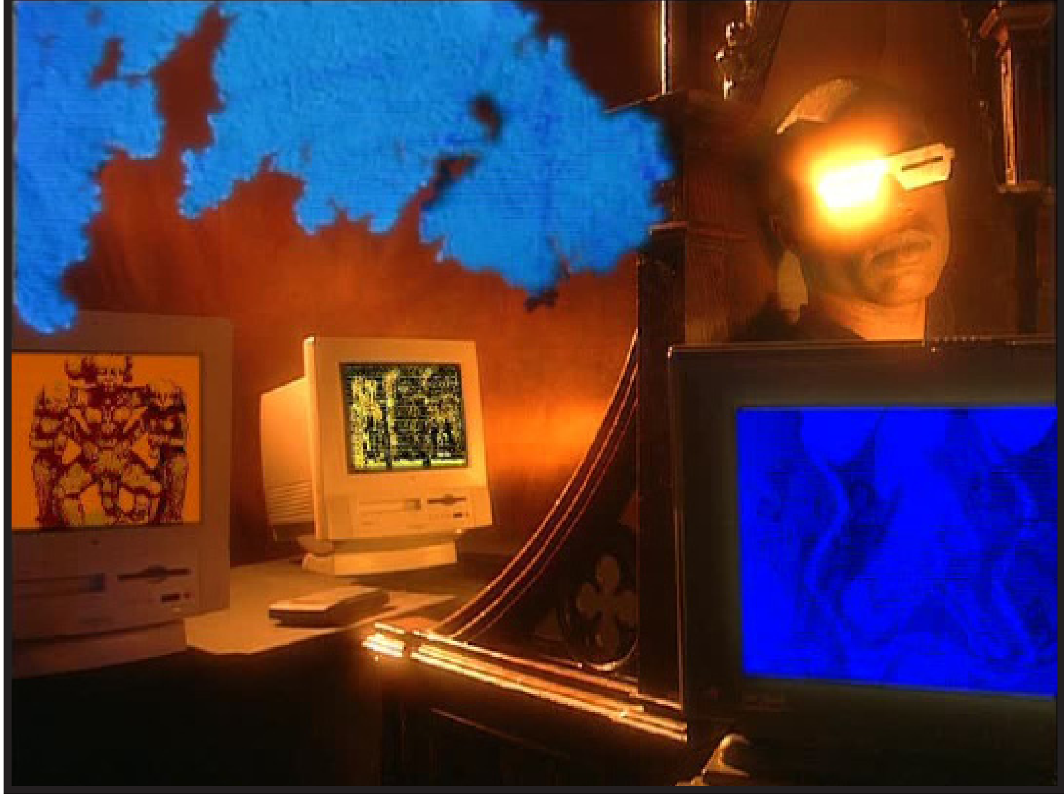
"Data Thief," *Last Angel* explores the fecund theoretical implications of the music, art, literature, and criticism surrounding Afrofuturism. Much of the focus is on the music and its performance/performativity, highlighting music's conceptual and theoretical potency, or, as Shana Redmond puts it, music is a *method*, "a complex system of mean(ing)s and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment… [and] to new political modalities."[9]

In *Last Angel*, the Data Thief receives clues about the past: the "black secret technology" of the blues, the "Mothership Connection" of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, and the like. Only in the past, it seems, can our future-hero find the answers he seeks, and the past he is revisiting was in fact already living in the future when he arrived back in time. Thus, many of our themes come together: Data Thief's quest, the film itself, and the music/figures with which the film is concerned are all foundationally archaeological; they are attempts to uncover and reconstruct a history that has either been written out, or was never written originally. The quest is met by remixing, by time travelling, by rewriting and reactivating history through experimentation, through sonic, musical, and audiovisual theory and praxis. It's a future-past, with seeds in the present—funk uncut. Of course this is idealistic, but, as Eshun suggests in the film, so are the musics at issue here, including the Detroit techno that takes its cues from Afrofuturist pioneers Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee "Scratch" Perry. These are all "impossible musics" that "imagine the future" rather than reflecting the past, or, we might say, they imagine a past *which may have been*—such as Clinton and Ra's fantastic invocation of black people's potentially extraterrestrial origins—while attempting to construct a future that may yet come out of the materials presently at hand (Figure 4).

The Data Thief's archaeological expedition soon uncovers "Africa," which he reasons is the source of "science fiction," an originary form rooted in the African use of "drums to cover distance." Or, we might say, *Last Angel* locates the origins of science fiction (and, of course, Afrofuturism) in the musical-communicative collapsing of time and space, or drumming as the attenuation of space-time. Akomfrah's formal innovation yet again matches the complexity of his thematic concerns. At times, sounds and voices are heavily effected—reverb, phasing, delay—and talking head interview footage is often shown on a screen-within-the-screen, displayed on an old personal computer placed slightly off-center, or on multiple screens scattered throughout the frame, forming an infinite regress of frames. Images and sounds flash and rapidly cut in and out—photographs, artwork, archival documents, and scientific sketches from African and Afro-diasporic history are rapidly intercut with interview footage and the sci-fi mélange of the Data Thief's quest. The inclusion in *Last Angel* of pioneering African-American astronaut Bernard Harris gestures toward the Pan-Africanism that gained such traction in much of postcolonial Africa and in Civil Rights movements in America. Harris, an avid science fiction and Parliament fan, brought along an African "composite" flag on his first NASA space flight—a flag which included all of the flags of all the countries in Africa at the time of the voyage—as a salute to his Afro-diasporic heritage. As Harris says, he wanted recognition that black people were the first astronomers and mathematicians in the world; hence, the "future-past-present" vortex is transposed to his NASA work. As the descendant of ancient African astronomers, he describes himself as their "son," returning from space (and the future) to show what has been accomplished. In the film, all of this is remixed with myriad rapidly intercut images from Ghana—a ghost from the future, visiting ghosts from the past, set to a soundtrack from outer space.

Foundationally, Akomfrah is imagining possible worlds—past, present, and future—in an era that desperately needs it. He persistently returns to the demand for re-envisioning and rewriting history precisely because whiteness has spent centuries becoming invisible, normalizing itself at unfathomable cost. As Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer contend (with nods to Stuart

Hall and Gayatri Spivak) this process proceeds through “the epistemic violence that has, historically, disavowed difference in Western discourses.”[10] So, these monuments to ghosts obviously work upon whiteness as well—exorcising it and drawing it out into the light, where it can be properly seen. Indeed, as blackness hovers throughout the BAFC and Akomfrah’s work, it is variously mobilized to recall, rethink, recreate; to tear down and build up again; to critique; to question; and to dream. In their oblique, even opaque (re)configurations of sounds and images, these films insist upon deliberate reflection—they demand that audiences think—but they are also visceral, presenting audiovisual material that is immediately affective. Like a chill down the spine, Akomfrah’s films move us directly while leaving behind vexing questions—thoughts lingering on the threshold of consciousness for days after contact. They are very much like ghosts, then, persistently challenging the conventional and calling us to hear, see, and otherwise sense the potentially transformative possibilities of existence as best we can. ■

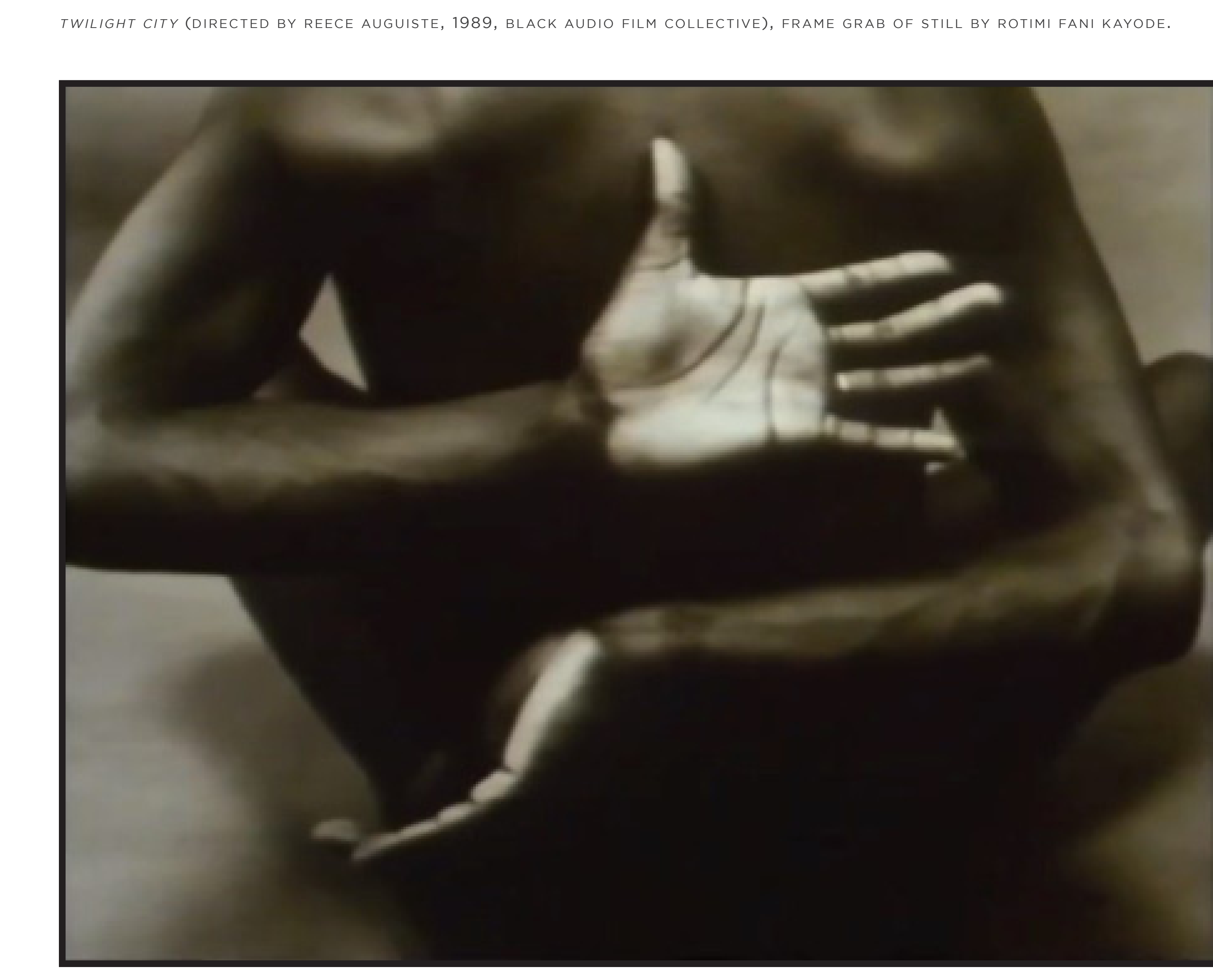


(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
The Data Thief’s Remix: “Surfing across the internet of black culture, breaking in…and stealing fragments”
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995, BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

[1] Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, eds., *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982–1998* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
[2] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, New ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.
[3] Ibid., 7–8.
[4] “Digitopia,” Smoking Dogs Films, http://www.smokingdogsfilms.com/filmDigit.htm.
[5] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998), -004. Eshun’s idiosyncratic pagination in this book indicates that page -004 should be understood as the fourth page of his introduction.
[6] Both Fred Moten and Alexander Weheliye produce innovative theorizations of blackness and “pastness in mediatic form” in their respective texts. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
[7] John Akomfrah, “Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora,” *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (2010): 27.
[8] Kara Keeling suggests that the film is, in fact, engaging in the process of creating an Afrofuturist canon. At this point, the film would also then be part of such a canon. Kara Keeling, “Introduction to *The Last Angel of History*” (Atlanta: BAFC Film and Speakers Series, Georgia State University, October 3, 2014).
[9] Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.
[10] Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “De Margin and De Centre,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 456.

The Ghosts of Akomfrah

TWILIGHT CITY (DIRECTED BY REECE AUGUISTE, 1989, BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB OF STILL BY ROTIMI FANI KAYODE.



Inside and Out: The Open Hand in the Work of Donald Rodney and Keith Piper

KRISTIN JUAREZ

“When one of your hands touches the other, something peculiar happens: You become aware of the strange ambivalence that makes your body different from all other things. Your hand is an object in the world, but it is also something you experience from within. And the hand you touch is also both an object and a feeling, sensing part of your embodied self. The touched *thing is also* touching.” Daniel Birnbaum on the exhibition *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*[1]

The outstretched hand is a gesture that can be located in the everyday, the ritual, the performance, and the sculpture. As a gesture of exchange, agency, and arrest in the work of art, it becomes a site of poetic resonance. Evoking Merleau-Ponty, Daniel Birnbaum describes the hand as the threshold for the embodied self and the body as object in the world, and the site where desire to move, and for artists to make, meets its external constraints. Artists Donald Rodney and Keith Piper—who along with Eddie Chambers and Claudette Johnson organized the Blk Art Group in Britain in the 1980s—created images that produced a tension with external constraints of social and political discrimination that dominated the public sphere, including city streets, neighborhoods, art schools, and the art world. The production of artwork, exhibitions, and conferences such as the National Black Art Convention in 1982, and later the Living Archive in 1997, suggest that cultural production was for these artists not only a question of visibility in the art world, but also about making visible the processes by which images deny depth of black subjectivity, allowing only shallow surfaces of blackness, as a signifier of difference, to be present in the records, in the galleries, and in the media.

It becomes possible to consider how these artists' formal decisions of scale, medium, and style worked with content to demand a hypervisible presence in order to critique the paradoxical conditions of social, political, and artistic constraint that was denied expression. As outlined by Jean Fisher in her introduction to the Living Archive conference in *Shades of Black*, reimagining presence across temporal distinctions has become a critical methodology for both artists and art historians to account for the processes of erasure and loss. This, she argues, has resulted in a historiography that is deeply invested in the voices of artists, diverging memories, and conflicting trajectories.[2] For many artists that began making work in the 1980s in Britain, the archive provided a site for critical examination and creative production where absences can be generative and loss can be exposed. The centrality of the body, both within the record and as a record, oscillates between the body experienced from within and the exterior image of the body. Two later works from Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, I will argue, articulate the unique position of the fold as articulated by Merleau-Ponty and elaborated by Domieta Torlasco. Both works manage to suspend a moment between hypervisiblity and invisibility, as well as the moment of touching and being the touched thing.

For Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, the body becomes a site for archivization of—as Torlasco posits—memory and creation, translation and invention.[3] By 1997 the two artists, who both began as painters, were working across artistic mediums that resulted in multimedia installations. Tracing the

prevalence of art mediums across the 1980s, Kobena Mercer notes that a decade that began with painting soon saw the rise of independent filmmakers working in film and video, as well as photography.[4] Coming out of art schools, artists were both addressing the formal specificity of their selected medium and its history. In *3 Songs of Pain, Light and Time* (1995)—a film made with the Black Audio Film Collective—Rodney notes that in addition to his personal relationship with Keith Piper, his artistic radicalization was inspired

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Donald Rodney, *In the House of My Father*, 1996-7. Photograph, color, on paper mounted onto aluminum, 1220 x 1530 mm, Tate Britain, London (work © The Estate of Donald Rodney), courtesy of the estate of Donald Rodney.

by Frida Kahlo's ability to use her crippled body as a metaphor for a broken political system. Piper's early paintings have been contextualized by the aesthetic sensibilities of Robert Rauschenberg. Filmmakers of the Black Audio Film Collective very deliberately engaged in renegotiating the language of filmmaking, including nonlinear narrative structures, experimentation with sound, as well as color. Photographers such as Joy Gregory, Ingrid Pollard, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode were as Mercer states—challenging the norms of documentary realism.

By the 1990s, the boundaries between mediums were no longer applicable. Prompted in large part by collaboration, conversations, and exposure taking place between black artists, a fluidity emerges by which media, archive, and historical and contemporaneous art images get incorporated into a multi-media practice. This practice can be seen most vividly in the works of the Black Audio Film Collective, Donald Rodney, and Keith Piper. As artists captivated by aesthetics as well as the history of form and/as the political, the way in which content is delivered cannot be overlooked.

In 1997, Donald Rodney produced the photograph *In the House Of My Father* and Keith Piper produced *Hand and Remains* for his interactive CD-Rom, *Relocating the Remains*. Both works feature the artist's own outstretched hand in a gesture of offering. As an image of resistance, the open hand counters the closed fist of black power with a radical openness. For Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, the images of their open hands act as the investigative surfaces at the threshold of interiority and exteriority of the body. Utilizing the skin as the archive where visual and avisual impressions can be found, both Rodney and Piper's hands are mediated through a hybrid use of artistic mediums.

There are several effects to be analyzed: how the artists use the image to produce and record the way the experiencing body gives way to being the art object; how the images subvert the paradoxical position of the black hypervisibility and invisibility through the use of the fold; the significance of technology (art medium) as it mediates a radical disorientation of the body schema. Rodney's use of photography to document a sculpture and his body (but also a place and memory), and Piper's digital programming that document his artwork and his body (and also bodies under surveillance and enslaved bodies) illustrate a deliberate mediation in which one artwork is understood through another. Their images, in which their bodies are both centrally

“THE SCULPTURE TRANSFORMS THE PHYSICAL LOSS OF HIS SKIN INTO A MEDIUM...”

present but distinctly absent, destabilize the proprioception of the experiencing body as an act of resistance, in which black subjects are not denied interiority but rather are able to deliberately withhold complete legibility.

In Donald Rodney’s photograph *In the House of My Father*, the artist’s outstretched hand holds the fragile sculpture of a house made of his own skin (Figure 1). The photograph was taken from his hospital bed, and is not itself the artwork, but is documenting the sculpture titled *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*. The sculpture transforms the physical loss of his skin into a medium, and that production into a site of mourning. Rodney uses his skin, which he lost following a surgery, in order to recall a prior hospital stay that prohibited him from seeing his father before he passed away. The sculpture does not honor the limits between interiority and exteriority, but rather radically folds them into one another. As Jennifer Barker explains, “As the edge between the body and the world, then, the skin functions always as both a covering and uncovering, because of its simultaneous proximity to the public world and to the secretive inner body.”[5] Here the secretive inner body is the site of his memories as well as the sickle cell anemia. His skin becomes the threshold where both become visible.

As an archive, the sculpture made of his skin makes the inner secretive body available to the public. His skin becomes a site where the limits of the representable are expressed as what Akira Lippit defines as the avisuality of an archive, or the externalization of an internal process.[6] As memories are hidden within and exposed as a house, the unstable sculpture throws into crisis Derrida’s emphasis on the archive as a permanent dwelling that shelters, which is also the expression of a principle of authority.[7] Domietta Torlasco elaborates, “Lineage, inheritance, transmission, according to family or state law—the site that the archive needs to realize itself as such is inextricably physical and symbolic.”[8] As an impermanent site marking the passing of his father the year before, the current loss of his skin, and the doubt his illness casts on his future, the photograph challenges the politically problematic “house arrest” that Derrida identifies as a condition for the archive.[9]

Mediating the sculpture, the photograph provides the indexical trace of both Rodney’s presence and the absence he is expressing. According to Derrida, as the archiving technology, the photograph produces as much as it records the event.[10] In the image, the sculpture sits in Rodney’s hand, visualizing the moment where Rodney is both the touching subject and the touched thing. For Lippit, self-awareness of radical exteriority, in which his interiority has been brought to the surface, allows the looking subject to disappear.[11] As such, the photograph documents a suspended state of disappearance, which allows for what Torlasco identifies as the possibility of “hybrid formations at the threshold of the visible world.”[12] Rodney’s hybrid subjectivity reorders his bodily schema as a fold, where he is both touching and the touched thing.

The skin he holds is all surface, visualizing a radical exteriority by obfuscating interiority without denying it. While the photograph acts as an archive, making visible the event, there is within the image a secret archive that is “...never located entirely on the inside or outside, never entirely visible or invisible.”[13] Unspoken memory, as Lippit describes, belongs to the avisual, the anarchive that captures the unsayable or unarchivable.[14] Torlasco describes avisuality, or the unrepresentable, as a rearrangement of perception that maintains an obscurity even as images make visible. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, she explains, “the fold is yet another name for the chiasm perception, the intertwining of seeing and being seen, touching and being touched—the cipher of reversibility, a coiling or doubling back that is in principle asymmetrical and always unfinished.”[15] This is where Rodney’s gesture becomes one of resistance.

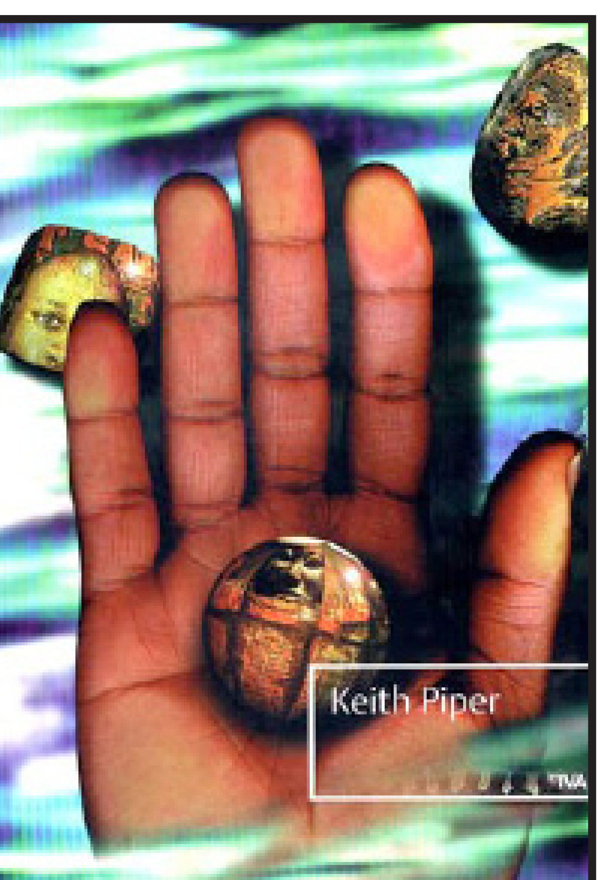
As a political body, he rejects the always-already-ness assigned to black British subjects. As the site

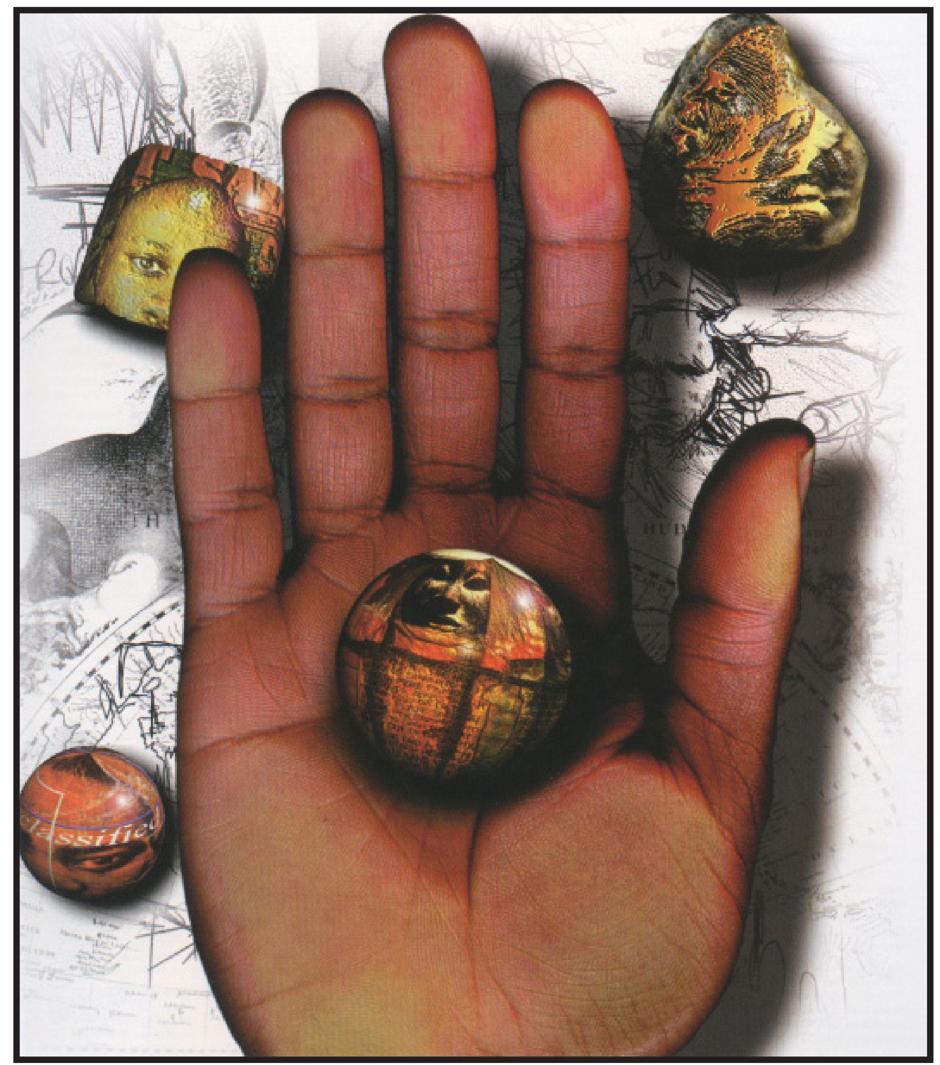
where blackness is visualized, the skin's ability to cover and uncover the secret inner body has been historically mobilized to evidence the invisible qualities of race visible. It is the site of overdetermination and where folding—as Alessandra Raengo asserts—has been employed to turn subjectivity inside out, refusing black bodies of interiority.[16] Further, the medium of photography has been utilized for the purposes of indexing racial difference, using its technology as way to prove the indisputable visibility of race.[17]

Sickle cell anemia, as Eddie Chambers has noted, has come to signify blackness because black people are the primary population affected by it. Rodney had attempted to use his "diseased" blood as part of the artwork *Visceral Canker* (1990). Rodney described the use of his blood saying, "The blood serves as an analogue for all Black blood, or all Black people, who are frequently seen as a cancer within white society."[18] The collectivizing move that Rodney performs within his body can further an examination of the sculpture *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*. Because the skin has become both the archive and the fold, the sculpture becomes a site of reversibility, acting as a site of the public's invisibility, the effects of a public disease. Akira Lippit describes the slippage between skin and archive as, "A place at once interior and exposed, imaginary and material: a public interiority and secret exteriority."[19] As Chambers noted in his lecture "Visualizing the Struggle of Black Britain" for black people the home did not necessarily mean refuge, it was a site that was both private and public as police could raid at their discretion. For many, homes were not chosen, but rather places where people were "put."[20] Without the privilege of interiority, the home becomes a site of folding, providing the opportunity for a multiplication of narratives that includes constraint, displacement, and urban

(LEFT) FIGURE 2:
Keith Piper, Cover image for exhibition catalogue *Relocating the Remains*, 1997, 220 x 310mm. Institute of International Visual Arts, London (work © Keith Piper, Institute of International Visual Arts), courtesy of the artist, Institute of International Visual Arts.

(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:
Keith Piper, Still from *Hand and Remains* project on *Relocating the Remains* CD-Rom, 1997 (work © Keith Piper), courtesy of the artist, Institute of International Visual Arts.





deterioration. In 1987, Piper and Rodney collaborated on *Next Turn of the Screw*, a mural painted directly on the gallery's wall that commemorated the black men and women who had been killed in their homes. As an act of resistance—following the silence of public officials acknowledging the death of fourteen young people in a house fire—civil uprisings made the invisibility of mourning and of injustice hypervisible.[21]

Central to the hypervisible and invisible paradox is the way technology mediates the meaning and immediacy of blackness. As mentioned earlier, Derrida believed that archivization produces the event as much as it records the event. As such, he continues archivization of an event is not apolitical, rather, "This is also our political experience of the so-called news media."[22] The appropriation of the news-media event is central to Keith Piper's practice as a means to deconstruct and reconstruct images of blackness. Suggesting new media art as both archive and fold, Torlasco elaborates, "Here memory comes into being as a folding of dimensions that cannot be simplified or translated into one another without residue: the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the intelligible, the future and the past—it is such an excess of openness with respect to its own constitution that the heretical archive displays and affirms against the violence of definition and the inevitability of forgetting."[23] New-media art practices as heretical archive performs a radical exteriority by means of its self-awareness, and does not make its mediation invisible but hypervisible. Remediation—which Bolter and Grusin define as the way in which new media is expressed by refashioning of old media—cannot erase the latter, but instead rearranges the order of perception.[24] Piper then uses the possibilities of new media to rearrange his perceiving and perceived body.

In *Hand and Remains*, Piper's open hand holds a digitally rendered sphere made up of Piper's 1982 painting *Black Assassin Saints*. The discoloration of the hand's fingertips and palm produce the effect that the hand is pressed directly against the surface of the image. A few versions of this image have been circulated online and two are in the exhibition catalogue, *Relocating the Remains*. As the cover for his exhibition catalogue, the background is an abstracted field of blue and aqua, referencing simultaneously the ocean, the sky, and a nebulous cyberspace (Figure 2). The wisps of color covering the bottom of his hand suggest that the hand is not in front of, but within the ambiguous matter. In the final image in the catalogue, the abstracted background is replaced by an image that combines loose sketches of human bodies, handwriting, and a world map that are recognizable as such but also indiscernible (Figure 3). The shadow the hand casts emphasizes the illusion of depth, and suspended between the background and the hand are various "stones."

There is one other difference between the two versions of *Hand and Remains*. The second image, which also has the map as a background, has an additional stone that has an image of a black man's face with the word "unclassified" written across the forehead. The image is manipulated in such a way that it is hard to distinguish who the person is and gives him an anonymity that could either protect the individual or generalize him as "all" black men. The other stones present in both versions are an image of the artist's face, partially obscured by the hand, and an image of a profile etched onto it recalling his work, *Seven Stories from Permanent Revolution* (1997).

In the image, his hand and face are both present yet detached from each other and any other body part. While the digital construction does not seek an illusory *trompe l'oeil* effect, the shadow the hand casts emphasizes the physical presence of the hand within the artifice. Here, hypermediacy becomes a particularly fruitful concept to describe the possibilities made available in *Hand and Remains*. Bolter and Grusin posit, "Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself—with windows that open to other representations or other media…In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle or obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy."[25] As a windowed body, his body parts function independently of one another, allowing him to simultaneously be the touching subject and the touched thing. As part of the remains, the title suggests that his head and the other stones are to be discarded, so the still image suspends the disappearance of the looking subject. As a result, the image depicts a body that is no longer confined to its physical limits, and as a fold prompts a rearrangement of the order of perception. The arrangement and unclear presence of these objects that exist in a heterogeneous space, rather than a flat one, suggest that these images can move fluidly within it and have meanings and relationships that are deliberately shrouded.

As part of the larger project *Relocating the Remains* that accompanied an exhibition catalogue for his mid-career retrospective, the CD-Rom hosts the records of Piper's digital projects including video works, sound recordings, and research images. Throughout the visual material, the outstretched hand arises as a motif through his work as a site of offering in works such as *A Ship Called Jesus* (1991), where hands hold coins before a slave ship grounded by water and topped by the church arch, and *The Fire Next Time* (1991), where three video works are projected onto a slide image of an open hand (Figure 4). Printed on the CR-Rom, two cupped hands appear to be cradling the disc itself. In the publication foreword, Gilane Tawadros and David Chandler (the Director and Projects Manager) explain, "In the past his work has consistently invoked the body and its sensory domain: eyes and hands recur; speech, vision and touch are tangible registers that underpin his narratives of difference, subjugation and resistance; the complexities of desire, of pain and longing are inscribed across the somatic field."[26] In addition to the interactive projects on the CD-Rom, Piper has included an archive of modes of surveillance on black men, ethnographic images as a site for both undiscovered narratives as well as the historical construction of racial difference as evidenced in the photographed body.

As a multi-media archive that resists the inevitability of forgetting, *Hand and Remains* also includes an archive of his body, his past work, and effort furthered throughout the content of the CD-Rom. By hypermediating these bodies, Rodney allows a figure to exhibit a radical exteriority that is irreducible to itself, as Torlasco claims, acting as "a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity."[27] Refusing to accept the historical ways in which these figures have been denied interiority, Piper's interventions reveal the ways in which they were made to be both hypervisible and invisible, while reinscribing their position as one of deliberate opacity, demanding the right to not be understood.[28] As a result, Piper creates what Torlasco terms the heretical archive, one that "can help us imagine an unruly, porous, incoherent legacy, one that appropriates a certain history rather than attempting to negate it."[29]

Further denying the ability to know all of these bodies, *Relocating the Remains* is dispersed across an exhibition space, a catalogue, CD-Rom, and an Internet site. About this dispersion in cyberspace, Piper states,

> In the case of this project, the act of 'relocation' takes on multiple meanings. In a literal sense, the relocation becomes from physical to virtual space. The remains of objects, activities and ideas which at one time exclusively occupied the cold space of galleries and other places designated for the display of art, have become disembodied, recoded into digital form. At points these remains are compacted onto the CD-Rom, at others they are set adrift onto the virtual expanses of the Internet.[30]

By emphasizing the fluid mobility of ideas, process, and objects that disperse and converge across virtual space and physical spaces, Piper reinforces the presence of the avisual in the visible. Like Rodney, the works also fold public interiority and private exteriority. As Jennifer Gonzalez writes, "For Piper, visual images are not, or not only, always already corrupted signs participating in the spectacle that is capitalism; they can also be the site for significant identifications, particularly for those subjects who are interpellated by them and can recognize themselves in specific histories of embodiment."[31] By creating images that do not always suppose a denied interiority, Piper encourages viewers to see themselves seeing as a way to better understand the depth of the figures imaged as surface.

Donald Rodney and Keith Piper use their own bodies as an act of resistance occurring between the hypervisibility and the invisibility of blackness in the public sphere. By performing the fold in which

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
Keith Piper, *The Fire Next Time*, 1991, Dimensions Variable, Exhibition view from *A Ship Called Jesus*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England (work © Keith Piper), courtesy of the artist, Institute of International Visual Arts.

the touching subject become the touched object, they both work to expose the limits of visibility from within the inner secret body, and body politic. Gonzalez writes, “Race serves as an aspect of secrecy in the logic of publicity, but as an already publicly constructed discourse, its secrets are plainly evident. This is its fundamental contradiction.”[32] Rodney and Piper each perform this contradiction at the level of the body through the seemingly small gesture of the open hand. While the image appears to be rooted in the individual body, I have argued that in both works enfold private and public, expressing the conditions of constraint for black people in their physical environment.

In *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* Fred Moten indicates, “Constraint, mobility, and displacement are, therefore, conditions of possibility of the avant-garde. Deterioration is crucial to the avant-garde, as well: as a certain aesthetics, as an effect of disinvestment, as a psychic condition: the decay of form and the internal and external environment of regenerative aesthetic production: turning, vanishing, enclosing, invaginating.”[33] Moten’s suggestion articulates the processes by which the threshold of the outside world and the inner body produce new aesthetic forms. Further, by recognizing the fold as a regenerative aesthetic, Moten’s insights amplify the radicalism of Rodney and Piper’s works.

Stemming from Rodney’s deteriorating health and the decay of the post-industrial city of Piper’s childhood, both artists sought to express how a constraining police force, attempts to displace their British identity, and the suppressions of public demonstrations affected the individual body and the body politic.[34] By using their bodies to express the invagination, or folding that Moten identifies, Piper and Rodney produce hybrid forms of self-reflexivity proposing new arrangements of perception of blackness, including its mediation and resistance, in the public sphere. ■

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[1] Daniel Birnbaum, “Lygia Clark Museum of Modern Art, New York,” *Artforum* 53, no.2 (October 2014): 274.
[2] Jean Fisher, “Dialogues” in David Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press Books), 169.
[3] Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xi.
[4] Kobena Mercer, “Iconography after Identity,” in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press Books) 49.
[5] Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, First Trade Paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 28.

[6] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.
[7] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.
[8] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 1.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 17.
[11] Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 46.
[12] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xv.
[13] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 10.
[14] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, 11.
[15] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.
[16] Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 2013), 43.
[17] Jennifer Gonzalez, “Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology” in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 341.
[18] Eddie Chambers, *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton (London: Autograph, 2003), 33.
[19] Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 9.
[20] Eddie Chambers, “Visualizing the Struggle of Black Britain” (lecture, National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta, GA, September 27, 2014).
[21] In 1981 and 1985, cities around Britain experienced the uprisings or riots that responded largely to racial injustice.
[22] Derrida, *Archive Fever* 17.
[23] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.
[24] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 6.
[25] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation*, 35.
[26] Gilane Tawadros and David Chandler, foreword to *Keith Piper: Relocating the Remains* by Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997), 5.
[27] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.
[28] In Kara Keeling lecture “Errantry and Imagination in Wanuri Kahiu’s *Pumzi*,” she leveraged Eduoard Glissant’s concept of opacity as a position of resistance to reductive concept of the Other. (lecture, Georgia Institute of Technology, October 2, 2014).
[29] Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xv.
[30] Keith Piper, “Relocating the Remains (A nomad leaves few traces),” Invia, http://www.iniva.org/piper/RRNotes.html
[31] Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 70 (January 1, 2009): 55.
[32] Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public,” 59.
[33] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 40.
[34] Mercer, “Art Histories and Culture’s Geographies: 1979–1985” in *Relocating the Remains*, 20.

PAUL KLEE. *ANGELUS NOVUS*, 1920, OIL AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER,
31.8 X 24.2CM. ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM (COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS).

Akomfrah's Angel of History

CLINTON FLUKER

What is the nature of history in John Akomfrah's 1995 documentary, *The Last Angel of History*? One way to answer this question is to begin with the title. *The Last Angel of History* is surely a reference to Walter Benjamin's famous meditation on Paul Klee's 1920 painting, *Angelus Novus*, in his own "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In the ninth thesis of this text, Benjamin does a close reading of Klee's painting in order to make a critique of Karl Marx's historical materialism. Benjamin discerns that the image depicts an angel looking toward a catastrophic past: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."[1] The angel of history desires to stay and help mend this catastrophe, but his wings are caught in a storm that propels him toward the future: "This storm is what we call progress."[2]

There are two important aspects to this thesis that are relevant to understanding the concept of history in Akomfrah's film: the location of the storm and the angel's desire to stay. Benjamin explains that the storm's origin is Paradise. In Abrahamic religious traditions, Paradise is the subject of various interpretations. Paradise can refer to the mythic Garden of Eden (from which humans fell from grace), the future state of the universe that will eventually be restored, the afterlife (heaven), or a combination of the three.[3] Usually depicted as a peaceful place, Benjamin portrays Paradise as the source of a violent storm that ferociously propels the angel of history's wings toward the future: "a storm is blowing in Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them."[4]

The angel of history's back is turned toward the future because he wants to stay—presumably in the present (or perhaps even return to the past)—to help mend the catastrophe before his feet. However, historical materialism's sense of history is oriented towards the future. That is to say, each distinct historical event builds on another toward a logical end based on material progress. Critical of this position, Benjamin describes the past in this painting as a pile of debris that continues to grow skyward.[5] Unable to fight the storm, the angel is forced in a temporal direction against his will for the sake of progress.

II

In the narrative of *The Last Angel of History*, Akomfrah deals head on with the notion of history by using a similar mechanism employed by Benjamin in "Theses." Rather than focusing on a character in a painting, Akomfrah considers the story of the historical figure and blues legend, Robert Johnson. In the very beginning of the film, the narrator recites the famous story of how Johnson learned to play the blues: "Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in the Deep South. He sold his soul and in return he was given the secret of a black technology, a black secret technology that we know to be now as the blues."[6]

Using this story as inspiration, Akomfrah creates another character in Johnson's image he calls the Data Thief. Two hundred years into the future, the Data Thief is told a story: "If you can find the crossroads…you'll find fragments, techno-fossils, and if you can put those elements, those fragments together, you'll find the code. Crack that code, and you'll have the keys to your future."[7] Before venturing on his journey to find the crossroads, he is given a clue: The Mothership Connection. Following this clue, the Data Thief, "[Surfs] across the internet of black culture, breaking into the vaults, breaking into the rooms, and stealing fragments, fragments from cyber-culture, techno-culture, narrative-culture."[8]

Armed with a special set of sunglasses and a black box, this character is a time-traveler. The documentary follows the Data Thief as he discovers different fragments of black cultural productions throughout history in the form of video footage, pictures, and interviews with artists and critics. Several of these interviewees include Juan Atkins, John Corbett, Derrick May, Ishmael Reed, Greg Tate, DJ Spooky, Kodwo Eshun, Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and George Clinton. Eventually, The Mothership Connection leads the Data Thief to twentieth-century Africa.

According to the narrator, when the Data Thief reaches Africa, he

becomes the last angel of history. Similar to Benjamin's angel, Akomfrah's angel is trapped. Though the Data Thief wants to return to his own time in the future, his search for Johnson's crossroads has led him back in time to 20th century Africa where he will forever be stuck in time and space.[9] The reason the Data Thief is trapped in this period is best understood through an analysis of how Akomfrah uses both The Mothership Connection and the crossroads throughout the narrative.

III

Released in 1975, *Mothership Connection* is Parliament's 4th studio album. The album cover features a photo of Parliament's bandleader, George Clinton, sitting in a spaceship near an unidentified planet. When asked about this album cover in an interview from *The Last Angel of*

(LEFT) FIGURE 1:
The Data Thief
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

History, Clinton states: "On [this] record, I had to find another place that we hadn't perceived black people to be, and that was on a spaceship. So, I pictured him in there leaning like it was a Cadillac. You know, slidin' through space, chillin'… coming from the planet Sirius."[10]

In addition to the imagery provided on the album cover, the music situates blackness in outer space through the use of electronic voice distortions and musical instruments such as Bootsy Collins' famous star-shaped electric guitar. In other attempts to situate blackness in odd places, Parliament also became known for their jarring live performances and eclectic outfits. In one interview for *The Last Angel of History*, techno artist Derrick May states:

> I went to go see a concert when I was a little kid… I'll never forget this man coming out of the top of the roof on a cable, dressed in a diaper and big white platform boots, playing a guitar and called himself Starchild. And then this other dude comes out of a so-called spaceship that lands out of the center of the stage.[11]

The album tells the story of the arrival of Starchild, an alien from another planet, who has arrived in a Mothership (spaceship) to bring the people of Earth the *Funk*. This storyline is narrated by several different characters including the Lollipop Man. On the album's first track, "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," acting as an intergalactic DJ, Lollipop Man informs the citizens of Earth that they are listening to a broadcast from the Mothership on a frequency he calls W-E-F-U-N-K:

> Welcome to station WEFUNK,
> better known as We-Funk
> Or deeper still, the Mothership Connection.
> Home of the extraterrestrial brothers,
> Dealers of funky music.
> P.Funk, uncut funk, The Bomb.[12]

Integral to interpreting *Mothership Connection* is Clinton's notion of Funk. According to Kodwo Eshun, an acclaimed music and Afrofuturism critic, Funk is a healing substance. In his book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Eshun notes that Parliament's very first album was called *Osmium*, the world's most pungent metal: "Funkadelia… invades through the nostrils and seeps through the nerves, setting inhalation at war with the body. You breathe in

the purification of the universe."[13] Lollipop Man states "P-Funk":

> If you got faults, defects or shortcomings,
> You know, like arthritis, rheumatism
> or migraines,
> Whatever part of your body it is,
> I want you to lay it on your radio,
> let the vibes flow through.
> Funk not only moves, it
> can re-move, dig?[14]

In addition to its healing properties, Starchild describes the Funk as a substance that is so ancient, it is likely that the citizens of Earth have simply forgotten how powerful it can be: "Face it, even your memory banks have forgotten this funk."[15] As referenced in the song "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," Funk is as ancient as the Egyptian pyramids that the Parliament crew has returned to claim. In fact, the secret to Funk, Earth's regenerating life force, is in the pyramids. All Starchild wants to do is remind the citizens of Earth of this fact by hitting them with pure, unadulterated Funk. Luckily, Funk is also something that is easy to obtain. All a person needs to do is listen to the Funky music performed by Starchild and his crew: "Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip and come on up to the Mothership."[16]

Also in "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," Starchild welcomes the people of Earth to "good times" on the Mothership. He tells the listeners that his arrival, itself, is the Mothership Connection. Eshun states: "The Mothership Connection is Clinton's symbol for what happens to Funk when you pass it through the studio and when it becomes astro, or it becomes space, when it becomes extraterrestrial."[17]

As Starchild's voice travels through the radio waves, a connection between the citizens of Earth and the UFO is forged. If the voice of Starchild is the medium through which Funk is dispersed to the citizens of Earth, and Funk itself is the ancient source of good vibes and Earth's life force, The Mothership Connection represents a return to origins: "The Mothership Connection is the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and Africa as an Alien Future."[18] This logic is further supported by the name of the album and the connection that is forged between the people of Earth and the spaceship. The "Mother" ship Connection is a metaphorical allusion to the middle passage and a return to Africa. Likewise, it is no surprise that the Data Thief's search for the crossroads leads to Africa while aboard Clinton's Mothership. However, it is still a quandary as to why Akomfrah's angel gets stuck there.

IV

In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory,* Houston Baker discusses the idea of the crossroads in blues and African-American culture. Baker's attempt at developing a black vernacular theory through a blues aesthetic will help shed light on why the Data Thief finds himself trapped. Baker says of the crossroads, "the railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travelers—a multifarious assembly in transit."[19] Baker asserts that blues singers, like Robert Johnson, are always situated at a crossroads because it is only at this sight of fluidity that

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:
Black Box and Sunglasses
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995, BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

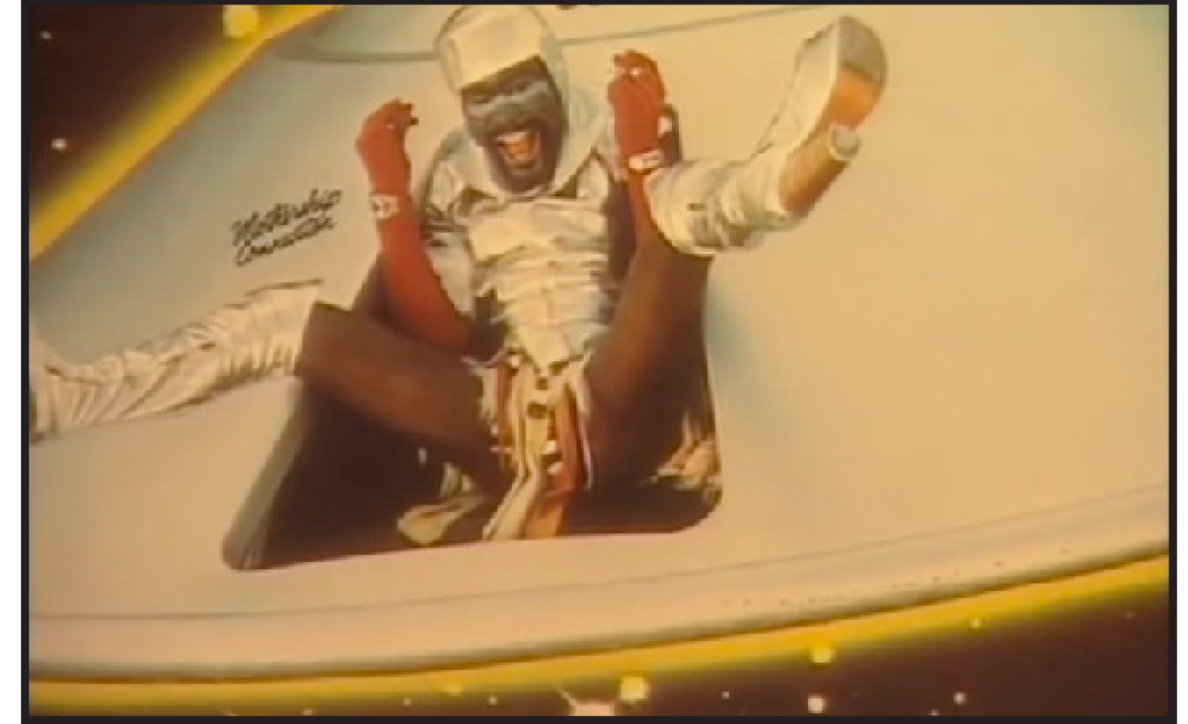
"HE ARGUES THAT WHEN BLUES ARTISTS SING [...] THEY PERFORM AN ACTION THAT IS SIMILAR TO THE BLACK HOLE..."

a blues singer finds the power to transform "experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song."[20] In this way, Baker describes a concept of the crossroads where the rules and principles of the world that usually constrict or oppress a person no longer apply. By singing at the crossroads, the blues singer and his kin, such as the Data Thief, experience a form of liberation through artistic expression.

In an attempt to explain how his philosophy of a blues aesthetic operates, Baker uses the scientific concept of the black hole. In the text, the black hole functions as a prime metaphor for how he believes the crossroads transforms time and space. A black hole is a star with gravity so dense that it consumes all light that comes into contact with it. Occasionally, because the amount of energy concentrated inside a black hole is so powerful, it pulls other stars and planets into its orbit. If a star were to get too close to a black hole, it would be consumed after crossing the event horizon and enter a field where time and space bends.

In scientific circles, what lies on the other side of a black hole is unknown, but there is conjecture that they may be portals to other universes altered by the bending of the space-time continuum.[21] This is the aspect of the black hole that Baker finds so interesting. He argues that when blues artists sing or when writers such as Richard Wright employ a blues vernacular in their work, they perform an action that is similar to the black hole:

> The symbolic content of Afro-American expressive culture can thus be formulated



(LEFT) FIGURE 3:
Mothership Connection Album Cover
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

> in terms of the black hole conceived as a subcultural…region in which a dominant, white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume, producing a new expressive order.[22]

In *The Last Angel of History*, the narrator states that Robert Johnson received a secret black technology at the crossroads. He goes on to explain that this black technology was the blues and that, "the blues begat jazz, the blues begat soul, the blues begat hip-hop, the blues begat R&B."[23] Within the film's narrative, we follow the lineage of Robert Johnson 200 years into the future, where Akomfrah introduces the Data Thief. Just as in Baker's text, the Data Thief is drawn toward the crossroads because he wishes to be free of his own time. However, as he traces The Mothership Connection back to Africa, back to the crossroads, he realizes that he can never return to where he came from.

This realization at the end of *The Last Angel of History*, at first glance, appears contradictory. If the Data Thief stays tuned to the Mothership and locates the crossroads, he is supposed to find the key to the future! So why is he stuck in twentieth-century Africa? Baker argues that once a person enters the black hole (or the crossroads), they are utterly transformed. He likens entering the black hole to going through rites of passage. When a black person enters the crossroads, they go through three rites. The first stage "involves the black person's separation from a dominant, white society."[24] In the second stage, the black person feels a sense of "… timelessness and spacelessness… outside of history…characterized by [the] receipt of ancestral wisdom."[25] During this phase, Baker argues that an ahistorical "sense of the black self's historicity" is achieved.[26]

During the third stage, the initiate is reintegrated into the society from which they came, but they are totally and irreversibly transformed because that person has now been made whole through their interaction with ancestral wisdom:

> The expressive community at the center of the black hole is always conceived as 'marginal' because its members never 'return' to the affective and perceptual structures of an old white dispensation. In actuality, the expressive community of the black (w)hole…is the center of a new order of existence.[27]

That is to say, the black (w)hole is a space marked by fluid radicalism. Black people at the crossroads allow themselves to become vessels whereby the blues are released into the world to take on forms and rhythms that can no longer be contained by the normative conventions of the day, such as the notion of linear history. Akomfrah further develops this connection to the crossroads when a frame featuring the Data Thief's sunglasses and black box (time-traveling tools) is followed by a frame of a nail and a piece of wood. This juxtaposition shows how the nail and the wood, perceived analog instruments, are actually time-traveling apparatuses that have aided black people in their efforts to move fluidly in and out of conceptions of rigid, linear historical frameworks for generations.

V

I argue that the manner in which Akomfrah employs the concept of

(LEFT) FIGURE 4:
Nail and Wood
THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY
(DIRECTED BY JOHN AKOMFRAH, 1995,
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE), FRAME GRAB.

history in this film resonates quite well with Benjamin because *The Last Angel of History* also attempts to make a critique of historical materialism. Benjamin's angel sees the past as a whole catastrophe, not a series of independent catastrophic events leading toward a logical future. Throughout the text, Benjamin levels a critique against Karl Marx in particular, and other historical materialists generally, for failing to recognize the interrelated nature of seemingly separate events over time. Moreover, with too much focus on progress toward the future, the past and the present conditions of actual people are easily overlooked.

In similar fashion, Akomfrah's angel serves as a critique of strictly linear notions of history by orienting his angel's narrative toward the crossroads and The Mothership Connection. Near the end of the film, Akomfrah's angel cannot leave twentieth-century Africa because he has gone through the black hole of the crossroads where time and space bend. It is where concepts such as past, present, and future no longer have the same meanings that they did before. The Data Thief has returned via The Mothership Connection to an Africa that is both an ancient past and an alien future simultaneously. In other words, the world where history is linear is an "optical illusion."[28] There is no future or past for the Data Thief to return to because he has entered a realm where such distinctions are fluid and unfixed. Thus, at the end of *The Last Angel of History*, the viewer discovers that the Data Thief is not trapped at all. Instead, he is free of the very idea of chronological history altogether. ■

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.
[2] Ibid., 258.
[3] Editors Markus Bockmuehl and Guy G. Stroumsa discuss the various meanings of Paradise in the Christian and Jewish traditions in *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[4] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257. Susan Handelman's "Walter Benjamin and the Angel of History," *Crosscurrents: Religion and Intellectual Life* 41, no.3 (1992): 344–352 expands upon Benjamin's use of Paradise and its relationship to the Jewish religious tradition.
[5] For more on Benjamin's critique of historical materialism see Theses I-VI, 253–255.
[6] John Akomfrah, dir., *The Last Angel of History*. Black Audio Film Collective. 1995. May 9, 2014. http://vimeo.com/72909756.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] The narrator of the film makes two specific references to the Data Thief traveling to Africa during the film. In the 26th minute, the Data Thief travels to 'our time' and the

Akomfrah's Angel

voiceover is accompanied by images of Africa from the early to the mid twentieth-century. In the 37th minute, the narrator states that this is the Data Thief's last visit to Africa, and the voiceover is accompanied by what is presumably video of Africa during the 1990's, the time the film was produced. Precisely where in twentieth-century Africa the Data Thief gets stuck is unclear.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Parliament. "P-Funk." *The Mothership Connection*. Casablanca Records, 1975. Spotify.
[13] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 54.
[14] Parliament, "P-Funk."
[15] Ibid.
[16] Parliament. "*The Mothership Connection*." The Mothership Connection. Casablanca Records, 1975. Spotify.
[17] Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), Kindle Edition, 228.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Neil Degrasse Tyson, *Cosmos: A Space Time Odyssey*, "A Sky Full of Ghosts." NBC Studios. Mar 30, 2014. Apr 10, 2014. http://www.hulu.com/watch/615445#i0,p0,d0.
[22] Baker, 3526.
[23] Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*.
[24] Baker, 3542.
[25] Ibid., 3554.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 3582.
[28] Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*. Throughout the film, Akomfrah refers to how the difference between social reality and science fiction is an 'optical illusion.' In this sense, the film suggests that the real lived experience of black people around the world is quite similar to popular science fiction narratives such as those offered by *The Mothership Connection*.

John Lennon with Michael X - interview (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtDu73_4QIc), frame grab.

The Fluidity of Black Radicalism in 1980s Britain

CAMERON KUNZELMAN

British life in the postwar period was counted off in civil disturbances. While the term "riot" has a complicated position in both public discourse and in British legal tradition, it is possible to delineate a whole group of hesitations down to a set of facts. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed sporadic British uprisings, and in the 1970s these became more regular as police applied more and more pressure to the generations of immigrant populations that had poured into Britain over the previous three decades. In 1980, Bristol was on fire. In 1981, the populations of Brixton, Southall, Toxteth, and Liverpool were rising up. 1985 saw it all happening again, both in those places and in others.

The question that haunted the authorities during the riots and continues until this day is: why? At the bottom, what was the root cause of these riots? In their book *Uprising!*, published in the period between the 1981 and 1985 civil disturbances, leftist journalists Martin Kettle and Lucy Hodges point to the long history of British rioting for "powerless people" to "physically challenge the world that seemed to deny them what they wanted."[1]

The creation of a new British subjectivity in the immediate period after World War II cannot be understated, and the understanding of the collective "who" that rose up in the 1970s and 1980s is dependent on that factor. The postwar years saw the passing of the Nationality Act in 1948, which in no uncertain terms declared that "all citizens of independent commonwealth countries remained British."[2] Between 1948 and 1962, when the first of several immigration-limiting bills was passed, there was a massive influx of migrants to mainland Britain from across the empire. British citizens from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean immigrated for a number of reasons, most significantly due to the perception that there was more work opportunity there for them. Alongside those work opportunities, which were both scarce and concentrated in the service and construction sectors, they also experienced racism and what they called the "colour bar," a concept which mirrors the American "color line."

These migrants faced systemic racism from a variety of personal and governmental sources. "Europeans only" signs were commonly posted outside rental apartments or homes, forcing a *de facto* ghettoization of the newly-immigrated that limited social mobility. Political party members ran on anti-immigration and anti-immigrant platforms. There were many incidents of singular violence against those immigrants as well as large events like the Notting Hill riot in 1958 where the black population was terrorized for days on end by white "teddy boys" with iron bars and petrol bombs.

The mass migration into mainland Britain in the 1950s and 1960s meant that a large portion of the black and Asian youth of the 1970s and 1980s were first-generation. When Black Audio Film Collective member David Lawson spoke about the influx of Caribbean immigrants at a *liquid blackness* retrospective on the Collective's work in the Fall of 2014, he characterized it as colonial peoples traveling to a place that they considered home. This was doubly literal for the first-generation youth. They were living in the unified colonial and cultural home country of their birth.

At the same time, they were also living in a country that was experiencing the worst recession since the prewar period. Inflation had steadily ticked up before drastically increasing at the close of the 1970s. Unemployment was the highest Britain had seen in decades. Police violence against communities of color showed no signs of slowing, and the overapplication of stoppages and arrests on "sus" (a version of criminal loitering) increased tension between those communities and an overzealous, implicitly racist police force.[3]

This gives us at least a sketch of an answer to the "who" in "who was uprising during the 1980s?" and allows us to begin to answer the original question of "why were these people rising up in violent response to their government and social situation?"

I am going to use the rest of this essay to dwell on this question because it provides us with the ability to think about elements of fluidity in black radicalism. As a term,

"black radicalism" evokes several different registers. One is that of the decolonization efforts, in concrete and written form, demonstrated so clearly by Frantz Fanon in his *Toward the African Revolution* and *Wretched of the Earth*. Another form is that embodied by various tactics employed during the American Civil Rights Movement: the community, service, and economic boycotts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that have been folded under the long shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the early Black Power stances of Stokely Carmichael during his time with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and after. Still another form is the black militarism embodied by the Fruit of Islam and then, later, the Black Panthers. Yet another is Fred Moten's sense of the black radical tradition, encompassing the black poetic and jazz traditions as ways of formulating a particular kind of politics that valorizes those modes of artistic creation as ways of understanding new forms of collective expression and action.[4] The jazz ensemble, for example, becomes a way of thinking through radicalism itself.

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Michael X leaving a plane in the Black Audio Film Collective's *Who Needs A Heart?* (BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE, 1991), FRAME GRAB.

This network of black radicalism in all of its different forms points to a particular mode of *liquid blackness*. To speak of *liquid blackness* is, in part, to talk about the ways that blackness arranges itself in space as well as how it arranges space around itself. However, if that is true, then there are secondary functions of *liquid blackness*, and we must talk about the *politics* of that liquidity and what it affords in terms of the ability for people of color to act in the world. What we can see in the case of black radicalism is a space in which the liquidity of blackness allows for a plurality of methods for addressing how blackness is marked onto the body. Fanon's description of being hailed as black in *Black Skin, White Masks* is the ur-moment of this formulation, illustrating how blackness constructs both the visual and the space the visual takes place in.

Black radicalism, then, can be seen as a container that *liquid blackness* both forms and is formed by. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will take a speculative historical approach and map the fluid radicalism of the past with contemporary developments in understanding the liquidity of blackness. While the latter might inevitably be tied up with current ways that capitalism and the visual arts have interweaved with one another, it is perhaps fruitful to think backward in order to trace moments of fluidity that have set the conditions of possibility for our contemporary period.

I am going to dedicate the rest of this essay to two particular cases in which black radicalism's fluid structure played out in the history and context of the civil disturbances in 1970s and 1980s Britain. The first will be that of Michael X, his particular brand of black radicalism, and how it demonstrates the space-shaping qualities of *liquid blackness* in the context of the riots. The second will be an analysis of how the British political system understood the political uprisings and how the fluidity of radicalism generated a particular kind of response from the British political and policing establishment.

John L. Williams' *Michael X: A Life in Black and White* is an account of

Black Radicalism

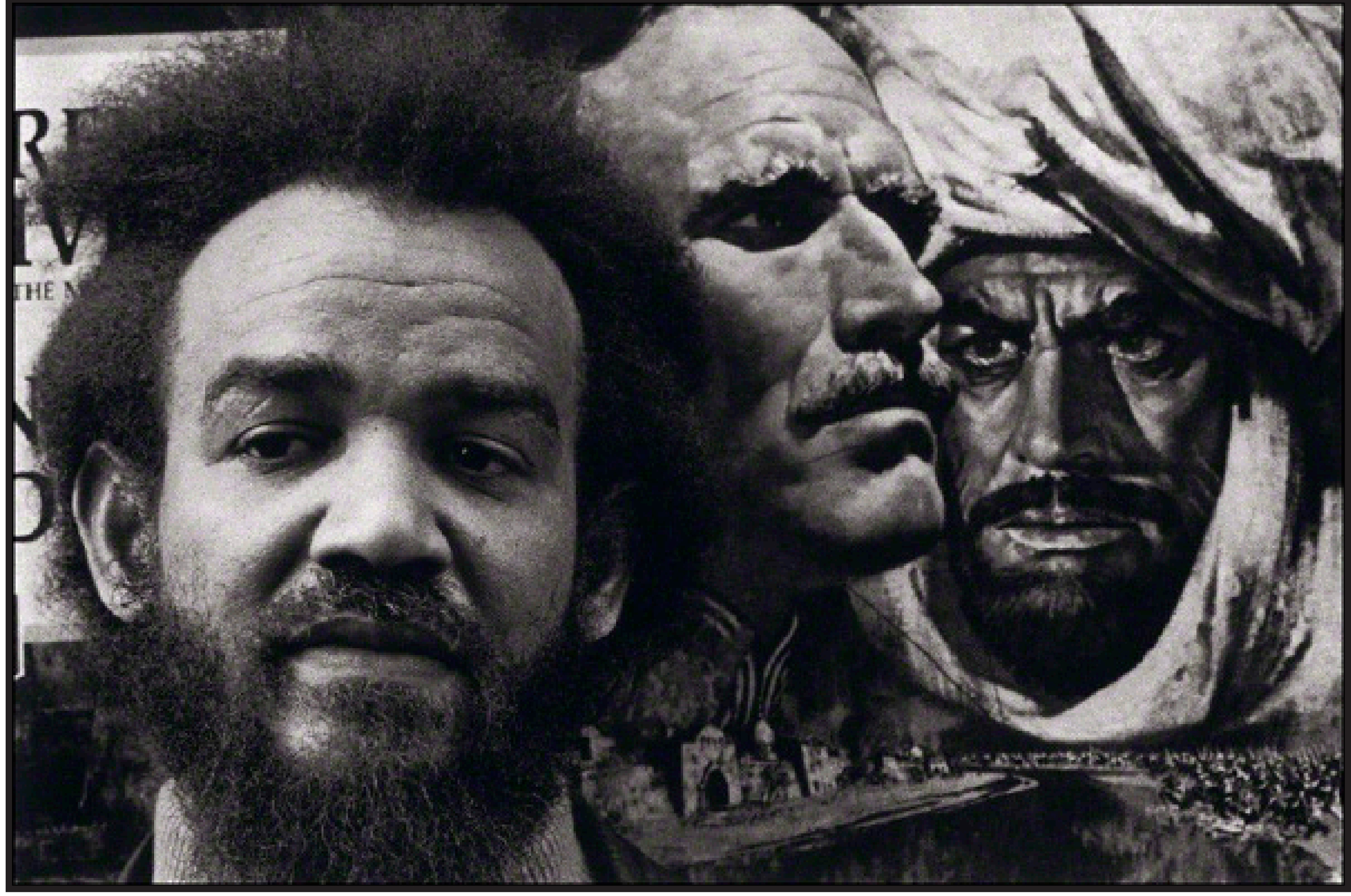
"MICHAEL X CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF A NATION THAT WAS BARRELING TOWARD A DECADE OF RACIAL VIOLENCE..."

the life of Michael De Freitas, who became well known as Michael X (and at the end of his life, Michael Abdul Malik). It is a story of a particular formation of militaristic black radicalism in the United Kingdom during the 1960s. An heir to the political goals of figures like Malcolm X, Michael X captured the attention of a nation that was barreling toward a decade of racial violence and rebellion. He first burst into the spotlight with the formation of the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS), which was an organization devoted to racial justice in Britain.

In and out of jail for various charges of public disturbance, Michael X understood that any developments in the political power of black people in Britain would have to be built on a stable structure. His answer came in the form of the Black House, a community and organizational center that existed to exclusively support black artists and community members. Lacking the grassroots funding base of organizations like the Nation of Islam, Michael X funded the Black House through "his preferred money-raising technique—exploiting white liberal guilt."[5]

It is precisely this white liberal guilt that makes Michael X's story as a criminal turned black power public figure salient for a discussion of the liquidity of black radicalism. Michael X was able to secure funding from celebrities like John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who committed ten thousand pounds to Michael X in order for him to write a book on "the Black Experience."[6] At the same time, he

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:
HORACE OVÉ, *MICHAEL X (MICHAEL DEFREITAS; MICHAEL ABDUL MALIK)*, 1966, COLOR PRINT.



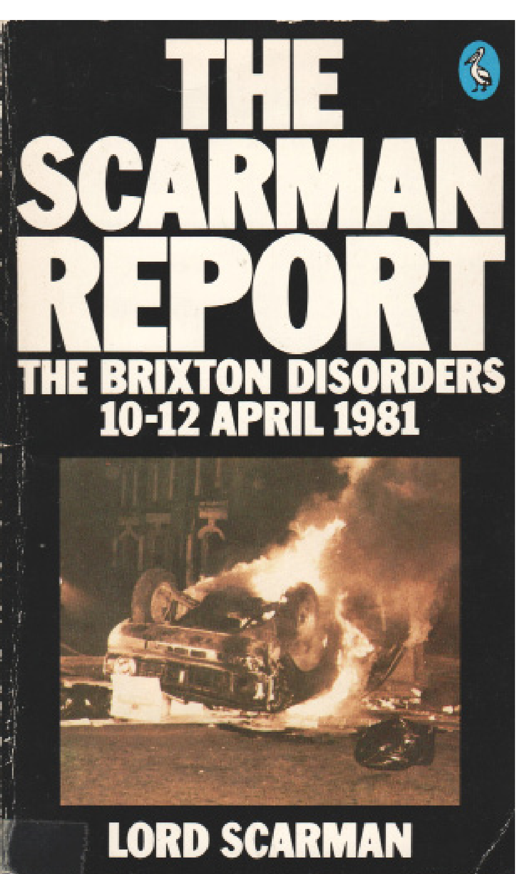
called for donations to the Black House by "upbraiding the white reader for taking an interest in black struggles abroad but ignoring what goes on the home front."[7] In these moments, he is invoking a black radicalism that reduces the complexity of the material, lived conditions of black people and turns it into a shapeless, liquid mass that flows through and stands in for the actual lived lives of those people. Michael X's white liberal audience, in their rush to find "black radicalism," can only find this amorphous, manipulatable mass that claims to represent a vast plurality of experiences that can never be reduced to a single entity.[8]

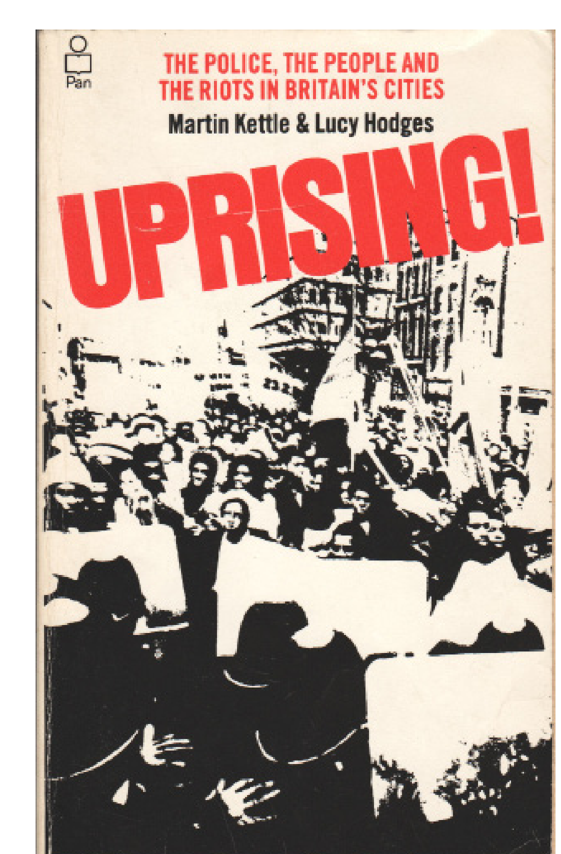
The period in which Michael X was most active, the late 1960s and early 1970s, "reflected the growth of a more radical, autonomist movement in black British politics," but current historical documents make it apparent that the radical left in the United Kingdom grew disenchanted with American-style black radicalism as the 1970s went on.[9] The civil disturbances of the 1980s were not generated through a black radical dream of slogans and community solidarity, but instead through a response to increased pressure by policing agencies.[10]

The British riots of the early 1980s present a post-black power world in the sense that black power is not an abstracted specter existing rhetorically to secure concessions from intelligentsia of British society. Instead, it has become materially grounded within the crowds of black men and women literally exercising power to attack and expel militarized police from their communities. While these victories in 1980, 1981, and 1985 were never totalizing or permanent, it is a moment where the becoming-liquid, or becoming-abstracted, quality of blackness is thwarted by a solidity in black communities allied with both themselves and others.

However, in the investigatory aftermath of these events, we can see a fluid black radicalism appearing again. Instead of the radical left evoking a malleable blackness for a tactical victory, this time it is the moderate right asserting that there must be a black radicalism at the heart of an uprising against the state apparatus that oppressed black people daily.

A reader of Kettle and Hodges' *Uprising!* will notice this specter of black radicalism. In the Sunday newspaper after the Brixton riots, Sir David McNee alleged that the riots were started by "troublemakers from elsewhere."[11] There were other hints that "white and black agitators came into the area once violence had broken out" but had not started the riots.[12] Later, during July's so-called copycat riots, "the hunt was





(LEFT) FIGURE 3:
The Scarman Report, the controversial published findings of the British government's official inquest.

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
Uprising!, a book written about the sociological conditions that caused the riots published in the early 1980s.

on immediately for outside political activists."[13] There were unconfirmed reports of Cockney and Scottish voices. The Labour Party Young Socialists handed out pamphlets, which drew concern around their involvement in the riots. There were hints of guerilla tactics being used by motorcycle gangs and "young men masked in balaclava helmets."[14]

The inquest into the Brixton riots led by Lord Scarman, producing the well-known *Scarman Report*, considered and dismissed these claims of outside influencers.[15] Despite raised concerns that there were American, white outsider, and Rastafarian direction and organization in the riots, none of these were substantiated. The civil uprisings were, from the facts that could be gathered, merely enacted by large groups of people deciding that they were not going to take it anymore rather than the machinations of organized politics. For some like Ronald Butt, a writer for *The Times*, "the problem was 'well-educated activists' who are 'getting young blacks to believe they are victims of police oppression.'"[16]

This is the other side of the abstracted, fluidification of black radicalism. In this case, the Right is able to leverage fears about black radicalism into an outright moral panic about a strange, allied group of collaborators. Yet, just like Michael X, the conservative ideologues of authority understood that abstracting this radicalism away from any actual material manifestation of political action allows for a "justified" reactionary, conservative response to the situation. The fluidity allows for actual black organizations, figures, and regular people to be sublimated beneath reports of "grimly determined" young black men who seemed to initiate the riots in Brixton.[17] In the moment that the radicalism rhetorically manifests as anything other than a symptom of a material condition, it becomes abstracted, moveable, and malleable like clay.

When black radicalism follows the pattern of *liquid blackness*, lifting and becoming abstracted from material conditions and into the realm of space-making sensorial politics, there is a danger that the abstracted blackness can become a totalizing, essentializing force. In these two examples, I have tried to show ways that black radical politics, in the time around the riotous period of the 1980s in the United Kingdom, have become fluidly radical. I have attempted to show that this moveable, flowing existence of blackness does not always beget a net positive. While the possibility of black radicalism to flow through groups ("Black is a state of mind," says the protagonist of *Who Needs A Heart?*) is sometimes liberatory, embracing an excess that can evoke community and coalition, it can also be gathered and manipulated that much easier.

There is a danger in becoming *more than*, a double-sided political venture that cannot ever be fully brought into a wholly liberatory light. ■

[1] Martin Kettle and Lucy Hodges, *Uprising! The Police, The People and The Riots in Britain's Cities* (London: Pan Books, 1982), 11.
[2] Ibid 41.
[3] Historical information on this time period in Britain can be found in Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!* and Brian D. Jacobs, *Black Politics and Urban Crisis in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[4] The term "black radical tradition" was coined in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
[5] John L. Williams, *Michael X: A Life in Black and White* (London: Century, 2008), 170.
[6] Ibid 178
[7] Ibid 179
[8] This is not to suggest that the Black House was all smoke and mirrors to line Michael X's pockets. John Williams highlights Vince Hines and Herman Edwards as well as "a number of solid hard-working community-oriented black people" who worked on setting up and facilitating genuinely beneficial work at and in conjunction with the Black House.
[9] Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 49.
[10] Pamphlets and zines published by rioters are still, to me, the most interesting and salient documents that express the intentions of the rioters themselves. Of particular note is the booklet *We Want To Riot, Not To Work*.
[11] Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 114.
[12] Ibid, 115.
[13] Ibid, 161.
[14] This and the previous examples are all taken from Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 161–162.
[15] *The Scarman Report* contains several pages of evidence about outside influences on the Brixton riots, 73–78. Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report* (London: Pelican Books, 1982).
[16] Butt is quoted in Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 187.
[17] Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report*, 175.

WINTER ONE VOLUME TWO

TWENTY FIVE CENTS

al-islam

THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL

Pilgrimage To The Holy Kaaba In Mecca

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THE HAJJ PILGRIMAGE, ONE OF THE MANY SYMBOLS USED BY IPNA EDITORS TO MOVE AFRICAN-AMERICANS TOWARDS "ORTHODOX" ISLAM. *AL-ISLAM: THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL* 2, WINTER 1 (1973)

Seeing and Reading *Al-Islam*: The Visual Rhetoric of the Islamic Party of North America's Newspaper (1971-78)

ABBAS BARZEGAR

While it is well known that African-American encounters with the global religion of Islam preceded the rise of the Nation of Islam in the mid-twentieth century as a national movement, historians also recognize that it was only in the larger cultural context of the black freedom struggle that figures such as Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali could help make Islamic symbols and imagery part of black political consciousness. One can add a host of artists, musicians, and cultural figures such as Amiri Baraka, Yusef Lateef, and H. Rap Brown to this process. By the early twentieth-first century, estimates suggested that there were well over one million African-American Muslims in the United States. Various studies demonstrated that they belong to a range of different organizations and Islamic religious orientations.[1] The transformation of African-American Islam which took place between the 1960s and 1980s is a complex and fragmented story that involves a myriad of organizations and individuals who engaged with different elements of Islamic tradition in different contexts with different aims. Unfortunately, because of the dearth of documentary and literary sources from this period, scholars have largely been unable to reconstruct and understand this important chapter in American social history.

Therefore, the scholarship on this material remains unsurprisingly thin and has failed to account for a seismic shift recognizable to any observer of African-American cultural history: namely that before 1970 the majority of African-American Muslims were members of the Nation of Islam and the word Islam in most black communities was virtually synonymous with that organization; whereas by the mid-1980s African-American Muslim communities flourished in a variety of different religious orientations and the rank and file of the Nation of Islam rapidly diminished.

During this period, a number of African-American Muslim organizations emerged to further the revolutionary ideals and demands of the multifaceted movement for black empowerment. Some groups, such as the Nation of Gods and Earths (Five Percenters) and the Hanafis, splintered from the Nation of Islam and further developed aspects of its ethnocentric theological project while others, such as the Dar al-Islam and the Islamic Party of North America, blended old-world "orthodox" Islamic beliefs with African-American revolutionary practices. In doing so, African-American Muslim organizations and movements have struggled to strike a balance between adopting the allegedly race-neutral religious identity of global Islam (which materialized more in theory than in practice) and addressing the social and political needs of historically disenfranchised black communities in the United States. Naturally, the very notions of blackness and African-American identity vis-à-vis the notions of American citizenship and membership in the wider global Muslim community would become a charged subject in the discourses underlying these movements' discursive and political practices. This essay explores the way one organization, The Islamic Party of North America (IPNA), active between 1970–1978, managed this tension in its print publication *Al-Islam: The Islamic Movement Journal* published in Washington D.C. between 1971–78. More specifically, it explores the way this tension was addressed in the visual rhetoric of the paper's cover images (or lack thereof) and overall structural layout.

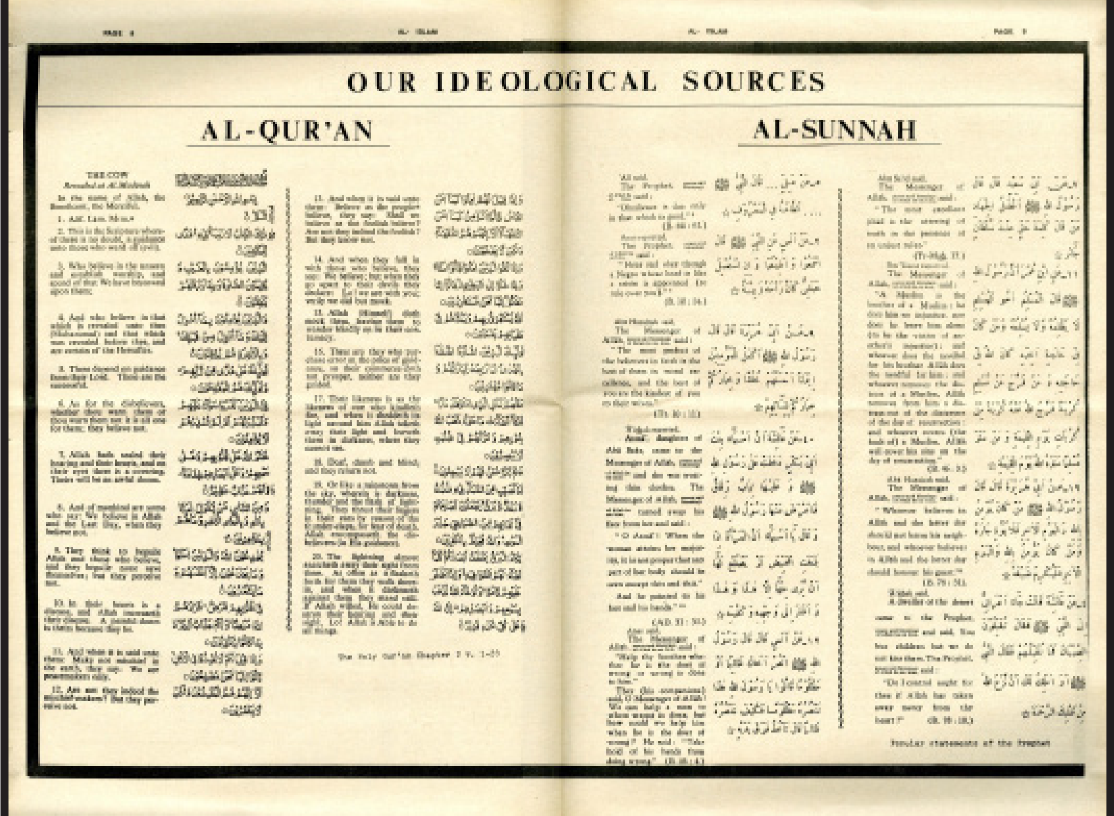
The IPNA was founded by Muzaffaruddin Hamid (originally

Cornelius Washington), an Atlanta-born aspiring jazz musician who converted to Islam after moving to New York City in the early 1960s. After traveling extensively throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Muzaffaruddin founded the IPNA in 1971 in Washington D.C., operating out of the Community Mosque located at 101 S Street. The organization was active in the neighborhoods surrounding Howard University where it distributed its newspapers in competition with organizations such as the Black Panther Party's *The Black Panther* and the Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks*. It also competed with the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (founded by Malcolm X) and its publication *The Western Sunrise*. The choice of images, titles, and other visual elements of the newspaper *Al-Islam* demonstrate that the editors and writers of the paper struggled to articulate both the institutional racism underlying black oppression in the United States and the strategic platform for revolutionary change that could overcome such obstacles to freedom. The struggle can be seen in the employment of visual elements in the paper that oscillate between symbols of Islam's larger universalist dimensions and those that address the particularities of the black experience in the United States.

THE ISLAMIC PARTY OF NORTH AMERICA AND *AL-ISLAM: THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL*

Muzaffaruddin established the Islamic Party after becoming disaffected with the formal politics of the Islamic Center of Washington D.C., which functioned as a cultural outfit for the Arab League. In addition, the Islamic Party sought to actualize the promise and potential of Islam as a revolutionary cultural and political force to alleviate black oppression in the United States. That the organization's headquarters were only a few blocks away from Howard University, where members regularly campaigned in competition with other black empowerment organizations, is a testament to the group's intention to participate in a nationwide cultural debate about black liberation.[2]

Among the distinctive features of the Islamic Party was its strident emphasis on ideology. IPNA used *Al-Islam* as a tool of advocacy and pedagogy as it sought to promote an alternative Islamist humanism as a remedy for social and cultural revolution in the United States. By adopting a black internationalist perspective and advocating an anti-Civil Rights logic, which argued that African-American liberation needed to be understood within the historic framework of European colonialism, the IPNA positioned itself as a critic of American institutionalized racism as well as of black nationalism.



OUR IDEOLOGICAL SOURCES

AL-QUR'AN

AL-SUNNAH

(LEFT) FIGURE 1:
The "Our Ideological Sources" section occupied the middle of the *Al-Islam* in every issue.
AL-ISLAM: THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL VOLUME 1, WINTER 1 (1971)

Sohail Daulatzai describes the larger intellectual context:

> [W]hile Civil Rights has assumed that Black Freedom is attainable within U.S. legal frameworks and political institutions, critical Black internationalists have historically questioned that assumption, seeing white supremacy as a global phenomenon and looking to international struggles within the Third World as lenses for their own battles with white power, exploring the tactics and strategies of those struggles, and also seeking solace and solidarity by expanding their racial community of belonging. And while Civil Rights has assumed that the United States has been a force for good in the world, whether it be through fighting and eradicating Communism or any other perceived threats to U.S. national security, Black internationalists have been skeptical and have even outright challenged U.S. foreign policy, viewing it as similar to European colonialism, as an extension of Manifest Destiny and a racist logic that it practices at home.[3]

The IPNA's contribution to African-American political thought fits squarely within this intellectual landscape. In the post-Civil Rights context of ideological competition over strategies for African-American liberation, the IPNA sought to undermine what it perceived to be the provincialism of black nationalist platforms through its own vision of Islamic humanism. The visual rhetoric of the paper demonstrates this dimension of the IPNA in its deployment of Arabic font, images of mosques, and extensive use of text.

The IPNA disseminated this perspective through its main publication *Al-Islam: The Islamic Movement Journal*, which began circulation in 1971. Ranging between 16–24 pages per volume, the full size paper was intentional in promoting its strong ideological position of Islam as a panacea for African-American and Third World liberation alike. Despite changes in editorship in its early years, *Al-Islam* maintained a fairly consistent structure throughout its publication tenure. According to its former editor, Ibrahim Hanif, *Al-Islam* had a circulation of approximately 10,000 copies which were distributed nationwide to IPNA members, affiliates, and supporters. Outside of the D.C. context, in which members dispersed the papers by hand to students and community members, it is unclear how the papers were disseminated in other locations. The editorial direction of the paper was led by Muzaffaruddin, along with the other senior members of IPNA. The only existing run of the newspapers is currently housed at Georgia State University's Department of Special Collections and Archives and has been curated by the After Malcolm Digital Archive Project.[4]

The front cover of the journal was typically covered by a piece of artwork or photograph that was intended to convey a strong visual

message. However, the inside content often lacked any photo or artwork altogether. The back cover throughout the first year of publication was virtually identical on each issue: the IPNA mission statement placed in a caption on the top-half/third of the page followed by another caption that provided a creedal message about Islam.[5] The center foldout was titled "Our Ideological Sources" and included on the left-hand side, under the subheading of Al-Qur'an, both translated and original Arabic verses of the central Islamic text (Figure 1). The translations were those of the well-known and highly circulated version rendered by A. Yusuf Ali. That *Al-Islam* used this translation, and not Maulana Muhammad Ali's, which was widely circulated in the African-American Muslim community, deserves note, given that it was the latter translation that was used by the Nation of Islam. The emphasis on Arabic text is a significant feature, because Arabic language and script—in this moment—came to signify Islamic orthodoxy as opposed to the purported heterodoxy of the Nation of Islam.

On the right hand side of the foldout, under the subheading of Al-Sunnah, were translations and Arabic originals of various Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions), drawn from the text *A Manual of Hadith* by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Another core element of the paper provided translations of well-known writings of Maulana Maudoodi, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb. These sections were supplemented with a variety of different entries, articles, and themes. These typically included an editorial message about current events, articles about Islamic history, commentary on social and political issues, reports on IPNA activity in Washington D.C. and around the country, book reviews, discussions on family and gender, and letters of support from constituents and/or non-members. A brief review of the cover images, which in effect are the only actual images in the paper, during the first year of publication provides insight into the material and ideological culture that constituted the Islamic Party. When analyzed in their historical and discursive contexts, the images—or lack thereof—exhibit the tension *Al-Islam* editors faced between addressing the practical challenges of black oppression on the one hand and promoting Islamic humanism as a universal panacea on the other.

SEEING AND READING *AL-ISLAM*

When considered within the context of African-American newspaper culture, perhaps the most striking feature of *Al-Islam* is the dearth of graphic and photographic or other imagery in the paper. This stands in stark contrast, for example, to

"THE LACK OF IMAGES AND GRAPHICS IN THE PAPER WAS THE RESULT OF A DELIBERATE CHOICE OF THE EDITORIAL BOARD..."

the celebrated artwork of Emory Douglas, the influential Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party between 1967 and 1980. Douglas' work was prominently featured in the organization's publication, *The Black Panther.* Likewise, the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper of the Nation of Islam was covered with images, photos, and artistic works that articulated the ideas of the organization and informed readers about critical events around the world. *The Western Sunrise*, another African-American Muslim newspaper, also incorporated photos and graphics in line with conventions of the time.

According to Ibrahim Hanif, the former editor of *Al-Islam*, the lack of images and graphics in the paper was the result of a deliberate choice of the editorial board. The strategic decision was based upon two interrelated factors: the widespread Islamic doctrinal restriction on images and the intent to provide ideological training through the publication itself. While restrictions on imagery are by no means universal in Muslim cultures and traditions, many African-American Muslim groups in the late 1960s and 1970s adopted so-called "orthodox" interpretations of Islamic law in a deliberate attempt to distance and distinguish themselves from the Nation of Islam which they regarded as a heretical movement. This emphasis on purity and authenticity also informed the limiting of images and graphics in favor of providing space for religious and ideological pedagogy. That said, the paper contained structures, texts, and graphics that nonetheless conveyed the ideological orientation of the group. For example, Arabic script on its own and/or when rendered in calligraphic form, functions as a piece of visual rhetoric in this context. Likewise, while the paper has few if any photographs or images of animate objects (per the orthodox Islamic restriction on such), the use of bold fonts, enlarged typescript, and other manipulations of text communicates visually as well as textually.

The inaugural issue of the paper, Volume 1, Winter 1 (Figure 2), includes no images or graphics whatsoever.[6] When compared to other publications in circulation at the time, the very absence of imagery in the paper made it distinct, from a visual perspective. Subsequent issues oscillated between including and omitting graphics on the cover page. The inaugural issue features a large, centrally placed Arabic calligraphic rendition of the Islamic Testimony of Faith (*Shahada*) in a black box with white letters surrounded on the top corners with light floral patterns. That no translation is provided further augments the presence of Arabic script as a distinguishing feature of the textual emphasis of the paper. The title of the paper is rendered in lowercase lettering ("al-islam") with the subtitle in smaller caps, "The Islamic Movement Journal." The lowercase lettering of "al-islam" was likely intended to draw attention to the Arabic linguistic character of the word Islam itself; that is, the definite article "al-" renders capitalization in English redundant. It also distinguishes "al-islam" from Islam (e.g., as in Nation of Islam). In

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al-islam THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL

WAR IN ISLAM

RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE

The very first clause of the fundamental laws on which human civilization is based spells out respect for human life. Foremost among the rights of man in civilization is the right to live and the first among his duties as a civilized being is to let live. All the religions and developed cultures of the world accept this moral principle of respect for life. A law or religion which does not accept this cannot become the religion or law of civilized human beings or help any group of human beings to lead a peaceful life and to develop and progress. Anybody can understand that if human life has no value, if it is not respected and there is no arrangement to protect it, no group of human beings can live together. On what basis would they deal with each other or obtain that peace of mind and security and that concentration of attention which man needs for purposes of trade, industry and agriculture, for earning, making a home, travelling and in general living a civilized life? Then leaving aside needs from the purely human point of view it is evident that the murder of a brother out of personal grudge or for personal gain is the extreme of hardheartedness which would surely not permit man to reach any moral heights or even to remain at the level of humanity.

The secular laws of nations establishes this respect for human life merely through fear of punishment and the use of force. but it is the task of a true religion to bring forth its real worth in the inner being of humanity so that the children of Adam my not unjustly shed blood when in a place where there is no fear of man-made regulations and where the police cannot reach. From this point of view it is difficult to find anything comparable in other religions to the correct and effective education provided by Islam about respect for life. The Holy Quran, in various places tries to inculcate these teachings in various ways and contents. In Surah Maida the story of two sons of Adam, of whom one killed the other unjustly, is related; following which Allah says:

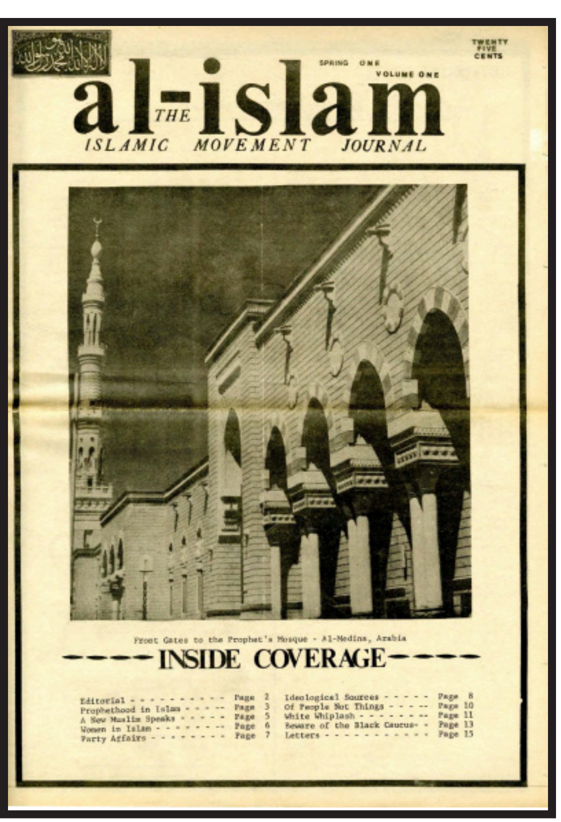
(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:
Arabic calligraphic rendition of the Islamic Testimony of Faith, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."
AL-ISLAM: THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL, VOLUME 1, WINTER 1

the center of the page, in all capital and bolded typeface letters, the words “War in Islam” appear, which serve as the title of the paper’s lead article. The article provides selected translations of the well-known work *al-Jihad fi al-Islam* (Jihad in Islam), written by Maulana Maudoodi, the towering Indian/Pakistani Islamist scholar, who is introduced as “one of the greatest living Islamic Revolutionary thinkers and writers.” When one considers the social context and function of the paper—namely its hand-to-hand distribution on street corners and college campus courtyards—one may conclude that the initial impact of the paper’s message must have been profound.

The next cover, Volume 1, Spring 1 (Figure 3), continues with the same title structure, but now comes to include a rectangular insert at the bottom of the page which functions as a table of contents, entitled “Inside Coverage.” The overwhelming majority of the page, however, is covered with a picture entitled, “Front Gates of the Prophet’s Mosque—Al-Medina, Arabia.” This cover stands in stark contrast to the text-heavy cover of the first issue but is consistent in the omission of any depiction of animate objects. In another sense, one could argue that there is a consistency between the two covers. That is, the Arabic calligraphy in the first issue corresponds directly to the image of the mosque in the second, and both convey symbols of Islam as an abstract and foreign, but politically relevant idea.[7]

The photo in this cover features a towering minaret and a facade of cascading arches. That the name “Arabia” appears without “Saudi” in front of it was likely a deliberate choice that sought to negate the notion that the currently reigning Saudi royal family has any proprietary rights over the Prophet’s Mosque. Of course, featuring the Prophet’s Mosque on the front cover of the paper emphasizes the organization’s orthodox nature. The rectangular Arabic calligraphic rendition of the Testimony of Faith featured centrally in the previous edition appears much smaller in the upper left-hand corner of the cover. The placement of this image/text, again with no translation, functions almost as a branding statement that should be considered within the repertoire of circulating images at the time. Namely, one should consider it in contradistinction to *The Black Panther*’s placement of Huey P. Newton’s head-shot within a star at the top-right of that paper. Whether or not this was a deliberate choice of the *Al-Islam* editorial board is unknown, but the visual contrast, in and of itself, is self-evident and was likely to be noticed by even a cursory viewer. Although there is no explicit mention of black nationalism on this cover, I argue that the visual messages of papers in the context of black politics communicated a subtle critique of ethnic and personality driven politics. This conclusion is corroborated by the testimonies of a number of activists from the IPNA and the Dar al-Islam, who consistently report that they were turned off by charismatic politics.

The Islamic Party’s critique of black nationalism and turn towards Islamic universalism was a difficult ideological program to pursue when considering the context of emancipatory ethnic politics in the 1970s. This is especially apparent when one bears in mind that for many African-American Muslims who embarked on the journey of cultural and religious transformation, the moral and political liberation of black peoples in the United States and around the world was the *raison d’être* of their conversion. As Edward Curtis notes, African-American Muslim identity has often been grounded in narratives of a historic connection between the religion of Islam and black peoples.[8] It is no surprise, therefore, that the third edition of the paper, Volume 1, Spring 2 (Figure 4), features a large gray image of the continent of Africa with the phrase “Islam in Africa” written so that it begins in North Africa and winds down to the bottom of the picture.[9] The title structure, typeface, and aforementioned Arabic calligraphy remain consistent on this cover. It should be noted that this is the first and only time that the continent of Africa, or any other explicit image or reference to pan-African or black nationalist symbols, appears on the front cover of the paper. Given that much of the paper’s contents



(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:
Front Gates of the Prophet’s Mosque—Al-Medina, Arabia.
AL-ISLAM: THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT JOURNAL, VOLUME 1, SPRING 1

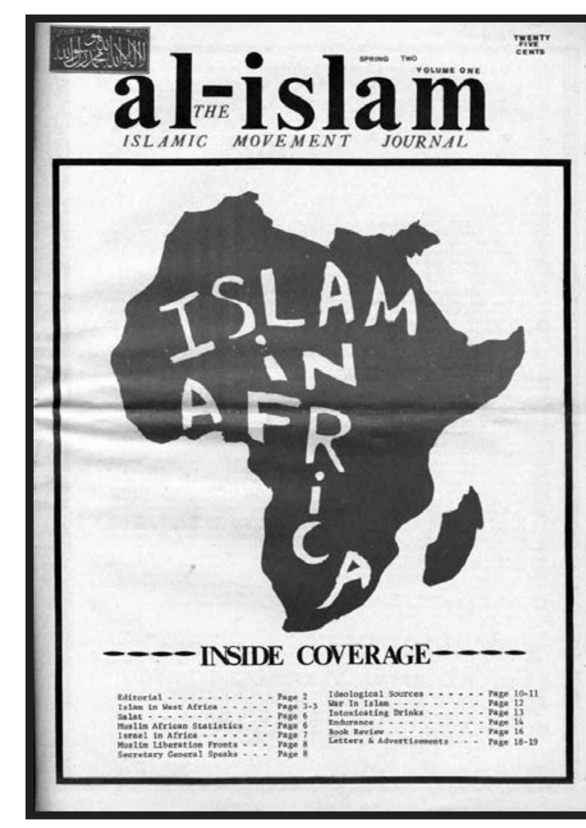
Al-Islam

in this and other issues are devoted to the topic of black nationalism vis-à-vis widespread African-American conversion to Islam, it is clear that the Islamic Party's leadership, although committed to a universalist Islamic ideal, struggled to persuade its target audience.

The remaining graphic styles and patterns of *Al-Islam*'s cover images and text do not depart radically from the precedent established in its first three editions. Throughout the remainder of the first year of publication, the covers feature images representing classical Islamic civilization. For example, Volume 1, Summer 1 features an artistically rendered open Qur'an with stylized Arabic script on the pages. A rose rests at the middle base of the Qur'an. Protruding from the center top of the Qur'an is a tall white candlestick, with a flame doubling as a sun, with the word "Allah" in the center. A calligraphic Testimony of Faith, different from the one that appears as seal in the upper-left hand corner, is rendered as an arch across the top of the drawing. Silhouettes of the Ka'ba, the Prophet's Mosque, and minarets fill in empty space. It should be noted that this image is repeated as the cover image in the Volume 4, Fall 1 issue.

Volume 1, Summer 2 features a photo of an astrolabe, an ancient astronomical navigation device used by Muslim scientists, flanked on the two top corners by a translation of verses from

(right) figure 4:
The Islamic Party of North America addressing issues surrounding black nationalism
Al-Islam: The Islamic Movement Journal, Volume 1, Spring 2



the Qur'an on the left hand side, mirrored with the original Arabic on the right. The caption reads,

> This intricate astrolabe was developed by Muslim scientists in the 13th century, A.D. Arising from practical religious needs, such as the Hajj (the pilgrimage), this instrument measured time, direction and distance and was used in developing astronomy and geophysics.

The presumed connection between religious piety and scientific achievement is part of a much larger trope in global Muslim thought dating back over a century.[19] Such a link is a central feature of modern reconstructions of the Muslim world prior to the rise of western European hegemony and can be counted as one of the many by-products of colonial modernity.

Volume 1, Fall 1 features a drawing entitled, "There Shall be Light" by Madiha Umari, who is not identified further. It depicts an imaginary landscape of minarets, domes, tents, and citadels. The various architectural elements in the picture are drawn from different parts of the Muslim world in a gesture, presumably, to the Islamic ethos of diversity and unity. In contrast, Volume 1, Fall 2 features a photo of a clenched hand with a protruding index finger held so as to represent the bearing of witness one performs upon conversion. The caption reads, "One God—One Message—One Movement." Again, the Islamic Party's struggle to balance the universalist Islamic ideals of a diverse multicultural global society of faith with the political imperatives of emancipatory politics in the 1970s is visible in contrast between the two Fall covers. The former portrays a fantastic imaginary of global Islam, abstract and distant while the latter photo of a clenched fist communicates realism, strength, and urgency. Indeed, this visual tension and contrast may serve as a suitable metaphor for the IPNA's larger project of social and cultural revolution which consistently struggled to strike a balance between the ideal universalism of Islam and practical necessities of political action.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the IPNA is representative of larger transformational trends in African-American Islam in the late twentieth century. The visual rhetoric of its publication *Al-Islam*, by deliberately omitting or downplaying the use images and graphics, sought to align itself with a global Islamic orthodox tradition perceived to be capable of transcending the provincialism of American racial politics. This strategy was adopted by many African-American Muslims during this

period and has colored the internal dynamics of this highly variegated community until the present moment. Recent studies, such as Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican*, demonstrate the way in which African-American Muslim communities continue to develop practical theological platforms that simultaneously address the realities of blackness in the United States and the possibilities of pursuing an alternative universal humanism through Islamic traditions.[11] Like the IPNA's efforts in the 1970s, African-American Muslim leaders such as Warith Deen Muhammad, Sirraj Wahhaj, and Imam Jamil Al-Amin, over the last three decades, have balanced these competing demands through piecemeal efforts. More in-depth studies of African-American Muslim articulations of race, identity, and Islamic universalism during the period between 1965 and 1985 will likely reveal the roots of discursive tensions still felt today. ■

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[1] Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Edward Curtis, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Amina McCloud, *African-American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For demographics see, Tom. W. Smith, "The Muslim Population of the United States: The Methodology of Estimates," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 404–417; "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism" Pew Research Center, August 30, 2011, http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/muslim-americans-no-signs-of-growth-in-alienation-or-support-for-extremism/

[2] Information regarding the formation of the Islamic Party of North America was obtained from oral histories conducted under the auspices of the After Malcolm Digital Archive in addition to Khaled Fattah Griggs, "The Islamic Party of North America: A Quiet Storm of Political Activism" in *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, eds., (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002) 77–106.

[3] Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) xii.

[4] The After Malcolm Digital Archive is a collaborative research initiative that seeks to document, digitize and preserve the history of African-American Islamic movements between 1965 and 1985. It is co-directed by Dr. Abbas Barzegar of the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University and Dr. Bilal King of the Department of Sociology at Morehouse College. More information about the project can be found at sites.gsu.edu/am

[5] The two captions read as follows:

> The Islamic Party of Masjid-ul-Ummah is an ideological party in the widest sense and not a mere political party or a religious or social reform organization. It is based on the firm conviction that Islam is an all pervading and comprehensive 'Order of Life' which it intends to promulgate and translate into action in all spheres of human life. The party believes that the root cause of all troubles in man's life is his forgetfulness of Allah (God) Almighty, his disregard of Divine Guidance as revealed through the Prophets and his lack of concern for being accountable for his deeds in the Hereafter. As a matter of fact wherever and whenever any type of evil has plagued human life, this very deviation from Allah has been the main cause of trouble. No scheme of reform in human affairs can bear fruit unless and until Obedience to Allah, belief in Man's accountability after death and adherence to the Divine Guidance as revealed through the Prophets are sincerely and actually made the basis of the entire edifice of human life. Without bringing about this fundamental change, every attempt to reform society on the basis of any of the materialistic concepts of justice (Racism, Nationalism, Capitalism, Communist-Marxism etc.), will only result in other forms of injustice.
>
> The Islamic Party is not a nationalist party either. Its ideology transcends all geographical boundaries and encompasses the welfare of the whole world and all mankind This is why historically and today the Islamists have been and are in the forefront of the struggle for human freedom and dignity.

[6] http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Islam/id/16/rec/7

[7] http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Islam/id/151/rec/3

[8] Edward E. Curtis IV, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (September 2005): 659–684.

[9] http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Islam/id/36/rec/4

[10] For example, see: Ali Rahnema, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

[11] Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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Our Speakers:

David Lawson,
former BAFC member and
producer for SMOKING DOGS FILMS

Eddie Chambers,
Associate Professor of Art History,
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Kara Keeling,
Associate Professor of Critical Studies
and American Studies and Ethnicity at
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Our Supporters:

Dean Pearl McHaney and *Annie Latta*,
at CENCIA, Center for International
and Collaborative Arts at
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

David Cheshier,
Chair of the Department
of Communication at
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Doug Shipman,
Chief Executive Officer and *Dina Bailey*,
Interpretation Curator at the NATIONAL
CENTER FOR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Dean Jacquelyn Royster,
Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts at
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Lisa Yaszek,
School of Literature, Media,
and Communication at
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

DeShawn Jenkins,
Managing Director,
AFRICA ATLANTA 2014

Matthew Bernstein,
Chair of the Film and Media
Studies Department at
EMORY UNIVERSITY

Romy Malon,
Events Coordinator at the
ATLANTA CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

Ayoka Chenzira,
Director of the Digital
Moving Image Salon at
SPELMAN COLLEGE

Andy Ditzler, FILM LOVE

Niklas Vollmer and *Daniel Robin*,
Peripheral Visions at
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Marcus Rosentrater, CONTRABAND CINEMA

Bram Creighton and *Brandon
Patrick Ellis*, Kopelff Recital Hall at
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

the staff at the Department of
Communication, *Marilyn Stiggers*,
Jani Faison, and *Diane Sealey*

and our community supporter *Karl Injex*,
THE SOUND TABLE