

IN FOCUS: Modes of Black Liquidity: Music Video as Black Art

The Unruly Archives of Black Music Videos

by ALESSANDRA RAENGO and LAUREN MCLEOD CRAMER, editors

Midway through Kahlil Joseph's short film *Music Is My Mistress* (2017), the cellist and singer Kelsey Lu turns to Ishmael Butler, a rapper and member of the hip-hop duo Shabazz Palaces, to ask a question. The dialogue is inaudible, but an intertitle appears on screen: "HER: Who is your favorite filmmaker?" "HIM: Miles Davis." This moment of Black audiovisual appreciation anticipates a conversation between Black popular culture scholars Uri McMillan and Mark Anthony Neal that inspires the subtitle for this In Focus dossier: "Music Video as Black Art."¹ McMillan and Neal interpret the complexity of contemporary Black music video production as a "return" to its status as "art"—and specifically as *Black art*—that self-consciously uses visual and sonic citations from various realms of Black expressive culture including the visual and performing arts, fashion, design, and, obviously, the rich history of Black music and Black music production. McMillan and Neal implicitly refer to an earlier, more recognizable moment in Black music video history, the mid-1990s and early 2000s, when Hype Williams defined music video aesthetics as one of the single most important innovators of the form. Although it is rarely addressed in the literature on music videos, the glare of the prolific filmmaker's influence extends beyond his signature luminous visual style; Williams distinguished the Black music video as a creative laboratory for a new generation of artists such as Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Bradford Young, and Jenn Nkiru. As Joseph

1 Uri McMillan interviewed by Mark Anthony Neal, "Left of Black with Uri McMillan," *Left of Black*, YouTube video, 24:37, John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University, October 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiX09EYwP4>.

suggests in *Music Is My Mistress*, this generation of artists holds the freedom of expression achieved through Black music as an inspiration for formal experimentation in audiovisual media and approaches its filmmaking practice through musical processes, such as improvisation, remixing, looping, and sampling. Often working collaboratively, these artists have taken the music video into the art gallery and bridged the gap between this popular form, art cinema, and installation art. This In Focus is dedicated to these filmmakers and the fluid exchange they have initiated.

In a 2016 article for the *New Yorker*, “The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,” on music videos shot by Jafa, Cassie da Costa explains that tracing the development of Black aesthetic modes across such diverse instantiations presents a distinct challenge.² However, Jenny Gunn has argued in response that it may be precisely where the proper terms of the lineage seem the least transparent that the work of the archive becomes most necessary.³ When this group of Black music video directors apply musical techniques to high-art visual references—as, for example, in Young’s and Joseph’s frequent re-creation of Roy DeCarava’s photographs or when Alan Ferguson and Solange Knowles reproduce the painting “Complication” by Ghanaian-British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in “Don’t Touch My Hair ft. Sampha”—they knowingly perform archival work. Like hip-hop producers “digging in the crates,” their work reorganizes history and challenges conventional thinking about medium specificity by bringing sometimes-unattended visual and sonic material to new surfaces. The artists discussed here understand and develop their filmmaking process after the music-making process. Hence their work’s form is powerfully shaped by complex, nonlinear temporalities, a radical investigation of the sound-image relation, and the relationship between movement and sound as it occurs through synchronization. By establishing a “sizeable archive of social, political, and cultural alternatives,” these filmmakers perform the inherently critical work of Black studies and distinguish the “Black music video,” within mainstream, popular spaces where this work is widely distributed, received—and most notably, appropriated.⁴

These artists’ theoretically engaged music videos resemble essay films and thus demand an analytical method that is similarly innovative: an untraditional historiography that follows the work’s complex references and is just as improvisational as the rich history of sound culture that sustains it. Thus, this dossier’s contributors attend to analytical approaches as they emerge from the work itself. We call this a “liquid” methodology because it was developed by the research group known as *liquid blackness*, precisely to probe the way the legacy of experimentations initiated by the filmmakers of the LA Rebellion affects contemporary artistic practices that bring film studies and film education, artistic space and praxis, popular culture, and the experimental and avant-garde into a fluid exchange.⁵ This mode of historiography highlights creative

2 Cassie da Costa, “The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,” *New Yorker*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-profound-power-of-the-new-solange-videos>.

3 Jenny Gunn, “Re: ‘The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,’ by Cassie da Costa, October 24, 2016,” letter to the *New Yorker* editor, November 18, 2016, <http://liquidblackness.com/jenny-gunns-letter-to-the-editor-re-the-profound-power-of-the-new-solange-videos-by-cassie-da-costa-new-yorker-october-24-2016/>.

4 Alexander Weheliye, “Introduction: Black Studies and Black Life,” *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 5–10.

5 *liquid blackness* is the name of a research group founded by Dr. Alessandra Raengo; it comprises graduate students and alumni of the doctoral program in Moving Images Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta who are

lineages that are visible sometimes only retroactively and recognizes different generations of artists' work through shared conversations that are not always legible in the traditional subdisciplinary divisions of our field.

In this way, the term "liquidity" further reflects the group's focus on the intersection of contemporary aesthetic theory and Black studies, to attend to the way Black expressive culture constantly reflects on what Blackness is and what it does.⁶ Thus, in lieu of fluidity, which traditionally accounts for shifts and instability in identity categories (most notably gender), we opt for a term that evokes the "thingness" of Blackness to emphasize how forcefully it has become the subject "matter" of contemporary filmmaking.⁷ Following this methodology, the authors of this special section, who are all members of the *liquid blackness* research group, offer aesthetic maps for this unruly archive that move in at least two directions: horizontally, as Black music videos increasingly reference contemporary visual art and appear in a widening number of venues, and vertically, as these videos plumb the depths of Black sonic, visual, performance, and expressive culture.

The current phenomena of saturation, eclecticism, and innovation in Black music videos, visible in works like Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Kahlil Joseph, Melina Matsoukas, Dikayl Rimmasch, Mark Romanek, Todd Tourso, and Jonas Åkerlund, 2016) and *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Ed Burke, 2019), Jay-Z's *4:44* (2017) music videos, and Donald Glover's work across platforms, requires a closer, but also more expansive, look at Black artistic lineages, or what we call "ensembles," to underscore fluid and sometimes intergenerational collaborations among several of the artists involved in this practice. "Ensemble" is also meant to evoke Fred Moten's theorization of the relationship between the part and the whole, the soloist and the group, epitomized by the cooperative and improvisational relationship between musicians in a jazz ensemble, which he sees as constantly experimenting with forms of sociality as well as formal lawmaking and lawbreaking.⁸ Indeed, we see this contemporary work, in part, as benefiting from a previous network

collaboratively studying blackness and aesthetics. See Lauren McLeod Cramer and Alessandra Raengo, "Freeing Black Codes: *liquid blackness* Plays the Jazz Ensemble," in "Black Code Studies," ed. Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal, special issue, *Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 8–21.

- 6 Consider Fred Moten's trilogy "Consent Not to Be a Single Being" (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017–2018); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Alexander Weheliye, *Habes Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Steven Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 7 We deploy but repurpose a term mobilized since the 2000s in sociology, architecture, digital imaging, and photography to describe unfinalizability and constant becoming. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 2000); Marcos Novak, "Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace," in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, ed. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (London: W. W. Norton, 2001); Joanna Zylińska, "On Bad Archives, Unruly Snappers and Liquid Photographs," *Photographies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 139–153; Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: Or the History of Photography* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). Yet when applied in a racial context, "liquid blackness" describes the complex of material forces and conditions that have to be negotiated in order for Blackness to act expansively and to be free to explore its own genius and possibilities. For more information on the *liquid blackness* research group's history and methodology, see "What Is *liquid blackness*?" <http://liquidblackness.com/about>.
- 8 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

of experimentations beginning with the politics of film form elaborated by the LA Rebellion filmmakers—Charles Burnett and Larry Clark, in particular—as channeled through what we call the Howard University Pedagogy Lab: the mentorship of Haile Gerima, who trained cinematographers and filmmakers Ernest Dickerson, Malik Sayeed, Bradford Young, Jenn Nkiru, and Jafa.⁹ We also note how these contemporary videos build on the feminist and experimental sensibilities advanced by filmmakers such as Barbara McCullough, Kathy Collins, and Julie Dash. Black music, for this previous generation of filmmakers, constituted a model of actualization, of exploration, and of intergenerational relations—a living archive of the past and a laboratory for the imagination of the future. That imagined future is now the present concern for both Black studies scholars and contemporary visual artists.

Whether it is Jafa's "Black Visual Intonation" (the study of how Black image making might aspire to "the beauty and alienation of Black music"), Young's "Black intentionality" (to underscore the political valence of form), or Nkiru's "cosmic archeology" (using visual culture archives to excavate the energetic lineages of Black memory), Black contemporary artists who are redefining the music video form all share a commitment to "Black study" visualized through images that reverberate with the vibrational intensity of the music that inspires them.¹⁰ As Charles P. "Chip" Linscott indicates in his essay, we can follow this interplay through decades of Black music, film, and video history. Our starting point is the opening of Larry Clark's 1977 film *Passing Through*, dedicated to musicians "known and unknown" (Figure 1). It begins with the chatter of musicians and the sound of instruments being tuned. In other words, we can actually hear the music—the practice, the process, and the ensemble—coming together. Writing on the beginning of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," which similarly features the sounds of congregation, Moten argues, "What emerges is a form, out of something that we call informality."¹¹ This informality, which Moten clarifies is not formlessness, emphasizes music making's groundedness in modes of sociality, process, and Black study. Perhaps because of this informality, which occurs as part of a still-developing artistic practice, this "golden age of the Black music video" has been more thoroughly documented by journalists rather than by academics.¹² Thus, while the role of Black music in Black filmmaking is not entirely new, what perhaps is new

9 Interview with Alessandra Raengo, "Bradford Young—The Visual Art of Black Care," Vimeo video, 23:18, *liquid blackness*, September 26, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/291961328>. See also his collaboration with Common, *Black America Again* (2016).

10 Harney and Moten describe "Black study" as a noninstitutional way of "thinking with others" that experiments with different forms of sociality and what they call "fugitivity." See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013). See also Arthur Jafa, "Black Visual Intonation," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 264–268. Jafa mistrusts synchronized sound because it subjects Black bodies and voices to the demands of coherence of the cinematic apparatus. He prefers the fugitivity of postdubbed sound. See Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt, "Love Is the Message, the Plan Is Death," *e-flux* 81, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126451/love-is-the-message-the-plan-is-death/>.

11 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 129.

12 See Danielle A. Scruggs, "We're in the Golden Age of the Black Music Video," *Artsy*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-golden-age-Black-music-video>; Hilton Als, "The Black Excellence of Kahlil Joseph," *New Yorker*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/06/the-Black-excellence-of-kahlil-joseph>.

is that the theoretical concepts developed by Jafa, Young, and Nkuru now appear as a matter of fact and part of a critical mass in the popular press.¹³

Competing approaches to music-video criticism can be reconciled through archival work ordered around artistic sensibilities. Academic writing on music videos is often concerned with the “celebrity machine” propelled by television networks and, now, online video-sharing platforms.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the art press has focused on artists like Young, Jafa, Joseph, and their praxes. In many ways, Hype Williams’s work is an essential point of connection in this history. Williams helped create the music video’s televisual aesthetic that trained audiences to “listen to music by looking at it.”¹⁵ Yet Williams’s love of the craft, his belief that Black soul music is inherently visual, his collaborations with Black artists working in other mediums (e.g., the prolific stylist June Ambrose), and his expansive view of art categories that put him in dialogue with

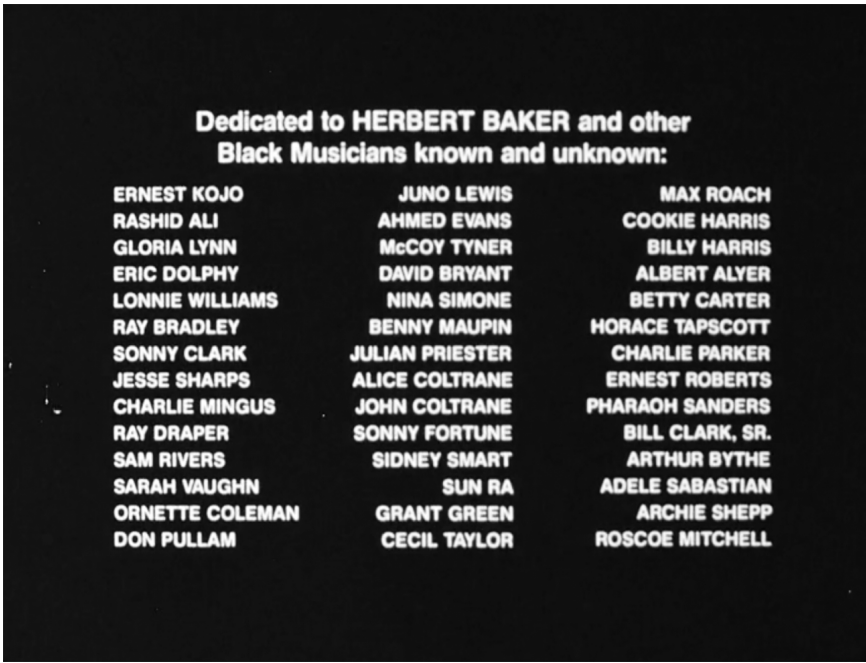


Figure 1. Screenshot from *Passing Through* (Larry Clark, 1977) listing contributors to an artistic lineage Clark figures in his film, and gesturing toward lineages to come. Courtesy of Larry Clark.

13 Nate Freeman, “The Messenger: How a Video by Arthur Jafa Became a Worldwide Sensation—and Described America to Itself,” *Artnews*, March 27, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/27/icons-arthur-jafa>; Tene Croom, “Common, Bradford Young Unveil short film ‘Black America Again’ at Carnegie Museum of Art,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 2017, <https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2017/07/13/common-bradford-young-unveil-short-film-Black-america-again-at-carnegie-museum-of-art>; Film-maker Jenn Nkuru’s Brain-Bending Vision,” *Financial Times*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/05d2648a-292f-11e9-9222-7024d72222bc>.

14 Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney, Kirsty Fairclough, and Michael Goddard, introduction to *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*, ed. Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney, Kirsty Fairclough, and Michael Goddard (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 7.

15 Arnold et al., 5.

eclectic visual artists (including Michel Gondry, Jean Baptiste Mondini, and Jean-Paul Goude) are all examples of liquidity in Williams's practice. An immanent methodology that attends to the way each work self-consciously addresses its aesthetic and artistic lineages allows us to see how artists like Williams, and even Larry Clark, are a part of contemporary Black music video artists' creative lineages and how their contributions have, ultimately, turned the music video into one of the Black arts.¹⁶

Current scholarship on the music video proves insufficient to address it as Black art because it is fundamentally preoccupied with developing analytical tools for what it still understands to be a hybrid form. The most interesting work on music videos has leveraged the form's instability to theorize sound-image relations. When Carol Vernallis suggests that scholars take sound and image to "couple therapy," she offers a mode of analysis that is "interpersonal," meaning that in addition to addressing the entire audiovisual landscape, it also reflexively considers the relationship between scholars and music videos.¹⁷ Vernallis's aim is to critique the disciplinary silos that leave scholars unable to address sound and image equally and the purist standards that continue to marginalize an art form with sonic source material that is "ready-made."¹⁸

This In Focus dossier contributes to the scholarship trying to account for the "musicalization of vision" by tracing an artistic lineage that uses Black music as a blueprint for image creation and thus enacts the audiovisuality that music video scholars are searching for as an art practice.¹⁹ By layering visual and sonic histories, artists form alternative narratives about creativity, inspiration, and collaboration that demand new historiographical approaches. The authors in this collection closely read these rigorous film essays to identify Black filmmakers' contributions to both the methods and the concerns of Black studies that often go unnoticed in popular spaces like YouTube and SoundCloud. For Linscott, this education is about developing the sensitivity to register the "undertones" of Black art because, as Michele Prettyman describes, this lineage anachronistically combines musical processes and visual imagery to create "odd futures" that are not always legible. Additionally, tracing these complex temporalities reveals a precise gestural archive that connects Black dance and postures of "cool" to critiques of anti-Black violence and the exclusionary category of the human. The repetition of these gestures, through bodily movement or editing, becomes a tool for remediating diasporic memory—both beautiful and violent. Processes of rememory are central parts of the contemplative tradition of Black essay films, James Tobias explains, since they use their generic indeterminacy to interpret the relationship between individual and collective memory mediated through sonic archives. Thus, Gunn argues, digging into and remixing the Black sonic and visual archive, and then making

16 "Hype Williams on Working with Puff Daddy, California Love, and Missy Elliot," interview by Jeff Mao, Red Bull Music Academy, video, 1:11:28, June 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSUav71UBmk>.

17 Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.

18 Steven Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos, Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 8.

19 Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2017), 62.

the work available in online spaces, as Nkiru does, constitutes a deliberate pedagogical practice, inviting a sort of “think-along” for future generations of artists and scholars. Overall, by exploring alternative temporalities and reorganizing the separate and sequential relationship between song and video, this lineage of the music video as Black art has the potential to rewrite the fraught history of music video tout court.

Contemporary Black music videos form linkages across the field of Black visual art at the same time that they play in the unruly archives of Black sound. As a result, these videos contribute new forms of connectivity to the “digital” and “postcinematic” aesthetics described in music-video literature. Digital tools have profoundly changed contemporary music videos, effectively blurring the lines between production and postproduction, challenging the confines of narrative and cinematic continuity, and affording Black artists a wider distribution network that contributes to their pursuit of Black study. Materially, Black music videos have not always followed this trend. (Joseph, for example, often shoots on film.) Yet these works always possess and invite a profound connectivity. Ultimately, as McMillan and Neal detect, the process of Black music-video making has so thoroughly absorbed existing networks of music, art, performance, and fashion that they have become completely entangled with their *soundful* images. The aesthetics of connection—both digital and analog—are essential to the way Black music videos are embedded in unattended histories that are equally committed to the past and future of Black expressive culture and to Black music videos understanding themselves as *Black art*. *

Secret Histories and Visual Riffs, or, Miles Davis, Alice Coltrane, and Flying Lotus Go to the Movies

by CHARLES P. "CHIP" LINSKOTT

In a 2017 "Tate Talk," Arthur Jafa contended that Kahlil Joseph makes music videos that employ "music as a structure for a visual pattern."¹ Jafa went on to argue that these musically founded visual patterns reveal "continuities [or] secret histories" at work in Black music and Black visual culture. Jafa's insights are teeming with acute implications for the study of Black music video and Black film, and thus I want to trace the operations of these "visual riffs on [the] music" through a brief series of notable works while suggesting that such a method is more widely applicable. For now, I focus on the relationships between music and image in William Greaves's groundbreaking *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* (1968), with music from Miles Davis's *In a Silent Way* (1969); Spike Lee's music video "Tutu Medley" (1986) for four tracks from Miles Davis's album *Tutu* (1986); and Kahlil Joseph's short film and gallery installation *Wildcat* (2013), which features Alice Coltrane's music as reworked by Flying Lotus. Careful analysis of the interplay of the musical works and their visual counterparts reveals the vital imbrications of Black sociality, improvisational praxis, Black arts of remixing and sampling, and the specific difficulties and triumphs of Black cultural production. Such analysis goes beyond traditional distinctions regarding form and content, extending deeply into history, theme, theoretical and philosophical positions, and notions of Black artistic praxis and cultural memory. Along with Jafa and Joseph, I mean to ask how music seeps into and across these moving images, providing opportunities for deeper understandings of both when taken together. In analyzing the complicated interrelationships shared by these particular musical and moving-image objects, we find "secret histories" that are deeply staked into Black culture, with face-value meanings doubling, tripling, and blooming exponentially into other denotations. From signifyin' to slave songs, code switching in perpetual eras of white supremacy, and the encrypted messages of hip-hop lyricism, the "secrecy" relies on close attention to what we might call underground continuities in the artworks and their contexts.

1 "Kahlil Joseph & Arthur Jafa: In Conversation: Tate Talks," video, 1:36:11, August 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otPECh1Q2xQ>. All subsequent Jafa quotations come from this talk.

It is important not to fetishize the secrecy of the maps and historical continuities posited by Jafa, however. “Maps to follow” and “histories to uncover” do not imply the necessity for arcane exegesis performed only by rarified audiences.² Instead, these concepts insist on some cultural literacy and sensitivity—that is, an awareness of Blackness and appreciation of some of its innumerable creative and historical forms. Jafa is pushing for audiences to feel the undercurrents in the work, to be sensitive to the overtones and undertones that go unnoticed during surface-level, hegemonic appreciation. In short, the music provides a map for the creation of the images, but history underpins the music and the image in toto and is essential to the deep appreciation of both. What I (following Jafa) mean is that there is a fecundity in the artworks that is best understood by carefully attending to the interplay of music and images, but comprehension—reading the map, so to speak—hinges on understanding elements of Black history and Black expressive culture that often lie buried under white hegemony. Jafa explicitly points out that although Black musicians have dominated genres such as jazz and hip-hop, Black filmmakers have struggled to achieve “broad recognition in industrial and critical spaces limited by the white imagination.”³ There is great depth to be found in pieces such as those analyzed here, but to truly feel the spirits at play in the pieces requires some work.

This sort of investigation entails what I would call a retroactive visibility, whereby the overlooked musical foundations of particular Black films and music videos become clear alongside the complex temporalities at work across lineages of Black filmmaking. Retrospection as a form of present-future clarification recalls Avery Gordon’s poetic theoretical formulation of haunting. As Gordon so memorably argues, “The ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known to us, in its own way, of course.”⁴ Gordon is at pains to emphasize that ghosts are not simply dead or missing people, but social figures; investigating ghosts, she insists, leads us to “that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.”⁵ Retrospection is, of course, one way to uncover ghosts. Put differently, to explore an apparition—an image or sound or memory or historical configuration that lingers—is to follow a map across the undercurrents that flow through our existence today. At least three generations of musically informed Black filmmaking can thus be understood via sensitivity to these histories. Jafa identifies Lee’s “Tutu Medley” video as the preeminent example of “breaking up the music” to serve as a visual map, but I hold that Greaves’s *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* does this precise thing much earlier and that similar processes continue in Joseph’s *Wildcat*. In his experimental documentary, Greaves borrows montage practices and other formal elements (e.g., group improvisation, ambient noise) from the film’s antecedent

2 Jafa employs similar phrases in “Tate Talks.”

3 Arthur Jafa, “My Black Death,” in *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 246.

4 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

5 Gordon, 8.

soundtrack, Miles Davis's 1969 album *In a Silent Way*.⁶ Thus, there is an extraordinary imbrication among key constitutive elements of both works, where components of one form (in this case, Davis's jazz music) offer a sort of productive determinism, or at least provide principal stimulus, for the other (Greaves's film). Further, elements such as improvisation, versioning, cutting, and remixing are foundational to both historical and contemporary Black expressive culture. For "Tutu Medley," Lee engineered such a dynamic by drawing upon the aesthetics of the most synthesizer-heavy album of Davis's storied career, ultimately arriving at a flashy, synthetic, and *cool* video that marked a decidedly 1980s fluctuation for Davis while also reflecting a deep Black ambivalence to technology.⁷ Finally, Joseph (who Jafa argues has "mastered" the technique of deconstructing music and reformulating it as images) and Flying Lotus repurpose the music of FlyLo's aunt, Alice Coltrane, as the soundtrack to a haunting avant-garde documentary on a Black rodeo in Oklahoma that is also a meditation on the nature of loss, remembrance, and historical memory in a singular Black community.⁸ Without the posthumous revitalization that Joseph's film provides for Coltrane's music, *Wildcat* cannot exist in its effective form. Each art form—music and film—gives life to the other as they explore the expressive and historical modes that stretch across Black culture. In all these artworks, attuned listening reveals that the secret histories haunting Black film are hidden in plain sight.

Greaves's pioneering *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is founded on the radical praxis behind Davis's *In a Silent Way* sessions, wherein a group of highly trained jazz musicians improvised on rough structures, with the final tracks assembled through copious remixing by the legendary engineer and producer Teo Macero. This method of composing and producing was revolutionary and yielded equally groundbreaking music. Greaves, in turn, fashioned his own innovative film after the model he found on *In a Silent Way* and in other jazz music: the director gathered a group of expert actors and filmmakers and similarly directed them to improvise according to a loose set of instructions.⁹ The results were heavily "remixed" in the editing room to create a film that emerged from collective improvisation but that would not achieve its true form until it was reconfigured. Both the film and its archetypal music make space for the aleatory, the ambient, and the noisy, and both are undergirded by the Black foundations of improvisation and remixing, but this is not necessarily obvious without both close textual analysis and contextual research. Once these secret histories are uncovered, the film reveals itself to viewers as an audiovisual artwork acutely concerned with Blackness as jazzy, noisy, im-

6 I have presented this particular case at length elsewhere. Also, the film was shot in 1968 but did not receive a final cut or official release until many years later—thus, the seeming disparity between the album's release date and the film's official date. Charles P. Linscott, "In a (Not So) Silent Way: Listening Past Black Visuality in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*," *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 169–190.

7 For a masterful unpacking of Black ambivalence to technology, see Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

8 Jafa, "Tate Talks."

9 Greaves was also inspired by a complex mélange of psychological, scientific, and philosophical works, including theories of thermodynamics and the work of Arthur F. Bentley. See Linscott, "In a (Not So) Silent Way," 175; James F. Ward, *Language, Form, and Inquiry: Arthur F. Bentley's Philosophy of Social Science* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 110; Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 244.

provisatory, social, and remixable.¹⁰ While *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is not a long-form music video, one might actually see it as such through Jafa's lens, despite the fact that the film predates music videos by over a decade. That is, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* "breaks up" *In a Silent Way* to use it as a map—a "structure for a visual pattern"—that leads careful viewers on an unprecedented journey through sound and image and through Black music and Black visual culture. Notwithstanding the singular nature of Davis's music and Greaves's film (no one has ever made another film like it, nor would Greaves), where might we find other Black films and music videos that use Black music as a map, weaving secret histories into the kernels of their being?

Jafa has told us precisely where to look. Jafa insists that his first exposure to the musical mapping technique was through Spike Lee's direction of a music video for Davis.¹¹ I do not believe that Davis's music supplies a necessary condition for such secret histories, but the connection is highly suggestive. Many Black musical pioneers (including Davis) reworked their own stylistic, generic, imagistic, and historical forms in ways that deserve closer attention. The work in question, "Tutu Medley," is hardly a typical music video. Whereas most music videos incorporate a single song, "Tutu Medley" samples pieces of four different tracks—"Splatch," "Tutu," "Tomaas," and "Portia"—with each vignette signifying a different visual aesthetic to match the music. At the beginning of the video, all four tracks play simultaneously in a nearly indiscernible cacophony that nevertheless serves as a sort of sonic "establishing shot" for the whole piece. However, this is discernible only if one has heard the album, in order to recognize the confluence of the four tracks. Thus, the secret history at play in Lee's "Tutu Medley" is one of deconstruction, sampling, synthesis, and noise. All these elements are foregrounded in the music itself, which is why Jafa maintains that Lee's video is a historical touchstone for music as a visual map.

Tutu is an album chiefly composed and performed by Marcus Miller, with Davis's trumpet as the lead solo instrument. The improvisation on the album comes principally from Davis playing along with Miller's precomposed and heavily synthesized backing tracks, and the album marks a significant shift for Davis in a number of ways, not least of which is that there is a substantial reliance on electronic synthesis, programmed beats, drum machines, and sampling, with no ensemble interplay and with Miller as primary composer. Such an approach proved controversial at the time, and the hoary aspersion was again lobbed at Davis: "That's not jazz."¹² If the music on the *Tutu* album is another profound and controversial stylistic departure in a career full of genre-defining musical innovations, Davis was also quite used to being told his continually evolving music had no relation to jazz. (In addition to his 1980s output, his 1960s and 1970s "electric period" was especially maligned.) But Davis, as usual, was coolly unfazed, and Lee's cutting-edge video reflects all this. In fact, the word *tutu* means "cool" in Yoruba and tends to refer to a sense of self-possession or composure. Of course, Davis has long been associated with the notion of cool (even attributed

10 Again, I make these points in greater detail in *Black Camera*. Linscott, "In a (Not So) Silent Way," 169–190.

11 Jafa, "Tate Talks."

12 George Cole, "Miles Davis—Tutu," *Jazzwise*, May 2011, <http://www.jazzwisemagazine.com/artists/14045-miles-davis-tutu>.

with inventing it wholesale), and such qualities run throughout the album and Lee's video. One of the signal mappings between the music and images, then, is coolness as aesthetic: relaxed and aloof, tuned in but unconcerned, attractive but distancing.¹³

"Tutu Medley" is decidedly of the 1980s—shiny, gaudy, excessive, paint splattered, neon, chromed out, abstract, and swooning—but it is also "Miles Davis 80s." The vignettes variously show Davis mysteriously floating along on an unseen dolly in a tracking shot, flinging small pieces of his abstract paintings below a crane shot, playing under spotlights on a New York City roof at night, posing immobile with his trumpet next to giant sculptures in a day-lit loft, and strutting down angular, brightly lit hallways while blowing a trumpet. Like the music itself, no image lingers too long. Once the audience gets comfortable, a new sample, synth jab, or trumpet squeal dives in or a new sequenced drumbeat breaks the flow. These are funky images for funky tunes, and the video practically screams that Davis does not give a shit what you think. Indeed, he aims his trademark glare directly at the camera in multiple close-up shots. Always the sartorialist, Davis at one point sports a trench coat made of chrome-plated vinyl. In short, these are synthetic images for synthetic music in a synthetic age. Marcus Miller himself remarked: "*Tutu* had a lot of elements that represented the 80s; that for better or for worse, represented where we were at, not just musically, but as a society. The technology had just been introduced in the last ten years and we were just struggling to figure out how to co-exist with these machines—they were making our lives better, they were making our lives worse, depending on who you talked to!"¹⁴ His ambivalence is prescient, as human coexistence with advanced technology remains challenging. But new sound technologies have particular weight for Blackness, as Alexander Weheliye has notably argued: "[T]he interface" of twentieth-century Black cultural production with technological and social histories of sound recording "provides a singular mode of (Black) modernity."¹⁵ *Tutu* and "Tutu Medley" unpack all of these issues, but one has to look and listen very carefully to follow the maps.

Kahlil Joseph's work builds on the musical deconstruction and audiovisual mapping found in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* and "Tutu Medley." Joseph's *Wildcat* is an experimental documentary short—and now multiscreen-projection gallery installation—depicting a historical Black rodeo in the community of Grayson, Oklahoma. One might even say that the piece is a "secret history" of a little-known and extraordinary Black community. In the film, the tightly knit rodeo family wrestles with the loss of their matriarch, "Aunt" Janet Celestine, while going about their workaday endeavors. Joseph emphasizes the competing interests of performance and sorrow, perseverance and grieving, all while filling the screen(s) with phantom, black-and-white images of absence and presence.¹⁶ Joseph uses images as well as sounds to haunt spectators. *Wildcat* blurs normative temporality by using forgotten Alice Coltrane music reworked by her nephew,

13 Joel Dinerstein, *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

14 Cole, "Miles Davis—Tutu."

15 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

16 I have written about such "imaginative conjunctions" of seemingly opposed concepts elsewhere. Charles P. Linscott, "Distinction and Conjunction in the Films of Kahlil Joseph," *In Media Res*, October 11, 2016, <http://mediacommons.org/imr/2016/10/11/distinction-and-conjunction-films-kahlil-joseph>.

the acclaimed hip-hop avant-gardist (and frequent Joseph collaborator) Flying Lotus. Here, the secret histories become pronounced and the visual maps become audible. The structural and thematic foundation of *Wildcat* is found in part in the treatment of Coltrane's music. Pointedly, both the music and the film are defined by interpenetration of the past and the present, and each is sensible only once the other is known. As ghostly images and ethereal recollections of Aunt Janet flit across the screen, the soundtrack similarly manipulates time through its use of neglected music sampled and produced for the modern ear. And again, the importance of the music and its history depends on a bit of (Black) historical knowledge. The richness of Black history and its systemic obfuscation are writ large here, as the underdetermined whiteness of the American Midwest is starkly refuted by Joseph's haunting film and Coltrane and FlyLo's haunted music. This brings the secret histories (and my investigation thereof) full circle, ending as they began with *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*: improvised music is sampled and remixed, with the new production both dictated by the past and reaching out to be free of it. Similarly, the images move in this fascinatingly liminal space as if drawn by the music *to be* in an aesthetic mode that swirls and lingers, breaks up and moves forward, while also (not so) secretly looking back.

In the end, it is not erudition as such that is necessary to more fully understand Black images and sounds such as those examined here. Rather, it is a sensitivity to musical and imagistic connections and to historical continuities within the pieces themselves—but also across historical lineages of Black filmmaking—that is required to follow the maps. Anyone can watch for what might otherwise slip by unnoticed. Anyone can see ghosts so long as they are willing to listen to the undertones, feel the undercurrents, and apprehend the (no longer) secret histories haunting the artworks. *

The Persistence of “Wild Style”: Hip-Hop and Music Video Culture at the Intersection of Performance and Provocation

by MICHELE PRETTYMAN

Hip-hop, an enduring historiographical enigma, invites reflection on what is past and what is prologue, particularly in relationship to race and the visual archive of performance.¹ I discuss the groundbreaking video for the South Bronx’s Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s (GMFFF) iconic song “The Message” (Alvin Hartley, 1982), then pivot to the twenty-first-century artist Donald Glover, and his musical alter-ego Childish Gambino, whose video “This Is America” (Hiro Murai, 2018) engages the archive of racialized movement and dance from the nineteenth century and became a viral phenomenon. Last, I consider how SoundCloud music streaming enabled the rise of new iterations of hip-hop music and video form, briefly discussing a video from the late provocateur XXXTentacion entitled “Look at Me” (James “JMP” Pereira, 2017).

The phrase “wild style,” first invoked roughly forty years ago by hip-hop pioneer Fab 5 Freddy, originally referred to graffiti, specifically to its bold, spray-painted, bubble style of lettering and later to the coded phrases, pictures, and full-blown painterly tableaux. It also refers to Charlie Ahearn’s groundbreaking film *Wild Style* (1983), which, like music video, provided a visual account of hip-hop’s nascent cultures of writing, movement, lyricism, and turntablism. Kodwo Eshun provides another useful take on wild style, explaining that it “exercises the senses, puts the eyes and ears through an escherized assault course.”² Embedded in the wild style trope is the notion of coding and decoding phrases, references and visual cyphers that may be disorienting, inaccessible, or

1 A compelling take on the archive is found in Lauren McLeod Cramer’s “Building the Black (Universal) Archive and the Architecture of Black Cinema,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 131–145. See specifically her description of the archive and architecture of “The Library of Babel.”

2 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 31. The term “escherized” refers to the work of Dutch graphic artist Maurits Cornelis Escher, famous for his “impossible constructions.”

so purposefully cryptic that those who are uninitiated may not be able to gain access to the world of meaning created by its makers.³

My articulation of wild style takes flight by examining a series of hip-hop music videos, noting how particular gestures and styles of performance in these texts reanimate earlier modes of performance and social critique—what Daphne Brooks might call dissent—and how they flow across nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century popular culture.⁴ The videos I engage are not simply political, ironic, or controversial; rather, they deploy embodied, discursive, and aesthetic provocations to destabilize categorization and meaning. Provocation is a thing, a graphic depiction of violence or a gesture, for instance, and a mode of performative encounter. In what follows, I trace how these videos modulate the space between paradigms of legibility and illegibility. Legibility refers to ways that music-video form fosters accessibility, transparency, or familiarity and how these videos circulate to multiple audiences, triggering exposure and commercial viability for the artist. Illegibility, then, is an impasse or disconnect between the artist and some viewers, which includes conflicting or paradoxical interpretations of the video and its relationship to the broader archive of race and performance. To be certain, it is not always clear what is legible or illegible in a given video, but it is the tension between these paradigms that is intriguing: how these texts deploy both elements in a single video; how they often disturb, confound, and awe us simultaneously; how provocation and critique are wielded bluntly at times and used in precise and nuanced ways at others.⁵

“Don’t Push Me, ‘Cause I’m Close to the Edge.” These lyrics, excerpted from “The Message” on GMFFF’s debut album, became a clarion call, an anthem, the (graffiti) writing on the wall, announcing to listeners that hip-hop was an oral—and visual—provocation to be reckoned with. By then, artists including the Sugar Hill Gang and Kurtis Blow had already appeared in rudimentary music videos, but “The Message” became a groundbreaking hit record, and the accompanying video would create a stylistic template for hip-hop visual culture. While on-street and club performances continued to help spread hip-hop’s momentum, music videos like “The Message” expanded the medium’s popularity.

The music video for “The Message” reflects the song’s lyrics and depicts age-old social problems through early video distortion techniques, creating a nightmarish, dystopian aesthetic. Group members pose not simply in a classic “b-boy” stance but in ways that index historical postures of Black masculinity across the decades captured in work by artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Barkley Hendricks, and Jamel Shabazz. The members of GMFFF wear a mashup of styles throughout the video: fitted jeans, leather and spiked accessories, hats, cowboy boots, and fringed jackets. These subtle queer references stand in stark contrast to their overall performance of Black male heteronormativity. In

3 Not be confused with Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding first published in 1973 in *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Stencilled Occasional Papers (Birmingham, UK: CCCS, 1973).

4 Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5 This is evocative of Charles P. “Chip” Linscott’s reading of Arthur Jafa’s “secret histories” in his essay in this *In Focus*.

one carefully composed scene, the group members stand atop a heap of rubble in the South Bronx, posing in an almost-heroic stance resembling cowboys in the Wild West. (In fact, one of the members is actually nicknamed “Cowboy.”) Some men lean on each other, others fold their arms across their chests in defiance, and their faces, like their bodies, are hardened, almost deadpan. The recurring stance embodies how male figures in early hip-hop culture often performed to enact a kind of social power, power often unavailable to them outright, and shores up narratives of masculinity, cultural, sexual prowess, and social progress. Much like tagging a train or the side of a building, using the city’s grid to power your sound equipment, or using the *n*-word publicly, these defiant postures represent a particular kind of transgression, one rooted in the politics of self-making, of claiming space and being seen doing so. The video for “The Message” thus codifies hip-hop’s emphasis on gestures, stances, and the aesthetics of Black male presence in public space as embodied forms of provocation. Yet there is another gesture in this video that signals a relationship to a larger performative narrative. While the group members typically pose with their legs splayed and rigid, in one shot the leg of one group member is slightly bent. This nuanced gesture—like the bend of a wrist, the curl of a lip, the snap of a neck, the cut of an eye, or a deadpan expression—has had a long life span as a mode of expressive signification migrating from the interpersonal to the public and then the performative sphere. They flow across time, in and through queer expressive life, in the church and the club, and on the street corner, stage, and screen.

W. T. Lhamon Jr.’s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* unearths the origins and context of these kinds of cultural gestures and performative modes of entertainment.⁶ He examines how gestures like the “bent knee,” among others, were endemic to the archive of blackface minstrel performance across the Atlantic, often referencing T. D. Rice, an iconic white blackface performer, who popularized many movements and dances in the mid-nineteenth century. Explaining this lineage, Lhamon writes:

Jacqui Malone, following Peter H. Wood, has argued that the chief distinguishing gesture of African-American body retentions in New World dance is the bent knee. . . . This “kneebone bent” is a move nurtured by the same Gullah community on the Georgia Sea Islands that carried “Knock Jim Crow” to us. The cultural bent knee is important because it shows that T. D. Rice was not delineating an individual crippledness, as the conventional story of his supposed theft from a lame hostler has had it all these years. Jim Crow’s bent knee was an African-American posture teaching nimble motion. His bent knee fostered coexistence and survival rather than rigid relations and extermination.⁷

The bent knee resurfaces in “The Message” and in Glover’s “This Is America,” reminding us that the archive of Black cultural performance travels.⁸

6 W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

7 Lhamon, 217.

8 The image of the Jim Crow performer often circulated on the internet is the one that appears on the cover and inside of Lhamon’s book, which is held by the Harvard Theatre Collection at Houghton Library.

Donald Glover Jumps Jim Crow. The emphasis on Black male embodiment in “The Message,” coupled with its sociopolitical critique, provide a compelling bridge to Glover’s account of twenty-first-century America. In a time still dominated by the reach of hip-hop culture, “This Is America” pivots from the dystopic visual tropes of urban space in the South Bronx captured in “The Message” to the confines of an anonymous warehouse. For Glover—an award-winning musical artist, the star and showrunner of the FX show *Atlanta* (2016–), and the two-headed hydra of Black geekdom and Atlanta ratchet who was raised in the Stone Mountain suburbs and educated at New York University—America is complicated. “This Is America” (awarded a Grammy for best music video) initiates audiences into this complexity through a series of jarringly violent scenes that juxtapose the power of dance, entertainment, and performance with the contemporary racial and political climate, making clear how wild style marks new territory between cultural legibility and illegibility.

“This Is America” was released amid a media blitz when Glover was featured on various national platforms in the space of several weeks in 2018. On May 5, Glover hosted and performed “This Is America” on *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 2018) while the video was simultaneously released on YouTube, where 12.9 million viewers watched it in a single day.⁹ On May 10, Glover’s FX show *Atlanta* broadcast its season two finale, and on May 25, Glover became part of the *Star Wars* franchise with his portrayal of Lando Calrissian in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Ron Howard, 2018). In sum, the release of the video was carefully coordinated with Glover’s performances across several divergent platforms to reach a complex set of audiences. Similarly, the song itself “jumps” across several genres, featuring influences from trap and Afrobeat music as well as multiple artists with vocal and writing credits.

The video itself stages scenes in which Glover’s alter ego, Childish Gambino, is both the purveyor of violence and the subject of terror. These scenes vacillate between dance performances and the firing of automatic weapons, culminating with Gambino racing toward the camera. Embodying Eshun’s articulation of wild style, the video is an assault on the senses. From the opening moment, viewers must manage the layered sonic flow of lyrics, instrumentality, and African-influenced background vocals. The first shot is of a guitar on a chair; a Black man walks in from stage right, sits, and plays as the camera moves left and Gambino’s body appears in the distance. His back is to the camera as it tracks closer; then he wiggles his head and gradually turns to face us. We soon discover that Gambino’s body will be emptied of singularity, that it will represent, reflect, embody, distract, and deflect simultaneously. His movements will be both anachronistic, of some other time and place, and contemporary, thanks to help from influential choreographer Sherrie Silver. Thomas F. DeFrantz eloquently discusses how Gambino uses “social dance” of African, African American, Latin, and Caribbean origins to express that “there will be revolutions led by people in motion; that the police state of America will not deprive us of our greatest resources of collective action through aesthetic gesture.”¹⁰

9 Jessica Klein, “Childish Gambino’s ‘This Is America’ in ‘Black One Shot,’” ed. Michael Gillespie and Lisa Uddin, Special issue, *Clocks 55 Million Views in Just Four Days*, *tubefilter*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.tubefilter.com/2018/05/09/childish-gambinos-this-is-america-breaks-youtube-record>.

10 Thomas F. DeFrantz, “This Is America,” in “Black One Shot,” ed. Michael Gillespie and Lisa Uddin, special issue, *ASAP/Journal*, August 27, 2018, <http://asapjournal.com/b-o-s-7-3-this-is-america-thomas-f-defrantz>.

Gambino's styles of dance are recognizable to some, unknown to others; his expressions and gesticulations range from the somber and melancholic to the whimsical, deadpan, confrontational, and pained. The video tests us, taunting us to keep pace as we try to decode every gesture and calculation. But my interest is not in decoding the meaning in the video but in considering how it is part of a larger narrative that both illuminates and obfuscates the perils of Black life and performance by foregrounding the slippage between visibility, success, and vilification. I argue that "This Is America" uses music video form to further complicate the historical relationships of performance, audiences, institutions of media, culture, and entertainment, revealing the peculiar interdependency of these spheres and the legacy and insanity of racial terror. The video communicates profound anxieties around this interdependence, evidenced in its absurdist, surrealist aesthetic.

The unseen bent knee that resurfaces in "This Is America" is a bit more pronounced than in "The Message," indexing Gambino's performance as part of the *longue durée* of race and popular entertainment (Figure 1). As seen in previous iterations of racialized performance, Gambino's presence is structured around the ironic deployment of a series of paradoxical elements. Shirtless in rough-hewn trousers and unstyled hair, his body performs dances from the past and present as gold chains bounce on his chest. Both familiar and unrecognizable, he nimbly traverses the space of the warehouse and jumps across the centuries. Wesley Morris aptly captures the dissonance incited by Gambino's performance as he writes: "There is the truly alarming sight of Mr. Glover's body, and the minstrel twitch that sends his limbs spasming and causes his eyes to pop. It's as if 200 years of disputed American entertainment are rattling his bones and pulling his strings to perform this dance macabre."¹¹



Figure 1. In "This Is America" Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) "jumps" across the centuries in a bent-knee pose (Doomsday Entertainment, 2018).

11 Wesley Morris, "'Atlanta' Skips a Grade," *New York Times*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/arts/television/atlanta-donald-glover-this-is-america.html>.

By the end of the video, Gambino hurls himself into a murky distance, running first away from, then toward, the camera. All his gesticulations and affections—the gyrations, bulging eyes, mischievous grins, awkward limb movements, even the deadpan expression—collapse into the fugitive: the sweaty, gold-chain-wearing man who flees across the centuries from slave catchers, a lynch mob, a police officer, the paparazzi, celebrity, or maybe his own alter ego. Gambino and Glover are perhaps collapsed in this final shot, then, embodying the paradoxes of commercial success, hypervisibility, and the seeming inevitability of racial and social terror.

Odd Futures. While Glover’s video recirculates nineteenth-century movement, gestures, and racial violence, his work also reflects the influence of internet culture and a younger generation of so-called SoundCloud rappers, specifically through his use of viral-ready, shock-value imagery and trap sonic influences.¹² Since roughly 2010, a generation of hip-hop artists and collectives emerged, producing many of the most influential and provocative figures.¹³ Florida’s XXXTentacion, who was murdered in 2018 at the age of twenty, captured this zeitgeist more than any other figure of the time. His music, which vividly conveys his depression, pain, and insecurity, first appeared on SoundCloud in 2013, but in the tumultuous years before his death, he became famous for his copious “fight videos” on YouTube and numerous arrests, which included charges that he assaulted his pregnant girlfriend. XXXTentacion released music that was known for its low-fi production values and raw “screamo” metal rap sound, but his music, like Glover’s, defies categorization and references a range of musical influences. In 2017, he released a video for a popular song called “Look at Me.” The video engages traumatic primal scenes of racial violence, including the hanging of three Black men and Emmett Till’s tragic murder. The video reenacts this historical terror, depicting XXXTentacion and two other figures suspended from trees as lynching victims. Indeed, XXXTentacion delivers his rap as his body dangles from a noose. Later, in an almost inexplicable scene, he talks with two young boys, then guides the young Black child to hang the young white child. XXXTentacion’s use of shock-value violence in “Look at Me” and his willingness to risk illegibility resonates with Glover’s deployment of these aesthetics in “This Is America.”

Glover may not have been influenced by this video, but his broader project shares the same gesture: it seems bent on bridging these in-between spaces, whether through time and genre or through his collaborations with artists whose sensibilities are as varied as Chance the Rapper and Migos. Like “This Is America” and “The Message,” the work reanimates wild style as a framework with the capacity to enable the powers of interpretation across time and space and to revile, beguile, destabilize, or otherwise modulate an unruly set of possibilities that flow through the interstices of technology,

12 Glover’s album *Because the Internet* (2013) specifically comments on the internet’s capacity to shape culture and content. For some context on SoundCloud rap, see David Turner, “Look at Me! The Noisy, Blown-Out SoundCloud Revolution Redefining Rap,” *Rolling Stone*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/look-at-me-the-noisy-blown-out-soundcloud-revolution-redefining-rap-123887>.

13 Prominent collectives include A\$AP Mob (Harlem, 2006: A\$AP Yams, A\$AP Rocky et al.); Odd Futures; Pro Era (Brooklyn, 2011: Joey Bada\$\$, Capital Steez et al.); and Florida’s Raider Klan (2008: SpaceGhost Purrp, et al.).

subjection, death, and embodiment. It often juxtaposes provocative uses of form and performance and stark references to violence and trauma to reach potentially disaffected viewers, reminding us that music video, however it circulates, remains the most salient way to reach and confound new generations of audiences. *

Special thanks to my son Jacob Beverly, whose insights about the contemporary music scene were invaluable.

The Music Film as Essay: Montage as Argument in Khalil Joseph's *Fly Paper* and *Process*

by JAMES TOBIAS

In conversation with the music-video form, the Black essay film advances processes of remembrance that leverage the possibilities of digital streaming but work against its instrumental logic through the double haptics of audio and vision. This essay shows this refusal and leveraging at work in Kahlil Joseph's twenty-three-minute installation *Fly Paper* (2018) and the visual album he directed for Sampha Sisay's 2017 album *Process*.

The historical essay film, for all its critical value, also has a special character: it may tend toward a specific kind of engagement, projecting a generatively problematic nowness where demands made on receivers' attention and memory entwine with questions of historical memory and media memory. Chris Marker—for Timothy Corrigan, the paradigmatic practitioner of the film essay—prototypes in *Sans Soleil* (1983) "immersion" in the nowness of cinematic time as just this complex problem of memory—and just as "immersion" became a technical ideal in the design of "navigable" screens.¹ Made on the

- 1 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49. Regarding the navigable, immersive media emerging in that period, Xerox Parc's Alto system provided, by the mid-1970s, the key elements of the navigable digital screen that would inform commercially viable personal computers of the next decade, while projects like Michael Naimark's *Aspen Mediamap* of 1978–1979, in which users could navigate the streets of Aspen via response to video imagery, brought videographic indexicality to ongoing experiments in navigable, immersive imagery. For the former, see, e.g., Alfredo M. Ronchi, *eCulture: Cultural Content in the Digital Age* (New York: Springer, 2009), 55. For the latter, see project documentation at <http://www.naimark.net/projects/aspen.html>.

culsp of transitions to digital production, Marker's film handles memory in ways that still resonate: indexed in the audiovisual image's memorializing power, historical memory matters all the more at the moment of crisis because it struggles to cohere in the interface of the historical and the medial. As the essay film has gained in its power to convey arguments about media power, historical memory, and the desire for a different world, Black audiovisual essayism—whether that of the Black Audio Film Collective, or the call-and-response between Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) and Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989)—has long explored this interface of media power, historical memory, and futural desire. For Corrigan, the essay film “subjects personal expression to the public domain of experience” to arrive at a moment of exterior belief “in a world always eliciting and refusing thought.”² Yet Black essayism challenges more than just a resistance to thought. The fact of working from underrepresentation to exteriorize subjective thought in the audiovisual image reorders the audiovisual image's priorities and those of its historical archive. Black film essayism thus matters as a complex material process in its own right, as thought and as force, haptics entangled with argumentation.

A montage of home video, historical footage, and contemporary footage shot by Joseph, all set in Harlem, Kahlil Joseph's *Fly Paper* makes specific the problematic of reordering audiovisual priorities and, in so doing, the historical trajectory of the film essay. Alessandra Raengo points out this work's sampling of Marker's *Sans Soleil*, observing the work's concern with a man who “has lost the ability to lose” memory; the film “is determined to carry the lost object(s) *along*, regardless of the cost.”³ *Fly Paper*'s unidentified subject models a characteristic attributed to digital networks: the lengthening extent of media memory, in contexts where we may struggle to process experience as much in terms of how we orient our moving bodies toward media objects as in terms of subjective, psychic experience. As an immersive installation, the version of *Fly Paper* presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles in Fall 2018 suggests the renewed relevance of an “expanded cinema” amid the politics, economics, and aesthetics of digital streaming. Rumbling with bass that filters through spectators' bodies as they sprawl on cushions spread across the gallery floor, *Fly Paper* lifts Alexandra Stewart's reading of a key line from the English version of *Sans Soleil*: “At least they will see the black.” As heard in *Fly Paper*, by auditor-viewers experiencing something on the order of a mediatic lucid dream, the *Sans Soleil* quotation is shorn of context, turned toward the Black essay cinema, so that the historicity and mediating power of the essay film prioritize Afro-diasporic memory. As bass washes through gallery space otherwise oriented toward the screen, the libidinal energies of the essay film are likewise redirected in a doubled haptics, the force of the visual in tension with that of the auditory.

The auditor-viewers' corporeal orientation thus remade, citing essay film history while remaking the way we remember it, *Fly Paper* subjects processes of racialization to its montage of Black scenes and movements figuring Afro-diasporic history

2 Corrigan, *Essay Film*, 49.

3 Alessandra Raengo, “Sounding Out a Stumble: Melancholic Loops in Kahlil Joseph's *Fly Paper*,” October 29, 2018, <http://liquidblackness.com/lb-art-reviews-kahlil-josephs-fly-paper-by-alessandra-raengo>.

and becoming. Writing phantasmatic gesture as historical memory, the film presents Ben Vereen and Storyboard P in formal wear dancing before the camera. Their performance enacts, as Raengo rightly observes in the review cited earlier, a dream of personal and collective memory. *Fly Paper*'s sound-image relations situate the auditor-viewer between sound-oriented gallery and screen-oriented projection to immerse us in what I think of as a montage of events: historical memory, streaming screen time, desiring future, montaged as complex screen events, convoking a demonstration of historically Black Harlem. The effect is more than personal or memorial: the aesthetic demonstration of Harlem as gestural, as musical, and as historically Black in Joseph's immersive essay means the simplistic, dominant idea that gentrification is simply about, say, problems of changing neighborhoods can be remembered as a broader and more violent process in which racialization is made to coincide with displacement and marginalization.

This is a too-literal reading of *Fly Paper*. But it speaks to the ways in which Black essayism has produced some of the most rigorous, sensibly demanding, and analytically rewarding audiovisual arguments on the mediation of history, memory, and social change. Critics have pointed out the symptomatic and commoditized representations of Blackness in distinct registers of digital production since the 1980s.⁴ Doing similar work through audiovisual means throughout this period of transition to digital cultural production, Black film and video essays broadly understood, I argue, have a similarly important place alongside interactive artworks, hypertext literature, web art, or critical video games for exploring digitalization as a historical process. In the work of audiovisual analysts like Joseph, encoding musicality into and as a digital stream allows the streaming work to express meaning beyond the work's composition or reception. It also enunciates historical process: as an affective expression, a doubled haptics. In Joseph's works, the digitalization of Blackness communicates through and against historical processes that would reduce it to a simple digital "virtuality," a mere technological possibility. His work thus resists the way that displaced memory or desire may be recapitalized and streamed in dominant culture as a digital commodity, digital self, digitized experience.

Particularly important among recent works of audiovisual essayism have been feature-length works wherein displacement and redirection of industrial forms and formulas help us arrive at new ways of knowing historical, social, and personal change beyond imperial regimes of signification. Demonstration in Black essayism is significant given the challenges such works present to capital's revaluation of historical memory, its pseudo-communicativity, and its pseudo-individuation ("social media" being a key example here). The doubled haptics of Black essay films foreground processes of transformation through inventive claims on memory and desire, as in Joseph's

4 On sampling, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); on morphing, see Evelyn Hammonds, "New Technologies of Race," in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (London: Routledge, 1997), 107–122; on Black cyborgs, see Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); on Black avatar bodies, see David Leonard, "It's Gotta Be the Body: Race, Body, and the Surveillance of Contemporary Black Athletes," in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, ed. Norman Denzin (Bradford, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2009), 33:165–190.

immersive essays that bridge art video and music video. His full-length works are particularly important in this regard, as they announce and ground value in streaming services' platform strategies. Joseph's work on Beyoncé's 2016 *Lemonade* is a crucial example, as it occurred at a critical moment of transition for HBO but also was temporarily an exclusive release for Tidal (for twenty-four hours). As significant as that project has been for critics, the subsequent visual album Joseph directed for Sampha Sisay's *Process* was closely tied to the launch of Apple Music and went even farther in form and specificity in terms of the thematic of "processing" memory and desire.

It is not through "proper" or "immediate" renderings of memory, speech, or desire that haptic expression takes shape as "processing" in Joseph's audiovisual essays; nor is "algorithmic" process given some mythic capacity to decipher digital media fantasies. "Processing" in these works demonstrates musical mediation grappling with historical and personal memory in terms of trauma or loss. Formally, the musicality of the image is improper to the highly narrativized images we expect of promotional music videos as star vehicles, and Joseph typically does not center his work on a capitalized star image, prompting us to think about how to attend to historical context. In addition, the sound remix—the shortening, expanding, or distorting of songs in transitions to Foley effects—makes the soundtrack improper to the commodity form of the pop song. Joseph uses this doubly improper deployment of audio and video materials to mediate memory and desire and bring the problems of distributed subjecthood, instrumentality, and personal and historical affect to the fore in our experience of media streaming.

In *Process*, mediating memory holds loss as loss, as Raengo observed for Joseph's *Fly Paper*. Further, this film holds up to our viewing and hearing a historical subject of loss who instrumentally holds the object of loss. In Sampha's music, the subject of loss is the singer-songwriter, the piano is the instrument of holding, the object of loss is his mother. "No one knows me like the piano in my [now deceased] mother's home," he sings, and, for the viewer who recognizes it, when this line finally reaches our ears late in *Process*, it functions as a cipher for the musical film as itself an essay on loss. For Joseph, in turn, the instrument of holding is the montage of digital audio and video. Both singer-songwriter and director appear as subjects of loss recouping loss by instrumentally, musically mediating loss as memory rather than as trauma. Between the two, the process broadens, shared but not universalized. Each subject of loss instrumentally holding the lost object thus preempts any positioning of a subject of loss who, in capital's investment in anti-Blackness, would be tasked with the perverse labor of becoming violently instrumentalized. This reformulation of instrumentality, where capital's violent ends are remediated as aesthetic means, is such that trauma and loss are not compounded in more violence, more trauma.

That treatment arises in the film's deconstruction of the song form that typifies the music clip or visual album. At moments, Sampha's songs dissolve into burbling underwater distortion; at others, vocals bubble up again, musically unmotivated, from ambient noise. Similarly, Joseph provides an early visual metaphor for Sampha's mourning of his mother in the hard surfaces of a forlorn swimming pool; by the end of the film, that pool becomes a figure of immersive memory returned, full of placid, inviting water. Across the process of feeling emptied out, then finding fragments of meaning

finally putting the past into a new configuration of the present, the film moves between London and Freetown, Sierra Leone. The film's deconstructed memory work finds a center not in either location but in a progressive revelation of the power of memory. This power manifests in the image of a Black woman first appearing within a distant cocoonlike mesh, growing to fill the screen as the film nears its finale: a crystalline kernel of the fragmented past grows into the fullness of memory. The deep cavity of hard loss fills, not with presence but with a pooling of desiring potential.

Process was initially released exclusively through Apple Music and was part of a strategy by Apple on its entry into the streaming platform market to compete with more established platforms like Spotify. One result is that the complex arguments about memory and desire enfolded within its sound-image relations reflexively suggest revisions to understandings of streaming media platforms and networked events. We routinely think of such media events—whether policy “tweets,” fashion “drops,” song releases, or avatar status updates—uncritically as digitally mediated, digitally networked, “digital events” whose spectacular pseudo-sociality seems to account for itself. But it is perhaps better to understand them as belonging to and expressing a more basic labor of temporal production, of the ways we produce the timeliness of everyday life in advanced information societies. Events emerging in digital networks have less power in their own right and are more indicative of a larger process of montage, a montage of events.

This montage of events—the montage of memory as screen event, of desire as screen event, of everyday life and historical world as screen events—articulates the demonstrative nature of space-making, time-streaming, and self-making practices in hyperindustrial capital. But capital, too, is historically contingent. And laboring time as production and consumption, as analysis and synthesis, also means that the montage of events as temporal labor may also bring back deleted, wounded, othered, or dead modes of historical memory, such that memory and its doubled capacity for marking fragments and remembering takes on a more powerful role in the desiring articulation of the present. Thus, in the same way time and memory embodied in a Harlem brownstone in *Fly Paper* can recall the trauma of gentrification, the montage of events in *Process* can remember time lost and extracted under capital.

Like the more overtly engaged audiovisual essays, *Process* mediates loss, memory, and desire rather than simply “documenting” a family member’s death or exploiting the mnemonic commodity potential of a song. *Process*’s rendering of an experience of loss’s paradoxical return to the fullness of memory when it is held as loss resonates with Hortense Spillers’s argument about African American men being “the only community of American males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself”; as such, it demonstrates “the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of ‘yes’ to the female within.”⁵ Joseph renders Black femininity in relation to Black masculinity in some form in many of his works; in *Process*, it is one aspect of a complex historical

5 Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.

project of incorporating the raced, sexed, gendered subject away from the remains of the racialized subject who is instrumentalized as a feminized and fungible object.

New digital media do, then, foreground historical process as a crisis, but, I add, as a crisis covalent with shifts in histories of racialization.⁶ The musical essay film's engaged demonstrativity, with its strong demands for active listening and viewing, involves the receiver in these larger historical processes, relating the receiver's mediated "now" to the work's temporalities and to the historical montage of events. As Marker's *Sans Soleil* demonstrates, the essay film once played along the edges of the mediation of memory, loss, and becoming; subsequent projects like Joseph's play that edge as a more explicitly musical process and as a musical argument with productive force of its own. Where racialization produces violence in terms of feminization, alternatively rendering Black masculine loss as a process of recovering a feminized knowledge gained at the touch of "the piano in my mother's home" entwines the song making of the son with the sonic instrumentality of the mother's memory making. In this process, doubling medial and historical time, the musical essay film becomes another instance of Black life and memory figuring the global streaming of media memory—and figuring in the global valuation of Apple Music as it competes for listens and views. If *Fly Paper* intervened in the mediation of the US national image, then Kahlil Joseph and Sampha Sisay's *Process* constitutes a contrapuntal island in the streams of national and transnational empire, downstream from global capital's technological rendering of the virtual as technical possibility. At this island, a new stream of diasporic memory reaches outwardly in mediation. *

6 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation* (1996; Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 81–83.

Intergenerational Pedagogy in Jenn Nkiru's *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*

by JENNY GUNN

We need to see ourselves to know we exist.

—Jenn Nkiru¹

The British Nigerian filmmaker Jenn Nkiru has quickly become an important and critically acclaimed practitioner of contemporary Black cinema whose focus on rendering rarely seen aspects of Black life—particularly queer identity and Black feminist thought—is an expression of a younger generation of Black artists' conception of identity, style, and history.² Nkiru experienced a meteoric rise to popular prominence as the second unit director for the Carters' "APESHIT" music video (Ricky Saiz, 2018).³ Creating a viral phenomenon, the "APESHIT" video was released on YouTube at the same time as the single, the first from Beyoncé and Jay-Z's first joint album, *EVERYTHING IS LOVE* (2018).⁴ Although she often works in the commercial music video form, directing videos for Kamasi Washington and Neneh Cherry, among others, like her frequent collaborators and fellow Howard graduates Arthur Jafa and Bradford Young, Nkiru intentionally pushes the format to more formally daring and theoretically informed ends, creating work that lives as comfortably in the formal gallery space as it does online. To recognize the situatedness of this type of work, located at the fluid intersection of art installation and experimental film, the *liquid blackness* group has utilized the term "music art video."⁵ Of keen interest to Nkiru's filmmaking practice

1 Jenn Nkiru, "Interview: Jenn Nkiru," in "Literary Highlife," interview by Irenosen Okojie, *Litro* 162, May 2017, <https://www.litro.co.uk/2017/05/litro-162-literary-highlife-interview-jenn-nkiru>.

2 Nkiru's MFA thesis, the experimental documentary *EN VOGUE* (2014), is about New York's voguing and ballroom subculture and was shot by Arthur Jafa and Bradford Young.

3 "Meet Jenn Nkiru, Nigerian Director Who Helped Direct Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Grandiose Visual for 'Apehit,'" *Savvy Magazine*, July 2, 2018, <http://savvymagafica.com/2018/07/02/meet-jenn-nkiru-nigerian-director-who-helped-direct-beyonce-and-jay-zs-grandiose-visual-for-apehit/>; Damilola Animashaun, "Meet Jenn Nkiru, the Director of the 2nd Unit of Jay-Z & Beyoncé's 'APESHIT' Video," *Konbini*, n.d., <http://www.konbini.com/ng/entertainment/music/meet-jenn-nkiru-helped-direct-jay-z-beyonce-stunning-ape-shit-video>.

4 For more on *APESHIT*, see Jenny Gunn, "The Outside Meets the Institution: The Carters' *Apehit* Video," *Black Camera* 11 (Fall 2019): 385–398.

5 *liquid blackness*, "(A) Black Lineage of the Music Art Video" screening and conversation at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (March 26, 2019) with Alessandra Raengo, Jenny Gunn, Jazmine Judson, and Corey Couch.

in particular is the building of coalitional diasporic audiences. Distribution through online streaming platforms is crucial to fulfill Nkiru's mission of the intergenerational pedagogy modeled in her music art videos. As an example of this coalition building, this essay considers her 2017 short film *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*.

Attesting to both the influence of music video and her prior experience as a DJ, Nkiru insists on the vital role of sound in her aesthetic formation and her filmmaking practice.⁶ The short *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* vigorously reflects this genealogy. Unearthing "secret histories" such as those Linscott discusses, the short features a variety of audio and video archival materials—including samples of Sun Ra, James Baldwin, Fred Moten, Steve Reich, Kathleen Cleaver, and Alice Coltrane, among many others—as well as original footage shot in South Africa and her native South London. In so doing, it enacts what Nkiru has deemed a "cosmic archaeology" of life and filmmaking in the African diaspora.⁷ Montage predominates as the aesthetic organization of the film, employing Nkiru's principle of sonic mimesis through its use of the remix logic of hip-hop sampling.⁸ Like early hip-hop, the experience of the work is frenetic. Disrupting the notional fidelity of the synched image and documentary realism, the video features a variety of one- to five-second audio and video archival clips, which makes the project of mapping its narrative organization and references daunting. Given its density and complexity, one might assume that Nkiru's archival resources were drawn from a public-access archive such as the BBC, but in fact Nkiru and her production team personally sought out permissions from each source, revealing a disciplined intention behind the use of each clip.⁹ Because of its intense reliance on archival footage, Nkiru has described *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* as akin to a bibliography, an observation which led the *liquid blackness* research group to think through her work as "Black Studies as Aesthetic Practice."¹⁰ Its formal structure largely mirroring its larger political purpose, the aesthetic density of *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* relays to its audiences the diverse complexity of African diasporic culture. Through montage, Nkiru's film touches on modes of embodiment, sexual and gender fluidities, spiritual and ritual practices, and theories of the Black experience from Afro-pessimism to Afrofuturism. To further illustrate the work's complexity, it seems useful to analytically examine a portion of the film in more detail.

The video channel Nowness produced *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* for their Blackstar series, which features upcoming directors' reflections on the Black experience. In Nkiru's words, it is "like therapy. It's where I go to reconcile my worlds—the material and the

6 Ali Hanan, "Director Jenn Nkiru on Greenlighting Projects, Life without a Mentor and Her Love of 35mm," *The Drum*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2018/04/23/director-jenn-nkiru-greenlighting-projects-life-without-mentor-and-her-love-35mm>; Jenn Nkiru, interview by British Council, 2018, <http://film.britishcouncil.org/comment/spotlight/2018/jenn-nkiru>.

7 Harriet Fitch Little, "Film-Maker Jenn Nkiru's Brain-Bending Vision," *Financial Times*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/05d2648a-292f-11e9-9222-7024d72222bc>.

8 Jenn Nkiru, "Jenn Nkiru's Panafican Imagination: Black Studies as Aesthetic Practice" (screening and artist talk, Georgia State University, Atlanta, April 14, 2019), <https://vimeo.com/366991749/ba1476a2a8>.

9 Jenn Nkiru, "Masterclass with Jenn Nkiru" (lecture, Georgia State University, Atlanta, April 15, 2019).

10 Jenn Nkiru and Jumoke Adeyanju, "YAASAA with Jenn Nkiru," Berlin Community Radio, February 28, 2018, https://www.mixcloud.com/BCR_Radio/yaasaa-with-jenn-nkiru/?play=fb; "Jenn Nkiru Research Page," *liquid blackness* (blog), January 21, 2019, <http://liquidblackness.com/jenn-nkiru-research>.

spiritual, the human and divine. This film is jazz; Black magic in motion.”¹¹ In our study of *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*, the *liquid blackness* research group quickly determined that sequential analysis alone would be inadequate for mapping the film’s aesthetic. Rather, *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* demands a methodology of excavation, of digging into its sequences. The film is divided into sections through the use of textual intertitles, quotations, and subtitles, but to determine its structure on the basis of the placement of the intertitles would be misleading, and even violates the experience of the film to a certain extent. The text functions primarily as a staccato punctuation, adding rhythmic complexity to the experience of the film while also suggesting thematic resonances for each of its individual sequences of visual imagery. As an example, consider the second third of the film, which proceeds after an intertitle featuring the Nigerian proverb “For you to become Eze Nri, you must first die -said One Igwe.”¹² Beginning at 3:41 and lasting for only one minute, the sequence features a tripartite repetition of archival footage from Léonard Pongo’s *The Necessary Evil* (2015) (about the establishment of independent churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo). In this shot, a woman swings her arm in a full rotation repetitively while participating in a trancelike prayer. The rhythm of the swinging arm is reinforced by the soundtrack, a rendition of the traditional prison song “Take This Hammer,” punctuated by a male voice’s guttural beat keepings. The soundtrack continues, ending in the spoken lyric “if he asks you was I runnin’ / uh / you tell him I was flyin’ / uh / tell him I was flyin’ / uh / .” This lyric creates a sound bridge as the image cuts to an intertitle featuring the words “Flying Africans.” This intertitle is succeeded by additional footage from *The Necessary Evil* along with original footage of a burial ceremony, a 2017 color-altered photograph by Alberto González Farran featuring actors re-creating moments from the Passion of the Christ in Sudan, brief excerpts from Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), a clip from a 1970s commercial for Afro Sheen, and a clip from Agnès Varda’s *Black Panthers* (1968) that features Kathleen Cleaver extolling the beauty of natural hair. The sequence ends with an audio recording from *Black Panthers* of a group of female singers chanting “Black is beautiful!” that leads, finally, into an extended sequence that Nkiru recorded of women of the Nation of Islam performing a ritual exercise.¹³ The felt intensity of the sequence is difficult to replicate in writing; nevertheless, as careful analysis reveals, its dense references and insistence on juxtaposition as an organizing principle create a jarring combination of transitions from the material subjugation of slave labor to spiritual freedom and practices, Black pride, and Black love. In other words, the principle of juxtaposition communicates the film’s avowed intent to portray the magic and dynamism of Blackness and to reiterate Nkiru’s often repeated mantra that “THE BLACK ECSTATIC CANNOT BE CONTAINED.”¹⁴

11 “Black Star: Rebirth Is Necessary,” Nowness, n.d., <https://www.nowness.com/series/black-star/rebirth-is-necessary-jenn-nkiru>.

12 For the following analysis, I am using notes from the commentary by John Roberts, Jazmine Hudson, and Alessandra Raengo during Nkiru, “Jenn Nkiru’s Panafican Imagination: Black Studies as Aesthetic Practice.”

13 Roberts, Hudson, and Raengo, commentary during Nkiru, “Jenn Nkiru’s Panafican Imagination.”

14 Nkiru, “Masterclass.”

In its reliance on both archival sampling and remixing as aesthetic principles that recall those of hip-hop music, *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* approximates what Arthur Jafa defines as “Black Visual Intonation”: the aspiration to achieve in Black cinema what has already been achieved in Black music. As Jafa states, the guiding ethos of Black Visual Intonation is contained in the question “How can we make Black images vibrate in accordance with certain frequential values that exist in Black music?”¹⁵ Like a hip-hop producer, Nkiru pursues transformational uses of archival footage that test the endurance of the indexical photographic or phonographic recording, exhausting their elasticity to create new cultural meanings and renewed relevancies.¹⁶ Nkiru cites the importance of passing down generational knowledge in Nigerian culture in expressing her desire that *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* will inspire “intergenerational cosmic conversation.”¹⁷ Just as early hip-hop sampling encouraged a return to the archives of early twentieth-century jazz, Nkiru hopes her film will reach twenty-first-century diasporic audiences and remind them of twentieth-century Black radicalisms. To that end, Nkiru leverages the digital distribution methods of networked culture, vowing that all of her films will eventually end up streaming for free on platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo.¹⁸

Nkiru’s keen attention to both her films’ distribution and reception speaks to her emphasis on the importance of process over the finished product. Producing a film such as *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* is an intellectual and emotional journey for the artist and her crew that does not end with the finished film.¹⁹ Rather, it continues as *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* encounters new audiences who become inspired to dig into its archive. Nkiru has indicated her openness to seeing her films reused and remixed by later viewers, and she strives for connection with her audiences, voicing her joy in hearing personally how her films affect audiences on the individual level.²⁰ She maintains active online profiles on Instagram and Twitter through which fans can follow her work and public appearances, and she encourages her followers to contact her through these directly.²¹ In this way, her intention to always prioritize the beauty of Black people and Black culture in her cinema extends into a commitment to fortify diasporic community through digital means.²²

The short film *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* crafts complex theoretical arguments complete with a citational apparatus for its audio and visual archives, which are included in full in the film’s credits sequence. In so doing, it recalls the essay film in multiple ways, particularly given Nkiru’s emphasis on process, the pointed employment of text, and

15 Arthur Jafa, “69,” in *Black Popular Culture / A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 249–254.

16 Nkiru, “Jenn Nkiru’s Panafican Imagination.”

17 Nkiru, “Masterclass.”

18 Nkiru.

19 Nkiru, “Jenn Nkiru’s Panafican Imagination.”

20 Nkiru; Nkiru, interview by British Council.

21 Nkiru, “Masterclass.”

22 Nkiru differentiates “Black cinema” from “Black film” to emphasize the political mobilization of aesthetic form as an expressive medium for Blackness. Nkiru.

its commitment to political vision.²³ Or more specifically, it operates as an iteration of what James Tobias deems “Black essayism” and, similarly to Joseph’s *Fly Paper*, (2018) approaches media as a form of memory. Laura Rascaroli defines the essay film as an inherently protean form that exists as “a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses,” a nexus within which *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* is quite comfortable.²⁴ As in the postwar era, technological changes, now in digital networked media, have led to a revitalization of the form.²⁵ As *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* exemplifies, digital technologies not only democratize the distribution of film and make large archives of visual content available, but have likewise led to an increasing visual literacy and a new generation of millennials fluent in moving image storytelling through the use of video editing software. These do-it-yourself practitioners of the video essay are Nkiru’s audience, the ones who give her works second lives, creating dialogue through their own reuses and remixes, and thus assuring that works such as *REBIRTH* avoid reifying into canonical objects.

Nkiru is not alone; as the remarkable popularity for such works indicates (see, for example, Michele Prettyman’s discussion of Childish Gambino’s “This is America” in this dossier), the music art video is perhaps the most thriving locus for the production of theoretically rich and politically complex arguments occurring in audiovisual aesthetic form. Moreover, this form is practiced by a range of contemporary Black filmmakers who often collaborate with one another. In 2014, Arthur Jafa cofounded the TNEG collective, with Malik Sayeed and Elissa Blount Moorhead, dedicated to the achievement of “not just new narratives but new aesthetics, new technical parameters, new intensities” all in the service of an emergent Black cinema “as central (culturally, socially, and economically) to the 21st century as was Black music to the 20th century.”²⁶ Nkiru is a member of the Ummah Chroma filmmaking collective, which directed *As Told to G/D Thyself* (2019), along with cinematographer Bradford Young, director Terence Nance, jazz musician and producer Kamasi Washington, and editor Marc Thomas.²⁷ In particular, Ummah Chroma’s commitment to a nonhierarchical filmmaking practice recalls the spirit of the Black radical tradition and the jazz ensemble, which for Fred Moten is a site of improvisation of experimental forms of sociality.²⁸ It is interesting, then, to note that Kamasi Washington initiated the formation of the Ummah Chroma collective out of a desire to fully realize the spirit of his

23 Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 31.

24 Rascaroli, 24.

25 Rascaroli, 24, 28; Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*” (1948), in *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 160.

26 “Ethos,” TNEG, <http://tneg.us/ethos>; “TNEG,” *Impossible Objects*, <http://www.impossibleobjectsmarfa.com/fragments-2/tneg>.

27 “Cinematographers Arthur Jafa & Malik Sayeed Team w/ Curator Elissa Blount-Moorhead to Launch New Film Production Company,” *Shadow and Act*, April 20, 2017, <https://shadowandact.com/cinematographers-arthur-jafa-malik-sayeed-team-w-curator-elissa-blount-moorhead-to-launch-new-film-production-company>; Tambay Obenson, “Terence Nance and Bradford Young Explain Their New Filmmaking Collective—Sundance,” *IndieWire*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/02/bradford-young-terence-nance-umma-chroma-sundance-1202039941>.

28 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

2018 album *Heaven and Earth*, which he felt was innately visual.²⁹ To have reached such a point, where the music needs the image to fulfill itself, surely seems a vital sign that this century is already Black cinema's for the taking.

Like its literary precursor, Rascaroli underscores that the essay film is inherently and avowedly subjective. As she states, in the essay film, "the interaction of the subjective perspective and the reality before it becomes a testing ground or questioning of both, and the structure of the film . . . follows the undetermined movement of that dialogue."³⁰ In interviews, Nkiru has repeatedly insisted that the "clearest sense of self," as a British Nigerian woman, guides and inspires her filmmaking practice.³¹ Although praising the work of her thesis adviser at Howard, Haile Gerima, Nkiru insists that she lacks a formal mentor. Having "yet to see a film [she] would have made," Nkiru "self-actualizes" her subjective truth through her cinema's attention to forms of Black sociality in African diasporic aesthetic practices. Perhaps even more important, modeling a new intergenerational pedagogy in works such as *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*, Nkiru further forges the bonds of dispersed diasporic communities, leveraging the capabilities of digital networked media. *

29 Obenson, "Terence Nance and Bradford Young."

30 Rascaroli, "Essay Film," 24.

31 Nkiru, "Interview"

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