Encountering the Rebellion: Liquid Blackness Reflects on the Expansive Possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion Films

Alessandra Raengo
Georgia State University, araengo@gsu.edu

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L.A. Rebellion
Creating a New Black Cinema

EDITED BY
Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart

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Encountering the Rebellion

*liquid blackness* Reflects on the Expansive Possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion Films

ALESSANDRA RAENGO

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

—John Akomfrah

THE L.A. REBELLION COMES TO TOWN

In late summer 2013 Matthew Bernstein, chair of the Film and Media Studies Department at Emory University, contacted me for a possible collaboration: bringing the “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema” tour to Atlanta. He told me that the thirty-six films on tour across North America would no longer be available after the end of the year. If we wanted them we had to act fast.

Matthew’s proposition came at a most propitious time, since I had been considering the possibility of constituting a research group focused on issues of blackness and aesthetics that would comprise students within and without Georgia State University, as well as interested
curators, local artists, and intellectuals. I envisioned the group as both the product of and the motor for porous forms of cross-pollination between academia and less institutionalized centers of thought and creative production—a fluid structure inspired by the conviction that artistic, curatorial, and scholarly practices are only materially, but not substantially, different ways of generating critical thought. Opening our doors to the L.A. Rebellion appeared as an ideal and provocative first project. Thus the research group **liquid blackness** was quickly constituted in order to facilitate the unfolding of the L.A. Rebellion tour.¹

Many of us knew the value of this work, even though we had seen only a handful of the films that came through with the tour, while others trusted the determination and energy of those more familiar with the films. All approached the tour as a collective research project. Thus, even before we saw the films, we came together and were slowly giving shape to some form of “collective,” where decisions are made nonhierarchically and by trusting the “genius” of the group. We now realize how much this resonates with the very conditions of formation of the L.A. Rebellion, which had successfully experimented with collaborative and community-based modes of production and therefore could help us reflect on the power of collective forms of both artistic practice and critical thinking.

To prepare for the tour we shared an essential bibliography of critical essays on the L.A. Rebellion, and those of us in teaching positions restructured our syllabi to create both a context for and an introduction to the tour; we created ad hoc assignments, offered incentives to encourage our students’ participation in the screenings, and enlisted our students’ help in hanging flyers and advertising the events so that they would feel part of a community-building activity. In the process of designing publicity materials for the tour, we developed a close relationship with some of the L.A. Rebellion images, mostly frame grabs that the tour’s curators made available to us. For the postcard and flyer, we chose two stills from Billy Woodberry’s *The Pocketbook* (1980), while the iconic image of Barbara O. Jones as Angela Davis in Haile Gerima’s *Child of Resistance* (1972), reaching through the bars of her jail, became the mesmerizing large poster for the tour. This is the same image in Zeinabu irene Davis’s unfinished documentary, *Spirits of Rebellion* (2011), that Clyde Taylor cites as expressing the overall attitude of the new type of filmmaking he eventually described as the L.A. Rebellion.

From a conceptual standpoint, it was immediately clear to us that we did not want to present the L.A. Rebellion as a minority cinema that
should solely be directed to minority audiences. On the contrary, we discussed it as a body of work that expands the film history canon by demonstrating unseen possibilities of cinema as a medium and an art form to articulate experiences that have always been at odds with mainstream narrative structure and visual repertoires. Thus, we felt that the L.A. Rebellion’s conditions, context, and modes of production have the potential to rejuvenate conversations about creativity in situations of oppression or neglect. A cinema of survival and endurance, the L.A.
Rebellion highlights the power of collective artistic practices in offering viable alternatives to articulate underrepresented experiences and political visions. We therefore felt that the L.A. Rebellion had to be offered as widely as possible; there was no audience or constituency that would not benefit from an encounter with this work. Hence it was our job to develop the transformative power of this encounter and make sure that the L.A. Rebellion would not leave its viewers unchanged. In fact, we sought ways to make the L.A. Rebellion stay and continue to resonate.

Many people in the larger scholarly community commented that it made perfect sense that the tour would travel to the South as its last stop in North America. Yet we quickly realized that this was not at all a self-evident proposition for our audiences and instead sense had to be made: audiences had to be educated as to what this material would be like, what it would be for, and why they should care for it. Further, we knew that hosting the tour would require strategies to involve nonacademic audiences, in keeping with the spirit of the L.A. Rebellion itself as well as the dynamic impulse at the heart of liquid blackness. In particular, I was inspired by the possibilities of collective viewing and the meaningful encounters that it might create, which these films had already mined in their previous public circulation at the time of their production. Michele Beverly, an alumna of the Moving Image Studies Program and former advisee, had experienced this firsthand when she worked with Haile Gerima and Shirikiana Aina during the distribution of Sankofa (1993); and Mary Feld, an advanced graduate student who was teaching a Third Cinema class at the time, told me she had been driven by an interest in the political possibilities of Third Cinema’s communal viewing practices. It seemed to me that we had to attempt to create a similar experience and probe the transformative possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion cinema, given that it was made and consumed in a collective manner and for a collective good.

These considerations instigated the creation of a multifaceted and adventurous outreach program. We mapped out environments that we believed should be exposed to this type of cinema and created teach-ins to educate various Atlanta communities, bringing the filmmakers to places as diverse as the fine art gallery and the feminist bookstore, the community arts center and the corporate world. We facilitated postscreening conversations to foster contacts between filmmakers and audiences and to let the works reverberate as we discussed them informally. We held the tour’s opening night at the iconic Plaza Theater, made available by the Atlanta Film Festival, and gathered afterward at the historic Manuel’s
Tavern, a local hangout for progressive Atlanta politicians. We also congregated at the Low Museum, a gallery space run by Georgia State University undergraduate students on the first floor of their house, and at the Sound Table, a restaurant and music venue excited to host us after the screening of Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977). We in *liquid blackness* also reached out to scholars and curators in Atlanta to be in conversation with the films and some of the guest filmmakers. The response, timid at first, continued to build over the unfolding of the film series.

Thus the process of hosting the tour became part of our own process of getting to learn the object, that is, the actual films and filmmakers. At the same time, our hosting was initiator and catalyst for the constitution of *liquid blackness* as a research group that is unavoidably already inspired by this encounter with the forms of collectivity that make up the L.A. Rebellion itself—collectivity not only in terms of collaborative modes of production (either with fellow UCLA students or more broadly with local communities of artists, sometimes specifically trained to work as film crew) but also for the way that the L.A. Rebellion demands a collectivity at the point of reception. Of course, any filmmaking requires an audience to sustain itself. But more specifically, as Larry Clark put it, channeling a sentiment he found expressed by Sékou Touré, art has to be demanded: the *people have to ask for it*.

At the screenings, we discovered audience members who had traveled from Birmingham, Alabama, to see the films; others, such as two female activist producers from South Carolina, happened to be in town, saw our fliers announcing the tour, and came to see Zeinabu Davis's films and talk to her. I remember an Afrocentric architect, an Ethiopian restaurant owner, and various members of the business community; there were both seasoned and bourgeoning artists and curators who were swept away by the audacity of the cumulative vision of the L.A. Rebellion, as well as older and more “traditional” scholars who knew some of the Burnett, Dash, and Gerima films but came to see the less accessible works. The tour also gave us the opportunity to expose our own students to unseen material and to make sure that the young aspiring filmmakers among them would know that, though they might in the future find themselves working with compromised means, they do not have to compromise their vision. The work done for the tour eventually inspired a short publication we posted on our website, as a way to chronicle our voyage through this experience and maybe also as a form of thanksgiving for insights received that have already begun to inform our scholarly practices.
WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

I want to emphasize "so far," since this is very much a still unfolding process and an ongoing commitment that, for instance, has brought us to undertake an in-depth study of *Passing Through*, which is still unfolding. This film in particular strongly resonates with the ideas of aesthetic liquidity we are pursuing as a group.

One of the first things we learned is that the L.A. Rebellion is a concept still in the course of definition. There is not yet a unified historiographical narrative. There is instead a vivacious plurality of voices, a polyphony of discourses, conversations, debates, and arguments about, for example, what it means to recognize this output under one historiographical umbrella, or what it means to describe it solely through Clyde Taylor's label as opposed to a broader definition of "black independent cinema." Furthermore, while the L.A. Rebellion involved community-based and collaborative modes of production, the term *collective* does not strictly apply (although I feel attracted to it, if it is understood in a loose sense); nor does the term *school* apply and even less, we feel, the idea of a *movement*. Everybody we met (Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, and two of the tour's co-curators, Jacqueline Stewart and Allyson Nadia Field) has a different version of what keeps this work together. From their accounts we piece together an attachment to, and celebration of, collaborative production practices and the awareness of making a radically different cinema that should be recognized as such, but also the impossibility, reluctance, or unwillingness to foreclose heterogeneity and individual expression by adopting a unified manifesto or poetic/aesthetic program.

But then what might be the point of holding on to this (or any other) label? What might *L.A. Rebellion* ultimately designate?

The term is born from a desire to describe an aesthetic distinctiveness that emerged in clear opposition to the surrounding American cinema, thanks to the heterogeneous output of generations of nonwhite film students who were closely involved in each other's creative and production processes in the pursuit of different ways to tell their own stories or articulate their own artistic and political vision. Yet, at this point in time, *L.A. Rebellion* describes more directly and unequivocally an archival project that challenges the understanding of American film history, claiming visibility for a set of aesthetic resources and production practices that, for some time, created a powerful parallel alternative to mainstream cinema.
Only now, as I am being asked to write about my own and the group’s experience of the L.A. Rebellion, do I realize that in many ways I am the product and beneficiary of both of these moments. In fact, I learned of the L.A. Rebellion first from Manthia Diawara’s *Black American Cinema* and Clyde Taylor’s essays, as I first came in contact with NYU faculty in the early 1990s, particularly Robert Stam who, I am convinced, started it all by letting me read the page proofs of *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. Surprisingly, a year or two later, I met Clyde Taylor in Italy, at a communications conference called “Antenna Cinema,” in Conegliano, a town only twenty minutes from where my parents lived. There I saw *Sankofa, A Powerful Thang* (Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1991), and Barbara O. While this sequence of events still puzzles me, it also indicates how I was always predisposed to think of the L.A. Rebellion in the aggregate. Thus, I “buy” the need for some designation, because I realize that, from yet another angle, the *L.A. Rebellion* label can be seen as a way to emphasize the productivity of a specific set of circumstances: the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to have a formal education in filmmaking; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to develop a specifically domestic focus/aesthetics at the same time as they were articulating a transnational film language; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to create urgently topical, yet timeless works; the first generation(s) of filmmakers of color to think of aesthetics as rarely, if ever, divorced from politics and to think of aesthetics from the point of view of a commitment to envisioning new ways of being in the world.

Finally, for us, the L.A. Rebellion is also inseparable from its tour, and thus it designates a specific series of events we facilitated in which various Atlanta audiences, who do not normally interact, came together in the same room to look at some (however loosely conceived) form of “collective” production and, more importantly, to consider the vivid testimony of the possibilities of an unrelenting Black imagination. The L.A. Rebellion is also what brought *liquid blackness* together, as a research group and as facilitator of conversations about the possibilities of blackness, creativity, and aesthetics. In this sense, the L.A. Rebellion is also very much a particular type of encounter. Thus, above and beyond its specific merit or shortcomings, one could regard this label and the archival program and scholarly output of which this book offers evidence as providing precisely the critical mass that, Larry Clark insisted, is necessary for any recognizable Black aesthetics.
THE EXPANSIVENESS OF BLACKNESS

One of the most compelling, and possibly contagious, aspects of the L.A. Rebellion might be what Jacqueline Stewart has described as the determination to preserve the possibilities of “black imagination.” In this sense, the L.A. Rebellion is expansive. In fact, it is a body of work that demonstrates the expansiveness of blackness.

An expansive dimension of the L.A. Rebellion resides in its being fueled by a transnational sensibility, or what Teshome Gabriel described as a nomadic aesthetics. This transnational sensibility is also evident at the point of reception, given the high visibility of many of these films in international film festivals, particularly in Europe and Africa. Developed through a close study of different national and transnational filmmaking traditions—most notably Third Cinema and African but also Asian cinema—the L.A. Rebellion also expresses a profoundly erudite cinema, which is radical in the very shape and modes of acquisition of this erudition: just consider the $1,000 grant that allowed Haile Gerima and other students to organize Thursday screenings of Third World Cinema, a film series eventually taken over by Teshome Gabriel. Yet the L.A. Rebellion produced a cinema profoundly engaged with its local community, in other words, a cinema that finds elsewhere the artistic tools to articulate something very specific and tragically neglected about the over here. This is a cinema profoundly invested in portraying the fine grain of the community here and now, particularly, but not exclusively, in the case of Charles Burnett’s and Billy Woodberry’s films (Several Friends [1969], Killer of Sheep [1977], My Brother’s Wedding [1983], When It Rains [1995] by Burnett; The Pocketbook [1980], Bless Their Little Hearts [1984] by Woodberry; but I should also mention Alile Sharon Larkin’s Your Children Come Back to You [1979])—films that can be considered part of the L.A. Rebellion’s “neorealist” thread.

Many of the films pivot around various forms of Afrocentric imagination, an investment in seeking links, connections, and interpretive schema from an ancestral past and alternative forms of historical consciousness, temporality, and sense of space and place. One might read in Water Ritual #1: A Rite of Urban Purification (Dir. Barbara McCullough, 1979) and I & I: An African Allegory (Dir. Ben Caldwell, 1979), for instance, an Afrofuturist sensibility in their exploration of forms of being in, but not belonging to, American culture. Many films share this sense that blackness comes from, and leads, elsewhere and communicates at levels that do not necessarily belong to an earthly plane. They share a sense of
the possibilities of reassembling disjointed fragments of a past no longer within reach; the sense of a beauty that can be constructed from a place of debilitation; poetry that can be fashioned in the midst of endangered environments. In *Passing Through*, for example, jazz assumes a cosmological power: it seems to travel by water, across the Middle Passage—where the "Middle Passage" also manifests itself in the myriad forms of oppression in everyday life, poignantly documented through the use of archival newsreel footage of episodes of police brutality at Attica, Cleveland, and Birmingham—and yet, as the musicians' mentor Poppa Harris insists, jazz is also rooted in the earth and soil. It responds and expresses contingent experiences of disruption and alienation and yet it also communicates what he describes as the "universal tempo."

In some L.A. Rebellion films the expansiveness of blackness manifests itself as the ability to empower the body to overcome its own limitations, even when various racial and gender-specific forms of oppression coalesce around it. In Julie Dash's *Four Women* (1975), for instance, dancer Linda Martina Young acts *out* and *through* the various characters described by the Nina Simone song featured in the film's soundtrack. In the film's prologue Young's silhouette is tightly wrapped in a veil, signifying the physically and metaphysically cramped conditions of the Middle Passage. She struggles to break free, while the soundtrack carries sounds of whip lashes, water, and moaning. Then, as the Simone song begins, Young gradually develops a wider range of motion—first, as Aunt Sarah, her arms are still wrapped around her body; then, as Saphronia and Sweet Thing, she gains momentum and sensuality; and finally, as Peaches, she stretches her arms fully and kicks amply into the air, as the editing repeats this gestures at an increasingly faster pace. Her movements both mimic and overcome the limitations imposed upon the body of the different archetypal women described in the song's lyrics, while the camerawork and fast cuts layer a multiplicity of angles (including from underneath her jaw) onto her unfolding movements.

Similarly, Emma Mae, the "country cousin" arriving in L.A. from Mississippi in Jamaa Fanaka's eponymous film (1976), is surprisingly gifted with the capacity (and determination) to settle any disagreement with a fistfight. The film's editing emphasizes her power to exceed the frame, so that "not only [does she] transcend the forces that regulate her body, [but] she also initiates new possibilities that move through the bodies of those around her." Alana, the protagonist of Alile Sharon Larkin's *A Different Image* (1982), insists on sitting with her legs spread open. This is comfortable to her, unattached to any intention other than the
expansive occupation of her personal space; yet the culture and people who surround her, particularly her male friend Vincent, find it difficult to accept this possibility. In Zeinabu irene Davis’s *Cycles* (1989) the female body is both awesome and sublime: its physiological rhythms might at times be mysterious and unexpected, but its possibilities for beauty, harmony, and pleasure are boundless.¹⁹

The path for this type of exploration was already opened in Barbara McCullough’s *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification*, in which the impact of the filmic image is tightly dependent on the expressive power of performer Yolanda Vidato’s body. The climax of the film, her urination inside a dilapidated shack, constitutes a personal and social rite of purification.²⁰ But there is something I find even more poignant about the way this action unfolds in time. After she squats down, nude in the foreground and center frame, the film cuts to a close-up of her pensive face. After a few moments, the camera slowly moves down her body and stops at the pubic area. Only then, and only after this uninterrupted camera movement, does she begin to urinate. The point here is that it is the cadence of her bodily expression that dictates the speed of the camera movement, not any heterodetermined dramatic logic of cinematic time.

The expansiveness of blackness also manifests itself in the L.A. Rebellion films in an intensive manner, especially in the “neorealist” films. For example, in the films’ minute and loving commitment to the tight fabric of lived communities, the small but significant gestures of the people who live in them, made poignant and somewhat universal by the very attention the camera directs at them and by the plethora of gestural and verbal non sequiturs, which might not belong in a Hollywood film but do belong to the subtle absurdities of real life.²¹

**THE MAGNITUDE OF SMALL GESTURES**

The lack of availability of many of the tour’s films prompted a form of consumption that is decidedly cinephilic. Since the films were screened over four weekends between late October and late November 2013, we found ourselves holding on to gestures, moments, textures, and moods that profoundly affected us, which we tried to piece together in a short publication—“*liquid blackness on the L.A. Rebellion*”—the written reflections we issued shortly after the end of the tour. For us, therefore, the L.A. Rebellion is very much tied to our individual and collective recollection of the material we saw.
In our brief writings on the tour we all focused on different details, but here are some of the gestures that immediately “stayed” with me: I am compelled by Pierce’s grandfather in Charles Burnett’s *My Brother’s Wedding*, who is stubbornly committed to keeping his shoes on, even though he is not planning to leave the house. Among other things, he reminds me of my own father. I am amused by the moment in *Fragrance* (Dir. Gay Abel-Bey, 1991) when George, who is sleeping on the couch during a visit to his family before shipping out to Vietnam, is awakened by his aunt who wants to gift him a nice new button-down shirt. George is grateful but also embarrassed, because the aunt is catching him without his pants on. Even more powerfully, I am profoundly moved by the moment in Billy Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts*, in which the father is readying the children to go to church and deposits—slowly, deliberately, and painfully—a coin in each of their hands. The moment is solemn as well as terrifying, since we know he has gotten the money from his wife, standing in the hallway, encouraging (and forgiving) him behind the scene.

Many of these actions have the poignancy of a Brechtian *gestus*, amply employed, for instance, in Third Cinema and in the European New Waves but here reinterpreted in different directions: the individual
does not disappear to the advantage of a symbolic act that captures the complex intersection of sociopolitical forces but is rather protected, preserved, and elevated in her individuality, even simply because of the camera’s ability to record her. These gestures are particular and universal, resilient and sublime. Charles Burnett’s films are packed with them, especially the gestures of children, a fact that has been amply addressed in the critical literature on his work. There is a moment in When It Rains that elicited chuckles from several audience members. The film follows a man who is trying to gather enough money from neighborhood friends to help a woman avoid eviction, a plot foil for several vignette-like encounters with various members of the community. During one of these exchanges a child is standing in the background making armpit farts as the adults discuss the woman’s situation. Suddenly, the film cuts away to the child so that he is alone in the frame as he continues this important activity. There is absolutely no dramatic reason for this action, nor can it simply be described as a “reality effect.” Rather, it is compelling and profoundly rich in itself precisely for its dramatic uselessness. Considered in relation to Burnett’s oeuvre, it is also part of a growing gestural archive of the everyday that he almost single-handedly initiated.

I find many of these moments both delightful and profound, but I am drawn a bit differently to the father’s hands in Bless Their Little Hearts. We first see them in close-up in the opening sequence as he is painstakingly filling out an application form at the employment office: I am struck by the deliberate and laborious movement of the pencil across the page. Throughout the film, his hands are rarely employed to work, and when they are, they are almost unseen, as happens in the sequence in which he paints a garage wall, which is almost entirely shot from behind his back. Even when he is shown smoking, his hands are somehow effaced. Instead, it is his entire bodily posture that commands attention within the frame. His body is rarely still or even vertical but rather is always slightly rocking, at an angle, or slowing pivoting on itself; or else it is slouched onto a chair, a couch, seemingly unable to muster any energy beyond the effort to ask one of his children to fetch a pack of cigarettes for him. Seemingly unable to convey emotion, these hands suddenly become poignant with meaning as they tighten the faucets after a long, careful, and almost burdensome shave—a scene shot from his side and in one long take. Their grip is so strong, the struggle they are both expressing and holding back so overwhelming, that the young daughter who follows the father in the bathroom is unable to turn the faucet open with her bare strength and has to fetch a wrench to help her.
In these slow and drawn-out actions we get access to something that the L.A. Rebellion has described so radically and so well: the landscape of the characters’ minds. The ability to render a profound, intense, and complicated interiority of the characters is, we in liquid blackness feel, one of the most astonishing accomplishments of the L.A. Rebellion work considered in its entirety.

**LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND**

Anybody who focuses on the use of locations in the L.A. Rebellion films will have to agree that they are reflective not only of the characters’ living conditions but also of their psychological landscapes. One of the most vivid examples is the widely discussed opening of *Bush Mama* (1975), where the film crew is harassed by the police while interrogatory voices of social workers are layered on the soundtrack. Through this use of sound and the almost seamless transition between the footage of police harassment, the long tracking shots of store windows and pedestrians in a street of Watts, and then eventually the shots of Dorothy strolling in this street, the film establishes an ambiguous place for the
spectator, both inside and outside Dorothy’s mind. Or, more provocatively, the film expands the conflict within Dorothy’s mind to its entire mise-en-scène. Throughout, Bush Mama employs audacious editing patterns that weave together thoughts, imaginations, visions, and memories to channel Dorothy’s inner landscape, the difficulty of her choices, and the psychological and systemic violence that is constantly directed at her as she begins to form a different way of looking at her reality.

The visual and material culture of the Black radical tradition that punctuates the film sets offers another powerful insight into the characters’ minds. Recurring iconic images, such as the seemingly ubiquitous poster of Angela Davis, constitute the backdrop for a number of dramatic scenes, also the photograph of a female African freedom fighter, holding a child with one hand and a rifle with the other. This latter is the image that ignites a shift in Dorothy’s political consciousness in Bush Mama, when the editing orchestrates a series of intense looks between the two women across time and space; but I see it also on the nightclub’s wall in Passing Through, when the musicians are discussing the possibility of recording independently from white music producers. Further, many of the sets display books by W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Eldridge Cleaver, Aimé Césaire, and a number of African American and Third World radical thinkers, which function to externalize the characters’ political mind-set.

Access to the landscape of the mind does not occur through classical character identification but through a focus on characters’ gestures and concrete circumstances, as in the moments from Bless Their Little Hearts mentioned above. The only (tentative and partial) access to Stan’s mind in Killer of Sheep occurs in the slaughterhouse sequences, where he arguably appears most active. Yet it is the status of the sheep—suspended between the literal (Stan’s job), the figural (insofar as they stand in for the coerced violence that encroaches on him), and the reference to a rich film history tradition (from Sergei Eisenstein’s Strike [1925], to Georges Franju’s Blood of the Beasts [1949], to Djibril Diop Mambéty’s Touki Bouki [1973])—that acts as a virtual archive of possibilities for Stan’s personal and political actions. The fact that Stan does not effectively act does not erase the resonance of these important references, which still press onto the image, within a film that, even though it focuses on layered forms of social, political, ideological, and psychological stagnation, is far from acquiescent.

More generally, as a technology, an apparatus, and an archival practice, “film” arguably becomes in the L.A. Rebellion a place where
repressed dreams and desires can finally be manifested. Think about the hotel maid in *Daydream Therapy* (Dir. Bernard Nicolas, 1977) and the fact that her righteous desire for retaliation is "acted out" only "on-film," so to speak, and not in her diegetic world: her impulses, reactions, and aspirations are recorded and safely guarded only this way. Or consider Dorothy's desire to hit the social worker with a bottle in *Bush Mama*. In the hands of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, cinema acts as an organic counterarchive for an alternative personal and political imagination.

At other times, the landscape of the mind is rendered through camera movements: for instance, in the way the camera gives in to, reproduces, and magnifies Barbara O.'s painful pacing within her suffocating prison cell in Gerima's *Child of Resistance*. The camera pivots on its axis with a restless pendulum-like movement, alternating between two perspectives: the point of view of the incarcerated—a figure inspired by Angela Davis—and the point of view of the guard. This incessant motion creates a strenuous viewing condition for the spectator as well. The sets, too, especially in Gerima's films, give access to the character's psychological landscape through their almost confrontational materiality: the makeshift (rocking) electric chair, also in *Child of Resistance*, produces a painful metallic sound, acting as an ominous and all too concrete foreboding soundtrack. Through it, the prisoner's destiny or destination is made tangible and terrifying. The chains that constrain both the Barbara O. character and the customers of the bar she visits in her imagination are conspicuously sized and obviously artisanally made, but this fact only enhances, rather then detracts from, their ability to convey their abysmal social, political, and human weight.

Halfway through the L.A. Rebellion tour I began to think about the films' ability to highlight the incongruities of American society. The very term *incongruity* is incongruously mild when used to describe the state of war in which the Black subject finds herself in these films. Yet it might still register the poignancy of some moments in which the viewer is jolted by the perception of incompatible forces being co-present in the same time, same place, and often in the same body. In other words, *incongruity* here expresses a question I believe these films pose very clearly for contemporary audiences: how can *this* and *that* be going on at the same time/in the same place? There are too many of these moments to list, but I want to reference at least *The Diary of an African Nun* (Dir. Julie Dash, 1977), where Barbara O.'s body is torn apart from competing alliances to the rigidity demanded by her religious habit and the riveting beat of the African drums she hears outside her window. Her habit was her
coveted prize and greatest childhood desire—a form of “regal” and dignified “liveness” she envied in the nuns and priests who taught at the mission school she frequented. She dreamed of wearing it, being “shrouded in whiteness like the mountains I see from my window,” her voice-over explains, and earning the “right to never be without it.” Yet, as the day ends, sheretires to her room and that same habit now has to come off, the drums she hears carry other impulses and desires: the food, wine, and conviviality she no longer has access to, or the equally unattainable spark of a young romance. More importantly, the drums awaken the conflict between a world she is committed to but that requires such a deep mortification and the world she really belongs to.

Shot in black and white, the film emphasizes the contrast between the immaculate whiteness of the protagonist’s dress and the richness of her complexion. As she disrobes to the drumbeat, she remarks, “I sing my whole chant in response to theirs.” Her body becomes a battlefield, since she is forced to maintain a composure both threatened and undermined by the sounds surrounding her. Yet the film does not have to withstand the same mortification: when her voice-over describes the possibility of a young girl dancing with her lover in the middle of the circle, while “the whole crowd can see the weakening of her knees,” the editing becomes furiously paced, showing repeated shots of the nun’s hands coming together in prayer from a multiplicity of angles. As the tempo increases she falls on her knees to pray, as if overwhelmed by her body’s desire to be the conduit of that type of liveness, rather than the “regal” kind she thought her habit would make accessible to her. Reminiscent of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), even the window’s shutters move rapidly and rhythmically to convey the emotional charge of the scene.

There are countless other examples of similar incongruities. In *Fragrance*, for example, two brothers react differently to the choice their older brother George has made to fight in Vietnam. The weight and incongruity of this decision are effectively captured the moment the youngest brother, Bobby, is made to sing “My Country ’Tis of Thee” in school, as punishment for talking in class. At the end of the film, when we know George will indeed go to Vietnam, we are left with a close shot of Bobby’s face framed next to the American flag, still at school, still expected to sing, but now standing silently and refusing to do so.

*Brick by Brick* (Dir. Shirikiana Aina, 1982) is a documentary investigation into the incongruity and human cost of gentrification in Washington, DC. A woman who lives in an overcrowded basement apart-
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ment articulates this through a painful recollection of the things she is blamed for, signaling the perpetuation of a categorical and systemic confusion between cause and effect. Her monologue is as arresting as it is eloquent:

You’re the cause why there’s no grass, you’re the cause why the landlord stopped coming to fix the property, you’re the cause why you don’t have a [health] care and why your children are fighting in school and come home with stitches in their head. You’re the cause why teachers are afraid in school. [...] The world resents you, the government resents you because you resent them. The system resents you because you don’t want to be a part of it. Your children resent you because you’re trying to live a better life for them and don’t give them just everything they want.31

At the end, how does one reconcile these incongruities? The films certainly refuse to do so, offering no facile respite, consolation, or resolution.

FORMS OF LIQUIDITY

Surprisingly, perhaps, the *liquid blackness* research group found a variety of forms of aesthetic liquidity in the films of the L.A. Rebellion.
While the concept is still evolving for us and is more specifically tied to contemporary forms of visual and sonic culture, in this context it indicates the capacity to seize the malleable qualities of the film image. An example is the expressive alternation between black-and-white and color footage as a way to foster the possibility for the filmic medium to convey a double vision. The filmic image, in other words, is handled as something that can stretch in two directions: toward what it shows and the thought process of which it is part. This is very clearly the case in *Hour Glass* (1971), where Haile Gerima’s use of rapid alternation between color and black-and-white footage inserts a level of critical engagement with the image that expresses the protagonist’s slowly awakening political consciousness. The film begins on a basketball court. A fast-paced editing of the protagonist’s moves (he is a basketball player) is matched to the rhythm of spoken word from the Last Poets featured in the soundtrack. As the film transitions to shots of white patrons in the stands, flickering between black-and-white and color, it also records the player’s realization of his own exploitation. Thus this alternation is used both for its potential to transition between subjective and objective reality and as a form of Brechtian alienation effect.

In general, the audacious Project One films of the L.A. Rebellion were one of the most exciting discoveries in terms of “liquid” aesthetics. We were amazed by their uncompromising energy and commitment to creating new images and by the diversity of artistic and cultural traditions, film techniques, and aesthetic solution harnessed in order to do that. We found liquidity more specifically in the way that many of these projects are invested in advancing and experimenting with the possibility of cinema’s engendering a different historical imagination. I am thinking, for example, about Ben Caldwell’s *Medea* (1973), where the texture and pulsating movement of the clouds in the opening sequence sets the stage for a seamless transition to a foregrounding of the round shape of a pregnant body, while a woman’s voice delivers a quasi-hypnotic chant punctuated by a recurring refrain: “to raise the race . . . to raise the race.” The chant is overlaid on a montage of still images that encompass African peoples and Black American figures, recapitulating the breadth of the diaspora in the ontogenesis of every soon-to-be-born Black child in America. The montage moves rapidly, increasingly assuming the pace of the mother’s heartbeat, her breathing, and her chanting all at once. Bathed in a warm hue, the still images display an extraordinary visual consistency, possibly in keeping with Caldwell’s interest in texture and in the relationship between the Black
body and its environment. This is a living, breathing, and organic counterarchive that does not abide by the representational logic that rarely serves Black bodies on film but is instead propelled by bodily rhythms and breath. This “impossible” archive is finally congealed in the delicate yet poignant image that concludes the film: a small child interacting with the spherical shape of a white balloon. Evoking circularity as well as perfection, this image gestures toward the idea of a self-contained Black history, which finds within itself the resources for its fulfillment.

There is also aesthetic liquidity in Zeinabu irene Davis’s film Compensation (1999), which follows two parallel relationships between a deaf woman and a hearing man as they unfold in the context of impending death at the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. The choice to focus on Black deaf culture gives an urgency to issues of communication, reciprocity, and mutuality that also informs the film’s formal choices. The diegetically motivated use of sign language creates the opportunity for individual shots to linger on a series of poignant gestures that temporarily suspend the expected narrative pace and appear to demand fulfillment, development, and existence beyond the here and now. As one witnesses the laborious and delayed communication between the characters, one is also experiencing a sort of in-between space, an unbridgeable gap that demands but does not provide resolution. The protagonists’ investment in communicating across the “hearing line” brings up important questions about (forms of) segregation as something powerfully played out at the level of the human sensorium—a segregation that the film somewhat overcomes by being equally accessible to hearing and deaf audiences.

We also found liquidity in the way a number of films—I am thinking primarily but not exclusively about I & I, Water Ritual, and Passing Through—display a commitment to working with texture, understood as a flexible, elastic, and plastic property of the image. Their use of superimpositions highlights the porosity and multiple temporalities of the image, while slow motion brings attention to its grain. The transitions enabled by the films’ textural emphasis are not only narrative but most importantly spatiotemporal, at times evoking forms of time travel that connect New World blacks back to their African roots. It is because of the texture of the image, created by sunlight filtering through the holes of an abandoned shack in land cleared for highway expansion in Water Ritual, that the film’s location seems suspended in time and space, primitive and postapocalyptic at the same time. It is the crisp,
slow-motion cinematography that makes the specks of dust settling on Yolanda Vidato’s face and hair, after she has blown it into the wind and toward the circle of found objects she has arranged in front of her spread legs, appear as particles full of potentiality, instability, and vibrancy. In Ben Caldwell’s films especially, but also in Passing Through, superimpositions are held for a long time. Several images, it seems, have to coexist and flow together over an extended duration in order to render the multiple ways in which blackness exists in space and time and to simultaneously index rootedness and displacement, origin and alienation.

This emphasis on the textural qualities of the image may render highly disparate genres compatible within the same film: I & I, for example, combines elements of experimental cinema with an oral history project. The film opens on a close-up of a shore with tiny waves gently washing over it. This suggests a libation offered to the elders as well as introduces the time travel of Alefi, the Wind. Played by Pamela Jones, Alefi is introduced by a pan shot sweeping first over a tree trunk slowly and at close range and then over the body of a woman sitting at the base of the tree, her face initially hiding on her lap. The camera then
focuses on her hands, which hold and slowly crack dry foliage. She stretches upward, making guttural sounds, and becomes the conduit for a primordial “om.” Here, attention to the textural qualities not only functions to create haptic images but rather is meant to evoke the Middle Passage as a “corridor” connecting Africa to the American shores, in both directions: African spirituality, the film suggests, and especially the concept of the “I,” can offer a foundation for reciprocity rather than the relations of prevarication introduced by the concept of the “you.”

In Caldwell’s work cinematography is key to the philosophical depth of the image, and the inner tension between stillness and movement conveys a fluidly multilayered visual structure. In I & I many transitions occur through overexposed images: for example, the transposition of the mythological Alefi from a natural environment to a modern downtown space. Sunlight splashing over the sharp edge of a skyscraper shot obliquely and from an extremely low angle appears to almost reach back and wash over the last image of the previous tree sequence. Similarly, after the camera tilts toward the ground to find Alefi again, now in a long shot, framed by the hard lines of modern architecture, and follows her gliding through this space, the image dissolves into a series of close-ups of old men’s faces; the shots are so close that their eyes and mouths fill the entire frame. The singing in the soundtrack has the quality of a whisper and the long-held superimpositions appear “breathful”: they feel full of air, space, and wind. This, too, is an expansive quality, rendered through fluidly layered cinematographic gestures.

Even more radically, we found liquidity in the way some of the most aesthetically abstract films fluidly incorporate newsreel images “from the world.” The primary example for this is Passing Through, which repeatedly transitions to archival footage of episodes of police violence and repression. These transitions, which are usually ushered in by changes in sound—whether the strained sound of a saxophone solo or the vibrant energy of an entire jazz ensemble—render continuous painfully incongruous aspects of human life: the seemingly unbound creativity of the musicians, on the one hand, and the worthlessness of their lives within oppressive, indeed deadly, labor conditions, on the other. Or, in a larger scope, they draw together the conditions of Los Angeles Black artists’ communities with the pervasive domestic and international antiblack violence, seen in the context of the international decolonization struggles the film professes alliance to. More fundamentally, the film employs aesthetic liquidity in the fluid processes of translation
and transposition between sound and vision, jazz and cinema, the main character’s compromised creative process and the possibility to fashion himself as a fulfilled and free individual.

Liquidity is also a way to regard how L.A. Rebellion films embrace their participation in translational artistic flows and to appreciate their reliance on aesthetic traditions developed in other countries, often in comparable political situations and conditions of production. Liquidity offers a way to describe the films’ fluid relationship to time and consciousness. Many of the films—*Medea*, *I & I*, and *Water Ritual* can stand as examples here—create a sense of people who are in this culture but not of this culture, which, if one follows the historiographical framework that Zeinabu irene Davis establishes in *Spirits of Rebellion*, leads to the Afrofuturist sensibility permeating the work of Cauleen Smith.

Again, taken together the L.A. Rebellion films demonstrate the expansiveness of blackness: blackness as a form of historical consciousness, blackness as engendering forms of interaction between bodies, blackness as a bundle of affective forces, immersive experiences, forms of cultural memory, and so on. But also blackness as cosmic principle—“to raise the race . . . to raise the race,” chants the expectant mother in *Medea*—blackness as life force and truly vibrant matter.
Where are we in relation to the L.A. Rebellion? What kind of relationship can we entertain with the work, its times and conditions of production, and the filmmakers themselves? Commenting on her personal experience of seeing *Daughters of the Dust* in 1992 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, liquid blackness member Michele Prettyman-Beverly writes, “This singular event had united the sometimes disjointed worlds that I cared about—the worlds of spirituality, community, art, and culture—and for a few hours a stage was set for us to have a uniquely intimate experience with cinema and with each other.”

The other liquid blackness members, too, had a similar experience, even though more dispersed and historically removed. Meeting the filmmakers left a profound impact on all of us, the implications of which we are still trying to understand. Yet, if our relationship to some of the filmmakers can now be understood on personal ground, what is our relationship to the conditions and the events that prompted their artistic vision? I find some help in understanding our investment in this work in John Akomfrah’s articulation of his generation’s relationship to the same sources and events. In his essay “Digitopia and the Specters of Diaspora,” Akomfrah explains the “digitopic yearning” that the diasporic subject of his generation feels toward historical suturing moments of which he/she has not been part—“Fanon, the Panthers, Black Power.” Whether it is taking place in scholarly or artistic practices, his/her work of recollection is unavoidably marked by a form of hauntology, by “that impossible gesture, a desire to seize and entrap the ghost.”

We are indeed objectively removed from the formative moments that gave rise to the L.A. Rebellion and even twice removed, both generationally and in terms of national context, from the conditions of the Black Audio Film Collective. At the same time, this very distance—this double ghost—affords us a space to see the work in a new light, as speaking directly to our concerns in the present. We are drawn to the digital imagery evoked in Akomfrah’s writing because it suggests a “fluid” relationship with the archive and thus “pliable” ways of suturing artistic or scholarly practices onto it. In fact, this is our investment, as well as the source of our excitement: not so much to entrap the ghost but to channel its continued resonance. We have been touched by something that is both distant and intimate, raw and hopeful, confined and unbound. The L.A. Rebellion tour has opened up a space where conversations can
occur over what before was still part of the “territory of the unspoken.” Identity politics no longer forecloses access to this work; on the contrary, the imaginative aesthetic possibilities explored by the L.A. Rebellion appear to have opened up a space where students, artists, and scholars of all extractions can commit to, invest in, and desire a greater understanding of the experience and expansive possibilities of blackness.

NOTES


1. The *liquid blackness* group now comprises about ten members: alumni and graduate students of Georgia State University’s Moving Image Studies Program in the Department of Communication (Michele Prettyman-Beverly; Lauren M. Cramer; Katharine Zakos; Kristin Juarez; Dorothy Hendrix; and Cameron Kunzelman), alumni of our undergraduate program in Film, Video, and Digital Imaging (Chris Hunt, Joey Molina, and Michael Sanders), and a graduate student from the Department of Art and Design (Christina Price Washington). Several sympathizers and students also offer logistical support: Jasmine A. Tillman from the Department of African American Studies, for example, as well as people from the Atlanta artistic community who are collaborating on some of our initiatives.

2. The specific locations we selected were Arnika Dawkins Fine Art Photography Gallery, WonderRoot Community Arts Center, Charis Bookstore, and King & Spalding Law Firm.

3. Atlanta Film Festival director Chris Escobar was instrumental to this partnership.

4. We invited the following people: Ayoka Chenzira, herself a pioneer East Coast filmmaker, now director of the Digital Moving Image Salon at Spelman College, whose work has been shown at festivals together with that of the L.A. Rebellion; Cinque Hicks, interim editor of the *International Review of African American Art*; Carol Thompson, curator of African art from the High Museum; Folashadé Alao, assistant professor of English and African American studies, University of South Carolina; and Akinyele Umoja and Makungu Akinyela, respectively chair and associate professor of African American studies at Georgia State University. Several Q&A sessions were facilitated by Michele Prettyman-Beverly.

5. Larry Clark trained members of artists’ communities such as the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles (PASLA) to work on his films, and many of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have indicated various types of collaborations with fellow UCLA students within and across departments, across “generations” (Charles Burnett, for example, shot a number of younger students’ films), and more broadly with entire neighborhoods, as it happens in Burnett’s films.

6. Filmmaking requires a triangular relation that also includes the critic, as Haile Gerima outlined in an influential essay, even though, he insists, consid-

7. Larry Clark, interview for “Dossier on Passing Through,” by Alessandra Raengo, San Francisco State University, March 19, 2014, unpublished. Clark’s decision to not seek theatrical distribution for Passing Through (1977), so that it would exist solely as an art object, clearly exemplifies this attitude.


9. See Haile Gerima’s call to form a united distribution company in his L.A. Rebellion oral history.

10. As Billy Woodberry put it, as I was driving him to a postscreening event at the Low Museum, “We all worked in each other’s films, but if we had to write a manifesto or give a formal structure to these collaborations, then we would not have known who was going to make coffee or do the photocopying.” In her oral history, Julie Dash expresses a similar sentiment, as does Clyde Taylor, who emphasizes the “bond” and collaborative climate among the UCLA students. Julie Dash, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart, Allyson Nadia Field, and Jan-Christopher Horak, June 8, 2010; and Clyde Taylor, oral history interview by Zeinabu irene Davis, Allyson Nadia Field, and Jacqueline Stewart, March 22, 2011, LAROH.

11. See Clyde Taylor’s retrospective characterization of this aesthetic distinctiveness as “bold,” “in your face,” “experimental,” and “transnational” in his L.A. Rebellion oral history.

12. Larry Clark, conversation with the author, on the occasion of Clark’s visit to Atlanta for the L.A. Rebellion tour, November 22–24, 2013.


15. In his oral history interview, Haile Gerima specifically discusses this grant, but screenings of international Third World or art cinema are also mentioned by Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry (who discusses off-campus venues), and Larry Clark. See Julie Dash, oral history; Billy Woodberry, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart and Allyson Nadia Field, June 24 and July
6, 2010; and Larry Clark, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart and Christopher Horak, June 2, 2010, LAROH.


17. This statement is partly inspired by Barbara McCullough’s interview on UCLA’s cable program, The View (c. 1979), www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/barbara-mccullough (accessed April 30, 2014). Clyde Taylor, too, emphasizes this aspect when he describes the role of “Africanity” in articulating a “science-fiction” aspiration: “a lot of the imagining, a lot of the dream work of possibility, had an African design to it.” In the same context, he also mentions Octavia Butler. Clyde Taylor, oral history. Consider also Julie Dash’s self-definition of her work as “speculative fiction.”


21. An example would be the frequent wrestling between father and son in Burnett’s My Brother’s Wedding, discussed in Cameron Kunzelman, “Playfighting in South Central: On the Everyday in My Brother’s Wedding,” in “liquid blackness on the L.A. Rebellion,” liquid blackness 1, no. 1 (2014): 25-27, http://liquidblackness.com/LB1_LARebellion.pdf. Given the attention granted in the literature to Charles Burnett’s films, this has in great part already been acknowledged. I do want to mention, however, Cliff Thompson, “The Devil Beats His Wife: Small Moments and Big Statements in the Films of Charles Burnett,” Cinéaste 23, no. 2 (1997): 24-27, which criticizes Burnett’s later work for not maintaining the same attention to small details as his earlier work. I further discuss this intensive expansiveness when I focus on the presence and power of “small gestures.”

22. I mention these scenes because only a handful of the films screened for the tour will become readily available in the near future, and therefore most of this material will continue to be encountered in similar circumstances. (The notable and exciting exception is the induction of Billy Woodberry’s Bless Their Little Hearts into the National Film Registry, which we hope will speed up its transition to DVD.)


27. In Gay Abel-Bey’s *Fragrance*, for example, as well as in Haile Gerima’s *Ashes & Embers*, from which the tour’s cover image was taken.

28. Haile Gerima’s *Hour Glass* (1971) is a great example of the use of iconic elements from the visual and material culture of the Black radical tradition. Not only are the key moments of the protagonist’s awakening political consciousness punctuated by his engagement with radical books and iconic images, but at times the film also stages the intersection between visual and material culture: for instance, in the recurring scenes of a naked child covered only with a sheet alternatively featuring images of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Angela Davis. Repeatedly, a white woman enters the frame and pulls the sheet away, leaving the child naked in bed.


34. I am referring to the “Awakening” photographic series that Caldwell used for his application to UCLA. Some of the photographs were hand painted and a good number were pictures of “Black women in the desert because I thought there was an interesting similarity between our skin, the brownness and the bushes, like our hair, and how it shows itself.” Ben Caldwell, oral history interview by Allyson Field and Jacqueline Stewart, June 14, 2010, LAROH.


36. These reflections about *I & I* are Caldwell’s own, from his oral history.

37. Ibid.

39. First came Zeinabu (Davis), who showed us her work in progress, Spirits of Rebellion, and tirelessly fielded all our questions about the L.A. Rebellion group, its history, and the friendships that still unite so many of the filmmakers. Then came Billy (Woodberry). His first task was to talk a bit about Jamaa Fanaka, and he made us all feel a bit of Fanaka’s energy, joviality, and charm. On the second evening, Billy talked about his own work, and he did so in his characteristic eloquent and yet humble and self-effacing way, emphasizing over and over again how it had been Charlie (Burnett) who had given him the script for Bless Their Little Hearts, had shot it, and had let him (Billy) figure out how to direct it and make his own mistakes in the process—this about a film that has now been made part of the National Film Registry. With tour co-curator Allyson Field, Billy came with us to the WonderRoot Community Arts Center, where he fielded questions about the general artistic context of the L.A. Rebellion and the reasons this group of people chose to make art as a way to affect something in their environment. Billy also came with us to a postscreening conversation at the Low Museum and interacted with talented young filmmakers, graduates of Georgia State University’s Film, Video, and Digital Imaging Program, well into the night. Haile Gerima was our guest on the third weekend. He was generous, witty, vivacious, and uncompromising. Unsurprisingly, he was hard-hitting on political issues, encouraging and visionary on artistic issues, and soft and tender in his interactions with everybody, particularly with my own ten-year-old daughter, Margot, who came to lunches and dinners with us and attended the screening of Bush Mama. I covered her eyes on a few occasions, obviously, but I am happy she was in the same room as this film and this filmmaker. This, too, might be counted as an L.A. Rebellion encounter. Finally, on the last weekend we welcomed Larry Clark. Karl Injex, one of the owners of the Sound Table, already knew about the “legendary” Passing Through and was delighted that Larry would be hanging out at his restaurant. Larry, too, was immensely gracious with us; he discussed his creative process, explained his aesthetic choices, and just hung out with graduate and undergraduate students so that eventually a strong enough relationship formed among us, which is now the basis for the research liquid blackness has undertaken on his film and on the arts and politics of the jazz ensemble.


41. I want to thank Michele Prettyman-Beverly for helping me articulate this thought.