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PHENOMENAL BODIES: THE METAPHYSICAL POSSIBILITIES OF POST-BLACK FILM
AND VISUAL CULTURE

by

MICHELE PRETTYMAN BEVERLY

ABSTRACT

In recent years, film, art, new media, and music video works created by black makers have demonstrated an increasingly “post-black” impulse. The term “post-black” was originally coined in response to innovative practices and works created by a generation of black artists who were shaped by hip-hop culture and Afro-modernist thinking. I use the term as a theoretical tool to discuss what lies beyond the racial character of a work, image, or body. Using a post-black theoretical methodology I examine a range of works by black filmmakers Kathleen Collins Prettyman and Lee Daniels, visual artists Wangechi Mutu and Jean-Michel Basquiat, new media artist Nettrice Gaskins, and music video works of hip-hop artists and performer Erykah Badu.

I discuss how black artists and filmmakers have moved through Darby English’s notion of “black representational space” as a sphere where bodies and works are beholden to specific historical and aesthetic expectations and limitations. I posit that black representational space has been challenged by what I describe as “metaphysical space” where bodies produce a new set of possibilities as procreative, fluid, liberated, and otherworldly forces. These bodies are neither positive nor negative; instead they occupy the in-between spaces between life and death, time and space, digital and analog, interiority and exteriority, vulnerability and empowerment. Post-

black visual culture displays the capacities of black bodies as creative forces that shape how we see and experience visual culture.

My methodology employs textual analysis of visual objects that articulate a post-black impulse, paying close attention to how these works compel viewers to see other dimensions of experience. In three chapters I draw from theoretical work in race and visibility, affect theory, phenomenology, and interiority from the likes of Charles Johnson, Frantz Fanon, Elena del R o, Sara Ahmed, Saidiya Hartman, and Elizabeth Alexander. This study aims to create an interdisciplinary analysis that charts new directions for exploring and re-imagining black bodies as subjects and objects of endless knowledge and creative potential.

INDEX WORDS: Blackness, Post-black, Race, Cinema, Visual culture, Black cinema, Media, Black film, Hip-hop, African American culture, African American film, African American cinema, Affect, African American film history, Kathleen Collins Prettyman

PHENOMENAL BODIES: THE METAPHYSICAL POSSIBILITIES OF POST-BLACK FILM
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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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Michele Prettyman Beverly
2012

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AND VISUAL CULTURE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to Micah, Maya, Jacob and James whom I love deeply and who walked this journey with me and to the late Kathleen Collins Prettyman who continues to inspire me.

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I want to thank the spirit of God that guides my life and my family and friends who have helped me through this process. It is with your love and support that this journey has been possible. This includes Micah, Maya, Jacob, James, Mom, Dad, Terri, Alvin, Kimmy, Asad, Sydney, Kayla, Momma, Aunt Fern, Maiesha, Mekyah, and countless other supporters. I want to thank each committee member for their unflagging support, encouragement and commitment: Dr. Barker for her time and careful attention to detail, Dr. Restivo for his cutting edge insights and his uncanny ability to always seem to understand what I am thinking, for Dr. Smith for always making room for my growth and giving me much to think about. Thanks to Dr. Eddie Chambers for his warmth, and openness and to Dr. Mark Anthony Neal for his time, energy and insight. Special thanks and eternal gratitude to Dr. Alessandra Raengo who is a mentor, friend and without whom none of this would be possible. Your commitment and dedication have transcended the role of an advisor and have enhanced my intellectual development immeasurably. Thanks also to the administrative faculty and staff of Georgia State's Department of Communication, including Dr. David Cheshier, the graduate committee, Tawanna Tookes, Diane Sealey, Marilyn Stiggers, Gary Fessenden, Kendra Woodard and Juana Leary—each of whom has always gone the extra mile for me. Thanks also to John Baker Brown, Tonia East, Rondee Gaines, Drew Ayers, Karen Petruska, Kris Cannon, and Tami Morris for your support.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project explores the possibilities of black bodies in contemporary film and visual culture. It was born, in part, out of an encounter that I had with Lee Daniels's film *Shadowboxer*. In 2005 I saw an early screening of the film with Daniels' in attendance along with a number of (black) industry executives and producers. While *Shadowboxer* marked Daniels' directorial debut, I sensed that he was emerging as a powerful cinematic voice. In 2001 he produced the provocative film *Monster's Ball* and while he was not credited as a creative influence his imprint is somehow palpable. *Monster's Ball* ignited a tangible sense of anxiety for some black viewers who claimed that the sexual intensity between "Latisha" played by Halle Berry and white actor Billy Bob Thornton revived disturbing tropes of black female sexuality and the familiar positive/negative debates over the representation of black bodies.¹ Daniels remained undaunted by the public scrutiny and criticism, which emerged amidst significant critical acclaim. Importantly, *Shadowboxer* would also feature scenes of intense interracial sexuality and black and white bodies creating spectacles of violence.²

Shadowboxer, a film which is both raw and beautiful, left me and certainly others (as I listened intently to viewers' reactions leaving the theater) with a sense that we had just witnessed something that we did not have the language to describe.³ I believe that the film ultimately had a

¹ Much of the discussion in the public sphere of the film on websites and talk radio shows surrounded Berry's character's sex scene with Thornton. Berry and the film were criticized for not portraying a "positive" image of a black woman. Ironically, or tellingly, Berry received the Oscar for Best Actress in a Motion Picture and the film was also nominated for Best Screenplay. See Melissa Anyiwo's review of the film which synthesizes many of the reactions to the film and its depictions of race at <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/filmreview.php?issue=6&id=176>. Web. 16 July 2011.

² According to www.imdb.com the film opened to a limited release of 22 screens. I would also point to another film produced by Daniels called *The Woodsman* (2004), which features an interracial cast and tells the story of a pedophile who returns to his hometown after he is released from prison. Web. 12 Jan 2012.

³ I overheard black filmmaker Warrington Hudlin wondering aloud, "What could we do with this...how can we market this?"

very limited theatrical release in the US, seen on only twenty-two screens and grossing \$370,627, in part because it does not follow the prescriptions of “black cinema” and as such was disorienting for black and non-black audiences alike.⁴ The beginning of the film reifies blackness as violence, pathology and social deviance as the viewer hears a disturbing account of a man assaulting his female partner. The opening scene provides an oral account of dialogue between a man and woman who we are meant to identify through the sound of black vernacular in their voices as no visual images are provided and all viewers see is a darkened screen. Beyond the opening scene, the film disavows the notion of race as an object of intelligibility as the viewer can no longer rely on racial tropes to comprehend the character and narrative arc of the film. The film refuses to placate or empower black viewers with images of redemption that resolve the traumatic rendering of black bodies as a “problem,” as bodies that do harm, that are destabilizing and disorienting, all of which is enacted in the film’s opening scene.

While it is difficult to attach Daniels to a particular style or set of generic conventions, his films clearly resist the designation of “black cinema.” Though *Shadowboxer* was directed by a black director and features black actors in prominent roles, it defies much of the logic that undergirds the public and scholarly discourses that surround black films. I use the film as a starting point to articulate significant shifts that have taken place in, borrowing a set of criteria from Nicole Fleetwood, the “practice, production and critical reception,” of cinema produced by black people.⁵ *Shadowboxer* is unsentimental about race, detached from the expectations of representing an authentic black subject, and disinterested in positive or negative portrayals of black characters and the experiences lives of black people. Daniels’s commitment is to cinema’s ability to compel us to look, to repulse us, to immerse us inside of undesirable spaces. His style

⁴ See www.imdb.com. Web. 10 January 2012.

⁵ See Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

of filmmaking is also attentive to the bodies that inhabit those spaces rather than to the racial contours of experience, ideology, or representation.

Daniels assumes an authority over the art of filmmaking, allowing what I call his “directorial subjectivity” to circulate through the historical and socio-political limitations of what black directors and bodies ought to do. Daniels is not working in the tradition of Oscar Micheaux’s aspirational morality tales designed to galvanize the emerging New Negro populace, and while his work is often intensely raw and socially taboo, it does not emulate Melvin Van Peebles’ revolutionary- inflected, experimental style. His films are not haunted by the poetic social realism of Charles Burnett or the Third Cinema diasporic aesthetics of Haile Gerima. Neither are they connected to the feminist narratives of black female filmmakers of the 1980s and ‘90s which would include the work of Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Michelle Parkerson, and Camille Billops. And unlike Spike Lee, Daniels’s work is not conversant with black cultural vernacular or the discourses of blackness and representation. The characters in Daniels’s work, including his more recent film *Precious* (2009), might be said to “trouble blackness,” as both male and female they do not restore a sense of social or visual homeostasis, but often produce a visceral sense of racial and bodily disorientation.⁶ The images in Daniels’s work do not heal cinematic or representational wounds, but foreground an *ironic* antagonism between moving images, blackness and whiteness.⁷ Daniels’s distinctive “directorial subjectivity” slashes and burns through the regimes of race and cinematic representation with all of its mythologies, limitations, and anxieties, as the bodies in his films endure traumas that are not brought on by

⁶ Nicole Fleetwood uses the term “troubling vision” to discuss how blackness is viewed and circulated and how race is seen as a force that troubles visual and discursive spheres. I draw more heavily from this book in chapter one.

⁷ In *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, a book which features an image from *Monster’s Ball* on the cover, author Frank Wilderson builds his argument around the notion of “racial antagonisms” where it is not racial conflict, but social antagonisms that films fail to resolve. I use the term “ironic antagonism” not to reinforce his ideas, but to explain how Daniels creates an ironic relationship between historical conceptions of race and his own construction of race in *Shadowboxer’s* cinematic universe.

racial identity.⁸ Daniels's directorial subjectivity manifests in the assertive manner in which his films overcome the historical and aesthetic expectations placed on black directors to produce cinema that empowers racial images, narratives and categories. While *Shadowboxer* resists a racial designation, the film is connected to a number of contemporary films and visual texts made by black filmmakers and artists which demand new analytical tools and epitomize new directions of artistic and cinematic practice. The film remains significant for me as it became the object that first articulated how we might see the notion of "black cinema" through a new set of lenses. Using *Shadowboxer* as a point of departure my research explores films and visual culture that challenge how racial signification is communicated, disavowed, and reimagined in innovative ways.

This project provides a language and methodological tools to articulate significant shifts and complexities in the work of black filmmakers and image producers focusing on how the meaning and significance of race continues to evolve across the many platforms of visual culture production. I employ the term "post-black," a term whose history I unpack a bit later, to account for ruptures in the discourses of blackness and representation. Post-black is not simply a provocative catch phrase, but a useful theoretical tool that helps us to see what lies beyond the racial character of a film or visual image and also explores the outcomes, knowledge, and intensity that black bodies produce as opposed to the signification which has been attached to the surface of the skin. Post-black thinking reads black bodies as creative forces and given that its origins are in art history and criticism, it attends to the formal and aesthetic qualities of still and moving images. Many of the bodies that I explore surface often as ironic and troubling figures inhabiting increasingly complicated spaces. These bodies are what drive my inquiry and in this sense I focus on bodies in films and music videos, image of bodies in visual art, and creative

⁸ I discuss this theme in the work of Kathleen Collins Prettyman and her film *Losing Ground* in Chapter 1.

bodies that function as artists, performers, and filmmakers. I discuss how bodies across different platforms and visual spheres are dynamic and complicated outcomes of a renewed disavowal of identity politics that had previously consumed them. This work recognizes that black bodies manifest a sense of agency and creativity often in spite of significant forces of “counter-embodiment,” that is the ways in which other bodies (and forces) have worked to diminish the movement and agency of black bodies. Ultimately I am committed to the “motility” of bodies believing that confining and limiting any bodies only serves to diminish our collective capacity to effectively produce and experience the pleasures and forward progression of visual culture.⁹ I also hope to show how bodies that have been visually distorted, marginalized, and confined do in fact produce “*bodies of knowledge*” beyond racial signification and have the potential to move and challenge us.

This line of inquiry is inspired by the work of two significant and very different philosophical trajectories. The first trajectory is animated by Gilles Deleuze’s Spinozist assertion: “we do not know what bodies can do.” In *Expressionism of Philosophy: Spinoza* Deleuze writes: “Whence the importance of the ethical question. We do not even know of what a body is capable, says Spinoza. That is: we do not even know of what affections we are capable nor the extent of our power” (224).¹⁰ While neither Deleuze nor Spinoza speak explicitly to the black body, I find that this statement can be leveraged to address the powers and capacities of raced bodies and the challenges of seeing and engaging those powers. To further make this point, consider Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza on the notions of action and suffering:

⁹ I borrow the term “motility” from Sara Ahmed and discuss it in detail in Chapter 3. It describes an embodied awareness of movement and agency that raced bodies have often been denied. See Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects and Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ In *Expressionism of Philosophy: Spinoza*, New York: Zone Books, 1990, Gilles Deleuze and Martin Joughin provide a compelling reading of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher’s treatise *Ethics*. Other important citations that specifically deal with Spinoza’s *Ethics* are: *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*. Benedictus de Spinoza and Edwin Curley(ed. and trans). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994 and Steven Nadler’s *Spinoza’s ‘Ethics’: An Introduction*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

We suffer external things, distinct from ourselves, we thus ourselves have a distinct force of passion and action...Our force of suffering exerts nothing because it expresses nothing at all: it “involves” only our impotence, that is to say, the limitation of our power of action (224).¹¹

In *Ethics*, Spinoza offers a complex set of philosophical propositions and proofs which hinge on our ability to see the body as a set of “powers,” powers which should not be seen as solely individuated and which are often indistinguishable from God, that is, not solely of man’s own making or mental capacity.¹² While I do not wish to fully interrogate or oversimplify this complex treatise, I do find to be particularly significant how Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza conflates the notion of external suffering with an impotent subjectivity. These words uncannily describe a narrative of black bodily experience where the black body’s subjectivity, having been externalized, is often truncated by significations of racial suffering and an overdetermined racial identity. While this project does not explicitly address philosophy or the work of these philosophers, I find that this language provides a compelling point of departure into a discussion of the black body, as in this project I attempt to unearth an observable embodied subjectivity that is not impotent, but active and very much alive.¹³

A second guiding assertion comes through the work of Frantz Fanon, whose contributions are critical to this and most any exploration of race, visibility and subjectivity. I

¹¹ Much of the language in *Expressionism*, particularly in Chapter 14 entitled “What Can a Body Do?” evokes the “metaphysical” powers of bodies.

¹² The following passage from Spinoza’s *Ethics* helps to clarify the capacities (the “What”) that Deleuze is uncertain that man can attribute to his/her own bodily and intellectual constitution: no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has as yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish solely by the laws of nature...Deleuze in *Expressionism in Philosophy* also says: ...so the questions *What is the structure of a body?* and *What can a body do?* are equivalent questions, because “what a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected.”

¹³ While Deleuze and Spinoza might be an unexpected point of departure there is some work that evokes Deleuze in an analysis of race. Perhaps the most relevant and comprehensive treatment of Deleuzian theory, race and cinema is Kara Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007 and Sara Ahmed’s *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

find that despite Fanon's emphasis on the trauma that black bodies experience at being seen as "raced" and not fully "human," he does allude to the existence of a what I am calling a "metaphysical space," as an almost inconceivable sphere where the black body and consciousness are freed from the psychic and social traumas of anti-black fears, limitations, and anxieties and moves instead with a sense of agency and interiority. Fanon imagined the possibility, even for a moment, that this trauma might not be the end of the story. The next to last sentence of Fanon's seminal text, *Black Skins, White Masks* reads, "At the end of this book we would like the reader to feel with us the open dimension of every consciousness. My final prayer: O my body, always make me a man who questions!"¹⁴ Here he anticipates an inherently sturdy, almost transcendent, subjectivity that lies beyond the totalizing effects of racism and the traumas of the "historico- racial schema." Fanon's rigorous analysis documents the trauma that "seeing" enacts on black bodies, yet here he also posits that the visual sphere might yield great metaphysical capacities. He outlines a template of subjectivity, one of *feeling, being* and the intense desire of *seeking, knowing, and questioning*. Fanon's own body seems to yearn for more substance, more answers, more questions, and more connections to other bodies and in this vein I read bodies as a space onto which consciousness (of something), mental inquiry, and experiences are always being mapped and re-imagined. My research attempts to provide, not an answer to his prayer, but perhaps a response to his own embodied desires and entreaties, and a substantive engagement of what lies within (or beyond) "the open dimension of every consciousness." This research posits that the exploration of black bodies and visibility might contribute to the undoing of racial trauma and unearth a hidden dimension of experience, subjectivity, and possibilities.¹⁵

¹⁴ See the most recent translation of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*. (trans. Richard Philcox). New York: Grove Press, 2008. 232.

¹⁵ In this formulation, Fanon accounts for the epidermal, sociological, and psychological dimensions of seeing and experiencing race and racism.

To account for what black bodies can do this project undertakes two primary objectives. First I use the term “post-black” as a theoretical framework to explain how particular works of visual culture provide an opening for black bodies to move, circulate, and navigate through racial discourses in order to access a space not solely defined by race, but one which allows for a range of metaphysical possibilities. Secondly, I explain how in this “metaphysical space” black bodies are animated not by racial logic, mythologies or historical expectations, but by a range of embodied experiences, including interior and exterior sensations, wellness and disease, experiences of fleshly and technological bodies, and of angst and sublimity. I claim the term “metaphysical” to account for these experiences and to emphasize how black bodies in this space repossess the intersection of “black” and “human” as a dimension of suppressed and unexplored reservoirs of knowledge and intensity. The pursuit and the outcomes of metaphysical space for black bodies should not be underappreciated, as they have often been caught in a historical, visual, cinematic, and discursive vortex which has often hurled them aside, or swallowed them whole as surface, pre-determined, visible objects. Central to “metaphysical space” is the notion of interiority, which should not be read as an intellectual or Cartesian accomplishment, but as a complex space of experience and creative outcomes.¹⁶

This project, then, is more than an intervention; it is a search and rescue mission that attempts to recover the intensity and possibilities of black bodies. My primary research inquiry asks: what do black bodies moving through the post-black universe of contemporary visual culture (film, visual/digital art, new media and music video) *do*? This leads to a subset of additional questions: How can we interpret black bodies that do not function simply as “raced” objects? What alternative aesthetic or artistic outcomes are created by black bodies? How do

¹⁶ I discuss Elizabeth Alexander’s formulation and exploration of interiority in black American literature and culture throughout this project. See her text, *The Black Interior*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004.

black bodies in these visual works affect other bodies and viewers? What kinds of subjectivities and experiences lie beyond familiar experiences of racial identity? My research identifies a cohesive set of post-black visual works and provides close textual analysis of these objects to uncover evidence and insight into what bodies can indeed do. These visual works push through Fanon's "open dimension," which I describe as a "portal," and include the work of filmmakers Kathleen Collins Prettyman and Lee Daniels, several hip hop video works, the art and body of Jean-Michel Basquiat, contemporary music video/art works by Erykah Badu, and art/new media works of Nettrice Gaskins— works that make tangible an artistic subjectivity and challenge how spectators engage black bodies. In Chapter One, I examine Kathleen Collins Prettyman's film *Losing Ground* focusing on the film's emphasis on interiority and the "affect worlds" of characters' mental, sensual and emotional states.¹⁷ The characters in *Losing Ground* have a complicated, but understated relationship with racial identity, as race is one in a series of "affective" forces that compels them to seek ecstasy and artistic fulfillment. The characters become subjects not because of racialized experiences and social transformation, but because writer/director Kathleen Collins Prettyman produces an alternative subjectivity that relies on the characters' dogged pursuit of desire and imagination. Chapter Two explains how hip-hop artists have produced an archive of visual culture that produces powerful reactions, which I call "encounters," with viewers by projecting embodied creativity as an active force in the visual sphere. I explore two pioneering hip-hop music videos for Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" and Wu-Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M." and early graffiti culture, explaining how the black male body initiates viewers into the trauma and creativity of their experiences in

¹⁷ I use the term "affect worlds" to describe the film, but not in the way that Lauren Berlant uses it to describe public spheres and how affect allows for shared experiences and reactions. See Berlant's essay where she describes this in detail, "Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture." *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 447-450. I use the term to describe how the film is saturated with affective intensity which surfaces through the character's distinct experiences, anxieties, and pursuits.

the urban visual universe. I also examine the creative bodies of graffiti artists, of iconic artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, and illusionist David Blaine, whose bodies compel us to reimagine masculinity as a spectacular force in and on urban space. Chapter Three discusses the complexities of male and female bodies as cinematic, artistic and performative forces. I discuss bodies at the cellular level exploring images of HeLa cells and the intersection of bodies and disease in the art of Wangechi Mutu. I discuss the art/new media works of Nettrice Gaskins and music videos of performer Erykah Badu. Lastly I return to Lee Daniel's film *Shadowboxer* and how it both references and disavows the mythologies of black masculinity. I emphasize how metaphysical space emerges through bodies at the intersections of sexuality, flesh/non-flesh, time, space and death. These visual works are also emblematic of changes in visual aesthetics and technology which emphasize the art of filmmaking and digital technology rather than overtly racial or political ideas.

A Brief History of "Post-Black"

The idea of "post-blackness" is a guiding principle that requires clarification and contextualization.¹⁸ The term was originally used by art historian Robert Farris Thompson, though in a different context than its meaning today, as he emphasized the complex relationship between race, modernism, and the marginalization of black art and artists in largely white institutions.¹⁹ The term in its present usage is attributed to curator Thelma Golden of the Studio

¹⁸ Post-black is not synonymous with the term "post-racial" though some have used the terms interchangeably. For a discussion on "post-racial" politics see Brett St. Louis's essay, "Post-race/post-politics? Activist-intellectualism and the Reification of Race." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25.4 (2002): 652-675. Web. 2 Jan 2012. Unlike the premise of post-racial thinking, my articulation of post-blackness does not disavow historical record or personal experiences of black people, nor does it suggest that race, racial discourse, and racial/social activism are no longer relevant. On the contrary, I maintain that post-black ideas retain race as a defining trope of modernity, post-modernity, and Afro-modernity.

¹⁹ Robert Farris Thompson emphasized the inability of post-modernism to account for the African diaspora's contributions to modernity. See his essay on "AfroModernism" in *Artforum* (1991): 91-94.

Museum of Harlem, who, in an irreverent context, used the term to refer to how some black artists of the late 1980s and '90s were beginning to reject the notion that they were “black” artists creating “black” art.²⁰ Post-black gained public circulation when Golden’s ideas were published in the catalog for the ground-breaking *Freestyle* exhibition which she curated.²¹ Golden observed how newer generations of black artists seemed to be working in a way that was different from black artists of previous generations, specifically their predecessors of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.²² She emphasized that while their work often reflected racial themes, it was often the artists who did not want to be seen as black artists doing “black art.” The term has come to suggest that the work of this and subsequent generations of black artists demands a (re) reading of race, of the act of creating, and of how we read visual culture, or perhaps that we were not properly reading these objects in the first place. Many of these artists wanted the freedom to work in different mediums, may have studied at predominantly white institutions, and demanded the liberty to explore a wide range of subjects, aesthetics and points of view. On one hand, blackness remained, at times, a relevant artistic inspiration; on the other, artists did not want their racial identification to be the determining factor in how the work was engaged, interpreted and experienced. Post-black thinking challenges the point-of-view of much of the rhetorical outpouring of the Black Arts Movement where race was often the object of intelligibility, of inquiry, of value and of signification; thus the post- black paradigm demands a different set of relationships to race, identity, medium, and context.

²⁰ Though Golden is credited with coining the term in this context, she has discussed how the term was the outgrowth of a conversation with artist Glenn Ligon. See *Freestyle*. New York: The Studio Museum of Harlem, 2001.

²¹ For an updated account of this moment, see an interview that Huey Copeland conducts with both Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon in *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* Eds. Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschluter, London: Tate Publishing, 2010.

²² Some of the artists who appear in the *Freestyle* exhibit include: Kori Newkirk, Sanford Biggers, Jennie C. Jones, Laylah Ali, and Susan Smith-Pinelo.

Golden's epiphany did not emerge in isolation as the late 1980s and early '90s was a tremendous period of cultural production, definition, and contestation for scholars, filmmakers, and artists. A number of significant manifestos appeared, each describing a similar phenomenon but with its own terminology, historical context, and aesthetic concerns. Among them were Greg Tate's "Cultural Nats Meet Freaky-Deke: The Return of the Black Aesthetic," and Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic."²³ Yet the most sustained theoretical trajectory explored the notion of "post-soul" culture.²⁴ Two authors initially took up the mantle of "post-soul" as a significant historical demarcation delineating shifts in pre and post-Civil Rights cultural production. First, journalist/writer Nelson George would write *Buppies, B-Boy, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* and later *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)*.²⁵ For George post-soul marked a paradigmatic shift in how "black" music, film and popular culture were conceptualized, marketed and packaged for black audiences. In the preface to the recent edition of *Buppies*, he outlines the broad contours of his conception of post-soul saying: "This book is about the culture of African Americans who have come of age since the demise of the civil rights movement in the late '60s."²⁶ He explains:

Though the saga of post-soul hinges on the way two fringe movements, hip hop and black film, came up from the underground, other equally important strains reflected the unending debate over authenticity, co-optation, and redefinition that desegregation's new opportunities and contradictions intensified (*Buppies* 6).

²³ Tate's essay appears in the *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* (Dec 1986): 7. Ellis's work appears in *Callaloo*, 1989, 233-243 and in other anthologies.

²⁴ For a post-soul analysis of cinema see William R. Grant IV's *Post-Soul Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations and Breakpoints, 1970-1995*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.

²⁵ *Buppies* was first published in 1992 and reprinted in 2001 by Da Capo Press and *Post-Soul Nation* was published by Viking Press in 2004.

²⁶ *Buppies*, xi.

Then in 2002 Mark Anthony Neal provided a powerful elaboration on post-soul thinking in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and The Post-Soul Aesthetic*.²⁷ Neal's take on post-soul culture articulates many of the same contours, but emphasizes specific changes in how black identity was also framed:

In the post-soul aesthetic I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation...the general commodification of black life and culture and the proliferation of "meta-identities...I am also suggesting that this aesthetic ultimately renders many "traditional" tropes of blackness dated and even meaningless; in its borrowing from black modern traditions, it is so consumed with its contemporary existential concerns that such traditions are not just called into question but obliterated.²⁸

These authors emphasize the tensions that surface as a result of the freedoms gained during the Civil Rights Movement which also includes the complex challenges of urban post-industrial living conditions and the emergence of an array of cultural texts in hip-hop, cinema and popular music.

By 2007 the term continued to be used fruitfully with the publication of significant scholarship that fused elements of post-soul and post-black (among other trajectories) and expanded their theoretical and pedagogical possibilities.²⁹ In 2007 the *African American Review* devoted a special issue to post-soul (and post-black) theoretical work.³⁰ Among the essays included is an essay by Bertram Ashe entitled, "These—Are—the "Breaks": A Roundtable

²⁷ *Soul Babies: Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 2-3.

²⁹ An example of scholarship that wove these trajectories together is Marlo David's essay that illuminates both post-soul and Afrofuturist paradigms, "Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibilities in Black Popular Music." *African American Review* 41.4 (Winter 2007): 695-707.

³⁰ Contributors to this special edition of *African American Review* included: Bertram Ashe, Paul Taylor, Richard Schurr, and Aldon Lynn Nielsen.

Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic,” which featured contributors Mark Anthony Neal, Bertram Ashe, Crystal Anderson, Evie Shockley, and Alexander Weheliye. Other essays leaned in the direction of post-black, including Paul Taylor’s “Post-Black, Old Black.” Richard Schurr contributes an essay that discusses the aesthetics of post-soul in African American art. In much of this literature the terms are used interchangeably and in often unpredictable ways. For some authors the terms are more historical, while others emphasize art history and criticism, or apply the term to popular culture.

Also in 2007 a number of art historians including Mary Schmidt Campbell, Darby English, and Derek Conrad Murray would publish work on post-black art providing innovative analytical approaches to the work of black artists.³¹ In “African American Art in a Post-Black Era,” Schmidt Campbell legitimizes and contextualizes the post-black impulse before Golden’s elucidation of the actual term in the 1990s, describing post-black as a profound generational divide:

Golden, an intern at the museum at about the time of those shows, has observed that the museum at that time felt as though it were her parents’ museum. Rebellion against so-called positive ways of presenting blackness was evident everywhere in the culture during the 1990s from hip hop to the work of Kara Walker.

They challenged notions of positive/negative with images that confronted viewers with harsh realities no matter how unpleasant for black and white alike.

What these dialectics emphatically demonstrate is that perhaps the most

³¹ Mary Schmidt Campbell’s “African American Art in a Post-Black Era,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 2007. 317 – 330. Darby English’s contribution to post-black influenced art criticism and analysis is a book entitled, *How to Read a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, and Derek Conrad Murray’s review/response to English’s text is also insightful, see his essay “Post Post-Black: Some Politically Incorrect Thoughts on the Reception and Contemplation of African-American Art.” *Art Journal*, 2007. 112-116.

important function of a black fine arts museum has been as a site where contested paradigms of ‘blackness’ can engage.³²

Schmidt Campbell summarizes a set of ideas about post-blackness which I discuss in my own analysis of post-black texts. First, post-black disavows the discourses of positive/negative images as a mandate that has often been imposed on black artists and filmmakers over several generations. Artists like Kara Walker, who is evoked in Schmidt Campbell’s analysis, have faced systemic criticism and ostracization by black artists and institutions, and their work goes unseen and unengaged as it is lost in the discourses that surround it.³³ Secondly, what Schmidt Campbell describes as work that “confronted viewers,” I describe as work that produces an “encounter” that may awe, disturb, or disorientate viewers. Describing the objectives of young post-black artists Schmidt Campbell also writes: “What they are claiming as full citizens is a blank canvas with no predetermined expectations, no constraints, no prohibitions, only the full range of whatever unpredictable inventions the unfettered imagination can produce” (329). Here she reifies another defining characteristic—the “black imagination”—which I discuss at length throughout the project. The black imagination is an important dimension of my argument as it marks a space of unbridled creativity that is not defined or inhibited by racial identity and cultural politics.

³² Schmidt Campbell 317 - 330. Artist Kara Walker was perhaps second only to artist Jean-Michel Basquiat as a seminal post-black icon. While her work gained international notoriety and access to a broad institutional audience, she was roundly criticized by the black arts community and black viewers for work that challenged how Blacks and Whites viewed racial and sexual bodies, stereotypes, and histories. For an in-depth treatment of her work see Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw’s *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004. See also Howardena Pindell’s *Kara Walker No/ Kara Walker Yes/ Kara Walker?* New York: MidMarch Arts Press, 2009.

³³ For a description of the reception and treatment of Kara Walker’s work see Jerry Saltz’s online essays at http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/saltz/saltz11-24-98.asp, and <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/40277/>. Web. 13 May 2012. An example of criticism of post-blackness and of the strategy of reappropriating stereotypes, which is a central technique deployed in Walker’s work is found in Michael Harris’s *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 2003. He provides a strong critique of Walker and artist Michael Ray Charles finding that their work is deeply problematic. In Chapter 1 I provide an example of how post-black filmmaker Kathleen Collins Prettyman was also questioned and at times attacked for the subject matter of her films, the race of some of her characters and for not defining herself as a “black artist.”

I have chosen to deploy the term post-black over other terms as it attends to the weight of art and visual culture as rich objects of analysis whose “powers” should be engaged. The work of black artists warrants our attention as it has suffered significant neglect given that so much of our attention has been directed at the “regimes of representation” rather than at the objects themselves, as Darby English explains, “. . . black artists’ work seldom serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate. Instead, it is almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same). . . .”³⁴ Art historian Kobena Mercer makes similar pronouncements, saying:

...the black art object is rarely a focus of attention in its own right. Artists, art worlds and artworks are three very distinct ontological categories, but a brief glance over the discourse of black art criticism at various moments in the 20th century—from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Negritude movement of the 1940s, to the US Black Arts Movement of the 1960s—shows a consistent emphasis on the first and the second elements that tends to undermine the quality of attention given to the third.³⁵

One of my objectives is to explore how post-black filmmakers and artists produce work, not with the expressed and explicit purposes of speaking to sociological or racial experiences (though they are certainly inflected by these phenomena), but as forces that engage a range of experiences and subjectivities. The work that I explore disrupts visual and social realism,

³⁴ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat discuss the notion of “regimes of representation” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994. They see it in a slightly different way than I am using it here. For them it is an outgrowth of a Eurocentric worldview; for me the term can also refer to strictures that black cultural nationalist thinking can impose on black artists, image makers and audiences. In either case, it restricts the possibilities of cultural production and evolved reception practices. See also English’s *How to Read a Work of Art in Total Darkness*.

³⁵ Kobena Mercer’s essay “Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde” in his anthology *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007. 138. Art historian Richard Powell also echoes this point explaining, “Considering the uphill struggle that proponents of a high black culture have faced, there was little room for popular black cultural forms (like film and video) to be considered with comparable measures of artistic and historical value.” *Black Art and Culture in the 21st Century*, Thames & Hudson, 1997, 203.

demystifies familiar tropes of blackness, and inserts black bodies into spaces which are often disorienting and defamiliarizing.³⁶ These works function more precisely as art objects than as solely commercial or entertainment products.³⁷ While they may have a commodity function, they also exhibit significant artistic character, which has at times been diminished or obscured altogether by the insistence that black films must do certain kinds of socio-political work. I do not go so far as to call these films “art films,” as that designation is also constrictive and provides yet another set of criteria to overcome, yet the term “art” is used here to speak to the capacity that an art object has to create an encounter with viewers and with the broader universe of bodies and ideas. My usage of the term “art” aligns with philosopher/phenomenologist Charles Johnson’s formulation of the term, as he explains, “...art transforms our perception and performs an epistemological service by allowing us to see the world of consciousness, culture, and the universe in new ways.”³⁸ Post-black allows us to successfully apprehend the possibilities of work that aims for a powerful interaction with audiences and describes ways in which black artists and filmmakers wrestle with conceptions of blackness and whether or not a singular idea of blackness should be *the* prevailing, visible fact in the art and culture they produce.

Post-black thinking surfaces across the twentieth century often in response to prevailing cultural movements or schools of thought.³⁹ The earliest post-black responses could not be

³⁶ A post-black cinema archive would include Bill Gunn’s *Ganja and Hess* (1973), *Losing Ground* (1982), Spike Lee’s first feature film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) and his more recent theatrical production, *Passing Strange* (2009), Wendell Harris’s *Chameleon Street* (1989) and Barry Jenkins’s *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008).

³⁷ This should not suggest that these films do not have a commodity function or that they cannot be commercially successful. It is important however to differentiate these films from the work of Tyler Perry, for instance, whose work is an explicit entertainment commodity.

³⁸ (Charles Johnson interview, http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The_M%26C_Interview_1_Charles_Johnson_6_07 Web. 14 Apr 2012.

³⁹ Post-black in particular continues to inspire much public dialogue. In 2011 author Touré released, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What it Means to be Black Now*. New York, Free Press, 2011, which was the subject of much public debate. Touré’s conception of post-black, while rooted in some of the same history that I cite, takes a very different track by emphasizing identity and cultural politics instead of the term’s roots in art and cultural history.

called “waves,” but should more aptly be described as “ripples” in the larger pond of cultural discourse. Some of the earliest ripples were in response to the writing of early cultural critics and writers like W. E. B. Du Bois. In an essay entitled, “The Criteria of Negro Art,” which he originally delivered as a speech and later published in *The Crisis*, Du Bois claims that art should play a significant role in black life, decreeing what the nature of black (then “Negro”) art should be and how it should function. He argues that black people must take up art as both an investment in humanistic aesthetics of “beauty” and also as a propagandistic tool for social and political empowerment.⁴⁰ Du Bois was often at the center of debates with Alain Locke, and others, but two other writers George Schuyler, a science fiction writer often cited as an early Afrofuturist, and Langston Hughes, an eminent figure of the Harlem Renaissance, also challenged his perspectives on black cultural production.⁴¹ In the mid-1920s, each would publish his own “manifesto,” which would influence subsequent generations of scholars, critics and artists. Following Du Bois and the Harlem Renaissance, which also provided rich debates on the nature of black art and culture, post-black re-surfaces in the 1960s in response to a very fertile and discursively powerful Black Arts Movement.⁴²

⁴⁰ See *The Crisis*, June 1926.

⁴¹ Alain Locke was an eminent scholar whose work paved the way for the black scholarship and cultural/social criticism. He is most well-known for his work *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925, which he edited, and was first published in 1925. Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was also published in *The Nation* in 1926. Schuyler’s essay “The Negro Art Hokum” appeared in *The Nation* in Oct of 1926. Afro-futurism is a term that refers to black scholarship and engagement of technology and science fiction/futuristic discourses that communicate shifts in blackness, humanism and embodiment. I discuss it in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁴² I cannot do these debates justice in this project, but a few prominent figures in the debates of the Harlem Renaissance era were art historian James Porter, Aaron Douglas and a number of figures who focused on the literary trajectory including Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Nora Neale Hurston. Romare Bearden, a major artistic figure in the 20th century across several eras, was another significant artistic voice. For a discussion of Bearden’s perspective on art see his essay, “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 245-60, 1969. Several central issues that both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement address include the inclusion of “lower-class” concerns, subjects, and vernacular, whether or not there is a “black” aesthetic, should black artists engage white institutions, and whether black artists chief concerns should be racial politics or the pursuit of an individuated sense of artistic purpose, which is central to my articulation of post-blackness.

Post-Black and the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement was an explosion of work by black visual artists, playwrights, poets, and photographers in the 1960s whose work was inspired by the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements and the desire to transform the meaning and context of blackness and racial identity.⁴³ This proliferation of culture and artistic foment was accompanied by searing manifestos that lay claim to a set of ideas about black life, art, aesthetics, and cultural ideology that would provide renewed interest in creating art, new debates around aesthetics and new audiences for the work.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Black Arts Movement was its ability to catalyze disenfranchised, restless and increasingly disillusioned young people in America's major cities including Newark, NJ, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles around that thing which had most shaped their life chances—racial identity. Racial blackness was reclaimed and re-appropriated by its architects Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, and Ron Karenga (Maulana Karenga) as a symbol of rebellion, pride, and power. Neal famously articulates the relationship between black art and the Black Power movement, saying, “Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”⁴⁵

⁴³ The Black Arts Movement encompassed not just visual art, but also theater, performance art, poetry, creative writing, even urban murals on the sides of buildings. Yet, I do think that the sphere of visual art remains the most complicated. For a discussion of the various mediums see Collins and Crawford's *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. A small sample of artists who emerged in this period include Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Sonia Sanchez, Sun Ra, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Jeff Donaldson, Kalamu ya Salaam, Nina Simone and countless others. Art institutions and presses included: Black Arts Repertory Theater, Free Southern Theater, BLKARTSOUTH, Organization of Black American Culture, the Du Sable Museum, Institute of the Black World, Broadside Press, Third World Press, *Black Scholar*, *Journal of Black Poetry* and *Negro Digest/Black World*.

⁴⁴ Several other significant manifestos of the Black Arts Movement include: Ron Karenga, “On Black Art,” *Black Theater* 9-10; a series of works by Leroi Jones including his anthology with Larry Neal, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, New York: Morrow, 1968 and Ed Bullins's, *The Theme is Blackness: The Corner and Other Plays*. New York: Morrow, 1973.

⁴⁵ Neal's essay was extremely influential as is the volume in which it appears. See Neal's “The Black Arts Movement,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971, 257.

These architects inspired artists to reject the degradation and oppression associated with racial blackness, African ancestry, history, culture, and appearance and to instead embrace blackness as a symbol of beauty, strength, and intellectual and artistic creativity. The rhetoric of cultural nationalism emerged in Ron Karenga's revolutionary proclamations that "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution" as well as in Melvin Dixon's emphasis on community over individualism and the de-centering of Western aesthetics as he writes:

Black Art, by definition, exists primarily for Black people. It is an art which combines the social and political pulse of the Black community into an artistic reflection of that emotion, that spirit, that energy. As an aesthetic foundation it seeks to step beyond the white Western framework of American art which has enclosed and smothered any previous expression of Blackness.⁴⁶

Mary Ellen Lennon explains that cultural nationalism was embedded in the Black Arts Movement, saying: "The creative arts were a necessary element of this revolutionary black culture. . . cultural nationalists explored a "black aesthetic" that was distinctive, meaningful, and authentically representative of the unique history, experience, and culture of people of African descent."⁴⁷ The Black Arts Movement was not only galvanizing artists, but capturing the attention of the masses of Blacks largely situated in urban centers by providing tangible outlets for channeling the pressures and anxieties of anti-black racism and entrenched social inequity.

In *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*, Amy Agubu Ongiri contextualizes the impact of the Black Arts

⁴⁶ Ron (Maulena) Karenga's excerpt appears in "Black Cultural Nationalism," *Negro Digest*, 1968, 5-9. Dixon's excerpt is taken from "White Critic- Black Art???" in *Black Art Notes* Ed. Tom Lloyd, *Black Art Notes*, 1971.

⁴⁷See Lennon's essay "A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968-1971," 92-116 in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*.

Movement and documents the prolific scholarship that was produced. She also provides insight into its relationship to post-blackness.⁴⁸

By presenting the culture of the everyday African American struggle as one worthy of serious scholarly recognition and analysis, the movement contributed to the current formation of African American studies and to a general understanding of what is valuable about African American culture. Problematic as it would become, the decision to make “the Black experience” of “the average Negro” the central determinant in the figuration of a “Black aesthetic” was a truly critical break with past conceptualizations of the ways in which African American art was constructed... Though the movement was relatively short... it continues to exert a powerful influence on artists’ ideas about themselves and their art. In his introduction to *The Leroi Jones Reader*, William J. Harris rightfully claims, “No post-Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art.” (xxvi) (Ongiri 22)⁴⁹

Ongiri alludes to the “problematic” notion of placing black identity at the center of an aesthetic movement and juxtaposes this idea to post-blackness. Yet her point evades a central issue, that it is, in fact, post-black work and practices that expose and interrogate this “problem,” resolving to value and foreground the work of the artists over the ever-shifting terrain of identity and cultural politics. This project does not dismiss the relevance of race, nor the profound impact of the Black Arts Movement as essential to the development of subsequent generations of artists, as

⁴⁸The abundance of scholarly work dedicated to the debate and nature of black art and cultural production in this era cannot be overstated. According to Amy Ongiri in *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, “In the five year period between 1967 and 1973, more than thirty new anthologies were published, many by small or independent press” (24).

⁴⁹ *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, by Amiri Baraka and edited by William J. Harris, New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991, 2000.

Harris affirms. The manifestos, rhetoric, and literature of the Black Arts Movement which placed blackness at the center of the pursuit and creation of a “black aesthetic” created the conditions for post-blackness as an alternative framework which reads blackness differently, but which also exists amidst different socio-political and economic conditions.⁵⁰ What must also be made clear is that the choice to foreground a blackness that was about racial identity, the lives of everyday black people and experiences, and vernacular culture was profoundly necessary in its historical moment and context and indeed revolutionary in its ability to transform the direction, tenor, and constructs of black culture and consciousness. My definition of post-blackness, then, does not challenge the historical relevance of the Black Arts Movement, nor does it invalidate the outpouring of visual art, music, and poetry that it produced and which continues to have resonance. This project contends that blackness is neither factual, as the Black Arts Movement contends, nor completely escapable, as critics of post-blackness have pointed out, but for black artists of subsequent generations it must be negotiated and navigated, rather than seen as both the journey and the destination. My work affirms the significance of the Black Arts Movement as it shaped future interpretations of race, identity, and embodiment, opening a door for spaces of contestation, new subjects, styles, innovation, and context. My focus is to explain how the work of contemporary post-black artists desires to be seen not for its racial character, but for how it activates bodies, artistry, and imagination. Post-black work matters, as it possesses a power that is worthy of as much attention as has been paid to cultural ideology and socio-political concerns.

⁵⁰ The earliest post-black works, *Ganja and Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1972), *Losing Ground* (Collins-Prettyman, 1982), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986) and the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat emerged largely in the 1980s, a time which arguably was not much different than the mid-1960s of the Black Arts Movement. Both eras were plagued by high unemployment, poverty, and urban deterioration. The later waves of post-blackness from the 1990s to the present are marked by socio-economic shifts, increased numbers of black students studying art and film in universities, changes in technology and new platforms for film/digital media content.

The relationship that the Black Arts Movement has had with subsequent generations of artists, filmmakers, and audiences is significant. We see the persistent influence of the Black Arts Movement in the style and subject matter of black filmmakers, in hip-hop music and culture, and in the scholarly work that shaped black cultural studies.⁵¹ The rhetoric and aesthetic sensibilities of the Black Arts Movement are explicitly reflected in the work of filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles and the filmmakers of the LA School/Rebellion. Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, released in 1971, embodied the aggressive, political and masculinist rhetoric of this era. While it was often criticized for lacking an explicit and coherent political narrative, *Sweetback* is a clear outcome of the Black Arts Movement's clarion call to assert a black aesthetic that was grounded in the lived experiences of black people, and the disavowal of Western cultural norms and practices of art, culture, and in this case, cinema. The film's complex use of sound, raw depiction of racial and sexual taboos, and its disjointed narrative foreground a sexually liberated black male anti-hero who emerges from the ghetto to, in some ways unintelligibly, challenge and escape the racist, authoritarian, and corrupt forces that held sway over inhabitants of black American cities. The film was released in theatres and became a box office success despite its subject matter and gritty aesthetics, galvanizing a black audience that shared similar concerns and experiences and simultaneously garnering interest from Hollywood powerbrokers.⁵² While the film can also be understood in the context of the

⁵¹ A number of scholars have discussed how the impact of rage, realism, and violence in films and hip-hop culture of the late 1980s and early 90s is a direct outcome of the influence of the Black Arts Movement. See Marvin Gladney's "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop." *African American Review*, 291-301, 1995; S. Craig Watkins's *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998, and "A Nation of Millions: Hip Hop Culture and the Legacy of Black Nationalism." *Communication Review*, 373-399, 2001; and Eddie Glaude Jr. Ed. *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002.

⁵² This film, along with the Chester Himes adaptation of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, helped to create the formula (and an audience) for Blaxploitation films of the 1970s.

American New Wave which shared many of its cinematic preoccupations it stayed true to the Black Art's Movement's central tenets:

...fundamental to the black aesthetic was the creative artist's *responsibility* and *connection* to the black community. Instead of accepting Western culture's false assertion that art was "impartial" or apolitical, the black aesthetic asserted the liberatory impulse of the artist's craft ...that "his primary responsibility is to black people and their plight (Lennon 96, emphasis hers).⁵³

Sweetback became a link between the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts Movement and the cinematic avant-garde and signaled that black filmmakers could successfully challenge Western aesthetics and modes of representation. Van Peebles, however, was not the only cinematic force that took inspiration from the Black Arts Movement and the political tumult of the 1960s. The LA School of filmmakers, a group of black students from various parts of the US and the African diaspora studying at film schools in Los Angeles, emerged in the late 1960s and 70s and initiated the most sustained and deliberate black independent filmmaking movement of the last century.⁵⁴

Describing the influences of the LA School, Ntongela Masilela, a member of the collective, explains the complex set of influences and political forces that surrounded the group:

The intellectual and cultural coordinates of this Black independent film movement are inseparable from the political and social struggles and convulsions of the 1960s. For these African and African- American filmmakers, imagination was inescapably wedded to political and cultural commitment.⁵⁵

⁵³ This quote is excerpted from Lennon's essay. She quotes Francis and Val Gray Ward's, "The Black Artist—His Role in the Struggle," *Black Scholar* 2.5 (1971): 23.

⁵⁴ Spike Lee initiates a resurgence of black film production in the late 1980s and 90s, but it was not completely an independent endeavor, nor could it be described as a deliberate movement. He blazed the trail for many others including John Singleton, Matty Rich, Leslie Harris, Darnell Martin, and the Hughes Brothers.

⁵⁵ See Masilela's essay "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers" in *Black American Cinema*, Ed. Manthia Diawara 107-117.

Masilela explains that the LA School never subscribed to a “single hegemonic ideology” and some for instance were critical of Van Peebles’s film for not explicitly offering a legitimate political ideology. He also points out that there was “a dialectical tension between the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts Movement and the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party...” among the members of the collective (109). I discuss the LA School’s impact in more detail in Chapter 1 as it also became a force that defined the direction, content, and objectives of black filmmaking and it is some of these objectives that post-black films have moved away from, privileging instead the pursuit of freedom, embodiment and metaphysical space. The Black Arts Movement however, became the force that propelled cultural nationalism, the notion of a “black aesthetic,” and black pride into the future of hip-hop music, cinema and black cultural studies.

This dissertation project emerges out of a deep engagement with past and contemporary concerns and frameworks. Fundamentally it challenges the notion that black bodies must stand in for racial identity and authentically “black” experiences, sensibilities, and socio-political expectations. It uses the framework of post- blackness to argue that black bodies might stand in for a range of experiences and embodied desires. In each chapter I identify bodies that challenge the representational paradigm by emphasizing affective, cellular, digital, and cosmic subjectivities which expand the bodily, temporal and spatial dimensions that have constricted the movement of black bodies and culture.

The Challenges of Representation

In the years following the emergence of the LA School, scholarship that dealt with race, film and representation emerged largely out the fields of cultural studies, film studies, and African American studies. These disciplines coalesced around several central tenets, a few of which include: using cinema as a space to reconstitute African American history and culture,

alternative narrative/aesthetic strategies, and the importance of oppositional/resistant reception strategies. Cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Kobena Mercer in Britain interrogated the complexity of race, diaspora and cultural identity claiming that modernity and race were complicated ideas that were constantly in flux and always reshaping modernity and post-modernity.⁵⁶ These and other scholars continued to theorize the problems of race and visibility by examining how race functions in high and popular cultures, noting that black bodies were continually marginalized, absent, or contorted to suit the purposes of institutional forces in art, advertising, cinema and television. Much of this scholarship was devoted to identifying the contentious nature of contemporary image-making, which demonstrated a need to reanimate antiquated cultural stereotypes.⁵⁷

In 1992 scholars of film, art, literature, and cultural studies gathered in New York to participate in a conference that addressed the current and future trajectories of race, identity, and culture. In her introduction to the anthology of essays that the conference spawned, Gina Dent incisively outlines the contours and objectives of both the conference and the larger field of black cultural studies:

⁵⁶ See Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer's "Introduction-De Margin and De Centre," *Screen* 1988, 4; Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* 36 (1989), 68; Kobena Mercer's "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 4.10(1990): 61-78; Stuart Hall's "What is This "Black in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture* ed. Gina Dent, Seattle: Bay Press, 1992; and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁵⁷ A sample of the most relevant scholarship on black film studies and representation of this era includes: bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, 1992; *The Black American Cinema* anthology edited by Manthia Diawara, New York and London: Routledge, 1993; Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1993; Mark Reid's *Redefining Black Film*, Berkeley: University of CA Press, 1993; bell hooks's *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994; James Snead's *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, eds. Colin McCabe and Cornel West, New York and London: Routledge, 1994; Michael T. Martin ed. *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence and Oppositionality*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995; bell hooks's *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, New York and London: Routledge, 1996; Daniel Bernardi's anthology *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997; Tommy Lott's "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema and Wahneema Lubiano's "But Compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse" both in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* ed. Valerie Smith, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997; and Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, New York and London: Routledge, 1998.

...one of the challenges for cultural criticism today is to learn to grasp the full range of questions and problems proposed in media where the modes of expression are not easily captured within language...one figure came to stand in for this complexity, returning again and again in variants on a single refrain, a single elusive phrase: black pleasure, black joy (1).

She goes further, saying:

In attending to the domain of culture and in articulating a variety of points of ambivalence, this volume points past the conclusions drawn in the game of positive and negative image-making and toward the context in which the game is played out...it has become increasingly clear that black criticism will have to begin to make use of the more sophisticated cultural analyses that depend on understanding the complexities of video imaging, the dynamics of representation, and reception theories... (5-6).

These excerpts synthesize the concerns and objectives of the past and attempts to see the future, a future that can imagine pleasure and joy and a more sophisticated reading of race beyond the historical problems of visibility. This anthology, which I discuss more in Chapter 1, provides the clarion call, but without a full acknowledgement of the context in which pleasure and joy are produced and theorized. The scholarly and public conversations in the 1990s continued to examine the “burden of representation” amidst a dizzying array of artistic, cinematic, and popular cultural forms that require a constant evaluation of tools and analytical methodologies.⁵⁸ Moving through the 1990s into the twenty-first century, scholars began to relinquish the need to account for representational paradigms and explored performance studies, art history and visual culture, and bodies across cinematic, popular and digital platforms. Thus there was a shift from

⁵⁸ This term is evoked in Kobena Mercer’s essay, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text* 4.10 (1990): 61-78 and also by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in “The Black Man’s Burden” in *Black Popular Culture* ed. Gina Dent, 1992, 75-83.

scholarship which relied on literary studies and an influx of studies of popular/visual culture that explored complicated readings of race, embodiment, and blackness. This included innovative work in Afro-futurism, Afro-Modernism, post-soul, and post-black, much of which I have mentioned earlier.⁵⁹ Additional work emphasizes phenomenology and affect, along with studies explaining how race and slavery were foundational tropes of modernity and visual culture and continues to draw from Fanon and Du Bois as foundational influences in studies of race, culture, and visibility.⁶⁰

My work speaks to some of the concerns raised in black film and visual and cultural studies which illuminates the work of black artists/filmmakers and re-imagines raced embodiment and the contours of vision and visibility. One such concern has been raised by Michele Wallace who insightfully summarizes why vision and visibility remain problematic, a train of thought which I pick up in my study of post-blackness:

I am interested in the potential for a revolution in vision. The relationship of the problems of visibility (who produces and reproduces vision) to popular culture and material culture and, ultimately, history is vital. We are in danger of getting wasted by ghosts, by what the film historian Thomas Cripps calls “black shadows on the silver screen,” by effusions and visual traces that haunt us because we refuse to study them, to

⁵⁹ Here I am speaking of work by scholars like Richard Powell, Kara Keeling, Nicole Fleetwood, Derek Murray, Huey Copeland, Mark Anthony Neal, Alondra Nelson, and Alexander Weheliye.

⁶⁰ See also Huey Copeland and Jared Sexton’s Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction.” *Qui Parle* 13.2 (Spring/Summer 2005): 62 – 77; Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, U of Minnesota, 2003; Kara Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense*, Duke University Press, 2007; David Marriott’s, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007, and Gabrielle Hezekiah’s *Phenomenology’s Material Presence: Video, Vision and Experience*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Press, 2010.

look them in the eye. Many of us who come out of a black analytical tradition are in a world of darkness in regard to these matters.⁶¹

This is a powerful thread as I am interested in lifting the veil that disables vision, namely the weight of the obfuscating ideologies and discourses that prevent us from fully “seeing” black bodies and the work of black artists. My objective is not to simply identify works that are post-black, but to explain how these works allow bodies to articulate and inhabit states of being that have not been fully explored or accounted for. The most important question for me is not “is something black or post-black,” but what do the bodies and works *do*, what do they allow us to see and experience. These visual texts may produce a range of outcomes and aesthetic qualities, but in this study, I argue that there is a set of bodies, works, and filmmakers/artists that provide access to a metaphysical space.

From Post- Black to Metaphysical Space

Visual texts that draw from post-black conventions provide an escape into what I am calling “metaphysical space.”⁶² Metaphysical space opens a door for reimagining black creativity, interiority, and cultural production. I advance a theory of metaphysical space to make a deliberate break from the density of racial discourses that inscribe body, skin, and image with an externalized, racial, visual identity to a sphere where we see and experience bodies capable of producing a range of characteristics and experiences from awe and disorientation to the sublime and the ecstatic—a place where black artists also enjoy what Soraya and Derek Murray have

⁶¹ See Michele Wallace’s essay “Why Are There No Great Black Artists?” The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture” in the *Black Popular Culture* anthology, edited by Gina Dent, Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. 333-346.

⁶²I found only a few instances of literature that explicitly deal with the notion of metaphysics and race including: Charles Mills *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998, specifically Chapter 3: “But What Are You Really? The Metaphysics of Race,” and Meg Armstrong’s essay: “The Effects of Blackness”: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54.3 (1996): 213-236.

described as, “the pleasures of freedom.”⁶³ The term “metaphysical” foregrounds how we might shift our understanding of blackness as a densely physical manifestation to a sphere beyond a surface reading of bodies. Metaphysical space functions as a parallel universe where black bodies gain access to motility, a motivated and deliberate phenomenological agency. In this context, black bodies produce a range of affective and embodied gestures as creative and dynamic forces.

In his novel *Dreamer*, Charles Johnson provides a fictional account of the Civil Rights Movement and provides a compelling analogy for the relationship between post-black and metaphysical space. First, he articulates how the experience of the Civil Rights movement was in essence a break in the time-space continuum for black bodies. It produced a rupture that propelled bodies into a dichotomous world of protests, riots, racial violence, non-violence, resistance, non-resistance, all of which are rituals of profound bodily and spatial disorientation, compelling these bodies to navigate past and present experiences and histories of racial trauma, while also attempting to imagine an almost unimaginable future in which they could freely exist. These bodies were not only traumatized, but animated by forces of social transformation, agency, and self-awareness. Johnson’s narrative animates a specific trajectory of the post-black/post-soul experience which, as I mention earlier, cites the Civil Rights Movement as the seminal historical and ontological point of departure. It is this element of the post-soul paradigm which I find useful as it concretizes a literal break in the kinds of experiences that black people lived through before and after this movement and cites kinds of cultural shifts that were produced in its aftermath. Secondly, the following excerpt from *Dreamer* provides language, but more

⁶³ Soraya and Derek Murray, “A Rising Generation and the Pleasures of Freedom.” *The International Review of African American Art* 20.2 (2005): 3-12, 4. Derek Murray also wrote an important essay on hip hop and visuality entitled, “Hip Hop as High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle,” *Art Journal* 63.2 (2004):19 which heavily influenced my thinking about hip hop and visual culture.

importantly, a vivid primal scene (the post-black part of this formulation) that pinpoints the emergence of bodies moving through metaphysical space:

Then from the front room we could hear the door open. Outside, sirens pierced the hot night air. The neighborhood dogs howled. Through the window, I saw flames from burning cars dancing against a dark sky skirling with tear gas and smoke. The night felt wrong. *All of it, as if the riot, the looting and lunacy, breakdown and disorder, had torn space and time, destroying some delicate balance or barrier between dimensions—possible worlds—creating a portal for fantastic creatures to pour through.*” (Johnson 32, emphasis mine).⁶⁴

Johnson paints a very visual picture of a Civil Rights- era riot that virtually tears at the social and metaphysical fabric, describing how this tear or “portal” that is created becomes the metaphysical opening through which these newly freed and “fantastic” black bodies can now emerge. His language resonates with my own description of how post-black visual works allow bodies to circulate through metaphysical space emphasizing terms like “space and time,” “disorder,” and “barrier between dimensions.” As bodies and artists navigate metaphysical space they do not simply function as images, or works of art, but as forces that challenge regimes of power, historical narratives, cultural authority, aesthetics and representation. Post-black provides the opening for metaphysical space by disavowing the existing framework that limits black bodies and black artists, challenging the role of historical and even African-centered aesthetics and pivots from telling “black” stories to expressing an interior consciousness that is connected to lived experiences, but not bound by them.

A second significant theoretical trajectory that conjoins post-blackness and metaphysical space comes through literary scholar Elizabeth Alexander. Alexander closely examines the

⁶⁴ *Dreamer*, New York: Scribner, 1998.

significance of interiority in relationship to imagination and black subjectivity, which as she describes, includes:

. . . black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. It is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty. What do we learn when we pause at sites of contradiction where black creativity complicates and resists what blackness is “supposed” to be? What in our culture speaks, sustains and survives, post-nationalism, post-racial romance, into the unwritten black future we must imagine? (Alexander x-xi)

Alexander goes on to explain the image that dons the cover of her book, *The Black Interior*, a sculpture by acclaimed artist Elizabeth Catlett.⁶⁵ For Alexander the contours of the sculpture, the openness of the mouth and eyes beg the viewer to surmise, “what is inside?”

The notion of an “opening,” which, taking my cue from Johnson, I also describe as a “portal,” is a defining allegory of this project. For instance, the openings in the work of artist Nettrice Gaskins signify the movement and passage of bodies between worlds, entreating us to discover what has been suppressed in the realm of the imagination. Alexander also uses the term “metaphysical space,” which for me signifies not just an interior space, but an account of the space in between the lived experiences of raced bodies and experiences outside of those that are defined by race. Metaphysical space is where imagination, creativity, and embodied

⁶⁵ Catlett was a prolific sculptor and artist who worked for many decades across many black artistic movements. She left the US to take up citizenship in Mexico and died in March of 2012.

performance take flight, freed from the expectation to behave like a “black” body. It also provides visual referents for experiences we might categorize as unknowable or unimaginable. This chapter offers a look at how the body moves, maneuvers, and negotiates time and space, challenging the expectations of certain genres and platforms. Both viewers and the bodies in these works are transformed in dynamic ways across many platforms and aesthetic traditions.

I focus on visual works from the early 1980s to the present, exploring how they have evolved through the regimes and demands of the categories of “black art” and “black film.” In this metaphysical framework, the body and spaces that surround it create the possibility for a direct encounter that is not burdened by race, but one which reconfigures the notion of blackness itself. This encounter is central to understanding how images and the practices that create them can escape not subjectivity, as Deleuze might suggest, but might stage a (momentary) flight from external demands.

Black Audiences, Film, and Public Discourse

This project also intervenes in the public sphere and the discourses that surround blackness in film and visual culture. The public sphere remains a provocative space for the exchange of ideas between filmmakers, artists, audiences and theorists. A recent instance of an outpouring of public discourse surfaced around two films released within the past year, *The Help* (Dir. Tate Taylor, 2011) adapted from Kathryn Stockett’s novel of the same name, and *Red Tails* (2012), directed by newcomer Anthony Hemingway and executive produced by George Lucas. *The Help* tells the story of black domestic workers in the Civil Rights Era South through the eyes of an ambitious white female journalist, while *Red Tails* is a fictionalized account of the all-black squadron known as the “Tuskegee Airmen” who countered the discriminatory practices of the US military during World War II. These films revived debates around how race, black bodies

and history are represented and these debates continue to have a place in public and academic discourse so long as image creation, dissemination and social power are intertwined and contested.⁶⁶ Richard Powell points to the historical parallels between the earliest days of moving images and the growth of institutions that would counter racist imagery and propaganda, like W.E.B. Du Bois and the early NAACP. Powell argues that the deliberations about film, art, and representation were not simply rhetorical exercises, but central to the evolution of cinema in a broader context, as he writes, “Most art historians have ignored the pivotal position that black cultural themes have held in constructing a filmic vision in the twentieth century. . . .Not only were these scholars incapable of seeing film (and later, video) as art, but they maintained a view that mass media was primarily a vehicle for commercial entertainment and propaganda” (Powell 203). These debates are an intrinsic part of American cultural rhetoric and they continue to help shape a vision of film’s purpose and social utility. In other words, insofar as the public sphere is concerned, representation and race still matter, particularly concerning debates and narratives about film and mediated images. The question then becomes, how can scholarship and this project in particular help these debates to evolve?

This project is also sensitive and attentive to the anxieties that surface in the “affect worlds” of public discourse and the intense emotional and psychic needs of viewers to placate and resolve the persistent problem of black bodies and visibility. Yet much of the anxiety over the politics of the image has entrenched our thinking rather than liberated it, and these persistent questions require more tools and an expansive critical vocabulary to be sufficiently addressed.

⁶⁶ For discussions on early cinema, blackness and representation see Jackie Stewart’s *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema And Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005; Richard Powell’s *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997; Cedric Robinson’s *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II*. Durham: University of North Carolina, 2007; Daniel Bernardi’s *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996, and Michael Rogin’s “Black Face, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice.” *Critical Inquiry* 18.3 (1992): 417-453.

The proliferation of online spaces where writers, bloggers, viewers and critics exchange information and radio and television programs where race, cinema, and visual and popular culture are discussed raise many questions of the images that we are exposed to— but often without the benefit of an evolving discourse. My research is also meant to be read as a discursive intervention into those spaces, where the following questions are often asked: Why can we (black media makers) not tell our own stories? Why don't the images/programs that we see represent us? These questions have been around since the release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), but they need a new orientation.⁶⁷ I submit that part of the challenge with how black audiences interpret images is that there is a disconnection between the expectations of audiences and the objectives of film and media makers. Black audiences, it seems, continue to expect narratives with references to “authentic experiences,” “uplifting stories,” “positive images,” and “real black life.”⁶⁸ This desire for positive images reinscribes blackness as an authentic object that liberates viewers only when it is familiar and stabilizing and lacks the complexity, irony and diverse experiences that post-black work often enacts. Another unfortunate consequence of these kinds of expectations is the resistance of audiences (and sometimes scholars) to engage work that challenges those expectations. My work aims to find new objects to theorize and new spaces of connectivity. It is also my hope that an expansion of how we read and engage these works will ultimately generate interest, increase demand, and provide new audiences for this kind of work.

My research pushes for a sense of agency for filmmakers and visual artists, granting them the freedom to work in different mediums, with an array of subject matters, narrative and

⁶⁷ Griffith's 1915 film was a watershed moment as it ignited an intense reaction from black audiences, signaling that film was yet another domain that would challenge their humanity.

⁶⁸ While this is an unscientific account, I have for years engaged the spheres of online blogs, talk radio programs and the like, where these kinds of ideas are circulated.

character possibilities. This freedom however often comes with a price as these works are often viewed with disdain, skepticism or rarely encountered at all as they often have difficulty accessing mainstream and even alternative channels and platforms of distribution. This too is changing as alternative production and distribution models are gaining momentum as they provide avenues for making these incarnations of black bodies visible. An important example of a new model that creates synergy between audiences and filmmakers is seen in the launch of the African American Film Festival Release Movement. AFFRM is a vehicle to inform and galvanize supporters of films produced by black makers and also provides outlets for distribution for those films. Independent filmmaker Ava DuVernay has become the face of black independent filmmaking having won major prizes at the Sundance Film Festival and in January 2012 she became the first black woman director to win the coveted Director's prize for her film, *Middle of Nowhere*.⁶⁹ DuVernay explains the complex challenges that black filmmakers face, saying:

It has been a challenge for us to reach out to people who just love art house films who may not necessarily view these films because they're black, but they are good films. We happen to be black, but it's just as good as anything else that you're seeing out there... I just hope the art house film lovers, indie film lovers just kind of patronize everything, whether it's Latino films or LGBT films or black films. It kind of seems that we're a little bit segmented.⁷⁰

Here DuVernay articulates an important attribute that is central to how I define post-black film and new media. These works find homes on websites, film festival circuits, and other alternative

⁶⁹ DuVernay explains AFFRM's mission in an interview with CJ Perry published online by <http://www.filmslatemagazine.com/filmmaking/affrm-helping-african-american-indie-films-get-theatrical-distribution>. Web. 12 Apr 2012.

⁷⁰ See Perry interview with DuVernay.

distribution models. They tend to emphasize an artistic sensibility and foreground the medium rather than the commercial or commodity appeal. These works may lean towards irreverence, satire, disorientation and destabilization, tending to present complicated views of relationships, identity and community. The work of DuVernay, Barry Jenkins, and a host of young filmmakers is paradoxical as it attests to the reconstitution of a movement of black filmmakers, yet one that has its own relationship to some of the historical, sociological and cinematic exigencies that have often worked against black bodies and creative imagination. These filmmakers use film form, technology, and in some cases, their exposure to the film industry and film school training to reconceptualize bodies and film narratives. This project aims to expand the reach, context and expectations of audiences who may be aware of films like *The Help* and *Red Tails*, but not of the work of filmmakers like DuVernay.

Post-black works challenge racial politics and the expectations of blackness as a problem to be solved, or obstacle to be overcome; instead they animate what *bodies can do* rather than what the social and visual regimes deny or disallow. Post-black as metaphysical space relishes spaces of continuity and discontinuity in history and memory, the public and the private, the self and the social, the interior and the exterior. Movement and circulation are also central to metaphysical space as the act of movement works to counter, push, and pull against the bulwark of discourses that has often obscured an interior subjectivity that is present in these works. I pay close attention to the body and its presence in front of, and behind the camera, bodies that direct, act, perform and create and bodies that circulate as characters, or as still images. Within this space, black bodies circulate between the politics of race and representation, post-black

discourses, anti-black discourses and in the process, display the body's multi-dimensional possibilities as it moves, not completely free, but mobile, seeking an array of embodied possibilities.

CHAPTER 1: LOSING GROUND AND FILMMAKER KATHLEEN COLLINS

PRETTYMAN

There is no other voice like Kathleen Collins' among filmmakers. Her vision goes 'to the bone,' and we stand before her perception naked and grateful (*Black Film Review* 2).⁷¹

The loss of Kathleen Collins Prettyman is a true tragedy, for she was a woman of genius, a woman readying herself to do her best work. But it is also a tragedy that there were those who, locked into conventional attitudes, could not see the truth, the beauty, and the honesty of her work. In "Losing Ground," [sic] she brought to the screen aspects of Black life that have never been shown before, exploring pain, jealousy, and a woman's search for her own identity in an absolute and unflinching way (Nicholson 7).⁷²

In this chapter I explore the work and impact of Kathleen Collins Prettyman whose creative voice as a filmmaker and writer occupies a distinctive and visionary space in the archive of cinema produced by black and non-black filmmakers alike. A student of philosophy, religion, literature, and cinema, her work resonates with these epic influences, yet it is also attentive to the granular nuances of the lives of her characters and the sometimes subtle, sometimes grave choices, longings, and disappointments that animate their worlds. At the center of my analysis is her film *Losing Ground*, which was completed in 1982.⁷³ The film explores the life of Sara, a

⁷¹ This quote appears in an editorial commentary in a special issue of the *Black Film Review*, 5.1 1988/89.

⁷² David Nicholson's quote appears in his essay "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation With Kathleen Collins Prettyman" *Black Film Review* 5.1 (1988/89): 6-15.

⁷³ In "Re-Creating Their Media Image: Two Generations of Black Women Filmmakers" *The Black Scholar* 25.2 (1993): 47-53, John Williams points out that "*Losing Ground* never enjoyed a commercial critical release." According to Chandra Tyler Mountain, it did however win first prize at the Figueroa da Foz International Film Festival in Portugal. See Mountain's entry in the *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*, ed. Yolanda Williams Page. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2007, 106.

black philosophy professor who begins researching what she describes as “ecstatic experiences” then longs to experience them. Sara’s persona is largely defined by her rigid and hyper-rational approach to living and she desperately seeks an escape to a more sensuous and vibrant existence.

In this chapter I make several arguments about Collins Prettyman’s identity as a director and the cinematic point of view that she asserts in *Losing Ground*. First I provide a historical account of Collins Prettyman’s early work as a writer, editor, and cultural critic, contextualizing her evolution alongside other currents of black cultural thought. I specifically examine how she emerges from a distinct set of socio-cultural influences which shaped her vision as a filmmaker and often ran counter to the cultural ideologies of her peers. I discuss her contributions to black independent filmmaking traditions, asserting that she authored a unique cinematic style in a moment most known for the culturally and politically charged cinema of the LA School of black filmmakers, waning New Hollywood aesthetics, and Blaxploitation-styled commercialism. This historical groundwork is significant as it explains the nuances of various schools of filmmaking and cultural production and documents important reservoirs of scholarship on black filmmakers which have not been fully explored. I make the case that the black film tradition does not follow a singular thread, but includes many complicated and often contentious works and practices.

The second half of the chapter is devoted to my seminal premise, that Collins Prettyman is vanguard of “post-black cinematic aesthetics.” As I mention in the Introduction, I use the term “post-black” to emphasize and account for the artistic character of particular films and visual works and the agency that black filmmakers enact. Post-black films have a number of functions: they might complicate how viewers see and process race, disavow racial identity altogether, privilege other kinds of subjectivities, or challenge dominant narrative or representational paradigms. *Losing Ground* demands a re-thinking of how audiences and scholars engage and

interpret films made by black filmmakers and demonstrates the need for alternative analytical trajectories. As post-black cinema, *Losing Ground* literally animates black bodies through the use of exterior movements and gestures along with a simultaneous emphasis on the interior dimensions of human experience. The film excavates a suppressed bodily intensity which is often experienced at the surface of the body and circulates between bodies, but also manifests in the interior worlds of the characters. Bodies in *Losing Ground* are not representational templates that account for how black people and black culture function, instead they explore other possibilities beyond those governed by racial identity and experience. Also central to my analysis of the film are the affective sensations that circulate in characters' movements, gestures, conversations, writing, and creativity. I discuss affective intensity in Collins Prettyman's work by drawing from a range of affective perspectives, including the work of Elena del R  o and to a lesser extent Nicole Fleetwood and Kara Keeling. By viewing the films through two lenses, post-black and affective, we observe (and experience) how bodies move beyond the strictures of racialized gazes, expectations, and trauma to spaces of embodied desire and fluidity. I explore how affective intensity functions in three specific ways. First, intensity emerges as depictions of characters' interior processes. As viewers we gain unfettered and unprecedented access to characters' thoughts, desires, and intellectual musings and how these processes impact other bodies. Secondly, affective intensity emerges through artistic and performative expression, specifically painting, dancing, and acting. A third affective dimension is the eruption of laughter, outbursts, and dialogue which are at times awkward, yet which release the affect that accrues throughout the film and allows these bodies to create cinematic subjectivities rarely seen onscreen. Lastly I articulate how the film itself is a metaphor for the accrual of intensity that remains bottled up in film and visual culture produced by black filmmakers. There is one

important caveat regarding my methodology. While my work borrows from the Deleuzian-influenced work of both del R  o and Keeling, as I explain in the Introduction, it is not a Deleuzian analysis, as I borrow specific theoretical threads only when they are using in meeting the primary objective of illuminating the possibilities of black bodies.

In this chapter I describe metaphysical space as a dimension where bodies vacillate between a continuum of experiences and states of being—life/death, ecstasy/banality, disaffection/intense emotion—and as spaces of heightened desire. The dichotomy of interiority and exteriority becomes a metaphor for how Sara sees the world— her philosophical musings and inquiries, her intellectual writing, her desires for ecstasy, and her outward projection of those desires. The film also animates a perspective of “interiority” deployed by literary theorist Elizabeth Alexander, which I also discuss in detail in Chapter 3. Alexander writes, “The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people know we possess but need to be reminded of”(x). This conception of interiority is specifically applied to black bodies enacting not a universal vision of interiority, but one that unearths with precision why interiority continues to be an objective for raced bodies. A second vital perspective on interiority comes from L.H. Stallings. In “‘Redemptive Softness’: Interiority, Intellect, and Black Women’s Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins’s *Losing Ground*,” one of the only analytical essays written on *Losing Ground*, Stallings articulates how interiority subverts an entire history of over-determined, hyper-embodied readings of black female bodies. In the film we see interiority expressed as thinking, theorizing, intellectual exploration, problem solving, and how it is attached to the main character’s pursuit of ecstasy.

Kathleen Collins Prettyman, who died prematurely in 1988 at the age of 46, is credited as the first African American feature filmmaker. She directed two films, *The Cruz Brothers and*

Miss Malloy (1980) and *Losing Ground* (1982), and her iconoclastic style of filmmaking attends to the complex interior world of her characters and the intimate spaces that they inhabit using complex dialogue that draws from art, culture, and philosophy.⁷⁴ The film's co-producer and cinematographer Ronald Gray speaks to the film's use of language, referring to it as "essentially literature."⁷⁵ Collins Prettyman was first and foremost a prolific writer⁷⁶ having written plays, novels, and short stories and was also regarded as a talented editor.⁷⁷ She was educated at Skidmore College where she received a B.A. in Philosophy and Religion and later did graduate work in France at the Sorbonne's Middlebury College. Her dissertation work at Middlebury was on André Breton and the surrealists and she describes Erich Rohmer, the French philosopher and filmmaker, as her primary cinematic influence, as she explains, "...he's [Rohmer] very literary... and I think of myself as a very literary filmmaker...and this is why I insist that I am a writer first. I really like language in film, and he is not the least bit afraid of language in film."⁷⁸ In this same interview with David Nicholson, founding editor of the sadly now defunct *Black Film Review*, Collins Prettyman describes her early life as a burgeoning writer and filmmaker, providing an honest glimpse into the difficulties of getting her films produced:

Nobody would give any money to a black woman to direct a film. This was in 1971.

Forget it. It was just ridiculous. . . And then I got so discouraged, ...That was probably the most discouraging time of my life. I gave it up, moved out of New York City, moved to the country and started writing plays (10).

⁷⁴ Chandra Tyler Mountain cites *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* (1980) as the first film written, produced and directed by a black woman, where others cite *Losing Ground*. According to Mountain, the film is an adaptation of Jewish writer Henry H. Roth's short story. I suspect that as *The Cruz Brothers* was not intended to be distributed to or exhibited in a theater that, for some, does not qualify it as a feature film.

⁷⁵ See Klotman.

⁷⁶ Collins Prettyman was writing a musical drama on the life of black female aviator Bessie Coleman and even wrote the lyrics to music that appears in *Losing Ground* for which Michael Minard was composer. Klotman,125.

⁷⁷ According to Klotman she worked as a film editor from 1967-1974.

⁷⁸ See her interview with David Nicholson, 10-11.

After taking a job teaching directing and screenwriting at City College of New York she was encouraged to revisit the idea of directing her own work and after some time, she directed *Losing Ground*.⁷⁹ The film was made largely with AFI and NEA grants with a crew of twenty-two production people, the core of the crew being Collins Prettyman's students, for about \$125,000.⁸⁰ Completed with funds from a German television station, the film was released in 1982.⁸¹ Collins Prettyman's films, academic interests, pedagogical perspectives and her writing all circulate around common themes of philosophical exploration, language, and what she describes as "the dynamics of people in odd situations."⁸² Scholarship on Collins Prettyman's work has been scant, some of it triggered perhaps by her untimely death in 1988. *The Black Film Review* dedicated a large portion of the Winter 1988/89 edition to remembering her work and its impact. This edition featured articles written by filmmaker and poet Michelle Parkerson and a poignant dialogue between Collins Prettyman and Nicholson.⁸³ Viewing her films has also been limited due to the difficulty in accessing the films themselves,⁸⁴ yet she has been included in several encyclopedias on black women literary figures.⁸⁵

⁷⁹From 1974-1988 Collins Prettyman served on the faculty of the Theatre Arts Department at the City College of New York where she taught courses in directing for film, scriptwriting, editing, theory, aesthetics of cinema, and 8mm and 16mm camera techniques. Klotman, 123.

⁸⁰ Klotman, 124.

⁸¹ Ibid 125.

⁸² Nicholson, 11.

⁸³ Michelle Parkerson is a filmmaker known for documentary/experimental films like *Storme: Lady of the Jewel Box* (1991) and *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1995). Her work was recently included in Spelman College's installation of black women media makers entitled, "Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970." Ironically Collins Prettyman's work was not, though this was largely an installation of short form media works.

⁸⁴ To date, none of her films are available on DVD. I was able to secure VHS copies thanks to her husband Alfred Prettyman.

⁸⁵See *Taking Center Stage: Feminism in Contemporary US Drama*. ed. Janet Brown Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991. *African American Dramatists: An A to Z Guide*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2004, ed. Emmanuel Sampath Nelson. *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Film*, ed. Geetha Ramanatha. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 160. See the *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* Vol 1 Ed. Yolanda Williams Page. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2007, 106-111.

Film scholar Phyllis Klotman archives some of the most important work on Collins Prettyman in *Screenplays of the African American Experience*, including a copy of the original shooting script for the film.⁸⁶ In this anthology of screenplays Klotman categorizes Collins Prettyman's work as exemplary of black cinema that documents "the African American experience," explaining that the protagonist is transformed through her experience with black culture:

Characterized by Collins as a comedy drama about a young woman who takes herself too seriously, *Losing Ground* was the first feature film by an independent African American woman filmmaker. Her protagonist is a professor of philosophy who tries to examine "ecstasy" from a purely rational perspective while her artist-husband finds it much more interesting to *pursue* ecstasy. A rare breed, Sara is immersed in the philosophy of Western civilization, but ironically the limitations of her life are illuminated by her involvement in black folk culture. She "becomes" Frankie in a student film (within the film) based on the folk song "Frankie and Johnny"(125).

Klotman's assessment of the film emphasizes a pervasive strand of theoretical discourse that interprets black film and culture. Suggesting that Sara is "illuminated" through her engagement with black (folk) culture Klotman reaffirms a central tenet of black cinema culture and the discourse that surrounds it—the expectation that films made by black filmmakers must consistently stabilize the cinematic and cultural "fact of blackness."⁸⁷ In the context of black

⁸⁶ Biographical information on Collins Prettyman comes from several sources. See David Nicholson's interview with Collins Prettyman and Phyllis Klotman's *Screenplays of the African American Experience*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. Her original name is listed as Kathleen Conwell Collins or Kathleen Conway Collins. At the time of the film's release, she was known as Kathleen Collins. She became Kathleen Collins Prettyman after marrying Professor Alfred Prettyman.

⁸⁷Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1952]. See also Alan Read's anthology that engages Fanon's notion of the "fact of blackness," *The Fact of Blackness*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1996.

cinema culture, this often cited phrase and the title of the fifth chapter of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* illuminates how black film culture has entrenched and advanced ideas about blackness, specifically designating blackness as *the* object, and the principle of intelligibility that governs how we understand films made by black filmmakers. It has been, in essence, that *thing* that gives film its meaning and signification.

My view of the film and of Sara is decidedly different. Rather than stabilizing the centrality and singularity of blackness, this film interrupts the conventions that Klotman asserts. Much of the cultural criticism published around the time Klotman wrote about *Losing Ground* (the late 1980s and '90s) directly and indirectly underscored the political and cultural responsibility that black filmmakers were charged with maintaining. Black filmmakers were often expected to re-create black cultural memory, challenge distortions of dominant culture cinema, document an authentic "history" of black people and depict a recognizable (and therefore authentic) black experience and subjectivity. The work of scholars and cultural critics was also in many ways expected to affirm these same expectations.⁸⁸ The study of race and the various theoretical forms of blackness are undeniably significant subjects of exploration, yet I am most interested in what drives the creative and artistic expressivity of black artists and in finding spaces where racial discourse means something new or is completely absent. This chapter contends that black filmmakers have been confined and their aesthetic prowess diminished with the expectation that they maintain blackness within limited and specific aesthetic, narrative, and representational parameters. My project unearths *Losing Ground* as a work that challenges these limitations, exploring its complexities that have been missed or obfuscated by dense racial discourses.

⁸⁸ I discuss this literature later in the chapter, specifically how scholars and critics grappled with a language that would sufficiently address the film and the perception that Collins Prettyman was not in line with black identity politics.

Returning to Klotman's analysis of *Losing Ground*, I contend that Sara is not disconnected from "blackness" at all, as she and the film itself make numerous references to black culture, and black identity is debated in the film. She is not transformed by a racial awakening or by "re-connecting" to black culture, but is enlivened by a series of embodied exchanges with others and by allowing her body to truly experience the union of her senses with her interior self. I interpret both Collins Prettyman and her protagonist Sara as figures who are neither solely defined by Western Cartesian models, nor by archetypal racial constructs. Both women occupy a number of subject positions, Collins Prettyman as director, writer, professor, and editor and Sara as writer, researcher, philosopher, wife, professor, actress, and daughter. In these spheres they challenge the visions and expectations of womanhood, personhood, and blackness. Collins Prettyman's persona as a director and writer emerges as she carefully crafts intimate experiences, layered dialogue, and complex characters. Likewise, Sara's intellectual inquiries and writing become embodied forces that propel her longing, anxiety and reason beyond the boundaries of racial and gender concerns toward the pursuit of her own internal motivations and desires. Both figures pursue an individuated encounter with the world and an unfettered experience of life on their own terms and in often uncomfortable terrain.⁸⁹ While Sara might be described as having *a* black experience, she does not reproduce the historical or representational "black experience" that has often been expected as I mention above.⁹⁰ Instead in their respective domains these women re-imagine the possibilities of cinematic, black, and human subjectivity. While Klotman (and Collins Prettyman) have designated the film a "comedy drama," I see the film in more weighty terms as a powerful dramatization of the

⁸⁹ "Terrain" and "ground" become important metaphors as the title suggests. After a confrontation with Victor, Sara exclaims to her mother, "I'm on shaky ground."

⁹⁰ Black cinematic discourses have pursued questions of authenticity, realistic-ness, and experience as essential forces in making black lived experiences visible and also worked to disavow the dizzying array of distortions of these experiences.

internal spaces of a character and an example of independent American filmmaking that illuminates the limits and the possibilities of films produced by African Americans.⁹¹

Collins Prettyman and Black Independent Cinema

For black filmmakers and artists coming of age in the 1960s, it seems inevitable that race, cinema, and political ideology would collide in powerful and productive ways and like many young students of that era, Collins Prettyman was drawn to engage the politics of racial and social change. She grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey, but her family was originally from a settlement called “Gouldtown,” which was one of the oldest settlements of African Americans in North America. Her father was a mortician, principal of a high school, and later the first black state legislator from New Jersey.⁹² Chandra Tyler Mountain describes her early political involvement saying, “Collins followed her father’s political lead and became involved in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) thrust to register voters in the South and these experiences, she explains, became the basis for some of her earliest short stories.”⁹³ Collins Prettyman, like other black artists and writers, was influenced by the prevailing political winds of the 1960s, and her political activism inspired her burgeoning creative imagination.

Documentary filmmaking became an early vehicle for Collins Prettyman to merge her growing participation in the Civil Rights Movement with the increased opportunities offered by public and independent television industry. Film scholar and historian James Snead explains the originative moments of black independent cinema suggesting that stylistic and technological

⁹¹ I suspect that when seeking funds for distribution, from largely European companies, Collins Prettyman felt compelled to label the film in a way that might solicit more interest and thus she refers to the film as a comedy-drama. Klotman captures co-producer Ronald Gray’s sentiments on genre and distribution: “...art houses wouldn’t take it because they didn’t know what audience it would attract. Even in Europe, in Amiens (France) for example, the audience—at least some—didn’t respond positively because there was no ghetto in the film” (125).

⁹² See Klotman.

⁹³ Encyclopedia 106.

innovations made filmmaking more useful and accessible for providing a voice for black experiences:

The 'New Wave' and cinema verite' movements gave a certain high-cultural sanction to the use of "real-life" subjects as raw material for independent film, and in many cases blurred the distinction between "documentary" and "fictional" films altogether, creating both an appetite and a system of distribution ("art houses," public television, museums) for filmmaking that did not conform to the visual and narrative principles of Hollywood's "classical realist" tradition .⁹⁴

Snead explains that black students began attending film school programs in universities as a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement and that:

...this new generation of black independent filmmakers decided to exploit film's full aesthetic and political potential. They set about recoding black skin on screen and in the public realm by revising the contexts and concepts with which it had long been associated (371).

He cites William Greaves as a pioneer of this movement, who worked with the National Film Board of Canada, the United Nations and WNET. Collins Prettyman also worked for WNET as an editor on such programs as *American Dream Machine*, *Black Journal* and *The 51st State* as well as for William Greaves Productions.⁹⁵ These early documentarians, Greaves, Collins, and Bourne worked mainly on the east coast. Also on the East Coast were brothers Warrington and

⁹⁴ Snead, James. "Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films" in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence and Oppositionality*. Ed. Michael Martin. Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1995, 371.

⁹⁵ Klotman 123.

Reginald Hudlin, who today remain active in film and media production.⁹⁶ Warrington Hudlin would direct *Streetcorner Stories* (1977), a one-hour documentary about the lives of black men who meet on a New Haven, CT corner. James Snead also cites Henry Miller's *Death of a Dunbar Girl* (1974), W. Hudlin's *Color* (1982), and Camille Billops and James Hatch's *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1978) and *Finding Christa* (1982) as additional contributions to black independent filmmaking on the East Coast.⁹⁷

Warrington and Reginald became fixtures in what writers George and Trey Ellis would call the "post-soul"⁹⁸ and the "new black aesthetic"⁹⁹ respectively. They were East coast, middle-class, educated filmmakers who generated a great deal of interest in black independent filmmaking. Warrington Hudlin was a co-founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation which was designed to create, support, and invest in black filmmakers.¹⁰⁰ Writer and cultural commentator Nelson George describes the nuances of this early independent impulse:

Hudlin [Warrington], who lives in Harlem, is part of a community of black independent filmmakers on both coasts who've been toiling throughout the '70s, mostly ignored by Hollywood and mainstream (white and black media). Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song* in 1971 was the last independent black film to get a significant commercial release and a large audience. Independent black filmmakers like

⁹⁶ Warrington Hudlin has directed a number of independent films, while Reginald directed films like *House Party* (1991) and the successful romantic comedy, *Boomerang* (1992) starring Eddie Murphy and Halle Berry.

⁹⁷ Billops's films are intensely personal. Her film *Suzanne, Suzanne* is a documentary in which filmmaker she chronicles her niece's heroin addiction and *Finding Christa* depicts Billops's own journey to finding the daughter that she gave up for adoption.

⁹⁸ George and Neal use the term "post-soul" to describe the era of post-civil rights music and culture and how the relationship with race would shift significantly.

⁹⁹ Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic."

¹⁰⁰ The Black Filmmaker Foundation was founded in 1978 and it was designed "to redress the institutional disenfranchisement of black filmmakers and black audiences." It was a distribution collective in NYC and now has one of the largest collections of black films and videotapes for sale or rental according to www.encyclopedia.jrank.org Web. 10 Mar 2012.

Hudlin fund their films via grants from art organizations or family, or they make them at film schools they attend or teach at. Seen mostly at festivals or museums, the modest films rarely have stars, usually have strong political or social themes, and never have an advertising budget...¹⁰¹

Collins Prettyman is emblematic of this scenario that George describes. As a professor at City College of New York she trained many students (one of her most prominent students being filmmaker Julie Dash of the LA School) and some of them would work closely with her on *Losing Ground*; and while she was something of an outlier, she was not completely disconnected from other filmmakers and thinkers. For instance, she collaborated closely with actor, writer and director Bill Gunn, another creative cinematic voice, who worked with her in *Losing Ground* starring as the artist/husband of the protagonist. Gunn who was active in film and in New York theater, wrote and directed two intense and unflinching independent films, *STOP!* (1970) and his magnum opus *Ganja and Hess* (1973). The similarities between Collins Prettyman and Gunn are many. Both had successful parallel careers, Gunn in theater, Collins Prettyman as a novelist and playwright. Both created worlds dominated by intimate renderings of characters, external social dilemmas, and sensual subject matter, films perhaps best suited for art houses than for broad multiplex consumption, and both died prematurely.¹⁰² But perhaps most important are the ways in which both filmmakers challenged the conventions of Hollywood and of black cinematic culture. Describing Bill Gunn's two films and his cinematic legacy Marlo David writes:

Each film subverts genre and, as a result, asks audiences to imagine an alternative to the black insatiable Other that is punished narratively with trauma, injury, social ostracism,

¹⁰¹ See Nelson *George's Post-Soul Nation*.

¹⁰² Bill Gunn would pass away one year after Collins Prettyman on the eve of the premiere of one of his theatrical productions.

or death. In *STOP!*, a romantically disenchanted white couple must eventually divest themselves of their sexual authority through an extended erotic encounter with a biracial and bi-sexual couple...In *Ganja & Hess*, Gunn revamps vampire lore through the figuration of a black man and woman whose psychological, sexual, and spiritual connections serve as a mediation on black desire, obsession, addiction and freedom.¹⁰³

Many of these themes, specifically the convergence of sensuality, freedom, and complicated character identities are vital to both artists' work. Yet these themes are largely absent from the work of many black filmmakers of this era. The diverse creative work by independent black artists on the East Coast ran parallel to the famed West Coast black independent film movement known as the LA School, but Collins Prettyman's cinematic imagination deviated dramatically from that of her West Coast peers.

While Collins Prettyman was editing, writing, and teaching in New York, black graduate from various places in the African diaspora were exploring Third world cinema and developing a more politically-inflected, post-colonial cinematic sensibility. In the tradition of merging the political with the artistic, these filmmakers contested Western perspectives on art, history and culture and Hollywood's "colonial" approach to filmmaking, instead cultivating an anti-colonial narrative framework replete with "everyday" heroes and heroines. In two essays Ntongela Masilela, himself a member of this collective, describes the origins and ideologies of the group.¹⁰⁴ In "Women Directors of the Los Angeles School" he explains:

¹⁰³ Marlo David, "Let it Go Black": Desire and the Erotic Subject in the Films of Bill Gunn." *Black Camera, An International Film Journal* 2.2 (2011): 26-46, 28.

¹⁰⁴ See "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers" in Manthia Diawara's *Black American Cinema*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993. 107-117 and "Women Directors of the Los Angeles School" in *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, New York and London: Routledge, 1998. 21-42.

The Los Angeles School, whose historical moment extends from 1967 to 1982 represents a cultural movement of Black independent filmmaking and constitutes part of the avant-garde of African American culture. Inasmuch as the Harlem Renaissance was the literary avant-garde of the 1920 and the Black Arts Movement was the poetic avant-garde of the 1960s, the Los Angeles School could be viewed as the filmic avant-garde of the 1970s... These artists inherited a cultural legacy stretching from writers of the Harlem Renaissance to poet Sonia Sanchez..." ("Women Directors" 21).

Masilela describes the two waves of student filmmakers who coalesced around the University of Los Angeles's Theater Arts Department in the early 1970s. In the first cohort were most notably Charles Burnett and Haile Gerima, and in the second, pioneering filmmaker Julie Dash. Masilela argues that these filmmakers, who were yet students, launched "a school of filmmaking that would last approximately a decade" ("The Los Angeles School" 107). Masilela makes two significant points about the relationship between cinematic aesthetics and the cinematic and historical contexts in which these filmmakers located themselves. First, he explains that these filmmakers wanted to find a film form unique to their historical situation and cultural experience, a form that could not be appropriated by Hollywood and second, he emphasizes that the collective was influenced by previous generations of black cultural workers, like Oscar Micheaux. He defines the LA school an artistic movement in continuity with other significant twentieth-century black cultural movements, saying that it "represents a cultural movement in Black independent filmmaking and constitutes part of the avant-garde of African American culture." While Masilela outlines the contours of this film movement, Snead explains the intent of the LA School:

Most of these filmmakers were trained at UCLA film school, but their films protest against the form and content of the tradition they were being taught. Their chief ambition was to rewrite the standard cinematic language of cuts, fades, frame composition, and camera movement in order to represent their own “non-standard” vision of black people and culture (23).

In the process of creating what Paula Massood has described as “an aesthetic appropriate to conditions” these filmmakers extolled a number of cinematic and ideological conventions.¹⁰⁵

They were vested in the ideological and visual power of cinema and, according to Masilela, made a type of cinema that was “anti-Hollywood in its narration, visual poetics, and theorizing of history...” (“The Los Angeles School” 115). Masilela also describes how Gerima in particular, understood the filmmaking process as an art form and “an intellectual project.”

There are shared spaces between the “intellectual projects” created by Collins Prettyman and those launched by the women of the LA School. Masilela concurs with Jacqueline Bobo’s assertion that the black female filmmakers of this era were profoundly impacted by literary aesthetics and the sensibilities exhibited in the work of Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker.¹⁰⁶ Masilela, whose essay focuses on the work of filmmakers like Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, and Carroll Parrott Blue, argues that LA School filmmakers engaged and represented a black identity that was not grounded in Molefi Asante’s Afrocentric logic, but rather that:

. . . embraced a type of Pan-Africanism as reconstituted by Toni Morrison as American Africanism. Morrison, in her recent book of critical essays, *Playing in the Dark*:

¹⁰⁵ See Paula Massood’s “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo) Realism and the Documentary Impulse.” *Wide Angle* 21.4 (1999): 20-41.

¹⁰⁶ See Masilela’s discussion of how Julie Dash draws from an Alice Walker short story for her film *Diary of an African Nun* (1977)

Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), defines Africanism as the denotative and connotative Blackness that African people signify...Morrison makes clear that her revision of Africanism diametrically opposes conventional Afrocentricity, which often replicates the imperialistic tendencies of Eurocentric scholarship” (“Women Directors” 23).

Women of the LA School use a wide range of forms and aesthetics including narrative, documentary, and experimental/avant-gardist approaches to unearth a female subjectivity that was grounded in ritual, sensuality, and historical memory.¹⁰⁷ Like Collins Prettyman, they shared an interest in what Masilela describes as “the nature of culture and the creative process that culture itself entails.”¹⁰⁸ While Collins Prettyman was disconnected, both geo-politically and ideologically, from the LA School and some of its influences, her work does share an investment in creativity and female sensuality; yet is not as vested in Africanist interpretations of ritual and memory.

It is however the work of Charles Burnett and her relationship with filmmaker Haile Gerima that arguably impacted Collins Prettyman most significantly. She and Gerima were both interested in cinema’s artistic and intellectual nuances and he encouraged her to explore the works of black artists, like Lorraine Hansberry.¹⁰⁹ Hansberry’s writing and point-of-view resonated with Collins Prettyman. She found in Hansberry a kindred spirit, “I have this feeling of being very connected with Lorraine Hansberry. I’ve never found another black writer who I

¹⁰⁷Critical work on black women’s filmmaking includes: *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, New York and London: Routledge, 1998; *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara, Routledge: New York, 1993; Michael Martin ed. *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence and Oppositionality*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995; Valerie Smith’s *Not Just race, not just gender: Black Feminist Readings*, New York and London: Routledge, 1998; and *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Univ Press, 1997; and Mark Reid’s *Redefining Black Film*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ “Women Directors” 26.

¹⁰⁹ See Collins Prettyman’s interview with David Nicholson.

felt was asking the same questions I was asking until I started reading her work.”¹¹⁰ Collins Prettyman claims that the two had shared “preoccupations,” and that Hansberry “had a really incredible sense of life that fascinates me. That anything in life was accessible for her to write about. . . instead of feeling that the Black experience was the only experience that she could write about. And it is that breadth of vision that I have always sensed was ultimately my vision” (8). Collins Prettyman also describes how she believes that Hansberry’s well-known play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was “never done correctly. . . . It’s a play that’s actually been misinterpreted in that it’s been taken as kind of a simple family tale. . . I think that the levels of abstraction in the play are more complicated than that” (8). In Collins Prettyman’s reading of Hansberry we observe their shared need to cultivate characters and narratives in ways that ran counter to the cultural politics of the 1960s and ‘70s. Collins Prettyman’s readings of *A Raisin in the Sun* is telling points to a different orientation of cinematic subjectivity in relationship to trauma and community. The same is true of her reading of Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977). Speaking of that film, she exclaimed, “When I saw *Killer of Sheep*, I went out of my mind. I really lost it” (Nicholson 11). Her reading of the film she focuses on the main character, Stan: “The guy (Stan) in *Killer of Sheep* is in conflict. He’s in internal conflict. I’m [main character] enjoying being depressed. Feeling sorry for myself. Can I permit myself this liberty? That’s conflict, it’s just the internal kind of conflict that is what actually occurs in people” (Nicholson 14). Collins Prettyman’s analytical point of view emphasizes Stan’s existential struggle, and how the film navigates his internal crisis and challenges those around him.¹¹¹ In an essay entitled “‘A Place in

¹¹⁰ Nicholson, 8.

¹¹¹ This essay appears in Pearl Bowser’s (ed.) *In Color: 60 Years of Minority Women in Film 1921-1981*. New York: Third World Newsreel, 1984. 4-7. In this essay, she critiques the representation of the masculine “adventure” motif and its cinematic impact on black female experience in film.

Time” and “Killer of Sheep”[sic]: Two Radical Definitions of Adventure Minus Women,” Collins Prettyman writes of *Killer of Sheep*:

In no other black film that I have seen has working-class black life been captured with such completeness. There is no apology for its rough edges. No sociological explanations border the fringes. . . . Even more than this is the film’s daring willingness to be particular. While it is surely possible to view the films as a metaphor for the plight of the black man in general, Burnett seems to go to great pains to make his hero one man rather than all men. . . . His acceptance of his own existence is an individual thing that now separates him from any other man, black or white. . . (7).

A few paragraphs later, she says, “Likewise, the boldness with which Burnett pursues the issue of choice is not to be taken lightly, for he flatly refuses the notion that Black life is so confining an exercise that choice is irrelevant” (7). For Collins Prettyman, the film’s greatest accomplishment is its differentiation, rather than a collective flattening, of black suffering. She values the nuanced singularity of Burnett’s portrayal of Stan as a necessary step in fulfilling the individual humanity of a character, a strategy which she privileges over the tradition of dramatizing a collective identity or set of social problems. Consider her reading of *Killer of Sheep* juxtaposed to Masilela’s, which interprets the work of both Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett in a radically different way:

While Gerima’s films focus on politics and history, within which the family is situated and to which it must respond, Burnett is fascinated with the complex intricacies and mechanisms of the family structure itself.

However, both were preoccupied with the politics of resistance within the

family which emerged after the Watts rebellion of 1965. *Killer of Sheep*, a true classic of the Los Angeles School, is a paean to childhood. The film is structured around various forms of rituals: of the family, of childhood, of oppression and of resistance to oppression. Stan, the protagonist of *Killer of Sheep*, is involved in a series of complex rituals which hold his family together, triumphing through sheer will amidst the adverse and demoralizing conditions of working in a slaughterhouse and living in a ghetto, a territory occupied by the police. Yet his family exudes warmth and tenderness, especially his wife. There is no sentimentalizing of this lived experience, only a depiction of victory over hostile conditions (Masilela 112).

Masilela's reading of *Killer of Sheep* is ironically sentimental, decrying a familiar set of socio-historical concerns. He emphasizes the forces of lived experiences: rituals, adverse living conditions, and the presence of a warm and tender family life—all very familiar and stabilizing forces, yet gives little attention to the de-stabilizing features of the film's narrative and the emotions of alienation that Stan and other's experience. I point to these readings of *Killer of Sheep* for two reasons. By invoking the poetics of a hard-working black man struggling to maintain a secure family, Masilela connects this cinematic work to a long tradition of black art that serves as "social uplift" and to the long tradition of art as an inseparable arm of socio-political discourse. Secondly, it emphasizes the divergent analytical perspectives of Collins Prettyman and those, like Masilela, whose reading relies on socio-cultural narratives and privileges black vernacular tropes in theorizing cinema. The two readings of *Killer of Sheep* are emblematic of the two emerging schools of thought regarding the directions in which black

cinema would evolve—as narratives of black cultural vernacular and social realism, or as films that visualize the internal human experiences, de-emphasizing blackness as the central point from which to experience being and art. I include Masilela and Collins Prettyman’s divergent readings of *Killer of Sheep* as they are exemplary of different interpretive frameworks and point to Collins Prettyman’s attempts to destabilize the foundational tropes of criticism of the work of black filmmakers.

Collins Prettyman’s tendency to privilege interiority over black socio-cultural thinking was not merely a theoretical posture, but was an integral dimension of her own cinematic point of view. Chandra Tyler Mountain describes this cinematic point of view:

Collins wrote life as she saw it and did not allow herself to be fettered by constraints placed on African American writers. She looked at African Americans as human subjects, not race subjects. When her plays did focus on issues of race, she rendered what she felt were honest portrayals of black life and not portrayals which exaggerated or posed overtly positive aspects of black life in America while ignoring the often negative and daunting realities. Rather than seeing black problems as simple manifestations of white oppression, through her writing, Collins suggests that much of it has to do with the internal dialogue and pressures people impose on themselves (*Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* 106).

Collins Prettyman acknowledges that she privileges the interior space, rather than the conflicts of an exterior, racialized subjectivity, as she comments to Nicholson, “. . . While I’m interested in external reality, I am much more concerned with how people resolve their inner dilemma in the face of external reality. . . If I favor anything, I probably always favor the internal resolution. . .”

(Nicholson 12). Inasmuch as the film destabilizes the externalization of trauma and race as the object of intelligibility, it also destabilizes some aspects of the feminist and womanist discourses of the time. In an essay that describes black womanist film as a distinct theory and practice of filmmaking, Mark Reid posits that, “These black womanist films question patriarchal and heterosexist notions of black female subjectivity. Additionally, each film creates a spectatorial position which speaks to micro- as well as macro-struggles against phallic forms of knowledge and power within and without the black community.”¹¹² Reid explains that womanism resists both “raceless feminism and phallic pan-africanism” suggesting that black womanist films avoid dramatizing one-dimensional struggles which ignore the black woman's three-pronged oppression” (4). Womanist work emerges out of the space cleared by black women literary figures emerging in the 1970s and ‘80s. Reid writes, “Black womanism, as Alice Walker suggests, represents universalist notions of blackness which conjoin African and African diasporic cultures. Consequently, the black womanist film project constructs a post-Négritude theory of reception and production” (Reid 5). In Reid’s analysis of *Losing Ground*, he asserts that the film is “a critique of sexism.” This conclusion is problematic for two reasons; first it imposes a flat reading of the film as an answer, a solution to the persistence of patriarchal domination. This kind of reading of the film as an answer to social problems diminishes its complexity and the very specific subjectivities that emerge in the film. The film does not speak to an existing set of sociological conditions or social problems. In fact, it is intentional about creating a world that is discrete, not isolated, but self-contained enough to allow the characters some distance from the outside world so that they can indulge in self-definition and internal exploration. This concept of space in Collins Prettyman’s work and cinematic point of view is

¹¹² See Mark Reid’s “Dialogic Modes of Representing Africa(s): Womanist Film,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25.2 (1991): 375-388, 377.

analogous to how her work distances itself from the mandates that surround the production of black cinematic culture. Collins Prettyman's readings of *Killer of Sheep* and *A Raisin in the Sun* reinforce her capacity to mine the mental landscapes of characters and their wide-ranging experiences and stories. Unlike Burnett and Gerima, Collins Prettyman was not surrounded by black diasporic culture, but was impacted by films like Rohmer's *My Night with Maud* (1969) which she cites as "the film which has probably influenced me more than any other movie"(Nicholson 11). She demonstrated a willingness to be politically isolated, disavowing the pressing expectations of her peers, and of black and white audiences.

Collins Prettyman and Post-Black Cinema

Many of the themes in the work of Collins Prettyman and Gunn are also significant elements of what I describe as a "post-black cinematic aesthetic."¹¹³ In the late 1970s and '80s, New York became the center of a post-black cultural universe where filmmakers like Collins Prettyman, a young Spike Lee, and artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat were experimenting with new approaches to creating film, art and visual culture.¹¹⁴ *Losing Ground* enacts a number of approaches to post-black cinema. First it refuses to center blackness and racial identity as the subject and object of the film. Second it de-emphasizes the sociological and representational discourses that dominated black cultural production privileging an interior subjectivity. Lastly it articulates an expanded universe of intellectual, cultural, and psychic influences on the narrative and characters and on the aesthetic possibilities of the film itself. In the film for instance, Sara

¹¹³ While George and Ellis describe this moment as part of the "post-soul" and "new black aesthetic" I argue in the introduction that post-black is a more appropriate term to account for specific emerging aesthetics and practices.

¹¹⁴ Here I am thinking specifically of Lee's breakthrough film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). This film was vested in an artistic visual modality, using black and white film stock, innovative scene compositions and sound and in the development of a universe of characters, particularly the film's protagonist Nola Darling, who were adamant about self-expression, self-definition, and sexual freedom. These themes are central to my articulation of a post-black aesthetic. See Chapter 2 for an analysis of Jean-Michel Basquiat and his relationship to post-blackness.

moves in and out of references to Sartre, Christian Gnosticism, and representational art alongside discussions of “mulatto crises” and how “Negroes” are different from Latin Americans. The film is unapologetic about the influences and ideas that shape the characters who often demonstrate a sense of awareness of themselves as mobile, fluid, and multifaceted beings. James Snead astutely captures the emergence of a post-black cinematic sensibility in the work of early black independent filmmakers as he writes:

Spike Lee’s fine series of early films (produced at the NYU Film School), *The Answer* (1980), *Sarah* (1981), *Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983), and *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) reveal a quirky yet appealing filmic sensibility and a familiarity with the diverse social and economic condition of black Americans that few filmmakers white or black, achieve. Mary Neema Barnette’s *Sky Captain* (1984) and Reginald Hudlin’s *House Party* (1984) and *Reggie’s World of Soul* (1985) share with Lee’s films a fluent command of white and black cultural languages, and an insistence on counterposing them in an interesting dialectic. Instead of seeing Blacks purely in terms of white norms and practices, these films show Blacks securely positioned in their own environments, discussing and dealing with their own problems, ignoring or at best belittling the toys and games of the dominant white culture (24-25).

While not mentioning *Losing Ground*, Snead identifies the significance of cultural fluency and of the importance of language in conveying self-actualized cinematic subjectivities in cinema produced by black East Coast filmmakers in the 1980s. John Williams captures *Losing Ground*’s post-black visual and aesthetic power: “Postmodern and antirealist, the film has the look and feel of a painting. Using a highly innovative, nonlinear method of presentation, *Losing Ground* dramatizes several different ‘stories’ which merge together rather than a single

conventional plot.”¹¹⁵ He mentions the various art forms featured in the film “jazz, salsa, choreographed dance and theater-of-the-absurd reenactments” which serve as conduits for the film’s (and the main character’s) exploration of what he calls “a sector of black middle class life seldom examined before in film and seldom seen since...”(48). Williams also rightly points to the quandary that Collins Prettyman’s films presented for critics:

The few critics who deigned to comment on the film were less than receptive to its originality. As the film was consciously devoid of the ghetto stereotypes so commonplace in films by home-boy filmmakers today, most critics simply did not know how to comment on its subversive vision of black culture. Some even took issue with the very notion of a “black female philosophy professor” as entailing too much of a willing suspension of disbelief (48-49).

The critical reception of the film and the perception of Collins Prettyman as a filmmaker continued to amplify her outlier status. She was often misunderstood and faced criticism from black critics and audiences. Chandra Tyler Mountain concurs, saying: “She met a great deal of criticism because many feel that her plays have not been black centered or have lacked the requisite positive representations of black life. Despite such disapproval, Collins continued to write about the complexities of black life, some of which has little, if anything to do with race”(107). David Nicholson also captures the vitriolic tenor of the criticism of *Losing Ground*:

Later that week, when *Losing Ground* [sic] was shown, I heard something that shocked me, for it was evidence of an attitude that I found incomprehensible. After the screening a man asked Kathleen Collins Prettyman if she had made the film. When she said yes, he

¹¹⁵ Williams “Re-Creating Their Media Image.” 47.

replied, “You’re a traitor to the race,” and stalked away. And still later, months later, talking to one of our better known filmmakers whose work has enjoyed national release, this director-writer-producer told me he did not like “Losing Ground” [sic] because it was a negative portrait of a black marriage” (Nicholson 7).

This kind of response was indicative of the intensity of black audience expectations of black filmmakers and reveals how written and public criticism became a mechanism to censor the artistic capacities of black filmmakers and the stories they were able to tell. Mountain critiques a number of Collins Prettyman’s plays, which share similar themes, often with a more tragic twist. Her plays often feature characters trapped in broken relationships who are held captive, almost immobilized, by emotional and psychological traumas. They feature sisters and brothers, mothers and sons, embroiled in turmoil, so much so that in one play, *The Brothers* (1982), Mountain notes, “The brothers are so caught up in brooding over what being a Negro means... They make little notice of Gandhi’s or King’s assassination... One of the brothers in this play comments, Negro life is a void”.¹¹⁶ Collins Prettyman’s work does not disavow the psychological or cultural power of race, but focuses on de-emphasizing external forces which for her are dwarfed by the vastness and capacity of the internal spaces of human experience. Jacqueline Bobo similarly explains how Collins Prettyman’s understanding of film language and form could have an impact on viewers:

Collins understood that the effective use of cinema had the potential to evoke in the viewer a certain depth of response, similar to that experienced by other forms of art. In her films she was concerned with utilizing the grammar of film to resolve the structural and formal questions. . . For independent makers, especially, this was necessary if

¹¹⁶ *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* 108.

audiences were to gain an appreciation of cinema as more than a commercial vehicle” (Bobo 12).

This sentiment reinforces the artistic nature of Collins Prettyman’s work and emphasizes that she sought to connect to audiences through her mastery of language and form, rather than a reliance on commercial or sociological appeal.

By the late 1980s, Collins Prettyman became a lightning rod of sorts as she, more than her films, became the topic of conversation, in part because of her disavowal of the identity politics that dominated the conversations of her time. Klotman explains: “Collins’ sensibility was unique. She never apologized for or explained why she made a film about three Puerto Rican brothers and an old Irish woman, from a work by a Jewish author, nor did she feel it worthwhile to discuss the fact that ghetto poverty was absent from *Losing Ground*” (Klotman 123). Writing about Collins Prettyman’s first film, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, Bobo writes, “[Its] technical properties were overlooked at the time of its debut because more attention was given to the absence of black people in the film. However, Collins felt that any subject was open to Black artists” (13). Bobo discusses here what I have also tried to foreground, that Collins Prettyman was pushing to understand and fully manifest the capacity of film language and aesthetics. Bobo explains that, “Amplifying the potential of the medium was a prime consideration in Collins’ work” (13). We get a glimpse of Collins Prettyman’s awareness of the pressures placed on her in this comment she makes to Nicholson: “I think I have been afraid of being alone too much...a fear that I was going to be considered nuts kind of frightened me. Because when I was going to do *The Cruz Brothers*, people asked, ‘Why do you want to do a movie about some Puerto Ricans and some dying Irish lady?’ I think that’s been a fear of mine...” (13). We see further evidence that Collins Prettyman’s identity politics were often in

question at the Black Popular Culture Conference in December of 1991. Author and black filmmaker Ada Gay Griffin writes about her encounter with Collins Prettyman at that event:

I distinctly remember the first time I met a black woman filmmaker—and this story points to what has become the lie of drawing a straightforward gender analysis in terms of examining Black film production. It was in 1980, and I remember driving several miles to the University of Pittsburgh to see a film called *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, which was to be followed by a discussion with the filmmaker, Kathleen Collins. The film is about the relationship of an aging white woman to two [sic] Puerto-Rican teenagers who become her groundskeepers on an estate in upstate New York. After the film was shown, there were two questions posed to Collins. The first was a question I also wanted ask: “This film didn't have any Black characters. Do you plan to make any films with Black characters in them?” Her response was, yes, she certainly intended to do that. But she went on to say that she did not define herself as a Black filmmaker or as a woman filmmaker, but simply as a filmmaker who could make films about anything she wanted to, and she refused to be labeled by any term. As a twenty-four year old Black woman, I was pretty crushed by that response. And it’s a response I am still trying to learn from (Dent 232).

Griffin's candid revelation speaks poignantly to the consciousness of other black artists and audiences of the time and the divide that existed between artists like Griffin and Collins Prettyman. Collins Prettyman’s insistence that she need not define herself or her work along racial fault lines is a strand of post-black discourse that hearkens back to dissident voices like

that of artist Raymond Saunders who in his manifesto “Black is a Color” insists that racializing art diminishes the artist’s prowess and the audience. Saunders declares:

Racial hang-ups are extraneous to art, no artist can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art--the living root and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human spiritual and intellectual experience. Can't we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?¹¹⁷

Years later Jean-Michel Basquiat and artist Kara Walker would make similar pronouncements and endure a complicated relationship with black and white critics and publics.¹¹⁸ These debates between black artists, critics, and audiences go back well into the twentieth-century (as I discuss in the introductory chapter), but they reached an affective peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Manthia Diawara's anthology *Black American Cinema* (1993) and the *Black Popular Culture* anthology expose the constraints that Black critics have often placed on filmmakers and their subjectivities as artists.¹¹⁹ The *Black Popular Culture* anthology also includes questions and responses from the conference proceedings. Cultural critic Greg Tate poses a question to Griffin's comments, and yet, he does not question Griffin’s point-of-view, but simply asks her “what is your identification” as a filmmaker. The emphasis on the filmmaker’s racial identity

¹¹⁷ Saunders’s 1967 pamphlet appears in Sharon F. Patton’s *African-American Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 227-228 and at the following link: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug01/hughes/debatepg.html>. Web. 10 Mar 2012.

¹¹⁸ Artists like Betye Saar who were active contributors to the art and discourses of the Black Arts Movement took extreme umbrage with the way that artist Kara Walker was embraced by the white art and institutional establishments with what Saar regarded as racially destructive imagery. Walker was the youngest person to receive the prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant and has been one of the most widely shown artists in the world since the 1990s. Part of Saar’s argument is that Walker benefitted largely from white patronage. She says, “I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly the women and children; that is was basically for the amusement of the white art establishment.” Quote appears in episode 6 of the PBS series *I’ll Make Me a World*. (Dir. Denise Greene, 1999)

¹¹⁹ For an example of particularly vitriolic film criticism see Amiri Baraka’s essay on Spike Lee, “Spike Lee at the Movies,” in Diawara’s *Black American Cinema*. New York and Routledge: 1993. 145-153. In this essay Spike Lee is on the receiving end of an unduly harsh and misguided critique, which is ironically cyclical, given the harsh critiques that he has since levied against Tyler Perry.

announces a blind spot in the thinking about Collins Prettyman's film, an opening that is central to my conception of post-blackness—that *Losing Ground* remains unseen and unengaged. This opening is the void that my reading of the film as a post-black film attempts to address. The discussion at the Black Popular Culture conference, where many of the greatest minds and most prolific writers on black culture gathered, did not address the film itself, the first of its kind by a black female director. No one commented on the look of the film, or its innovative use of dialogue. Instead, the intellectual energy was directed towards questioning how Collins Prettyman chose to identify her directorial self. This moment is telling as it points to the need for a post-black analytical framework that engages the work explicitly instead of focusing on identity politics. The film sits, waiting to be engaged, while audiences and critics stake out their respective ideological positions.

I have explained how *Losing Ground* functions in relation to the black American independent filmmaking movements of the LA School and in east coast filmmaking, and while the film disavows the overtly political and ideological influences of Third Cinema, and anti-colonial cinema, I do find that it is connected to the notion of “imperfect cinema” articulated by Julia Garcia Espinosa in his Third Cinema treatise, “For an Imperfect Cinema.”¹²⁰

Espinosa writes:

“Imperfect cinema finds a new audience in those who struggle, and it finds its themes in their problems...

¹²⁰See Espinosa's online manifesto, “For an Imperfect Cinema” in *Jump Cut* <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>. Web. 22 June 2011.

A new poetics for the cinema will, above all, be a "partisan" and "committed" poetics, a "committed" art, a consciously and resolutely "committed" cinema — that is to say, an "imperfect" cinema.

These excerpts describe Collins Prettyman's directorial labor and a commitment to creating new conditions for the production and reception of art. This labor for *Espinosa* is an imperfect quest, but so too are the outcomes, as the films are often created under "imperfect" conditions. As a filmmaker Collins Prettyman labored under a different set of conditions than most any dominant cinema filmmaker, financing the film largely with grants and functioning without the backing of significant financial revenue, or production and distribution support.¹²¹ As a divorced woman raising children in upstate New York where the film was shot, her filmmaking was integrally connected to the material constraints and circumstances of her own existence. Given her financial limitations, a skeleton crew, and her limited experience as a director, the film's completion is, in and of itself, a significant accomplishment. Collins Prettyman considered the film "flawed" and cites the very real nature of financial limitations in producing a film that was, in her words, "... a complex narrative film on almost too little money and we just barely pulled it off" (Nicholson 12). She worked in a way that interrupted the dominant commercial and industrial frameworks and her films are "imperfect" to the extent that they do not embody the expectations and production values of those spheres.

What some might see as unconventional production values, quirks, or "imperfections," in the film, I interpret as spaces where affective eruptions surface. The acting, particularly of the

¹²¹ Klotman explains that she received money from ARD, a West German television network, but they never released or distributed the film widely, perhaps in part because they misconstrued the film's context and Collins Prettyman's unique vision of African American life which I mention earlier. They essentially provided a minimal amount of completion funds, but allowed the film to go largely unseen.

main character, is at times awkward, her body language and dialogue are at times stilted and jerky. The power of the film lies in how Collins Prettyman struggles to find a voice for herself and for her awkward protagonist. While the film was not produced under ideal conditions and may in some places be “flawed,” I am struck by its pursuit of clarity, character depth, coherence and interiority which in many ways is a difficult concept to depict.¹²² The dialogue is thoughtful, philosophical and somewhat aloof for a screenplay, but it helps to craft subjectivities and experiences which are unfamiliar to film audiences. The film interpolates a particular audience, including many subtle references which would only be familiar to those who are “insiders,” that is, those who inhabit the world where these philosophical and cultural references make sense. For instance the young male film student who casts Sara in his film references an early black film actress Pearl McCormack and an early “race film” *The Scar of Shame* (Dir. Frank Perregini, 1927).¹²³ *Losing Ground* is aware of itself as an exploration, a meditation on filmmaking and self-discovery, and it resists talking down to an audience, for whom film language is often made too familiar and too accessible. In Sara’s first meeting with Duke, an out-of-work actor who also stars in his nephew’s student film, the two of them end up casually discussing her paper. Their banter includes a discussion of the “deviant Gnostics,” “psychic orientation,” reincarnation, karmic debt-- concepts which require a certain kind of exposure to understand and concepts not often included in film dialogue. *Losing Ground* argues that there are other ways to be “cinematic,” as it challenges the expectations of viewers by infusing ideas that are unfamiliar or mundane and also intellectual language that may not engage a broad audience. The film grapples for a language that attends to the depths of experience which Collins Prettyman’s characters

¹²² See Alexander’s aforementioned discussion of interiority. See also L.H. Stallings, “Redemptive Softness: Interiority, Intellect and Black Women’s Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins’s *Losing Ground*,” *Black Camera, An International Film Journal* 2.2 (2011): 47-62 which deals explicitly with the concept in *Losing Ground*.

¹²³ *The Scar of Shame* was a production of the Colored Film Players Production, an early producer of race films. Colored Film Players made films for Blacks and had a multiracial production team.

pursue. The protagonist's journey of self-discovery has few lofty aims; it does not lead the protagonist to a womanist, feminist, Afrocentric, spiritual or sexual awakening per se, or even one of transcendence, instead the protagonist is allowed to feel, to fumble, to lose, to see, and she remains grounded, not in philosophical ideals, but in a visceral world of her own making. Collins Prettyman does not create a flawless film (if there is such a thing) but in her own way risks criticism and imperfection to create the film that she wanted to make, and for these reasons her presence is vital to any independent filmmaking tradition.

Losing Ground demands a shift in the processes of film spectatorship. Discussing spectatorship in Bill Gunn's provocative film *Ganja and Hess*, Marlo David points to significant ways in which spectators are empowered to experience films which challenge our racial and bodily imagination. She writes:

In my analysis of Gunn's work, I also theorize a position that supports dialectic between radical spectator and filmmaker who ultimately share the desire to expand our imaginative perspectives outside of the bounds of the Jezebel, the Buck and other pervasive racialized sexual types circulated by Hollywood filmmakers of all races, nationally and globally. The exchange requires a kind of give-and-take between filmmaker and spectator; it requires a mutuality of desire for the destabilization of Hollywood conventions shared between artists and audience (David 30).

David continues, citing the work of Toni Cade Bambara, who wrote of an "empowered eye" where the spectator functions as an engaged party, participating in a more empowered and

critical viewing of a film.¹²⁴ Clyde Taylor and Haile Gerima have also theorized the importance of a renewed interest in spectatorship and posit that not only filmmakers, but black film audiences must embrace their role as agents in processing a film's power.¹²⁵ In Chapter 2 I write of a "direct encounter" that the works and images that I have identified have with viewers. I argue here that the notion of a direct encounter also applies to *Losing Ground* as the film defamiliarizes black character archetypes, narrative structure, content, and viewer expectations, compelling the viewer to look more closely at the characters and story and also at the process that created them. This film confronts the viewer in a way that extracts the characters, story, and the film itself from the traditions of "black cinema" and its viewing expectations, forcing us to truly *see* it.

In a chapter written over twenty years ago about the future of black independent cinema David Nicholson diagnoses the problems of black independent filmmaking:

If there is any single point that I want to make here it is that the world is so complex, so fraught with ambiguity and contradiction that it imposes a special responsibility on the narrative filmmaker and the novelist or short story writer. We are craftsmen and craftswomen, and it is dishonest and does us no good to retreat to an imagined, idealized past. It does us no good to avoid the world by retreating to fundamentalism...It does us no good to flatten the contradictions and ambiguities that so threaten the black community. . . .¹²⁶

¹²⁴ See Toni Cade Bambara's essay "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement in Diawara's anthology *Black American Cinema*. 118-144.

¹²⁵ See Clyde Taylor's essay "New U.S. Black Cinema." *Jump Cut* 28 (1983): 46-48. Haile Gerima discusses a formulation where the critic, spectator and filmmaker work in a triangulated unison in "Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinkesh vs. Lucy," which appears in Paul Willeman and Jim Pines' anthology, *Questions of Third Cinema*: London, British Film Institute, 1989.

¹²⁶ See Nicholson essay "Which Way the Black Film Movement?" Michael Martin Ed. *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 442-448. 447.

Similarly, in an essay on the future of black independent filmmaking's challenges and shortcomings, Clyde Taylor cites Collins Prettyman's comments on her work, as she explains, "We're just baby filmmakers. . . 'I've just begun to learn. I've only made two films.'" Her cinematographer and partner, Ronald Gray goes further, "Would you like to be judged on the basis of the first thing you wrote? Not published, but wrote?" (Taylor 459).

Losing Ground in its own ways diagnoses and remedies the concerns that Nicholson and Taylor raise, providing an opportunity to revisit important questions raised decades ago. Her films, even with their imperfections, help us to interrogate how raced bodies in cinema and visual culture break the thresholds of what is familiar, normative and taken for granted to allow us to broach questions of ecstasy, interiority, embodiment, and affective intensity. Thus far I have discussed *Losing Ground* as an outgrowth of Collins Prettyman's engagement and training in philosophy, literature and cinema, as an exemplar of what I refer to as the "New York School" of black independent filmmaking, and as an exemplar of post-black cinema. I now turn to an analysis of the film's affective intensity.

Affect Theory and Black Bodies

In *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* Nicole Fleetwood describes blackness as an "affective power" that circulates across visual and performative domains, and as a "force" that draws its potency from its movement as a discursive and social phenomenon. She writes:

Blackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse. Blackness in this sense circulates. It is not rooted in a history, people and things. Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and

subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills the void and is the void. Through its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments (6).

Fleetwood's explication of "blackness" is compelling, yet I argue that it is the interplay between blackness and post-blackness that compels bodies to *do*, to create, produce, and manifest. My use of the term "affect" then, is two-fold; as a noun it describes what adheres to the surface of black bodies, a gesture, movement, posture, or response, and as an adjective "affective" refers to intense encounter between bodies and discursive spaces, (between filmmakers and audiences or scholarly publics, for example) particularly in post-black works like *Losing Ground*. In her discussion of blackness and affect, Fleetwood poses the question, "How might we investigate the visible black body as a troubling presence to very scopical regimes that define it as such?"

Fleetwood pursues an interrogation into what she calls, "the affective power of black representational practices," and while I share her investment in race and affective power, my emphasis is on the possibilities of black bodies to deploy affect beyond the strictures of representation.

Likewise, Clare Hemmings and Kara Keeling have also done important work that expands how we understand the dynamics of race and affective power. In "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn" Clare Hemmings critiques how affect functions for specific subject positions, positing that like other theoretical paradigms that are oriented around language and signification, affect theories must also be re-evaluated to account for other subjectivities.¹²⁷ She writes, "only for certain subjects can affect be thought of as attaching in an

¹²⁷ Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19.5 (2005): 548-567.

open way; others are so over-associated with affect that they themselves are the object of affective transfer” (561). Using the term “the burden of affects,” she attaches affect to debilitating processes of representation in which “the black body carries the weight of, and is suffused with, racial affect. . . .” (562). She cites two passages, one from Fanon and another from writer Audre Lorde, in which a black figure is forced to reconcile his or her bodily experience with bodily sensations imposed on them from a white viewer, what Hemmings calls “other people’s affective response to their blackness” (561). While Fanon’s encounter with the young white child has been recounted many times, I do want to include Audre Lorde’s account, which follows.

When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize that there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. . . . Something’s going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.

(Hemmings 561, Lorde 1984, 147-48).

Hemmings explains how in this scene “it is the black body that carries the weight of, and is suffused with, racial affect, as it is the female body that carries the burden of the affects that maintain sexual difference. . . .” Keeling similarly embeds the notion of subjectivity within her articulation of affectivity, as she writes:

Wedding Bergson’s affection to Gramsci’s notion that the production and maintenance of common sense is a sensory-motor intellectual activity, I rely upon the term affectivity to mark the way that a living being’s interaction with other images involves a form of

labor that has to do with affect, with those sensations and feelings that carve out a subjective perception in things.¹²⁸

She goes further, suggesting that affectivity is the labor that “holds cinematic reality together” (25). She defines “cinematic reality” as cinematic perception that interacts with images in the material world, as “...affectivity located the productive, creative power of groups of living images” which “generates the movements and temporalities of cinematic reality” (26). These affective perspectives reify the significance of racial subjectivity as an essential component of affective exploration and signification, and not something to be relinquished or viewed as hopelessly corrupted.

I discuss the affective power in the *Losing Ground* from a number of vantage points. I begin by exploring Sara’s pursuit of “ecstatic experience,” I explain how it is connected to the notion of interiority, elaborating on how interiority encompasses Sara’s intellectual, emotional, sensual, and mystical desires. I discuss how affect manifests in embodied gestures and movement, as well as in the language, humor, and laughter that characters communicate. We see it explicitly in Sara’s awkward gesticulations, the movements of her body, and her overall discomfort in interpersonal exchanges. Next I explore the relationship between affect, art, and performance in the film as forces of creative expression and release. Lastly I connect the film’s affective intensity to post-blackness as it reflects Collins Prettyman’s point of view that race is not the sole determinant of the powerful experiences that black bodies can access and produce. *Losing Ground* captures the tension between blackness as a dominant social ontology and post-blackness as a counter-ontology. It is in the interplay between blackness and post-blackness,

¹²⁸ Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight*.

stability and instability, where an unfettered and ethereal metaphysical subjectivity emerges. Sara's body becomes the primary vehicle for the emergence of a subjectivity that plumbs the depths of human and otherworldly experience. Her potency does not lie in her ability to transform social and discursive narratives of black female bodies, but rather in how she untethers herself from these regimes to explore other ways of being.

Sara's pursuit of ecstatic experience is connected to her role as a professor and her engagement of the life of the mind and her intellectual intensity is on display in early scenes with students at the university. In the opening scene of the film Sara stands authoritatively at the front of a large lecture hall. As she lectures the camera pans the classroom, capturing student reactions to Sara's presence as a philosophy professor. Some of the students are asleep or disaffected, others are more attentive, and listening to her discuss Sartre, Nietzsche and existentialist responses to war. The varying student reactions, some enthralled, others disinterested, are a significant gesture as they pose a challenge to Clare Hemmings's articulation of the affective black body as one that always bears the weight or burden of the affective gaze. Unlike Fanon's experiences of being viewed with disgust, fear, or disdain, Sara's body elicits a range of responses from her students. Undaunted by student gazes and responses, she claims a bodily authority over her space. She lectures authoritatively and answers questions methodically. In this first scene the film evokes the dichotomy between Sara as an intellectual and Sara as a sexual being. The lecture hall is dominated by men, almost all of whom have shirts open to the navel, wear low afros (even the white students), and glasses. Some men are slim and elegant, like dancers. One such student wearing a deep unbuttoned V-neck shirt saunters up to her after class to talk about Genet and exclusion. He stares with a twinkle in his eye as she

speaks to him, as he did during her lecture, enraptured by her every word and Sara is initially oblivious to the student's sexual cues:

Student: Next week is our last class...

Student: You're terrific, so alive and terrific....(a long stare)

Sara: Thank you.

Student: You're husband appreciates you? (long pause)

Sara: My husband?

Student: I mean, I bet your husband appreciates you tremendously; you're so full of life.

Sara (flustered) I'll remember to tell him.

The student leaves hurriedly and awkward, stomping up the stairs, which I read as a gesture allowing him to release his sexual energy and his embarrassment in this awkward interpersonal exchange. We glimpse Sara's simultaneous comfort and discomfort in the authoritative, professorial role, where she can allow her mind to take flight yet must also erect barriers between herself and her students. Her modest beige blazer and skirt, her glasses and upswept hair suggest that she does not want to be seen as a sexual being, a feeling which does not last for long. Later a young female student tells Sara that she is "bright and lively" and "a real inspiration, especially with a husband and all." Sara quips to herself, "What is this thing they've all got about my having a husband?" I see these student reactions as a form of affective intensity, one which Sara is not yet able to apprehend. The students, both male and female, are impacted by Sara's intellectual intensity as a philosophy professor and their responses speak to the affective power that emanates from her.

Early in the film Sara is seen researching and writing, yet, it soon becomes apparent that the pursuit of ecstasy is not only an scholarly inquiry, but a personal quest for her to experience what she describes at various moments as a “trance,” “an experience,” or simply the ability to just “lose control.”¹²⁹ Much of the film’s narrative tension and affective intensity builds around her longing—a deeply entrenched desire to feel and experience something which she herself cannot fully articulate, yet knows is missing from her life. The affective intensity accrues as Sara’s pursuit becomes more aggressive, a pursuit made more frustrating because ecstasy seems effortless for everyone else around her; particularly her artist husband Victor, who has found another outlet for his desire, Celia, and even for Sara’s own mother. The title of this chapter invokes the title and lyrics of a 1970s Smokey Robinson song whose chorus reads: “A love like ours is never, ever free, you got to pay some agony for the ecstasy.” I borrow these lyrics because they speak to how Sara agonizes over ecstasy, at one point saying to Victor with fury and desperation, “Nothing I do leads to ecstasy!” This despair is magnified by Victor’s pursuits of ecstasy outside of his relationship with Sara, and is but one of the many intense and complex emotions that surface in the film. Sara’s pursuit of “the ecstatic experience” becomes *the* force around which all other affective forces emerge and her longing enlivens and heightens the desires of those around her.

Depictions of Sara’s “interior” self provide an intimate connection between her and the viewer. Sara pours over thick philosophy volumes at home and at libraries and is seen composing her paper aloud or clicking the typewriter. As she reads, her voice-over narration connects the viewer to the ideas that she explores, weaving us into her internal stream-of-consciousness. The voice-over is sometimes monotone or robotic, but fluid, her voice deeper

¹²⁹ Sara asks late in the film, “Why can’t I just **go**, lose control?”

and richer than in conversation. In these spaces we see close-ups of Sara with wisps of hair out of place, wrestling with ideas, her intellectual intensity bearing down on the pages. Interiority becomes a tangible force, and her body the vehicle for its release. While reading voraciously at the library she is interrupted by a tall, handsome figure, Duke, who says, “I’ve rarely seen anyone read with such concentration. Why are you reading with such concentration?” Sara looks up, slightly annoyed and taken aback that he asks what she is writing about. She rattles off a complex thesis to which Duke responds with even more complex questions. Her physical coolness hints at her interpersonal discomfort, yet Duke is not repelled by her distance, instead he is intrigued and drawn to her.

Sara’s intellect is always juxtaposed to an exteriorization of arousal as she becomes visually excited in a scene where she tries to explain to her mother the sense of invigoration that she experiences when writing a paper:

Sara: . . . The only thing I’ve known like that is sometimes when I’m writing a paper. My mind suddenly takes this tremendous leap into a new interpretation of the material and I know I’m right. I know I can prove it and my head just starts dancing like crazy.
(excitedly, then a pause) But that’s so cold Mama, and so dry. (pause) How does someone like you produce a child that thinks so very, very much?

L.H. Stallings makes a similar set of observations describing the power of interior female subjectivity as it emerges through the director and actor’s intellectual and sensual powers, saying:

Collins and Seret Scott, the actress who plays Sara, visually represent the connection between intellect, sensuality and ecstasy by conveying physical and sensory intensity

around these moments of intellectual engagement. Sara's voice in the voice-over is breathy, excitable and without pause, while her body language exudes a level of excitability. . .(50).

Sara's pursuit of intellectual knowledge increasingly becomes a desire for sensuality and stimulation.

Sensuality surfaces in her research, which is becoming more specific and engages mystical domains. In one research scene her voiceover narration describes this intersection of the sensual and the mystical:

In Haitian voodoo the subject is possessed...mounted by the God in question...the behavior changes radically as he (the subject) begins to assume the personality of the God...the possessed one is unconscious afterwards...yet a sensation of well-being of mental clarity, alertness, sometimes clairvoyance occurs...The ecstatic moment is, so to speak, after the fact.

This language stirs her subconscious, moving her to seek a more tactile encounter with the ecstatic and after writing this passage she seeks the counsel of a psychic, an encounter which is also revealing:

Sara: When you meet someone, for instance, looking at me, what happens inside you?

Psychic: I don't understand.

Sara: Can you see my future?

Psychic: I see that you are intelligent, secretive.

Sara: (annoyed, voice raised) Anyone can see that, my face tells you that!

Psychic: I don't understand.

Sara: I want to understand what it feels like to see something that has not yet happened.

Psychic: I see you with a tall dark man with a top hat and they're taking your picture.

Sara leaves mumbling "This is ridiculous, what am I looking for?"

This scene reveals Sara's increasing sense of alienation and despair and her desire to look outwardly for answers. Her intellectual labor is akin to an affective performance, one that she is initially incapable of recognizing, yet which ultimately helps her actualize her desires.

Art, Performance, and Affective Expression

Sara finds an unexpected outlet for her desires when she is offered a role in a student film. In her initial encounter with the student, George, Sara begins to imagine the possibilities of a performative self. George appears, peering at Sara at work in her office through a monocle, saying: "I've got you in a close-up Professor." Sara is flummoxed, then strangely giddy as he continues to view her through his lens. Playing the part of the flirtatious director, he flatters Sara and dramatically exclaims, "You could be a movie star, Professor!" likening her to a modern-day Dorothy Dandridge. When he asks her to be in his film, Sara gestures awkwardly, her hands motioning to her face, feigning disbelief, as if to say, "Who...me?" She laughs loudly, uneasily, as the student awaits a response. This scene is executed as a cinematic cliché, with each character playing an overly dramatic role from an iconic era. Sara resembles a nineteenth-century woman, dressed in a white peasant blouse with ruffles and puffy sleeves, a thin tie at the neck and her hair in a bun. She "performs" here the role of the burgeoning actress, a character in her own personal drama, a persona distinctly different from her professorial role in the opening scene that is rational and unemotive. Intrigued by George's remark comparing her to Dorothy Dandridge, she imagines what it might be like to be viewed as a sensual, cinematic object even for a

moment. George's over-acting speaks to his role in several dramas: on one hand he is an actor in the larger film, on another he is the director trying to cast Sara in his student film, and in a third role, he is an "actor" in Sara's personal drama. The process of filmmaking becomes a significant metaphor in the film, as being looked at, first through the monocle, then the lens of a camera is liberating for Sara. The film within a film is not simply an object to be seen, but it stages Sara's desires as a cinematic, performative object.

The film's tension and conflict builds as we see Sara and Victor, philosopher and artist, trying to experience fulfillment and pleasure in their respective domains. We are introduced to Victor at the couple's loft, posting fresh sketches on the wall which he drew while visiting a small town called Riverview. The dialogue in this scene is particularly telling:

Sara: What's the matter?

Victor: I feel lightheaded, like I've been walking around in a dream. That place is unbelievable; it's like a whole new universe to paint. You know I could do a whole series. Today was like a release.

S: Any libraries around?

V: There is a small lending library but odds are good that they don't carry Kant or Hegel, but you could drive down to New York once or twice a week.

S: If I did something artistic like write or act, would that get me a little more consideration?

V: If you were any good.

S: Nothing I do leads to ecstasy. You stay in a trance, a kind of private ecstatic trance; it's like living with a musician who sits around all day blowing his horn.

V: What's the matter, Hegel and the boys let you down?

S: I could be another Dorothy Dandridge. . . (seductive, then deflated) I am so reasonable...

This scene captures how the characters interior worlds collide. Victor's walks in the country looking at the old homes, sketching and flirting with Latin women, left him feeling euphoric; yet back at home, his encounter with Sara leaves him drained. While Sara's encounter with George placed her on the cusp of feeling *something*, she does not move easily into the realm of feelings. Unlike Victor, she is not able to easily release her energies and she becomes frustrated seeing Victor's excesses of ecstasy, reminding her of her inability to release her own. Echoing her own growing disenchantment with her philosophical pursuits he snaps back, "What's the matter, Hegel and the boys let you down?" Victor's condescending tone speaks to his disdain for Sara's philosophical endeavors, which for him are perhaps too abstract, yet it also hints at his jealousy, as if "Hegel and the boys" arouse Sara in ways that he cannot. As an artist, specifically a painter, Victor uses art and his portrait subject, Celia, to sustain his need to constantly re-live the ecstatic moments, a sign that he is also in crisis, one that must be constantly satiated by female attention and stimulation.

Victor embodies the conflict between abstract and representational thinking. In a scene with Carlos, Victor (with a hint of envy) describes Carlos's work as "pure" with no narrative references" and concludes with a heavy tone, "I have a need to make specific references." For Victor, his art and his sexual virulence are interconnected and his crises compel him to re-evaluate the kind of art that he produces. Later, while Sara and Duke are discussing Victor's shift from being an abstract painter to a representational artist, Duke concludes that "he must be approaching midlife." In another compelling scene, Sara poses by the open window of Victor's studio in the huge home they have rented. Victor sketches her against a beautiful night exterior

backdrop of trees and commenting on the sketch says, “Too representational, too easy.” Sara is perplexed and argues, “You mean to paint people is a cope-out?” He tries to explain the virtues of abstract art, saying, “abstract work is pure in a painterly sense, it deals with color and form. . . . What is this honesty cope-out bit, what you wanna’ nail me to the cross as a cope out and a thief.” Later, Victor’s crisis reaches a fevered pitch when he realizes that his internal self and his art are hopelessly impure, commenting to Carlos, again seemingly about his art, “I’m vulgar...with lots of dirty tricks.” This realization culminates in his push to be with Celia. Victor’s attempts to define his art and express his sexual energy are embodied in his attempts to hold tighter to Sara, and also to Celia. Victor’s crisis mirrors Sara’s as his sensual and emotional anxieties coalesce around intellectual questions of aesthetics and form. His struggles over the purity of abstract art versus representation are a direct reference to the hold that the representational paradigm has had over black cultural production, which I discuss in the subsequent section. Victor’s crisis also embodies the quest for fulfillment and validation for black artists of the twentieth century. Sara and Victor as intellectual and artist, find themselves isolated, conflicted, and trapped. In the respective world of mind and image, they constantly challenge each other, finding themselves at odds with notions about art, identity, aesthetics, monogamy, and the meaning or meaninglessness of their relationship and life’s work. Both characters seek comfort and validation in their pursuits, yet are unable to reconcile their internal and external realities creating a perpetual disconnect between them as spouses and lovers.

Sara’s decision to participate in the student film deepens her disconnection with Victor, but enlivens her own sensibilities. In the student film Sara plays “Frankie” opposite Duke from the earlier scene in the library, who plays “Johnny,” her vaudeville partner and lover. Duke, who

is also George's uncle, describes himself as an "out of work actor."¹³⁰ Sara becomes more aware of her body, particularly what she wears and how she moves. Her body had usually been draped in conservative, loose fitting clothing and she now wears a leotard, slinky skirt, and makeup. In the student film Sara appears opposite a voluptuous woman whose frame and seductive movements are a complete contrast to hers. While Sara's movements emphasize the angles and stiffness of her appendages and a lack of flexibility characteristic of a body that is not used to dancing, the voluptuous woman sways her rounded hips and body for an alluring effect. As "Frankie," Sara vies with this woman for the attention of her lover, "Johnny." The student film mirrors Sara's own life, where Celia, who is also a slender woman, seems more comfortable and confident in her body's capacity for movement and is seen dancing throughout the film freely and rhythmically to Latin music. Sara's performance in the film becomes an important vehicle for the release some of embodied desires and compels her to "act" and to move rather than being solely consumed by interior, rational processes.

Later in the film viewers are introduced to Sara's mother, who is, not coincidentally, an actress. Noticing what she calls "that vague look in your eye when you're tired" her mother admonishes Sara to "stop writing all those dissertations and write a play about your mother." Again the film establishes an adversarial relationship between Sara's profession and the arts. Her mother affirms the perception that the arts hold the keys to ecstasy, recalling one of her experiences as actress during Sara's childhood.

Mother: I'm like that. Oh yes, when I'm working a character. . . I'm always in complete control, but I'm just gone. The Gods have me or Satan, somebody has got me."

¹³⁰ In the "Frankie and Johnny" story, Frankie becomes jealous of Johnny's new partner and shoots him in a fit of rage.

Sara views her mother as much more liberated than she, and more open to fulfilling experiences. While Sara's anxieties are the film's central focus, to view this film solely as a woman's journey is to misread the complexity of the world that Collins Prettyman constructs, which is a meditation on the modern human condition.

The affective intensity is released through the characters' body movements, gestures, interactions, and the film's dialogue, particularly in the exchanges between Sara and Victor. In one telling exchange, their competing internal desires thwart any hope for an emotional connection. Sara arrives at home asking "What's the insane moment for today?" Victor ignores her, eager to share his news about selling a painting to a museum. He asks her to get the wine out of the refrigerator and she complies, then asks her to climb a short ladder to which she replies, "You mean you want me to climb up...can't we have it on land?" She awkwardly climbs up and says, "Victor I'm gonna fall. . . " He replies, "right on your ass. . . You've been married to me for ten years and you can't say "ass." This interaction depicts Sara as rigid, straight-laced, even detached and unemotional, but goes further, suggesting that Victor is more sensual and open to the possibilities of life.

Much of the film's intensity emerges through the volume, tone, and wording of the film's dialogue. Humor is often used not to solicit laughter from spectators, but as an affective release for the character's body in the film itself. Language and humor play a significant role in the scene where Sara first encounters Duke in the library. A second portion of their conversation follows:

Sara: Who are you?

Duke: ...In past lives I've been an Italian Count, an English Lord and a confederate soldier. In this life, I am an out of work actor who once studied for the ministry.

Apparently this is my first incarnation as a Negro...I must have built up a lot of Karmic debt.” (Sara laughs hysterically.)

This use of language relies on a complicated subtext and is one of the ways that the film challenges the notion of common sense, everyday vernacular of black comedy, drama, and culture.¹³¹ Collins Prettyman uses language to challenge expectations, to reiterate the significance of the life of the mind, and to complicate and satirize how we use language in relationship to race.

The film foregrounds laughter, which emerges in moments which are not comical, but emotionally weighty; it also becomes a vehicle for release. It recalls the often referenced Fanonian scene where he recounts his reaction to the white child who recoils from him in fear. Fleetwood describes this scene in the following way. “Fanon’s performance during this moment is one that fails him. He states that his smile tightened. And as the repetition of the boy’s declaration become more insistent, he attempted to laugh, “but laughter had become impossible” (Fleetwood 28). Fleetwood recognizes Fanon’s attempts to “resolve his troubling presence” in this scene, by attempting to invoke laughter to trivialize and dismiss the severity of this exchange and also to release the anxiety of the moment. Laughter similarly functions in *Losing Ground* as another affective release. As Fanon’s experience attests, laughter, smiling, whether in humor, chagrin, or as a gesture of dismissiveness, was not fully available to black bodies, as they were expected to suppress something as visceral as laughter in certain social settings. Laughter can be considered a political gesture, not displayed in certain social situations. Fanon attempts to use laughter to dismiss this traumatic situation. But he cannot. Sara, however, can laugh, and uses laughter to assuage the emotional intensity of particular moments.

¹³¹ Keeling discusses the notion of “common sense” as a trope of black culture in *The Witch’s Flight*.

Victor also laughs and bellows in ways that seem excessive. He and Carlos spend an entire conversation laughing with very little actual humor in their dialogue and he yells throughout the film, often in tense moments. In a disturbing scene which I explain in more detail at the end of the chapter, he feigns a strange and unsettling laugh while trying to force his way into Celia's sleeping bag. His penchant for disturbing gestures and crass behavior ultimately alienate him from Celia and Sara. As he describes his dream-like experiences painting in Riverview, he uses low, muted tones and only after Sara stalks off abruptly he yells, "You wanna eat out!" The volume and tone of his voice become forces that project his anxieties; suggesting that he needs something beyond being heard. Later he proclaims to Sara as if on top of a building, "I'm a genuine success...Your husband is a genuine *black* (with emphasis) success!" While the characters are only one foot apart, his emphatic yell is both awkward and ironic. Victor's proclamation signifies on a tradition of art and antiquated notions of "Negro" strivings.¹³² Yet Negro strivings are hardly of interest to him as he is more preoccupied with the meaning of his work and its aesthetic value. Victor is also seen yelling at Celia and while there is a slight language barrier between them, it becomes clear that she can understand him, but tires of hearing him talk and often just disagrees with his point of view. Celia often yells back, feisty and undaunted by Victor's overbearing gestures. Her Puerto Rican accent, vocal affect, body language, and worldview are decidedly different from that of Victor and Sara. She speaks pointedly, ending most of her sentences with "man," and moves with openness, fluidity, and an ease of living in the moment that immediately attracts Victor and the other characters. Not marked as an intellectual, though she offers some of the film's most interesting commentary, she is depicted as a woman who enjoys dance, music, and life and relishes experiences over

¹³² See Du Bois's previously mentioned "The Criteria of Negro Art" and *The Souls of Black Folks* and Locke's *The New Negro*.

theoretical conversation. Celia is a force that complicates the relationship between Sara and Victor and she represents a body that moves and dances without the need of artistic or intellectual labels and expectations. She moves with great ease and comfort, which attracts Victor and counters the rigidity that binds both he and Sara.

While working on the student film, Sara decides to spend time away from Victor and stays with her mother. She enjoys working on the film and having her own space. In one of the most revealing and poignant scenes in the film Sara confides in her mother about Victor's affairs, but the scene is peppered with bursts of laughter. An excerpt of the dialogue follows:

Sara: There have always been women.

Mother: And the very idea, how does that make you feel?

Sara: What do you mean the very *idea*? (dramatically)

Mother: Well, the idea that he lifts himself up and puts himself down into somebody else.

Sara: (Laughs hysterically) Mama, you grow more and more outrageous every day.

Mother: Well some women get that stuck on that picture and it just drives them crazy.

Sara: Well it's graphic enough. (They laugh.)

Sara: The actual sex doesn't bother me. Victor has sex all the time with a color, a room, the way the light falls across a building. All that private ecstasy.

Mother: You envy that.

This exchange culminates in a medium close-up of Sara with a pained, almost despondent expression. Yet this revealing conversation is interrupted with her desperate laughter, providing Sara with her only means of releasing the emotions, anxieties, and desires that she carries.

Representation and Post-Blackness

Reading *Losing Ground* through an affective lens recuperates the intensity that representational discourses have often disavowed, an argument that is illuminated in the work of Elena del R  o, who in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* recognizes the limitations of representational thinking imposed onto affective bodies. She explains:

...the representational model proved either unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes...The imposition of a totalizing picture of reality as structured meaning carried out by the representational approach left little, if anything, to the unstructured sensations that are likewise set in motion in the film-viewing experience (2).

Del R  o’s line of thinking is critical to understanding how the imposition of a representational paradigm constrains how we are able to experience these bodies. This has profound significance for bodies and subjectivities that are marked by race as critical perspectives on black cinema have tended to privilege the representational over a film’s alternative aesthetic or artistic possibilities. As Darby English and Kobena Mercer have pointed out, black artists, critics, and consumers have perhaps played a role in keeping the strictures of “black representational space” alive, negating significant movement towards the production of cinema that foregrounds a non-representational point-of-view.¹³³ Del R  o’s framework provides a link between *Losing Ground*’s de-emphasis on insisting that characters represent, stand in for, or re-produce a black

¹³³ See English’s *How to Read a Work of Art in Total Darkness* and Mercer’s “Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde.” English’s notion of “black representational space” describes a kind of discursive contract between some black artists, filmmakers, and audiences to maintain shared representational desires and expectations.

identity or experience. Representation also plays a significant role in the artistic debates in the film, which provides a broader commentary on the importance of post-black artistic production.

Losing Ground as a post-black film reflects an engagement with black culture and important discursive debates, yet it also pursues goals that are not singularly motivated by the historical legacy of blackness. It points to how blackness and post-blackness inhabit a shared space, existing not in opposition, but in continuity. The bodies in *Losing Ground* interact with the legacies of black culture through discourse, vernacular, and history. We see this early in the film in George's evocation of actress Pearl McCormick of the race film *The Scar of Shame* and his references to Dorothy Dandridge, a figure known for her beauty and sensuality, and how he inserts Sara into this history.¹³⁴ These references indicate the student filmmaker's awareness of and relationship to black film history and yet his own film does not have a direct link to this history. Likewise, later in the film when Sara becomes threatened by Celia, she engages a strand of racial discourse that wants to draw clear distinctions between Blacks and Puerto Ricans. These insertions attach Sara to a black bodily experience, yet they are ruptures rather than a consistent portrait of her persona. Throughout most of the film these characters express a need for freedom from categorization which post-blackness provides, yet they engage blackness as anchor when they feel emotionally or mentally destabilized, as Sara does with Celia. The film also engages black vernacular, identity, and historical by using the word "Negro," and references to the tragic mulatto archetype. The film works to construct a universe in which blackness is neither a biological fact (as Sara, whose visual appearance does not instantly mark her as bi-racial, is consistently labeled a tragic mulatto), nor a space of trauma, lack, or limitation. Victor uses the term "mulatto crisis" not to reference to Sara's lineage, but to refer to what he views as

¹³⁴ Dorothy Dandridge was best known for two Otto Preminger films of the 1950s, *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959).

her overdramatized anxieties. Sara's mother describes her work as an actress and the "Negro" plays that she reluctantly participates in. Describing her role, she says "I play someone's mother...a beacon of strength and humility, it is a thoroughly colored play, we sing, we dance, there is even a character that runs track." Sara's mother emphasizes the clichés which have governed the production of film and theater and describes her stint as an actress in "thoroughly colored plays," which were a staple of some black theatrical ensembles, with dismay. While Sara's mother mocks this style of work, ironically this brand of theatrical production has been revived and moved from the stage to the screen in the work of Tyler Perry who revived the genre in the 1990s. The historical frameworks in which the work of Sara's mother and Perry emerge can both be traced back to Lorraine Hansberry, whose *A Raisin in the Sun* became the template for black theatrical presentations. This reference to Hansberry's work affirms my aforementioned discussion of Collins Prettyman's disdain of productions of *A Raisin in the Sun* that reduce or miss altogether the play's complexity.

The film relies on ironic uses of black vernacular, references and signification to challenge and, at times, reify the location of blackness as stabilizing anchor and at other times as an unstable and decomposing idea. When Victor and Sara share the news of the sale of his art, Sara's mother quips that if he was unsuccessful that she "could just tell my friends that you were talented, but unseen...racial excuses are the best." Victor laughs recalling Sara's mother's "bit about the light-skinned Negro," to which Sara replies, "what has all this ethnic humor have to do with anything." In one particularly intriguing moment in the film, a scene which I have already partially described, Sara comes home to an excited Victor ready to celebrate his success. As Sara enters the apartment Victor is listening to a tape player of a man's voice giving a speech or lecture. The man's voice is heard saying: "A whole category of problems resolve and revolve

around those abstract definitions of what is or is not capable in art.” The voice-over is briefly muted by Sara and Victor engaging in conversation. When they pause for a kiss, the voice resumes, “The black artist must have absolute freedom to interpret his experience both stylistically and in every other manner as would any other artist. No demands can be placed on him, other than the one simple clear mandate that he must interpret that which is real for him in a meaningful way.” This voice-over inserted into the film is a direct parallel to some of the earliest post-black debates, which I discuss in the Introduction. Interestingly, Victor listens to this treatise while painting and the speaker argues that black artists must be allowed to function as *artists* and not compelled to conform to racial expectations. This kind of post-black language is what animates Collins Prettyman’s work and it demonstrates her creative use of sound and language to insert ideas about the characters’ vision of art and likely her own.

The film enacts a complicated subjectivity, animating characters who are black, but whose sensibilities speak to a number of different intellectual, artistic and cultural influences. This again, is a central element of post-black thinking, as artists are allowed a full range of interests and influences. Sara and Victor do not disavow blackness, as it is interwoven into their experiences, politics, and colloquialisms, like “ain’t that a blip,” an expression Sara longs to exclaim in the midst of a faculty meeting. They also walk along the fault lines of Western and non-Western thinking about race and philosophies of experience. For Sara, to live only as the Cartesian self, without the ability to just “lose control,” would be an existence without the pleasures of passion, risk, and ecstasy, one that is hopelessly incomplete. Here Collins Prettyman inserts another substantive critique, this time of Western philosophical models that have upheld the thinking and rational subject as the model of a modern, sentient being.

Late in the film, these affective spheres collide and are released in a climactic party scene, where we witness Sara's evolution and Victor downward spiral. After several days of working with Duke on the student film and not being at home, Sara brings Duke to her home to meet Victor and perhaps to spend the weekend. This choice suggests indicates that Sara is now willing to live with reckless abandon. She acts out of her own desires, disavowing how Victor might react and she returns a visually changed woman. Her hair hangs loosely in contrast to the tight buns that she wears throughout much of the film and her body language is more relaxed and confident. She enters the backyard in a bright red blouse and red heels to find Victor entertaining Celia and Carlos. In the subsequent scene Sara dances with Duke and having spent time dancing in the student film, she is not as self-conscious, even though her movements contrast with the fluid and effervescent movements of Celia who glides across the floor, clasping a corner of her floral skirt. In a jealous tirade, Victor grabs Celia, who is dancing with Carlos, then grabs Sara and attempting to twirl her remarking, "I forgot you can't dance" and dropping her arm. After Victor's tense attempts to get the attention of both women, the next scene shows the group sleeping outside on the deck of a large outdoor pool. In the morning Victor jumps into the chilly water, beckoning the others to join him. The men and Celia dive in, while Sara looks on in characteristic dismay, saying, "I hate water, I feel like I'm drowning in the bathtub." Celia jumps in, her clothes on, saying, "I go in, but just like I am." When Celia comes out of the water, Sara goes to get her some warm clothes. Moments later, Victor follows behind Celia, then awkwardly rolls around with her on the sleeping bags, while she protests vehemently. Victor continues, trying to get on top of her and Sara returns, seeing this encounter. Outraged, she yells:

Sara: You go around taking that thing out in front of me, it's uncalled for, for you to fling your little private ecstasies in my face!

Victor: This is not one of your classes, don't lecture to me!

Sara: Don't fuck around then! Don't you take your dick out like it was *artistic*, like it was some goddamned paintbrush. Maybe that's what's uneven, that I got nothing to take out!

Sara storms away and through these gestures and outbursts we see how the film emphasizes a de-raced embodiment, one not worn on surface of the skin as Fanon has described, but one worn in the mind, through limbs, movement, dialogue, and body language. These are not simply black bodies in distress, but bodies which have moved through blackness and circulate through the density of other possibilities, some painful, some revelatory. It is Sara's pursuit of ecstasy that fleshes out the narrative and uncovers the desires of those around her. She becomes the catalyst for these eruptions displays and the subsequent release of intensity. What begins as a professional and intellectual endeavor intensifies, becoming an all-consuming desire not to simply understand or document ecstasy, but to feel it, embody it, and know it.

In the final scene, Sara is on the student film set, about to act out the climactic ending of the Frankie and Johnny story, where she shoots Johnny (Duke). Victor drives frantically to the film set and runs to where they are shooting. Sara, in full make-up, hair swirling around her head, holds up the gun and fires at Duke. The shot is piercing, affecting Duke, who stumbles to the ground, but also jarring for Victor, who jumps while watching Sara, whose face wears a look of anguish. There are several quick cuts, first to Duke's body, as he falls dramatically to the ground, then to Victor, then Sara, then back to Victor, whose face is pained. Victor looks at the ground in resignation and Sara's face, beautiful, grief-stricken, her hair blowing fiercely in the

wind, is the final image of the film.¹³⁵ *Losing Ground* stands as a cinematic outlier and is difficult to categorize into any particular genre or style. While it is prescient in anticipating significant black feminist discourses in literature and film, it should be understood as an embodiment of post-black cinema that invites viewers to experience film through a metaphysical lens. It relies on affective, rather than racial, gestures to connect to viewers, while simultaneously disrupting viewers' sensibilities and expectations. *Losing Ground* animates the metaphysical concerns of its characters in ways that construct a new kind of cinematic subjectivity.

Losing Ground is a metaphor for black independent filmmaking and artistic practice as it questions the dichotomies of abstraction over representation, Western thought versus non-Western dogma, sex as an act of body or of mind, and ecstasy over banality. The characters exemplify movement, freedom, and cultural and social mobility. They lease a large mansion, Sara holds a position at a university and is well-respected by her students, and Victor's work is not simply shown in galleries, but purchased by museums. Race does not function as the object of desire, lack, or alienation as neither Sara nor Victor bemoan racial suffering or limitations. The characters endure a metaphysical conflict, an internal crisis wrought by their longing to experience a heightened sense of being and an awareness of experiences of the sensuous and the sublime.

¹³⁵ In his aforementioned essay "Dialogic Modes of Representing Africa(s): Womanist Film," Mark Reid provides a different interpretation of this ending where he says that Sara points the gun at Victor and fires at him rather than Duke. While I believe that Sara has complex emotions and that Duke certainly embodies Victor, the editing of the scene does not seem to support Reid's interpretation.

CHAPTER 2: “MADE YOU LOOK!”:

EMBODIMENT AND INITIATION IN HIP-HOP VISUAL CULTURE

Wild style is totally illegible unless you're *initiated*.

--(Fab 5 Freddy, aka Fred Braithwaite)

Some people look at me and see negativity, some people look at me and see positivity,
but when I see myself I see creativity...

--(KRS- One, lyrics from the song “Stop the Violence”)

In this chapter I move to a discussion of hip-hop as a visual and artistic phenomenon and as an opening into post-blackness and metaphysical space. I open the chapter with two quotes which help to contextualize this project and its objectives. The first is taken from pioneering graffiti artist and rapper Fred Braithwaite who evokes the term “Wild Style” which originally described a style of graffiti writing and became synonymous with the brash, improvisational aesthetics in other forms of hip-hop culture: breakdancing, rapping, and dee-jaying.¹³⁶ Braithwaite juxtaposes the term with the notion of being “initiated,” a concept which I develop throughout the chapter. The term also describes two paradoxical trajectories of hip-hop as visual culture. In one sense, hip-hop as “Wild Style” is a visual phenomenon that is conspicuous, assertive, and provocative— “in your face.” It entices viewers into a “battle” of sorts, daring them to look and creating a “direct encounter” that provokes an intense reaction. In another vein “Wild Style” describes hip-hop’s power to enact a subtler and more nuanced relationship with

¹³⁶ Braithwaite was a graffiti artist and introduced hip-hop to the 1980s downtown art scene which included his friend, a young Jean-Michel Basquiat. He also helped to bring hip-hop into the mainstream as one of the hosts of Yo! MTV Raps under the name Fab 5 Freddy. *Wild Style* is also the name of a 1982 film by Charlie Ahearn which I discuss in detail later in this chapter and which provides a detailed visual exploration of these four dimensions of hip-hop culture.

viewers as an enigma or a puzzle that must be interpreted or decoded. Reading hip-hop visual culture through these lenses expands the contours of spectatorship, as viewers cannot simply take for granted that by *seeing* they comprehend the fullness of these images, that is, their context, subtext, and significance. Instead, as viewers we are challenged to give ourselves over to hip-hop's visual potency, becoming initiated into its capacity to affect us, its innovative use of language and symbolism, and its intense depiction of bodies and experiences. Engaging hip-hop as a force of initiation becomes a visual "rite of passage" for viewers who enter this world either as insiders or outsiders, a world which is unfamiliar to some and reimagined for others.¹³⁷ The experiences of seeing young people break-dancing, watching Dee-jays and rappers perform in parks and at block parties or encountering graffiti on your ride to work in the morning are seminal scenes in the logic of the post-industrial urbanity and post-modernity and also emblematic of shifts in how bodies "behave" and what they allow us to see. Hip-hop makes visible a landscape of bodies in motion mapped onto urban space and the residue of social decay, juxtaposing an embodied creativity with experiences that are at times traumatic, but also whimsical, thoughtful, and moving. The bodies that experience hip-hop visual culture might also be read as a counterpoint to the modernist experience of the flaneur and these experiences provide another important entry in the archive of vision and subjectivity.¹³⁸ The innovation of the music video format in particular inscribes a series of scenes into our collective experience

¹³⁷ KRS-One's song "Step Into a World: Rapture's Delight" (1997) also strongly evokes this idea of initiation into hip-hop.

¹³⁸ Later in this chapter I provide a reading of the film *Downtown 81* which depicts Jean-Michel Basquiat as a kind of post-modern flaneur as discussed in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. A number of important texts discuss how vision and visual practices are constituted across time, space, and cultural orientation including: Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967; Hal Foster Ed. *Vision and Visuality (Discussions in Contemporary Culture)*. New York: The New Press, 1988; Jonathan McCrary's *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992, and Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

revealing a set of historical and intimate perspectives of urban life in the 1970s and '80s and creating an array of responses of shock, awe, revulsion, and dismay.¹³⁹

The second excerpt, taken from a song by rapper K.R.S-One, provides an incisive reading of the body's self-reflexive possibilities, opening the way for hip-hop to become a site of agency and subjectivity that disavows the perceptions of others.¹⁴⁰ The song "Stop the Violence" is a clarion call for black male bodies who have taken to violence and self-destruction to instead turn to hip-hop as an outlet to express creativity. In the song's lyrics KRS-One redefines black male urban subjectivity which had been constructed and distorted by the external social forces of drug addiction and distribution, the criminal justice system, and violence. This perspective on subjectivity affirms the early twentieth century Du Boisian logic of double consciousness as KRS-One acknowledges his awareness of how others see him. Yet he also counters the potential damage done to his own personhood by seeing himself only through the eyes of others, choosing instead to adopt an ontology of self-awareness, self-definition, and self-actualization. This logic interrupts and negates the limits of double consciousness and of Fanon's historico-racial schema which is often imposed onto black bodies, privileging a reading of a body that is attuned to its creative powers. My reading of hip-hop as visual culture explores these complex relationships where encounters, agency, and subjectivity are circulated, challenged, and redefined. This

¹³⁹ A cross-reading of Fredric Jameson's *Signatures of the Visible*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990, specifically the first chapter and *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991; and Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, and George Lipsitz's *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*. Brooklyn and London: Verso, 1997 provide insight into post-industrial conditions, spatial orientation, and history out of which hip-hop emerges. While I include Jameson here for his attentive reading of the contours of post-modernism, I should also point out that my study emphasizes hip-hop and this moment as a profoundly affective one, which contradicts Jameson's characterization of the moment as one of "waning affect." More than any other cultural form of that era or since, hip-hop culture produces a heightened experience of affect. This is important because I find that the power (affective or otherwise) that black bodies have produced has not been accounted for or appreciated.

¹⁴⁰ KRS-One's name is an acronym for Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone. In this case he is speaking autobiographically, allowing himself to stand in for black male embodied creativity.

chapter extends the visual and social relationships described by Du Bois and Fanon, which I explain in my introduction, providing contemporary examples of how their theoretical work can be extended in new directions.

This chapter is a critical intervention that argues the merits of hip-hop texts as significant objects of visual culture studies. Hip-hop as visual culture is worthy of our analytical attention as it unearths objects and bodies which have been overlooked and undervalued and which do important work in shaping how we understand the powers of the body to create images that capture our attention and change how we see things. Many of these bodies circulate through scenes of violence and devastation to create powerful “direct encounters” with viewers and with the possibilities of their own self-making. Hip-hop artists and performers produce provocative “bodies” of work, which constitute an archive of scenes, historical references, aesthetic practices, and technological innovations. This archive expands the kinds of knowledge that bodies produce and our understanding of how bodies interact with technological and inanimate objects, how they re-imagine traumatic spaces, and perhaps most importantly, how these artists compel and move other bodies. These images and forms of embodied knowledge and experience provide a compelling answer to the question “what bodies can do,” particularly bodies which are invisible, marginalized or misunderstood. By truly seeing hip-hop visual culture and observing how these bodies shape vision and capture our attention we gain insight into what bodies can indeed do.

Building on the inquiry into what bodies can do, I develop a series of arguments about bodies, vision, and subject formation using a specific set of visual objects. The centerpiece of the chapter and a significant anchor for this entire study is the embodied artistry of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat is central because of his relationship to early hip-hop culture, which I discuss later in the chapter, and his role as a figure that inspired post-black discourse to emerge

as a legitimate framework of self-definition and actualization.¹⁴¹ He insisted that he be engaged for his intellectual and artistic character, rejecting dominant culture's persistent marginalization of black artists. He saw himself as an artistic force worthy of being acknowledged for his work and his ideas, rather than for antiquated and limited views on his racial identity. I read his work as an embodiment of metaphysical space as part of his works' aesthetic power draws from his ability to make visible seemingly unnamable dimensions of sensate, intellectual, and spiritual experience. He is the force that animates each of my individual claims and unifies them around the notion that powerful bodies and images make us see. I explore Basquiat's life, his early years of "writing on the city" under the SAMO moniker, his performance in the semi-autobiographical film *Downtown 81*, and his rise as an influential painter.

In addition to Basquiat, I have identified images, bodies and performances that emerged in and around hip-hop culture. These bodies, often male bodies of color, are a source of intrigue, but are also misread as socially threatening, monstrous, and devoid of artistic power. The objects that I have selected all address the fundamental concern of what bodies, can do, how they impact us, what they teach us, what they show and create. They include two films on early hip-hop culture *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, Jay-Z's book *Decoded* which chronicles hip-hop culture, two influential music videos for "The Message" and "C.R.E.A.M.," the embodied artistry of Basquiat, and the performances of illusionist David Blaine. I attend to how these bodies create art and visual works under uniquely dangerous or stressful conditions, where they are at times physically in danger, policed by the authorities, or responding to traumas that they have experienced or witnessed. I use this notion of trauma, specifically as it relates to Saidiya Hartman's explication of the relationship between witnessing trauma and subject formation, as

the foundation for a discussion of how these works and bodies initiate viewers into experiences of seeing trauma and the possibilities of being affected by these bodies and works. A second line of thinking explicates the notion of “initiation” as a seminal outcome that re-draws the parameters of spectatorship, where viewers in this formulation no longer simply see, but are drawn into the trauma, pulled, compelled (often with great resistance on their part) to inhabit and engage the spaces that the films, music videos, images, and bodies produce. Initiation goes beyond seeing, compelling viewers to acknowledge things that have often been invisible, obscured, or ignored. It allows for a heightened experience and an awareness of things that are often ugly or painful, which challenge our emotional registers. What is at stake here is the recognition that bodies and images, even those produced by and depicting marginalized bodies, do in fact have power. Initiation reconfigures the paradigm where black and brown bodies are objects being acted on by forces not of their making and instead provides a mechanism that allows the objects to become subjects, positioned to shape visual narratives, aesthetics, and viewers.

This project solidified around significant shared characteristics which I identified in a number of works that emerged in and around the hip-hop cultural movement of the 1970s and 80s. Perhaps the first marker of hip-hop’s visual power was the emergence of graffiti writing across New York City, particularly on subway trains, which is documented in the film *Wild Style* (Dir. Charlie Ahearn, 1982) and the documentary *Style Wars* (Dirs. Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, 1984). Both films uncover a world unseen by many. *Wild Style* captured the visual imagery of what hip-hop actually *looked* like, going to great lengths to document the essence of hip-hop’s early iconography in rapping, dee-jaying, graffiti writing, and break dancing and including some of its pioneering figures like Lee Quinones, Fab 5 Freddy, Rammellzee, and

Grandmaster Flash, actual locations, and neighborhoods. What is revealed is a city that was experiencing profound economic and social demise and was a visual eyesore in many ways and how young people began to use art, creativity, and performance to counter the poverty, lack of opportunities and resources, and the constraints placed on their social and physical mobility. These films also foreground how this culture produced “secret societies” where young people gathered to perform rituals and feats under the threat of great bodily harm as they were chased and jailed by authorities and at risk of injury, falling, or being electrocuted by live wires while writing or navigating the train yards.¹⁴² The act of producing art under particularly stressful and dangerous conditions, risking life and liberty compelled me to explore how hip-hop produces a visual aesthetic that assertively claims external space, is heavily invested in both the body’s physical and creative capacities, and is determined to be seen.

In addition to *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, a number of music videos create potent visual narratives that document the living conditions and visual landscape that these artists inhabited. I have identified two music videos produced a decade apart. Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five’s video for the song “The Message” (1982), and Wu-Tang Clan’s video for C.R.E.A.M (1993) both illuminate the relationship between vision, initiation and black male embodiment and space. Moving to the contemporary era I discuss the public performance spectacles of David

¹⁴² The death of graffiti artist Michael Stewart was a tragic incident that emphasized the dangers of these artistic practices. While the events surrounding his death are not completely clear, Stewart was killed after being pursued by police for writing on a subway station wall, and by some accounts died of strangulation. Stewart’s death profoundly impacted the black and the graffiti communities. Police officers were ultimately tried and acquitted in Stewart’s death. For information on Stewart’s death and injuries see <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1985/Six-Cops-Indicted-in-Connection-With-the-Death-of-Graffiti-Artist/id-1ee169f691f2dda0f4af7d6477e7d343>. Web 20 June 2012. Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was among those affected and did a painting that depicts Stewart writing and being beaten called *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*. Stewart’s death was also a source of inspiration for Spike Lee’s film *Do The Right Thing*, which inserted graffiti into the film’s mise-en-scene to commemorate the deaths of several black youths at the hands of brutality (police and otherwise) in New York in the 1980s. For Lee’s relationship to Stewart see <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/359465%7C0/Featured-Films.html>. Web. 20 June 2012.

Blaine explaining how the death-defying stunts he has attempted in front of urban crowds compel us to look at his body and to also realize the power of our own bodies.¹⁴³

Trauma, Subject Formation, and Metaphysical Space

To explicate what these bodies and images do I draw from discourses that position the body as embodying a knowledge of itself as a subject with a significant way of seeing and interacting with the world. Central to my analysis is the work of Saidiya Hartman who in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* provides useful analytical language and a clear articulation of the relationship between seeing and the creation of subjectivity.¹⁴⁴ Hartman's book begins by illustrating an incident of seeing and self-making that shapes the life of young Frederick Douglass, a story Douglass recounts in his now famous autobiography.¹⁴⁵ Hartman describes how having witnessed the beating of his Aunt Hester, Douglass is subsequently "born" into a subjectivity that is defined by the act of the beating and his having witnessed it.¹⁴⁶ I use this scene to account for similar traumas that are enacted by hip-hop music and videos. In the videos that I discuss, the rappers bear to witness to incidents of trauma and violence, familial dysfunction, poverty, crime, and police brutality and recount these experiences in their lyrics and in music video narratives. The viewers of these video images are also witnesses who are subjected and initiated into an awareness of what the bodies in these scenes experience. Hartman explains the significance of this act of witnessing and what it produces: "The passage through the blood-stained gate is an inaugural moment in the formation

¹⁴³ *Beautiful Struggle* is one of many specials on Blaine's career as a magician/illusionist/performance artist shown regularly on a number of cable channels including TLC and Bravo. Blaine has been frozen alive in ice, suspended hundreds of feet in the air on a platform for weeks, and held underwater without oxygen among other stunts.

¹⁴⁴ See Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁴⁵ See Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. First published by The Anti-Slavery Office, Boston, 1845.

¹⁴⁶ This scene is also seminal for Fred Moten, who spends significant time critiquing Hartman's reading and offers an analysis of the sonic implications of hearing Aunt Hester's beating.

of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject..." (3). I rely on how Hartman interrogates the subjectivity of the spectator, whom she argues is a witness or a voyeur in these visual and social relationships. In this chapter I try to account for how these visual relationships foster a more dynamic viewing experience and help us see and at times experience the knowledge that these bodies produce.

Subject formation and initiation are also integral elements components of "metaphysical space." In this chapter metaphysical space describes a dimension where bodies are suspended between the dichotomies of visibility and invisibility, flesh and technology, substance and nothingness, circulating away from a reading of bodies solely as "raced."¹⁴⁷ Metaphysical space is accessed as bodies seek an escape from urban blight, poverty and the forces that limit, confine, and police bodies. Bodies in hip-hop visual culture defy the physical constraints and limitations of race and of their own bodies, galvanizing the forces of creativity, ingenuity, and movement. In the essay "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat," bell hooks provides readers with an example of the kind of knowledge that a metaphysical reading of Basquiat might offer. She describes how the images in his work are enveloped in "anguish" and "estrangement," offering themselves as "rituals of sacrifice" and "rituals of recovery."¹⁴⁸ Evoking language that conjures an actual initiation process or ceremony, like "secret chambers" and the idea of "deciphering hidden codes" hooks codifies initiation as a metaphysical theme that challenges the physical impositions of white supremacy and the institutional forces that dismissed Basquiat's artistic prowess and his bodily presence. Hooks's work provides an example of a theoretical approach

¹⁴⁷ An upcoming documentary on hip-hop's pioneering rap artists called *Something From Nothing: The Art of Rap* reiterates the significance of rap as an "art" form and also evokes how rap music takes its material form from an ethereal "nothingness."

¹⁴⁸ See hooks's "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat" in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* London: Routledge, 1994. 25-37.

and language that inspires my discussion of initiation as a significant metaphysical theme in interpreting hip-hop visual culture.

An example of how I read hip-hop visual culture and metaphysical space comes in the form of a scene from the powerful film *La Haine* (Dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995). The film is set in a banlieue outside of Paris where three friends of African, Jewish and Arab ancestry navigate poverty, police brutality, violence, and alienation. For these young men hip-hop culture becomes an outlet for their angst and one scene in particular captures how it becomes a force that moves bodies, heightens sensation, and circulates into the atmosphere. The scene begins with a series of very high crane shots of the high rise apartment buildings where one character, Hubert, gazes out onto the large courtyard area where dozens of young men gather. The roar of whirling helicopters is heard overhead indicating a police presence, an ironic insertion given the actual presence of cameras filming the scene presumably in a helicopter. A dee-jay in one high rise apartment building opens a window and positions a huge speaker to project his music out towards the gathering area, a gesture signaling his intent to provide his music for the consumption and pleasure of others. Inside the dee-jay's bedroom he steps behind his equipment, but not before engaging in a series of heavily embodied gestures. He warms up, mixing and scratching the records with remarkable quickness, precision, and dexterity. The camera is positioned at the same height as the equipment, yet it captures the dee-jay's entire body. He uses his hands, arms, and shoulders, moving back and forth from one side of his turntables to the other, even using his mouth to manipulate the buttons and dials, creating quick cuts and scratches, sometimes rubbing his hands in a slower and smoother motion over the records for a different effect. Then he stops abruptly and resets the machine. He pauses, gently cracks his knuckles and rubs his hands together as if he is warming them, then brings them to his

face and rubs his eyes and face in a washing motion. He removes his hands from his face revealing a slight smile, then takes a breath, adjusts his baseball cap, and stretches his shoulders. Then, remarkably, he begins again, spinning, scratching, and cutting the records, this time with even more fluidity and vigor. The camera is now behind him, capturing a different perspective on his body's performance. This scene emphasizes the dee-jay's body as an active, self-aware force that intentionally prepares for this performance and for the power that it projects outward onto the listening ears below. He is aware of his skills, his body, his machines, and of his capacity to connect with and move the outside world. This scene provides an intimate point-of-view of this hyper-embodied performance and a subsequent scene captures the vast, ethereal reach of the body's ability to manifest powerful external and internal sensations. This next scene's perspective shifts to the exterior of the apartment building in a fluid and dramatic pan across the courtyard. The invisible movement of the sound is tracked by the crane shots which become bumpier, swaying from side to side almost mimicking an awkward bird or human flying over the banlieue. The camera rises higher eclipsing the top of the very tall apartments, then cuts to Vinz, a young Jewish man, who looks up in disbelief as the sounds rain down on him. Almost in a trance Vinz's face is incredulous, and he says in a loose English translation "Man, he is the shit." Vinz, who throughout the film is a volatile malcontent, is profoundly moved by the music and the artistry of the dee-jay and the audience witnesses this sublime exchange between the dee-jay who initiates Vinz and potentially other viewers into this pleasurable experience.

Decoding

These hip-hop texts and bodies are not often recognized for their complexity and require tools to help us interpret them. One contemporary text that articulates the importance of reading the visual complexity of hip-hop is Jay-Z's aptly titled book, *Decoded*.¹⁴⁹ In 2010 rap icon Jay-Z released *Decoded*, a book that is part memoir and part treatise on the history and value of hip-hop as an art form. What is most striking about the book itself is its investment in visuality, from the cover art to the numerous interior photographs and images documenting hip-hop's evolution. Jay-Z and co-author Dream Hampton integrate art images, symbols, illustrations, and photographic imagery of significant cultural figures ranging from Spike Lee and Marcus Garvey, to Ronald Reagan, the Black Panthers, the Beastie Boys, Kurt Cobain, Muhammad Ali, and Paul Robeson. *Decoded* is a visual encyclopedia capturing the history of hip-hop culture and significant moments of the last forty years. There are numerous images depicting black male fashion and style, as well as the iconography of New York's neighborhoods. Images of sound technology—the boom box, tape decks, and vinyl records abound, often imprinted with words and images. The bodies in these images are treated with great aesthetic care, positioned in ways that are reminiscent of the work of artists Kehinde Wiley and Barkley Kendricks.¹⁵⁰ One striking image depicts legendary rap group Run DMC, whose faces are in silhouette and only the imprint of their iconic fedoras makes the image a familiar one. Hip-hop lyrics are included, often words from Jay-Z's songs, and the text is enlarged to be seen and read, and also to emphasize the

¹⁴⁹ Carter, Shawn. *Decoded*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Kehinde Wiley is an artist whose work positions the bodies of young black men within the context of traditional Western portraiture. For an in-depth reading of his work in relationship to hip-hop style and aesthetics see Krista Thompson's essay "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop." *Art Bulletin* 91.4 (2009): 481-505. Richard Powell has written extensively on artist Barkley Kendricks whose work reimagines the conventions and style of portraiture to create complicated, often ironic portraits of black subjects, particularly black men. See Richard Powell's book, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

relationship between hip-hop and vision. Perhaps *Decoded's* most important contribution is its claim that hip-hop should be viewed as an art form that navigates narratives of high and low culture and race and class to become the most visible and influential cultural movement of the latter part of the twentieth century and this new millennium. Connecting hip-hop to visual art is a necessary discursive move as art remains a sphere of cultural canon formation and a stream of commerce and social visibility.

Jay-Z argues in *Decoded* that hip-hop is inextricably connected to the genius, labor, and experiences of black, brown, and poor bodies and yet he chooses Andy Warhol's *Rorschach* to don the book's cover.



Fig 2.1 *Decoded* cover¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ The image is available online at http://www.amazon.com/DECODED-Decoded-Author-Hardcover-Nov-2010/dp/B004CGJTGy/ref=sr_1_8?ie=UTF8&qid=1345131270&sr=8-8&keywords=decoded. Web. 20 July 2011.

While “Rorschach” as a work of art foregrounds questions of perspective and the powers of individuated interpretation, which is a valid point of departure when discussing hip-hop culture, the image also symbolizes the power and irony of the post-black impulse.¹⁵² The act of placing an image created by an iconic white artist on the cover of a book that ostensibly foregrounds the value of black and marginalized artists is a profound gesture. Jay-Z uses this image and the book itself to insert hip-hop into broader artistic and cultural narratives. This is in essence a post-black move as it foregoes the racial and cultural capital that may have been gained by having a black body or referent on the cover, choosing instead to provide a more complicated reading of hip-hop culture. The image on the cover provokes viewers to re-think what hip-hop means and to interrogate it, rather than attach a visceral significance to it. The cover incites us to raise questions about hip-hop as an art form, whether it is primarily an oral or visual medium, a black art form, high or low culture. The use of the Warhol art also signals a shift away from hip-hop as simply scenes of break-dancers, rappers, and images of a decaying South Bronx, inviting an exploration of other visual subjects and offers instead an opening to read hip-hop as a central element of post-black visual culture. A critical attribute of post-blackness is intertextuality and the inclusion of references from multiple influences and sources. In *Decoded*, intertextuality surfaces, for example, with the inclusion of references to Al Pacino as Tony Montana in *Scarface* (Dir. DePalma, 1983) or of revolutionary icon Che’ Guevara, which have been circulated broadly (often on t-shirts), both becoming synonymous with hip-hop culture’s ability to commodify cultural and political symbolism. Placing a piece of Basquiat’s art on the cover would have been too obvious a choice; instead, *Decoded* uses the cover art as a post-black initiatory gesture to hip-hop’s intertextual and global reach. It speaks to the multi-voiced, multivalent possibilities of

¹⁵² Henry Louis Gates has interestingly said of Fanon that he is a “Rorschach blot with legs.” See “Critical Fanonism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991): 457-470.

hip-hop performers and their awareness of multiple cultural traditions.¹⁵³ This impulse also positions blackness in constant contact with other influences, as an idea that is always in circulation, flux, and evolution.¹⁵⁴ Hip-hop in *Decoded* does not belong exclusively to black artists or black consumers, to New Yorkers or even to hip-hop fans. Hip-hop as a post-black phenomenon does not diminish the labor, genius or contributions of black artists, rather it positions this creativity within the broader scope of art, culture, and spectatorship.

Hip-hop has often been deconstructed and theorized as a sociological or geo-political construct and as the offspring of black cultural traditions, but rarely as a visual phenomenon.¹⁵⁵ In an essay entitled, “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop” Krista Thompson explains, “Despite the prominence of visual expression in contemporary hip-hop, many art historians, curators and critics frame hip-hop primarily as a musical genre or employ analytic approaches derived from the study of hip-hop’s sonic iterations” (481). Thompson explains that even in installations and exhibitions which at face value seem to be vested in displaying and foregrounding hip-hop as a visual medium curators and art historians often have difficulty accepting its visual prowess. While it may have seemed intuitive to connect hip-hop to “analogies derived from techniques of hip-hop dee-jaying,

¹⁵³This double-voiced-ness evokes Henry Louis Gates’s theory of the signifying monkey and the double-voiced trope that he identifies in African American literature. See Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. See also Kobena Mercer’s account of the double-voiced functionality influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin in the work of Betye Saar, Robert Colescott and David Hammons in “Tropes of the Grottesque in the Black Avant Garde.”

¹⁵⁴The title and content of Harry Elam and Kennell Jackson’s book, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005 attests to this idea of flux, evolution and circulation of black culture, as well as describing how it also moves outward from black communities to become a globally trafficked phenomenon.

¹⁵⁵ I have discussed some of the literature that examines hip-hop across these modalities in my introduction. For a discussion on hip-hop as a sociological/geo-political phenomenon see again Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture* and *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: The History of the Hip-Hop Generation* by Jeff Chang. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005. For a political perspective see S. Craig Watkins *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005 and Imani Perry’s *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* and Jeffrey Ogbar’s *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence, KS: Wichita State University Press, 2007.

specifically, “sampling, mixing, and remixing” or “cutting and scratching,” in the formulation of hip-hop’s visual aesthetic she argues that we lose “a more radical interrogation of visuality in hip-hop and its relation to art and its histories” (Thompson 481-82). Thompson connects this lack of attention to the visuality of black culture to earlier critiques leveled by scholars including Michele Wallace, who argues that our engagement, almost infatuation, with blackness in relation to musical (oral) traditions “stifles and represses most of the potential for understanding the visual in Afro-American Culture.”¹⁵⁶ Likewise, in *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*, Lisa Gail Collins riffs on this notion that visuality continues to suffer from a lack of critical attention, saying: “Quiet as it’s kept, there’s a visual paradox at the center of African American thought. There is also a simultaneous preoccupation with visual culture and a neglect of visual art and artists” (1). Collins’s assertion acknowledges an attraction to visuality and blackness, yet reminds us of a persistent disregard for the art objects and the creators themselves. This critique of the inadequacy of theoretical work on visual culture and blackness points to a disavowal of these art objects as worthy of substantive analytical attention.

In one of the few essays on hip-hop visual culture James Brunson III describes what he calls our “fascination with hip-hop” in a visual sense pointing to the National Museum of American History’s collection of “objects from all aspects of hip-hop arts and culture...including vinyl records, handwritten lyrics, boom boxes, clothing and costumes...”(74).¹⁵⁷ Brunson explains, “As the hip-hop economy has continued to grow, the popularity of its objects and images as forms of visual culture has intensified” (1). He posits a number of functions that hip-

¹⁵⁶ See Michele Wallace’s essay, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American culture,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990, 40.

¹⁵⁷ Brunson’s essay, “Showing, Seeing: Hip-Hop, Visual Culture, and the Show-and-Tell Performance” is in the *Black History Bulletin of the Association for the Study of African American Life & History* 74.1 (2011): 6-12.

hop as visual culture provides, “Visual culture offers reflections on the objects and imagery of hip-hop. It provides face-to-face encounters with stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, and the social spaces in which it appears” (74).

While Brunson emphasizes how hip-hop objects have been fetishized, art historian Derek Murray in an essay entitled “Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle” offers a pointed critique of this fetishization of hip-hop in an institutional context, describing the challenges of integrating hip-hop, the epitome of an “outsider” culture, into museum culture. In his analysis of some of the early exhibits that documented hip-hop as a visual art form Murray discusses some of the issues first brought to the fore by the presence of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and the visibility of graffiti culture in the 1980s. He foregrounds the tensions between hip-hop, art history, and visual culture studies, describing hip-hop as:

...a visually progressive art form in and of itself that continually fights for the control of its image. Hip-hop is all about visual agency. It fully understands the power of the visual image and its impact on ideological perceptions. The culture of high art is also well abreast of the potency of the visual, but what does it have to say about hip-hop? Can it say anything useful at all? (7)

Murray cites a number of challenges with representing hip-hop culture in the “high art,” institutional context. Describing the “One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art” (2001) exhibit at the Bronx Museum, he writes, “what I found to be most striking as I walked through the exhibition was its banality and quiet resonance. Like most exhibitions it was insistent upon the sedated, polite contemplation and restrained etiquette that is characteristic of art viewing” (7). He observes a similar viewing experience in “Mass Appeal: The Art Object

and Hip-Hop Culture” which he says, “makes hip-hop safe, palatable viewing for a curious, albeit apprehensive high-art public” (8). Murray concludes that these exhibits and the contexts of viewing that they establish might be interpreted as “dangerously anthropological in their tone as they “parade ethnic artists around in a thematic forum akin to a type of degrading, traveling minstrelsy, disallowing a complex and discursive reading of their work. For some, hip-hop must ultimately be domesticated and watered down to be palatable for art-world consumption” (8). Ultimately he argues that hip-hop has birthed an “avant-garde” visual culture that is doubly problematized as it is often vilified in the popular sphere and stripped of its vitality and critical value in the institutions of high-art. I argue that we need not solely experience hip-hop as an art form in an institutional context, nor should we be focused on the objects that are associated with it. Instead the visual culture of hip-hop constitutes a complex *mélange* of imagery including still and moving images, short and feature films, album/cd covers, photography, graffiti, and music videos. The most prolific imagery associated with early hip-hop was not of art or of moving or still images, but of bodies in urban space. New York, particularly images of the South Bronx, became the face of urban dystopia and early hip-hop artists would make an imprint onto these spaces.¹⁵⁸ The city-space was a site of poverty and social desolation, but also a surface onto which alternative visual and cinematic cultures would emerge. The images of the city marked a significant historical and cultural moment where the visibility of urban decay reached an affective peak, yet the suffering and dormant creativity of urban communities remained obscured.

¹⁵⁸ The South Bronx is a significant visual symbol of New York as a center of urban dystopia, and it is also considered the birthplace of hip-hop culture. See Rose’s *Black Noise*.

Bodies, Graffiti, and Urban Space

Graffiti artists provide a powerful example of how bodies create a visual text which evokes strong reactions from viewers or at times compels viewers to avoid looking. The presence of graffiti has the capacity to interrupt our bodies' habitual behaviors and seeing graffiti can produce a range of responses from viewers including shock, awe, dismay, and disdain for the artists and the work. Over time it becomes part of the banal, rather than the sublime, as it becomes part of our everyday experiences and visual environment. Yet what is important here is that these bodies attempt to intervene in what we see, what we engage, and how we feel. The intentionality of this gesture to encounter and potentially impact another body by producing something that is meant to be seen and which is created in a very embodied way is a central theme of this chapter.

Hip-hop as visual culture was born of bodily performances on the urban space. In her groundbreaking book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose provides a salient account of the earliest days of hip-hop and in very descriptive language describes this nascent visual cosmos:

Graffiti artists spray painted murals and (name)“tags” on trains, trucks, and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property. Early break-dancers' elaborate technologically inspired street corner dances involving head spins on concrete sidewalks made the street theatrically friendly...(Rose 22).

These early performative and artistic acts became community spectacles. Dancers would transfix passers-by with moves that merged concrete and flesh, defying space, matter, and the

logic of the human body. Rose also describes the significance of the visibility of the South Bronx in particular, as it became the iconographic site of urban despair.



Fig 2.2 Neal Boenzi, *The New York Times*, 1975 Charlotte Street in the South Bronx

Films would utilize the neighborhoods of the South Bronx as a backdrop for human, urban and visual despair. (33). Rose identifies films like *Fort Apache the Bronx* (Dir. Daniel Petrie, 1981), *Wolfen* (Dir. Michael Wadleigh, 1981), and *Koyaanisqatsi* (Dir. Godfrey Reggio, 1982) which depict the South Bronx as “a symbol of ruin” (33). The visibility of New York’s urban space became a significant visual trope of the nascent iconography of hip-hop.

The bodies that produce graffiti and visual culture also provide a literal and symbolic template through which we can read the possibilities of the body. Hip-hop as a cultural form

emerges, ironically, in the form of graffiti, which was a highly visible practice, yet one where the artists' bodies and identities remained invisible.



Fig 2.3 Photo by Eric Felisbert, *New York Times* Lexington Avenue train, artist, Lee Quinones

Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's documentary *Style Wars* (1982) chronicles how these artists, who were black, Latino, and white, wanted their art to be visible to a world that often stigmatized them, even as they remained largely out of sight. They were imagined by the larger public, particularly in the imagination of law enforcement and city government, as “midnight marauders,” invisible specters, who “vandalized” a city already knee-deep in deterioration.¹⁵⁹

The authoritarian voice heard in the voice-over narration in the beginning of *Style Wars* stands in

¹⁵⁹ I use the term “midnight marauders” to describe the graffiti artists who worked largely after midnight. It is also the title of the third album from esteemed rap group A Tribe Called Quest released in 1993.

for the white male authority figure who establishes himself as the voice of reason and control providing his account of the perspective of many of New York's citizens of graffiti as “a plague that never ends” and “a symbol that we’ve lost control.” Bernie Jacobs, an official responsible for stopping the onslaught of graffiti writers says in *Style Wars*, “graffiti is not an art, but the application of a medium to a surface.” The tagging on buildings was more easily controlled, but the subway trains became an extreme source of territorial contestation, where a battle ensued between then- Mayor Koch and his city officials and the thousands of youngsters bent on marking the city with their imprint. The graffiti made real and visible the existence of bodies that performed these feats and showcased talents which were rarely acknowledged. Mobile bodies of graffiti artists, breakdancers, dee-jays, and visual artists, like Basquiat and Keith Haring animated urban spaces of New York and later in Paris, Rio, and London, marking territories which they were told did not belong to them.¹⁶⁰ New York Mayor Koch launched a successful campaign against graffiti artists, who were perceived as bodies that threatened to take cultural and territorial ownership of the city. The continued presence of the graffiti, whether viewed as art or as an eyesore, positioned the artists as real and threatening as they accomplished these feats under the constant threat and surveillance of New York City Transit Workers and police officers. *Style Wars* documents the dangers that the graffiti artists faced taking the viewer through the dark underground tunnels and the train yards cordoned off with barbed wire and monitored by German shepherds. The documentary takes viewers inside this world showing the great lengths to which the artists would go to produce graffiti. The film features the artists and their creative process, inserting viewers into a world of names, aliases, styles of writing, symbols, and signifiers which did not exist to the train riders and passers-by who lived outside of

¹⁶⁰ Keith Haring was a white artist and contemporary of Basquiat. His work became an international phenomenon and was an example of how the graffiti aesthetic became a staple of high art venues.

this system of visual and cultural signification. The ability of graffiti artists to ‘perform’ these feats, that is, to scale the side of a building or train at two o’clock in the morning and produce a work of art, stands in for the highest ideals of artistic labor, yet went unseen and was performed under duress. The production and visibility of graffiti created new conditions for seeing which defied the practices of viewing in museums, movie theaters, or in front of television screens in our living rooms. Much of the seeing of these works was accompanied by a social and internal anxiety that positioned these bodies not as artists, but as forces that threatened to destroy external spaces and destabilize our conceptions of art and public space.

A scene in *Style Wars* also captures how one prominent seventeen year old graffiti artist sees himself as an invisible force in a telling exchange between the artist and his mother as they are interviewed by the documentarian:

Mother: It’s dangerous down there, but his contention is that he’s immortal, like most 17 year olds.

Son/Artist: It’s a matter of getting a tag on each line, it’s called “going All-City.” People see your tags in Queens, Uptown, Downtown, all over. (Mom chuckles with chagrin)

M: ...I don’t think he knows how silly that sounds. He’s going “All-city” to what end? And when I ask him, he says to me, ‘well just so people can see it, and they know who I am.’ Nobody knows who he is...

S: (interrupts) It’s not a matter so they know who I am...It’s a matter of bombing, knowing that I can do it.¹⁶¹ Every time I get on the train almost everyday I see my name and I say yeah, you know it, I was there, I bombed it. It’s for me, it’s not for nobody else to see. I don’t care about nobody else seein’ it or the fact if they can read it or not. It’s

¹⁶¹ “Bombing” is another term for doing graffiti on subway trains.

for me and other graffiti writers, that we can read it. All these other people who don't write, they're excluded. I don't care about them, they don't matter to me. It's for us."

(*Style Wars*)

This exchange captures how the graffiti artists use the insider/outsider dichotomy and the coded language and images that they produce to create power. The graffiti images are embedded with meaning in the world of their making, which as the young graffiti artist explains, only the writers can truly understand and "decode." The young graffiti artist mentions that the artists gain notoriety within their community of artists, which both *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* depict very clearly. Yet what the young artist does not acknowledge is that these images have an impact on the uninitiated as well. Compelling an uninitiated passer-by to look at these images confers on these artists a kind of visibility and the power to make someone look. The ability to affect viewers is connected to the desire of these artists to be recognized, even famous. Fred Braithwaite acknowledges an often unspoken objective of graffiti artists: "the whole objective in doing graffiti is fame, achieving a certain status and a certain recognition, like I'm gonna take over that space and people are gonna know me."¹⁶² The pursuit of fame, visibility, status, and validation also has a metaphysical currency. Being lifted out of the shadows of obscurity into any degree of visibility pierces the veil that limits how and where black bodies are seen and encountered and while the production of graffiti does not make the artists visible, it gives their work a footprint that lingers. The pursuit of fame and visibility is also the desire to exist in the metaphysical space of the collective mind.

The relationship between hip-hop, embodiment, and space is also explored in Robin James's essay entitled, "These. Are. The Breaks": Rethinking *Disagreement* Through Hip Hop."

¹⁶² See Braithwaite's interview in Tamra Davis's film *The Radiant Child*, 2010.

James reads Jacques Rancière's theory of political disagreement "with and against" Kodwo Eshun's theorization of hip hop and embodiment.¹⁶³ James leverages Rancière's argument that the practice of art is concerned with "bodily positions and movements and effects a change of rapport between what the arms know how to do and what the eye is capable of seeing," to comment on the role that embodiment performs in hip-hop's artistic character.¹⁶⁴ Through Rancière, James provides an account which is also useful to understanding how we can move through the discourses that ground hip-hop as a social, racial, and material reality, toward a reading that is attuned to the metaphysical energies that bodies in hip-hop possess and disseminate. Eshun provides a different take on the body, emphasizing how the body is in union with music, science and technology saying, "Music is the science of human nervous systems" (Eshun 161). Eshun explains how graffiti is powerful not solely as a "political" entity, but that its powers and possibilities emerge in the midst of language, space and embodiment:

The city walls turn into secret channels. The city trains become galleries without walls for the cyphertribes. The pictogram involves the senses in McLuhan's "ballet of postures of the mind." Wildstyle exercises the senses, puts the eyes and ears through an escherized assault course (31).

For Eshun, graffiti's cryptic, enigmatic language transforms physical space and sensate experience. He also describes how through hip-hop we do not gain "knowledge," but an understanding of the "unknowable." I share Eshun's investment in this notion of the "unknowable" which for me represents what metaphysical space makes visible. Graffiti art and writing produces signs and language, which escapes from bodies revealing what has been

¹⁶³ See Robin James's "These. Are. The Breaks": Rethinking *Disagreement* Through Hip Hop." *Transformations* Iss. 19 (2011). Accessed online at http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_19/article_05.shtml. Web. 4 Apr 2012. Eshun's argument is explained in *More Brilliant Than the Sun*.

¹⁶⁴ James cites Rancière's, "Thinking Between Disciplines," 4.

dormant, obscured, invisible, and unnamable. The embodied art and performances of hip-hop artists covered the city in signs, symbols and codes, directing us to see it in new ways. They reveal their own systems of signification and artistry and the contrasting deterioration of communities, buildings, homes, and neighborhoods. In this sense hip-hop becomes a bridge between the creative powers of the artists and shared public space, initiating viewers into a new awareness of the possibilities of both spheres. Graffiti made viewers look at a city that did not want to see itself, or perhaps did not want to know the city in this way. It invites a moment of consideration, an inquiry that asks: What is this? Who could have done it? How did they do it? While the individual identities of graffiti artists remain obscured, they are nonetheless aware of the power to anonymously insert themselves into social and visual relations. They provide a rupture, an opening that allows their art and an invisible, intangible metaphysical subjectivity to manifest onto the social sphere and into the consciousness of the viewer.

In the film *Wild Style* (1982) filmmaker Charlie Ahearn puts the visuality of early hip-hop on full display. Ahearn's film depicts hip-hop culture as a safe haven, a secret society of young black, Latino, and a few white artists, one that is dominated by young men, but includes a few young women as well. The film captures the point of view of these artists, depicting how they maneuver the city's landscape on trains and on foot through hidden corridors and back room clubs. *Wild Style* captures the visual iconography of early hip-hop with great precision, drawing from performances by legendary graffiti artists, dancers, and rappers who work against the backdrop of the New York City's neighborhoods in the 1980s, initiating the viewer into a hidden cultural space. In the film, Whites are only allowed into this space, but initiated, as they represented a hegemonic threat to the sacredness of the creative space. In one scene an ambitious rapper Fabe (played by rapper Fab 5 Freddy, who essentially plays himself) brings an

equally ambitious white female journalist into the train yards where graffiti artists gather. Fabe is chastised by the others who promptly leave, suspicious of the aggressive journalist's motives and fearful that their space will be exposed and that their identities as writers will be revealed to others. After the journalist survives the earlier trials in the film, she spends time watching these artists and introduces them to potential benefactors. She becomes connected to them and their creative space and decides not to "out" the identity of a rogue graffiti artist to get a hot scoop. The climactic final scene of the film is a huge event showcasing the local rappers, dee-jays, dancers, and artists on a large outdoor stage. The journalist stands quietly in the crowd watching the artists, not to write a story, but simply experiencing the performances. *Wild Style* ushers in the iconography of early hip-hop and emphasizes initiation as a powerful visual allegory and mechanism. In the film, initiation functions as a series of obstacles or boundaries which protect the work and creative spaces in which the graffiti artists work. These obstacles provide a necessary distance between the visual object and the viewer (in this case a young white journalist) who is an outsider to the culture. Initiation is then a process that keeps viewers at distance, challenging them to observe, contemplate, and reflect before being able to fully apprehend these objects. The world of graffiti art is one of insiders and outsiders. Placing the cryptic art encoded with ideas, commentary, and names in bold, conspicuous places where outsiders will encounter it suggests that the artists want their work to be seen and engaged, yet also decoded. This process of making viewers navigate the insider/outsider dichotomy is also a function of initiation. Ultimately in these texts of hip-hop visual culture, initiation provides space and distance as an opportunity for a vulnerable population to expose its ideas, art, and creativity to an often skeptical public. This space is dominated by Black and Latino bodies and Whites are largely seen as a threat, as outsiders or authority figures who threaten to expose the

identities of the artists and jeopardize the sacred creative space that they share. A White female journalist who crosses the threshold into this sacred space is kept at bay and not allowed into it until she too, is initiated: her car breaks down, she escapes being shot and yet she must navigate the hidden haunts of the graffiti artists. In one scene, an ambitious rapper Fabe (played by Fab 5 Freddy) seeking fame and publicity brings the

Birth, Initiation, and Visuality

Initiation also has significant implications in hip-hop music videos. These works foreground the sonic intensity of hip-hop music and also deploy carefully crafted mise-en-scene and powerful imagery, imagery which is often harsh, profane and painful to look at. These images themselves initiate viewers, testing whether they can be acceptable witnesses to this universe of images. I begin my analysis of hip-hop music videos by first examining the lyrics to a well-known song by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five called “The Message” which was released in 1982. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five is a historically significant group in the annals of American music and hip-hop culture and the group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (the first rap group to be so honored) in 2007. Grandmaster Flash, born Joseph Saddler in Barbados, pioneered the art of scratching and dee-jaying.¹⁶⁵ “The Message” is perhaps the group's most well-known song and it powerfully articulates the social and visual landscape of urban blight. The song documents how listeners can become “see-ers” and explains how we are initiated into this visual sphere. I first explore the song’s lyrics then analyze the music video that accompanies the song. A verse of the song states:

¹⁶⁵ Grandmaster Flash also performs in *Wild Style*.

A child is born, with no state of mind
 Blind to the ways of mankind
 God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too
 Because only God knows what you go through
 You grow in the ghetto, living second rate
 And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
 The places you play and where you stay
 Looks like one great big alley way

(Melle Mel, "The Message")

Rapper Melle Mel's lyrics depict a primal birth scene which imagines children born into the epic urban narrative which the song meticulously and forcefully describes. This excerpt is particularly useful as it describes how the child, most likely Black or Latino, is born into urban blight and comes of age and into a knowledge of itself and its surroundings by witnessing the lack, violence, and ugliness of the urban ghetto. This is a useful starting place to discuss how we are born into cultural, physical and spatial orientations of seeing and being. The newborn child here is initially unable to see, but more importantly, sufficiently "uninitiated," that is, pure in its inability to comprehend the gravity and severity of the circumstances into which it is born, thus "blind to the ways of mankind." This lyrical excerpt insightfully explicates hip-hop as a "scene of subjection," commenting on the ontological relationship between the birth of a new human soul and its immersion into traumatic surroundings. As the child grows it becomes steeped in "second rate living" and is eventually overtaken by vision and consumed by feelings of despair. According to the lyrics, it is the eyes themselves that house the festering hatred and not the soul or even the heart which is often the metaphorical site of human emotion. Here the eyes are not

simply windows to the soul or purveyors of sight, but they initiate the urban child into humanity, feeling, and being. Presumably as the child sees, it's developing visual sphere constructs an identity that is integrally tied to its living conditions, enacting a traumatized subjectivity and a warped sense of personhood.

By presenting this primal scene "The Message" illustrates how hip-hop culture is far more than an oral phenomenon, but one that expands the sensory experience of rap music to the visual sphere. It effectively constructs powerful imagery through its lyrical content and with the advent of early music video technology combines the spoken word with a visual narrative. "The Message" illuminates the conditions in poor communities in New York and elsewhere where human beings are chafed raw by the harshness of life. Melle Mel's pleading narrative creates a visual picture of broken glass, people urinating in shared spaces, and violence, invoking the senses to interpret this assault on our sensibilities. The opening verse of the song articulates what is seen and experienced in the urban space:

Broken glass everywhere

People pissing on the stairs, you know they just

Don't care

I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise

Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice

Rats in the front room, roaches in the back

Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat

I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far

Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car

The song goes on to describe how this process not only initiates the urban dweller/see-er into the world of the visual, but how the visual sphere debilitates the see-er's physical and mental state of being:

Mid-range, migraine, cancered membrane
 Sometimes I think I'm going insane, I swear I might hijack a plane. . .
 I can't walk through the park, cause it's crazy after the dark
 Keep my hand on the gun, cause they got me on the run
 I feel like an outlaw, broke my last fast jaw
 Hear them say you want some more, livin' on a seesaw

The song's hook also provides commentary, explaining that these conditions are not only undesirable, but inescapable, revealing the exacting toll that this takes on the psyche:

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge,
 I'm tryin not to lose my head
 It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
 How I keep from going under.

Ultimately it is vision that initiates the child into knowledge of a broken environment, contributing to a subjectivity that is also, at least in part, broken. "The Message" has remained a popular anthem of early hip-hop in part because of Melle Mel's intense, almost maniacal delivery, but also because of the precision of its visual commentary. The disturbing images of rats, roaches, urination, and menacing junkies as an inescapable reality into which certain human beings are born, creates a formula for despair, but also invites the possibility of a creative response to these conditions and experiences.

Birth and maturation in the urban ghetto can be understood as an initiation, a birth of sorts, into a scene of “visual violence.” “Visual violence” as described in “The Message” includes seeing or living in close proximity to trash, filth, rodents, crime, drugs, drugs addicts, pornography, prostitution, decaying buildings (homes), and human waste. Seeing and living amongst these elements creates an assault on the sensibilities of the see-er, and most profoundly on those who see these things habitually. I consider birth into these scenes of visual violence analogous to the initiation of a slave into a regime of physical violence and bodily oppression as Hartman explains earlier in this section. Hip-hop music and music videos that similarly evoke descriptions of traumatic visual experiences can either confine the see-er/hearer to its regime of subjection and trauma, or open a portal for the creation of alternative subject positions and other kinds of embodied responses. Hip-hop culture has functioned as a response to the detritus of urban poverty and subjection by recuperating and salvaging old turntables and sound equipment, the sides of decaying building and sidewalks as spaces on which to dee-jay, create art, and breakdance. These artists rapped about these spaces, wrote and performed *on* these spaces. The concrete sidewalk becomes a stage; a decaying building a canvass, old record players and audio equipment are revitalized and used to play and scratch records and mix music. The lyrics of “The Message” and the visual scenes that it enacts explain how urban dwellers of these particular communities are initiated into seeing and also into subjectivities as producers of art and culture.

As music videos like the one for “The Message” emerged, they began to shape a distinctive visual universe. The most pronounced images are of the bodies, primarily the body of Melle Mel standing on a heap of what was formerly a building. The first clear image featured in the video is not of rats, roaches, crime or violence, but an image of two black men, other members of the group, walking down a street. One carries a staple of the time, a large boom

box, on his shoulder. Within the frame there is an elevated subway train in the background and the street is lined with unkempt trees, grass and parked cars. The two men walk deliberately and in a few seconds meet up with the other members of the group. This scene foregrounds the boom box as a sign of urban culture and the technology of music. The scene is set, not for urban decay, but for musical artistry as the music is foregrounded, valued above the threats that will soon be described. Images of the group, though not fully visible or recognizable, are intercut with a variety of images of urban life including city streets, a homeless figure, and decaying housing projects. One memorable image features a tight shot of a desolate, seemingly uninhabitable housing project and as the camera zooms out, we see the rubble that surrounds the bombed-out building. Moments later a video image of a bottle being smashed on the concrete is synchronized with the song's explosive opening lyrics "Broken glass everywhere!" The next image is of rapper Melle Mel who stands center frame in front of a decrepit, boarded-up building. His attire is instantly noticeable and distinctive as it is very stylized, more like a costume than the standard urban dress of the time. Wearing a fitted white shirt, an equally fitted short sleeved light blue jacket, snug pants, boots, gloves, and a cap covering his corn rows, Melle Mel's style is almost theatrical, reminiscent of the 1970s group The Village People. This costume works effectively with Melle Mel's emphatic gestures, suggesting a full-blown theatrical performance. The other members of the group are only partially visible and again not fully recognizable. It is Melle Mel who is on stage here, indicative of the common practice of foregrounding the primary rapper more prominently than the dee-jay or other members; even legendary dee-jay Grandmaster Flash, whose name takes top billing, remains out of sight. The video continues the practice of synchronizing only a few of the images that Melle Mel describes, like the glass or the tow-truck, but the most salient and powerful images from the lyrics are not

actually included in the visual imagery of the video. Moments later in an interesting bit of stagecraft, as Melle Mel recites the song's unforgettable hook, "Don't push me . . .," he moves his arms and body in a sliding motion and slides across the frame, revealing the rest of the group's members posed in a dramatic stance on the steps of the abandoned building. Melle Mel's body language suggests that this is his posse or crew, those who will back him up. But this image is something of a teaser, as the camera quickly moves on to other images of people walking along New York streets, standing in storefronts or driving in traffic jams in Manhattan. These scenes provide a contrast between Manhattan as a bustling, thriving center of commerce, and the other neighborhoods which suffer from stagnation and atrophy. One of rap's earliest music videos, "The Message" conforms to some of the generic conventions outlined by Rose:

Rap video has also developed its own style and its own genre conventions. These conventions visualize hip hop style and usually affirm rap's primary thematic concerns: identity and location. Over most of its brief history (rap video production began in earnest in the mid-to late 1980s), rap video themes have repeatedly converged around the depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew or support system" (Rose 9-10).

As the video progresses, the other rappers perform in medium close-ups each wearing their own "costume." The other members remain in the background, gesturing and rocking from side to side. The remainder of the video continues to focus on Melle Mel as part actor, part rapper, and part storyteller. This video and its lyrical text position the group, primarily Melle Mel, as a narrator of an urban nightmare. The group does not perform on a traditional stage, but on the environment itself, the steps of the abandoned building and the rubble, with dramatic costumes

and stylized gestures reinforcing their presentation. The last scene of the video depicts the group being harassed and carted away by the police for no cause. This image reinforces the vulnerability of black male bodies who are doubly victimized, having experienced the visual violence, they now become misrecognized as the trauma. These men who are witnesses articulating their perspective of the primal urban nightmare, are now misinterpreted by the authorities as *being* the nightmare, the visual menace or eyesore that must be policed and removed from sight. This video positions bodies, space, and performance against the backdrop of a dystopic metanarrative where unsuspecting black male bodies are victims of a world that is both threatened by their presence and damaging to their sense of agency and self-awareness.

As hip-hop culture continued to evolve through the 1980s and '90s its visual prowess gained momentum and influence. Its relationship to urban space expanded to include other cities like Los Angeles whose unique urban topography was being introduced to viewers around the world. By the 1990s, West Coast artists battled for the cultural imagination of hip-hop by featuring different visual and stylistic elements. The Los Angeles urban landscape featured detached smaller dwellings, cars bouncing on hydraulics, and different styles of dress and slang, embodied by groups like N.W.A.¹⁶⁶ In 1993 as New York hip-hop waned, threatening to be overshadowed by West Coast artists, the group Wu-Tang clan emerged to reclaim New York as the center of hip-hop's visual universe. In sharp contrast to Los Angeles's style that was rife with gangster symbolism and culture, Wu-Tang Clan created a unique identity based on Chinese martial arts influences and imagery. The group's first album "Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers" was released in 1993 and it marked a significant evolution in hip-hop as visual

¹⁶⁶ N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit' Attitudes) was comprised of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and mastermind, the late Easy-E, among others. Their style emphasized the blight of Compton, CA, providing a stark contrast to the iconography of the South Bronx, and they were known for songs like "Fuck the Police."

culture. The group surfaced at a moment where it could capitalize on the increased circulation of hip-hop as an international phenomenon, as a music video product, and as a heavily trafficked commodity, conjoining a compelling visual identity with its gritty sound.

The music video for the song “C.R.E.A.M” from this first album provides compelling instances of continuity with “The Message” and draws from several of the generic conventions that Tricia Rose identifies which I mention earlier.¹⁶⁷ This video re-creates autobiographical vignettes against the backdrop of housing projects in Staten Island, New York where most of the nine member group is from. Filmed at night, it depicts the individual stories of particular members of the “crew” as they struggle to survive the perils of their communities. Graffiti written on narrow hallways, robberies, drug use and trafficking, fleeing down fire escapes, all now familiar tropes, are woven into the video’s imagery. The male characters fight, shoot, and give chase through dark streets, escaping through corridors and into waiting cars that weave through streets illuminated only by street lights and neon signs. Other figures warm themselves by fires in large cans, wearing gold teeth and scowls, pose menacingly in hooded coats, and engage in drug transactions. This is the urban nightmare, but a nightmare not seen through the eyes of mainstream society who often deem itself the victim, but through the eyes of the young men who inhabit it. We first see one of the group members as a young boy, then a teenager, and finally as a man who realizes the fallacy of participating in the cycles of crimes and violence that the lyrics suggest:

I grew up on the crime side; the New York Times side
 Staying alive was no jive

¹⁶⁷ C.R.E.A.M. is an acronym for Cash Rules Everything Around Me.

Only way, I begin to gee off was drug loot
 And let's start it like this son, rollin' with this one
 And that one, pullin' out gats for fun
 But it was just a dream for the teen, who was a fiend
 Started smokin' woolies at sixteen
 And running up in gates, and doing hits for high stakes
 Making my way on fire escapes
 No question I would speed, for cracks and weed
 The combination made my eyes bleed

 Times is ruff and tuff like leather
 Figured out I went the wrong route It's been twenty-two long hard years of still strugglin'
 Survival got me buggin', but I'm alive on arrival

The story recounted here reiterates the tropes of visual violence that the urban youth sees and experiences. Again the story begins with a young child who is initiated into life by seeing the difficulties between his parents and the subsequent violence, drug use, and crime that he is inevitably drawn into. A particularly poignant image of rapper Raekwon, whose autobiographical lyrics narrate the first half of the song, depicts his life as a young boy watching a scene of familial dysfunction. The young boy's body is initially vulnerable as he can only stand by helplessly watching his parents argue. Unlike the video for "The Message" the bodies in the "C.R.E.A.M." video are "actors" in their own nihilistic nightmares, rather than performers in a theatrical spectacle. The Wu-Tang members have a more naturalistic appearance than the stylized Furious Five, donning the "authentic" early nineties hip-hop attire, sagging jeans, thick

goose down coats, Timberland boots, wool caps, gold teeth etc. But the most striking visual element is again the black male body itself. The baggy clothing, coats and hats protect their bodies from the elements, and from the judgments of skeptical viewers erecting a barrier against the outside world. The camera focuses on the images of various members of the Wu-Tang crew, then on the other dozens of figures who either stand or wander through the darkness of the frame. The videos for “The Message” and “C.R.E.A.M.” provide cautionary narratives about how crime and the criminal justice system ultimately destroy the lives of black men by seeing them as predators. In the “C.R.E.A.M.” video prison is not simply mentioned but recreated as rapper Inspectah Deck and others are placed on a bus heading to a correctional facility and later behind a series of bars. The final minute of the video shifts radically from the cold, dark streets to an interior setting where the members of the crew sit around a table stacked with bags of money and champagne. As they sip champagne, we see image after image, close-up after close-up, of the men in the group. The images of their faces are repeated often from low angles which magnifies their power in the frame and this montage of faces produces a sense of hyper-embodiment and hyper-visibility of the men, countering the scenes described in the song. This illustrates several critical themes that I pursue in the remainder of the chapter. The black male body is vulnerable, traumatized, and later predatory as a result of seeing and experiencing this environment. The images of ostentatious wealth and excess, champagne and bags of money, insulate them from crime and lack and present them as compelling objects of visibility who demand to be seen by the viewer.

Both “The Message” and “C.R.E.A.M.” provide a visual space of agency for black male bodies who merge their creative powers as rappers and performers with narratives that describe how they are seen and what they have seen. This sense of agency provides these bodies with a

sense of awareness and self-determination and the creative act of rapping about their stories engenders the sense of self-actualization that KRS-One explains in the excerpt of his song at the beginning of the chapter. The notion of initiation is important here as these works intentionally erect a barrier or distance which “uninitiated” viewers must overcome to enter this space and make sense of the visual disorientation of the video.

In the Merriam Webster Dictionary to initiate is defined as: 1: start, begin 2: to induct into membership by or as if by special ceremonies and 3: to instruct in the rudiments or principles of something. Each of these three definitions bears some significance on this discussion, but I use initiation in a slightly different context. The notion of initiation conjures particular imagery in our collective imagination. It bears a mystical context referencing the participation in a series of spiritual tests or tasks that must be completed to gain access to a sacred space or status. It conjures images of secret societies, perhaps of the Druids donning long hooded robes, or Egyptian neophytes performing secret rituals. These concepts are embodied in two still photos bearing Wu-Tang’s image for the album *Enter the Wu-Tang 36 Chambers*. These images depict members of the group posed as initiates in a secret society of sorts.



Fig. 2.4 Wu-Tang Clan album cover, *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers*, 1993¹⁶⁸



Fig. 2.5 Wu-Tang Clan, photo¹⁶⁹

In both images, most of the men's features are masked by a white veil, which conceals their faces, yet still identifies them as black (as their hands are visible). Their demeanor and attire

¹⁶⁸ This album cover is available at the following link: <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/wu-tang-clan-enter-the-wu-tang-36-chambers-19691231>. Web. 10 June 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Image available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enter_the_Wu-Tang_\(36_Chambers\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enter_the_Wu-Tang_(36_Chambers)). Web. 10 June 2010.

also signify blackness, urban-ness, and maleness, yet their individual identities remain hidden, except it seems for the few faces which are not concealed. In Fig 2.5 the Wu-Tang symbol covers the background and appears as a logo in the foreground. The second image positions a member of the group on the floor where his genital area and face are focal points for the eye. The concealed faces could be interpreted as an attempt to demystify or debunk a static racial identity, but they also serves to initiate both Wu-Tang and the consumer of the image/music into their symbolical, hybrid identity as black masters of urban and Chinese culture. The body here is dense, clothed, without individuality or texture. The group's identities are formed by culture, symbolism and space, not simply by their race, and their cultural and artistic presence provides, in essence, the gateway to an alternative identity or subjectivity. The body here is present, yet not fully accessible and it inhabits a mystical space. My reading of these bodies complicates the misguided social logic surrounding black masculinity as dangerous, threatening bodies, interpreting them as elusive and, at times, vulnerable figures shrouded behind layers of clothing, coats, denim, skull caps, boots, masks— bodies which are staging an escape from the monstrous to the metaphysical.

Basquiat's Visual Universe

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,

Tame or wild?

Wild or tame,

Can you love a monster

Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him - and let his soul run wild.¹⁷⁰

This excerpt appears in Greg Tate's essay on artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and it foregrounds a number of themes that describe how I read black male bodies in metaphysical space as figures that hang in the balance between life and death, fear and vulnerability, monstrosity and genius.¹⁷¹ Thus far I have discussed how two influential hip-hop music videos locate black male bodies within traumatic, confined physical space, yet the artists' ability to perform in these spaces catapults them into another metaphysical reality where they give birth to other dimensions of themselves as creative beings capable of re-shaping and re-imagining what is seen and how they are seen by others. I want to first explain how Basquiat is connected to hip-hop visual culture and to clarify his complicated relationship to graffiti writing. Born in Brooklyn, Basquiat found his way into Manhattan, which for him, represented the artistic center of the universe. He entered the public sphere as a writer of cryptic sayings in Manhattan to which he uniformly attached the SAMO moniker.¹⁷² Basquiat produced a distinctive kind of graffiti, one that did not reflect the traditional styles of letter formation, largely consisting of the artists' names or pseudonyms and bold, colorful pictures. His writings, rather, were strategically placed statements, which were often a combination of whimsy, irony, poignancy, and social commentary.¹⁷³ Like many graffiti artists, he was self-taught, completing an alternative high school, yet having no formative training and he shared their practice of working and creating an artistic community on the streets and a strong desire for fame and recognition. He was interested in the innovative music that was emerging and while it is commonly known that he played in a

¹⁷⁰ Excerpt from Langston Hughes's poem "Genius Child."

¹⁷¹ *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, 233.

¹⁷² Basquiat's "partner-in-crime" Al Diaz was also responsible for some of the SAMO writings, though it was Basquiat who became known as 'Samo,' short for "same old shit."

¹⁷³ One example of his street writings says "Which of the following symbols is omnipresent? a. Lee Harvey Oswald b. Coca Cola c. (illegible) d. SAMO. (Michael Holman, *The Radiant Child*). A more cryptic example simply contained the words "ORIGIN OF COTTON."

band called Gray, he also produced a rap record called “Beat Bop” for artist Ramellzee versus K-Rob in 1983, described by cultural critic Greg Tate as a “masterpiece.” Tate documents Basquiat’s contentious relationship with the graffiti community, some of whom shared his interests in art and music, and also used their graffiti to catapult them into the art industry. Rammellzee, for instance, was an early pioneer of hip-hop culture and for a moment had a similar trajectory to Basquiat, beginning as a graffiti writer, then later becoming a rapper, artist, and theorist. According to Tate, Basquiat and Rammellzee had a rivalry of sorts, as he describes: “Rammellzee and other writers felt Basquiat had been unduly crowned king of graffiti painting by the art world despite having never sprayed a burner up on the trains.”¹⁷⁴ Despite Basquiat’s complex relationship to some in the hip-hop community, I locate him squarely within hip-hop’s creative and conceptual framework that appropriated public space as artistic space; conjoined music, language, and technology; and connected viewers to the traumatic images. In this section I provide an interpretation of Basquiat’s embodied artistry, illuminating how he shares some of the anxieties and sensibilities that produced hip-hop visual culture and how he interacted with the objects and spaces around him compelling viewers to *see* things differently. While some hip-hop artists imagined an escape from the subjection of their physical environments, Basquiat propelled himself into another universe. His approach to producing art and his understanding of his artistic subjectivity provided arguably the central inspiration for contemporary post-black thinking.

As Fred Braithwaite predicted, Basquiat’s flame has not yet died out. He remains one of the few black artists to penetrate the heart of whiteness— the Western art world, or what Diego

¹⁷⁴ See Greg Tate’s “Rammellzee: The Ikonoklast Samurai” *The Wire: Adventures in Sound and Music*, 2010. <http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/4501/print>. Web. 7 July 2012. Tate explains the term burner, saying, “If your fellow writers considered your bombing beautiful, you had made a “burner.”

Cortez has called “white walls, white people and minimal white art” (Mirzoeff 168).¹⁷⁵ His art, likeness, and legend have saturated the virtual public sphere where they are bought, viewed, and discussed. His presence, or perhaps his aura in a Benjaminian sense, continues to haunt us as images of his likeness are as pervasive as the art itself.¹⁷⁶ Basquiat’s writings were an ironic and deliberate gesture placed in and around places from which he felt artistically alienated; places which he felt would not accept him or his art. His writings stood in for his own desires to be seen and recognized. Nicholas Mirzoeff rightly characterizes this act as a standard practice of graffiti artists, saying:

One of the marks of success of graffiti artists was to place their tags in the most daring and conspicuous place possible. Basquiat often placed his work next to Soho art galleries on the night before an opening. Graffiti challenged the rigid *de facto* segregation of American cities by placing the work of outsiders where it could be seen by everyone (Mirzoeff 164).

Robert Farris Thompson echoes Mirzoeff’s claim that Basquiat enacted a strategic visibility as he writes:

Jean-Michel planted his street texts not just anywhere, but predominantly along the strategic byways of Soho and the East Village, sometimes even at art openings. Here, he

¹⁷⁵ Nicolas Mirzoeff’s comments appear in *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

¹⁷⁶ See Walter Benjamin’s discussion of “aura” in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.

knew, they were bound to be seen by influential people. They were not only social texts. They also constituted, in the purest Norman Mailer sense, advertisements for himself.¹⁷⁷

Both of these readings of his work describe Basquiat's longing to be seen, recognized, and validated for his artistic character. Basquiat understood that art was personal and embodied and he left an imprint on the city by transforming public spaces with his writings and his unique intellectual sensibilities. From the earliest SAMO writings to the art exhibits, Basquiat's work deliberately claimed sacred and contested public spaces, which he marked as sites for transforming and remaking public space. Basquiat used his body, his material resources, and his imagination to construct a self that resisted definitions; a self that was not solely contained by the containments of whiteness or blackness, but one which initiated viewers into the complexities of racial identities, bodies, space, and of seeing these elements collide on an artistic platform. In this way he broke through the thresholds that limited what black bodies were able to create and make visible.

¹⁷⁷ Thompson, Robert Farris. "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat." *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. Ed. Richard Marshall. New York: Whitney/Abrams, 1992. 28-43.



Fig 2.6 Basquiat SAMO, photo¹⁷⁸

After leaving home at any early age, he essentially lived on the streets and was homeless on and off for some time. Biographer Phoebe Hoban explains that while his family was financially comfortable, he distanced himself from their material comforts, making a home for himself in the tumultuous urban space.¹⁷⁹ Basquiat accepted the lack and instability of poverty and homelessness as a necessary component of his bohemian artistic identity and it also provided the impetus for him to take ownership over urban space as other graffiti artists and performers were doing. In the 2010 documentary on Basquiat's life, *The Radiant Child*, interviews with the artist

¹⁷⁸ Image available at <http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/inspiration/graffiti-art-streets-to-galleries/>. Web. 2 July 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Phoebe Hoban's *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

and others illuminate the lifestyle that Basquiat and his community of artists undertook.

Consider excerpts from these interviews:

He (Basquiat) had a big overcoat on and dreadlocks, he was kind of frightening, actually.

I later realized that the reason he was sitting at the bar was that he had no money.

(Suzanne Mallouk, former girlfriend)

We didn't have any money. We were still sneaking on trains to move around a lot. You know, crashing on people's couches from here to there, it was a crazy time. (Fab 5 Freddy)

I think that's how a lot of us were living, 18, 19 year olds who had just come to New York. You could just live here wild on the street and live hand to mouth. (unnamed associate)

Jean was doing it in a much more intensely radically bohemian style. (Fab 5 Freddy)

We used to look for money on the floor of The Mudd Club. Walking around for days and days without sleeping...Eating cheese doodles, panhandling, drinking wine with whinos. (Jean-Michel Basquiat)¹⁸⁰

From these quotes we learn of Basquiat's life and of his unique connection to the streets as a way of cultivating community and as a means of survival, where parks, coffee shops, diners, clubs, benches, friends' apartments became his personal space for living and creating. The walls and doorways of buildings became his canvasses and there was little delineation between the personal and social, public and private, living space and artistic space. Basquiat's refusal to find

¹⁸⁰ See *The Radiant Child*.

“legitimate” work, even a part-time job, is discussed by his friend Diego Cortez who explains how he convinced him to buy paint and paper to begin doing work and making money, which propelled him from doing the SAMO writings to working as an artist.¹⁸¹ His former girlfriend Suzanne Mallouk also explains an encounter with him where after taking a job with an electrician he cried to her saying that he couldn’t take having a job where he felt the woman mistreated him, making him feel like a slave.¹⁸² Basquiat was adamant about living as an artistic body where all of his energies and efforts were galvanized toward creative pursuits, whether as a musician in his band “Gray,” an actor in *Downtown 81*, or as an artist.

Basquiat’s intense desire to unleash his creative talent on the world made him a magnet for those looking for the next new “thing.” An early supporter, Annina Nosei, gave him studio space in the basement of her gallery and sponsored his first gallery showing where he reportedly made \$250,000.¹⁸³ Basquiat’s meteoric rise was due in part to his insistence that he would become famous and he positioned himself to find people and resources which could support his artistry, famously selling his postcard collages to Andy Warhol in a restaurant, which led to a long and complex friendship with him. He came to embody the “cult of personality” becoming a celebrity, an object, and a mythology that was simultaneously desired and reviled. His eccentric sense of style and his way of making art made him an object of great interest and curiosity. His body was one that always attracted other bodies, whether seducing women with his moves on the dance floor or allowing friends and strangers to watch him paint in his home, he was compelling to look at and be around.¹⁸⁴ Not an artist who worked with bodies by posing them or painting nudes, he often worked with “found objects”—windows, doors, tires, refrigerators, things he

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Basquiat’s ability to move and dance is recounted by his friends in *The Radiant Child*.

would find on the street and mark with paint, language, and figures. Basquiat's creative labor manifested to make people look and to experience indescribable sensations. He was again, not simply *seen*, but "encountered," a term used by his close friend and collector Bruno Bishofberger to describe his first experience of Basquiat's work.¹⁸⁵ The notion of an encounter invokes an exchange in which something more is at stake than seeing. What produces the richer, deeper sensations and experiences of his work is the degree to which Basquiat's "self" in the form of his influences and intellectual queries, his ironic commentary, writing and symbols he included, are incorporated into his work. Basquiat's ideas, concerns, and anxieties are included in the composition of this work along with the bodies and figures (at times his own body) in the work, "collaged," that is, embedded as objects "among other objects" as Fanon has said, not to objectify the body, but as a sacrificial practice of offering pieces of himself to be ingested as part of experiencing the work itself.

Basquiat's "self" was also integrated into the experimental, semi-autobiographical film *Downtown 81*, in which he stars as a young artist trying to find his way in New York in 1981. Though shot in 1981, it was not completed and released until 2001, years after his death. The film is constructed around his story featuring his friends and the places he would frequent. The film is reminiscent of *Wild Style*, released in 1982, which captured the experiences of early hip-hop figures and locations, yet instead of documenting early hip-hop it recreates the underground downtown art scene through the places and experiences of those who inhabited it. In the film, a young Basquiat wanders whimsically through a city that was both magical and menacing. My reading of *Downtown 81* describes how it in some ways counters the entrenched trauma of the other two music videos I have discussed, yet also affirms some of the challenges that black male

¹⁸⁵ *The Radiant Child*.

bodies encounter. In *Downtown 81*, Basquiat's body is ethereal, shot as if he is almost floating through Manhattan with freedom, imagination, and agency. Yet like the bodies in the music videos, he struggles to survive and to find support for producing his artwork, and is an object of surveillance and skepticism. Produced around the same time as the music video for "The Message," this film produces a very different set of possibilities for Basquiat's body than for Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five or Wu-Tang Clan. Basquiat's body escapes the confines of racial isolation and the disorientation of the outer boroughs. His body moves fluidly through Manhattan, which symbolizes artistic and personal freedom. In the film's opening scene, he is a patient in a hospital/institution where he is examined, poked, prodded, and ultimately set free. Walking past New York's art institutions like the Guggenheim he looks whimsically at his surroundings, at times blowing his clarinet and staring up at the clouds. The early tone of curiosity and whimsy changes to one of uncertainty where Basquiat endures a series of obstacles, his own initiation into the polarized and exclusive art world. *Downtown 81* becomes an avant-garde fairytale where Debbie Harry of "Blondie" becomes Basquiat's fairy godmother granting him acceptance in the world that he seeks. Basquiat's performance captures glimpses of his early life depicting a subjectivity that is playful, exploratory, and inquisitive and often unseen.

Basquiat and Post-Blackness

Basquiat personified the paradox of visibility and invisibility and his work, even his SAMO writings, were embedded with the densest part of himself, perhaps in the hopes that they might pierce the veil that tried to contain and define him, breaking through the limits of invisibility, racial mythologies, and anonymity. He embodies the post-black moment, one that is fraught with struggles over racism, identity, representation, and artistic freedom. Basquiat's

interviews and behaviors attempted to create an artistic self that existed as part of a black cultural tradition, yet he also pursued broader access, exposure, and critical reception. His efforts to enter the most acclaimed institutions were successful and he became an international figure by the age of 21, yet this success came at a price as he experienced sustained attacks against his work and persona. His reactions to racism are documented by his friends and by biographer Phoebe Hoban. Braithwaite described Basquiat's anger at being passed over by cab drivers in New York City, other accounts mention how he was chased away from certain restaurants and galleries. What has not often been discussed was Basquiat's relationship with other black artists, a perspective explored by artist Lorraine O'Grady in her essay "A Day At the Races: Lorraine O'Grady on Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Black Art World." O'Grady provides a particularly painful account of his mistreatment:

I'd heard the stories about exploitation (the studio in her basement, etc.), but these were less frightening to me than a white friend's tale of late-night calls from a Jean-Michel in despair after white patrons had physically recoiled from him. The simplest handshake was a landmine.¹⁸⁶

These accounts attest to his Fanonian experiences of racism, alienation, and disorientation. His body became a source of curiosity and intrigue, but was also marked as a defiled "other." Becoming rich and famous did not insulate him from social and rhetorical indignities and the anxieties that Whites expressed over his presence; at various points being called a "wild boy," "primitive," "monkey," and "pickininy." Arthur Danto explains how the critical reception of Basquiat's work was impacted by ethnocentrism and institutional racism:

¹⁸⁶ O'Grady's essay appeared in *Artforum* 1993.

Whether because of Basquiat's race or the uncertainty of his association with graffiti, the official art establishment was leery of him. Relatively few of his works are in public collections. . . Basquiat ended up being critically ghettoized, discussed in ethnic rather than philosophical terms.¹⁸⁷

As a black body, Basquiat was subjected to racism which manifests as systematic marginalization, exclusion, and a refusal to see, engage, and acknowledge his work and his personhood. Nelson George explains the complexity of what he experienced as a black male body:

What the art world did to him reminds me of what happens at various points in black history to black artists. You become a representation for white people of all black people. Because you're the only black person they know... The guy obviously spent a lot of time thinking about what his place in the world was and what was the place of black people and black men in the world. It's in his work over and over again.¹⁸⁸

He was arguably the last black modernist and the first postmodernist simultaneously. Influenced by the art and praxis of modernist artists, his most often discussed influence was Charlie Parker, the be-bop jazz icon, whose intensity, genius, and destructive behaviors he almost mimicked. bell hooks points out, “while it is obvious that Basquiat was influenced and inspired by the work of established white male artists, the content of his work does not neatly converge with theirs. Even when Basquiat can be placed stylistically in the exclusive white male art club that denies entry to most black artists, his subject matter—his content—always separates him once again, and defamiliarizes him” (342). Nicholas Mirzoeff positions Basquiat as one who was shaped by

¹⁸⁷ Arthur Danto, “Flyboy in the Buttermilk” April 5, 2005. <http://www.thenation.com/article/flyboy-buttermilk?page=0,2> Web. 30 June 2012.

¹⁸⁸ George's interview appears in *The Radiant Child*.

the “modernist construction of a visual system around racial difference” and simultaneously as one who explored an “alternative notion of identity through themes of Diaspora and exile.”¹⁸⁹ Both authors are correct to emphasize the tension between his modernist leanings and the trap of racial difference, yet I argue that his significance does not solely lie in his artistic prowess, his place within the modernist and postmodernist debates, or the degree to which his work is haunted by the specter of racial difference. I locate Basquiat squarely at the center of hip-hop visual culture and post- blackness as he was insistent on asserting himself as an artistic being worthy of our attention and intellectual consideration.

Lorraine O’Grady contextualizes some of the tensions between his relationship to “blackness” and “non-blackness” and the need, by some, to place him in a particular cultural and artistic context. She explains:

Under the compulsion to find hegemonic origins for him, such as Jean Dubuffet and Cy Twombly, analysis is being strangled. The debate needs air. If Basquiat did copy the painters so often mentioned, why them? What echoes made their styles appropriable to the experience of a late-20th-century black man? And has the black painter Raymond Saunders, whose work resonates with Basquiat's, heard them as well?¹⁹⁰

O’Grady highlights the difficulties of placing his work only as an outgrowth of White male modernism. She cites artist Raymond Saunders as a significant aesthetic influence on Basquiat. Saunders was an early voice articulating what has become known as post-blackness, as he was bent on undoing what he viewed as an overinvestment in racial character and themes. At the height of the Black Arts Movement, Saunders decried that black artists must not confuse race

¹⁸⁹ See *Bodyscape*. 168.

¹⁹⁰ Lorraine O’Grady, *Artforum* 31 (1993): 10-12.

with identity and should not create work that only speaks to racial identity. And while Basquiat did not articulate this concept in a treatise as Saunders did, he addressed the ironies, complexities, and pitfalls of racial and artistic identity in his conversations and in the naming of his paintings. These complexities are evidenced in some of the titles of his work: *The Irony of a Negro Policeman*, *Worthy Constituants (sic)*, *Icarus Himself*, *History of Black People*.

As Basquiat's work suggests, he did not wish to escape racial signification, but he also did not want the politics (and mythologies) of racial identity and representation imposed on what he could do as an artist, or on how his work was defined and circulated. The post-black framework helps to account for some of these complexities that confronted Basquiat and subsequent generations of artists, from concerns over aesthetic influences and cultural politics, to suspicions of mainstream cultural institutions and policing by black critics and audiences. Basquiat never used the term "post-black" to describe himself or what he did. But he is the figure that best elucidates how post-blackness speaks to the challenges of art and identity politics and the need for black bodies to push through the restrictions and boundaries imposed on their creative and physical possibilities.

Basquiat's work initiates by testing, challenging, and questioning the perceptions and sensibilities of onlookers. Bell hooks explains that "the work resists knowing." It requires rigorous interpretative energies to apprehend its form, signs, symbols, and written language. If you dare to look, your gain may not be one of pleasure, but of access to the emotional and visual awareness that he creates. His work depicts a space between heaven and hell, life and death, suffering and signifying. The bodies in these images dangle between these poles, not fully alive, not completely dead, as a reminder of the complex nature of race, humanity and suffering, yet

they also seem to mock the trauma and the finality of death. His images connect to the lyrical and visual narratives of the hip-hop music videos discussed earlier which reiterate themes of death, suicide, living as “hell,” and the confinement of the body. Consider the paintings that present a single black male image, often positioned in the center of the frame, with a swollen, exaggerated cranium, stick-like extremities, distorted eyes and gaping, transparent mouth. These bodies might be read as existing somewhere between life and death, having no flesh, only remnants of bone.¹⁹¹ These bodies may be the walking dead, the walking wounded, or perhaps they are walking among us, haunting us, summoning us to knowledge of the spaces that they inhabit. Some are clearly still marked by life, take *Warrior* for instance, where the image is decidedly defiant and aggressive. This image is brought to life by a central male figure brandishing a sword in one hand and perhaps a shield in the other. This figure grimaces with an aggressive snarl ready for battle and its body has more form and texture than many of the others. This defiant posture is a trope common to hip-hop images that make reference to suffering, but also counters with an embodied show of force, a strike, blow, or response to what surrounds them.

Other images in Basquiat’s paintings don crowns, wings, and haloes. In one piece entitled *Trumpet*, a figure sits in a chair, the canvass splattered by red, then white paint, playing a trumpet and wearing a black crown. While the crowns were often painted gold, this musician figures dons a black one, perhaps symbolic of the cultural prowess that he wields as a trumpet player. The crown can also take on a religious interpretation, particularly when explored through the heaven/hell dichotomy. In *Fallen Angel*, a figure that looks more birdlike than human, wears a colorful mass of feathers, wings and dons a two-dimensional halo. It connotes more hell than

¹⁹¹Works that depict these visual themes include: *Anthony Clarke, Auto portrait, Boy and Dog, Cabeza, Flexible, In This Case, Pecho Oreja, Teeth, Skull* et.al.

heaven, as the title suggests, and it hovers wearing a menacing grin. Perhaps in Basquiat's visual iconography, these figures are the initiators, guiding see-ers not to heaven or hell, but through these "scenes" where he forces them to reckon with the bodies that have been subjected to trauma. Robert Farris Thompson recognizes the power of Basquiat's paintings as works that compel us to look, as he says, "His paintings were deliberate enigmas and they in effect said, 'Get with it!' See the complexity of our culture. I'll give you a few hints."¹⁹² Thus the coded signification, the embedded layers of language and symbolism provide some distance, some space between the artist and the viewer, yet the work is also summoning, beckoning us to spend time with it, compelling us to truly see and engage it or as Farris Thompson suggests, to "get with it."

Perhaps prompted by his submersion into a socio-cultural order that revered and reviled him and by the need for an escape from his own personal demons, Basquiat's later work reflects a reverence for mystical and sacred symbolism. Art scholar Kellie Jones similarly argues that the work in Basquiat's later years reflects a more profound engagement of spiritual themes, specifically a connection to African-centered cosmological systems. Jones describes this theme as "historical frameworks of African spiritual systems and their power. They were charms to ward off pain and death and to fight for life and strength on a mystical plane."¹⁹³ Jones goes further suggesting that he was "painting into a space of communion, community and connectivity...where he could open himself out to the entire broad spectrum of his creativity and his soul."¹⁹⁴ Basquiat mastered the strategies of enacting his own powers of creativity and self-definition, which are also intrinsic to the production of hip-hop culture. He conjoined elements

¹⁹² See an interview with Farris Thompson in *The Radiant Child*.

¹⁹³ Kellie Jones's, *Eyeminded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid* 287.

of personal desire and encounters with objects and bodies to produce metaphysical experiences which birthed not a raced body, but a soul.

David Blaine: Impossible Bodies

Described as an illusionist, professional magician, and endurance artist David Blaine has performed a number of unbelievable tricks, stunts, and feats that challenge the limitations of the human body and he provides a compelling model of the impact of experiencing a “phenomenal” body in action. Like his predecessor Harry Houdini, Blaine uses his body to create an urban, modernist-styled spectacle, yet he has also become an avatar of the visual in a post-modern context as his performances also illustrate the powers and possibilities of black and brown male bodies in urban space. I use the term “avatar” here for a number of reasons. I use the term “avatar” here for a number of reasons. In this chapter, I would describe Blaine and Basquiat as avatars, and consider Merriam Webster Dictionary’s multiple meanings of the word as: the incarnation of a Hindu deity, an incarnation in human form, and an embodiment of a concept or philosophy in a person. Both Blaine and Basquiat resemble these “deities” or figures able to manipulate their bodies and the sensations of others.¹⁹⁵ For over a decade Blaine has performed tricks and a series of mind-bending stunts designed to make visible the body’s capacity to withstand vertigo, freezing temperatures, being drowned alive, and buried alive. Blaine partnered with production companies and networks to provide coverage of these stunts for audiences of millions.¹⁹⁶ His presence as a visual object, defying death most often in New York

¹⁹⁵ I discuss another meaning of avatar, an electronic image that represents a computer user, in Chapter Three.

¹⁹⁶ His stunt specials include *Buried Alive* (1999), where he was locked in a tank full of water underground for seven days without food or water, *Frozen in Time* (2000) where he was encased in a massive block of ice for 63 hrs, *Vertigo* (2002), *Above the Below* (2003) a 44-day endurance challenge in a case suspended 30ft in the air outside of London, *Drowned Alive* (2006) he was submerged in 8 ft sphere filled with water, and *Revolution* (2006) where he was shackled to a rotating gyroscope and *Dive of Death* (2008), where he hung upside down for hours.

City (once in London), connects him to a history of urban men of color in hip-hop culture who also perform feats in and on urban space for passers-by, which I have discussed at length earlier in the chapter. In this section, I explain how Blaine's performances provide another compelling example of how bodies at the intersections of racial difference, creativity, and physical space produce knowledge and intensity around visual performance. These bodies are not powerful because they are black, Latino or male, but because they galvanize their creativity and imagination to push through socio-economic and racial strictures to other dimensions of subjectivity and experience.

Blaine had a humble upbringing in New York and much like Basquiat, experienced a rapid rise to celebrity in his early twenties. By 24 he was a fixture in New York's cultural scene and his first television special, *Street Magic* (1997), debuted on ABC. Like Basquiat and hip-hop artists, Blaine's intention is to capture the attention of audiences and create a sense of awe around what bodies can do. Blaine's multi-racial identity and his position as an "ethnic" man in urban space connect him to the practices and aesthetics of hip-hop culture. While Blaine's ethnic heritage may not be self-evident (he is of Puerto Rican and Jewish ancestry), he often positions himself in close proximity to populations marked as black, brown, imprisoned, impoverished, and homeless. Blaine's vocal affect, body language, and the sites of his performances distinguish him from other contemporary illusionists and magicians like Criss Angel and David Copperfield, who perform on grand stages and in exclusive venues. The issue of racial identity, coupled with how Blaine stages his performances, particularly his television programs *Street Magic* and *Magic Man*, position him as "a man of the people" who engages non-mainstream, often marginalized populations. I focus primarily on these two programs, in which Blaine performs a series of visual tricks and stunts for passers-by from different walks of life. Blaine

chooses the participants in his performances and his locations carefully. He is keenly aware of variables like race, class, and location, as he explains in his book, *Mysterious Stranger*: “Then I started dreaming again. I fantasized about creating something new in magic—a magician whose stage was the real world, who could touch people of any race, any religion, any age, any ethnicity. . . . Magic shatters these barriers.”¹⁹⁷ He performs amongst communities of outliers—poor Blacks in New Orleans, gang members in East St. Louis neighborhood, and poor Whites in Appalachia. In *Magic Man* Blaine travels to Haiti (before the earthquake) and explores the connections between his illusionist work and the mysticism and voo-doo of Haitian culture.¹⁹⁸ In this same special he also interacts with a non-English speaking isolated tribe from the Amazon. In these two sections of the program, Blaine wants to account for people’s reactions across linguistic and cultural barriers, believing that his tricks and the reactions that they generate are transcendent.

Blaine’s performances are layered with metaphysical elements that collapse magic, spirituality, mysticism, and sensory experience. He initiates viewers into a world of his making to pursue a connection with viewers that extends beyond social boundaries and racial difference. He encourages onlookers to touch his body and in many of his tricks he touches them. Viewers are vital participants, breaking the wall between the magician’s body, the tricks, and the audience. Blaine is aware of the impact of his performances and describing an early experience with audience reactions, he writes:

¹⁹⁷ David Blaine, *Mysterious Stranger*. New York: Villard, 2002, 92.

¹⁹⁸ There is much debate around the terms “voo-doo” and “voo-dun.” For a salient discussion see Will Coleman’s essay “West African Roots of African American Spirituality.” in *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 9.4 (1997) and his book *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics and African/American Ways of Telling the Story*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999.

Their reactions to the magic were so animated and intense I instantly realized that this is what magic on television should be—magic done to real people in real places... While most people's image of a magician is that of someone who walks up to you and pulls quarters out of your ears, I sensed that magic is, at its best, could be an intense emotional experience—not just a series of amusing little tricks.¹⁹⁹

Blaine explains how the intensity is not simply born out of his individuated powers or abilities, but it is in the interaction, the transaction, the contact between himself and the viewers. I argue that this kind of intensity is not only transferred in real time, but is also powerful when mediated through television viewing. In the images and scenes of Blaine interacting with onlookers it is the reaction shots with these people which are undoubtedly the “money shots” in these programs.

In the image below Blaine is flanked by young men watching him perform a card trick. Blaine is clearly the object of attention, but the blocking and body language suggest his openness to the men's reactions, an engagement and recognition that the men surrounding him are a significant part of the spectacle. Linda Williams's discussion of the “money shot” in pornography is an appropriate analogy here as it is not the “act,” or trick, itself, but the spectators' reactions to the trick that Blaine pursues.²⁰⁰ The moment of release, disbelief, or awe provides the ultimate connection, the ultimate moment of euphoria, the ultimate moment of entertainment and intrigue. Blaine expects those watching him in real time and in the television audience to be skeptical, disinterested or suspicious, or to even question him, wondering if what we have seen is authentic, or even possible. His objective is to get us to watch, to suspend our disbelief long enough for him to exact a compelling reaction. Blaine expects disbelief, realizing

¹⁹⁹ *Mysterious Stranger*, New York: Villard, 2002, 79-80.

²⁰⁰ I am referring here to Linda Williams's discussion of the “money shot” in pornography. See *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Berkeley: University of CA Press, 1999.

that we may not believe in the illusion, which is often next to impossible to achieve. After recovering from his “Frozen in Time” endurance stunt, Blaine explains his intent “The reason why I’m doing this is because I want to create images that last through time, like art,” revealing the he has much in common with graffiti artists and Basquiat.²⁰¹

Blaine’s desire is that we are inspired by what his body can achieve and by our own reactions to it. In the image below, his own body is taut, focused, his eyes penetrating. All of his energy is invested in executing this trick and in interacting with the onlookers. The camera captures glimpses of the men’s skeptical body language: folding their arms, looking off-camera perhaps slightly distracted by other things in their environment.²⁰² Blaine’s objective in these scenes is to capture and enthrall a crowd in their own environment, pulling them out of the mundane for a moment and transporting them to another place.²⁰³ His stunts invariably produce intense reactions—some people stare in disbelief, others run away, some burst into fits of laughter, other cry or exclaim that they “want to cry.” These reactions are the metaphysical residue; they are what Blaine seeks and they provide a sense of the power that “seeing the unbelievable” exacts on viewers.

²⁰¹ This statement is courtesy of the *Frozen in Time* special (Dir. Roger Goodman, 2000).

²⁰² In one segment of Blaine’s special he is in St. Louis in the early morning hours with young black men who are distracted by real-life violence and a police presence in their community. Blaine continues to perform his trick amidst dangerous conditions.

²⁰³ Blaine’s “performances” have even included levitating, resuscitating flies and birds, and pulling his own heart out of his chest, which he did on a late night show some years ago. I am not sure if this act was actually ever broadcast.



Fig 2.7 David Blaine (in front, on the left) and spectators.²⁰⁴

Blaine explains the importance of his encounter as a magician with his audience, describing that he does magic *to* people:

When I did my magic to people, the important thing was their reaction and the communication between us. That dynamic was never depicted on the televised magic shows I saw. I couldn't understand why no magician had focused on the reactions of the people he was doing magic to. I knew that's what I would do.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Web. 12 Jan 2012.

²⁰⁵ *Mysterious Stranger* 94.

Like graffiti artists, rappers in music videos, and Basquiat, Blaine compels us to look, not simply to see his body, but to imagine the possibilities of the collective body. He challenges how other magicians have made themselves the visual objects of the experience, whereas for him, the real spectacle is his engagement with those around him. In an interview, Blaine's words confirm his intention to create powerful sensations with his audience of onlookers, as he says "I'm not claiming to have powers... Magic is not about having a puzzle to solve. It's about creating a moment of awe and astonishment."²⁰⁶ Like hip-hop performers and Basquiat his powers have not often been lauded by mainstream culture and his efforts, the powers of his own body, have been similarly marginalized. Magician Nick Lewin contextualizes Blaine's impact and his reception by the magic world:

The impact that Blaine's special had on his actual intended demographic audience was astonishing though... While this didn't totally surprise me I was amazed at how quickly he made his mark. What did surprise me however, was the way that the magic world not only failed to embrace him, but moved in such a unified manner to denounce and express their disapproval of him. Maybe they just didn't get the fact that his demographic didn't include them...²⁰⁷

This affirms the persistent criticism that black and brown male bodies endure and also acknowledges Blaine's engagement with particular demographics, those who have not had magicians come to their neighborhoods or who might never have seen a magic show in Las Vegas. Blaine functions beyond the boundaries of the mainstream magic world, allowing his "powers" to circulate into new terrain.

²⁰⁶ See his comments in an article written by Brett Martin at www.uri-geller.com/blaineto.htm. Web. 29 June 2012.

²⁰⁷ See Lewin's comments at <http://remarkablemagic.com/2010/03/08/david-blaine-whose-biggest-fault-is-that-he-spawned-criss-angel/>. Web. 29 June 2012.

Blaine embodies the metaphysical by willing his body to do the impossible, moving beyond the parameters of race, ethnicity, even the limits of being human. Seeing David Blaine perform magic and stunts viewers demonstrates how the body produces awe, anxiety, and intensity and his performances are part of a vital impulse at work in contemporary visual culture. As Blaine pushes to discover what bodies can do in a literal sense, he also sheds light on how post-black artists accomplish a similar task using a variety of mediums and strategies. The work post-black artists, filmmakers, and performers push through the expectations and politics of race and representation. Hip-hop artists have similarly brought voyeurs into their world, allowing them direct, up-close access to experiences, rather than observing these objects from a distance as we might engage objects in a gallery or museum. In these viewing experiences we are ushered into sacred spaces, places that have birthed trauma, creativity, and self-expression where performers and artists were called into being and viewers into witnessing. These artists move through the scenes of subjection where their personhood, creativity, and life chances are often policed and diminished, to other dimensions of personhood and experience.

CHAPTER 3: RE-IMAGINING BLACK BODIES IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

Recent iterations of visual art, film, and new media works embody a set of new possibilities for black bodies as creative and metaphysical entities. We see evidence of this in the 2011 Festival of the New Black Imagination, a conference devoted to the exploration of these possibilities where artists, writers, musicians, and those invested in cultural and technological production gathered. The festival's website describes it as:

...the launch of a new forum for progressive, forward-looking black cultural creators whose goal is to inspire the audience with examples and stories from creators, curators and thinkers from the African diaspora who are defying convention and are redefining what it means to be black in the 21st century.²⁰⁸

This festival re-animates post-black discourse, emerging alongside a number of forums, conferences, blogs, and websites like Mark Anthony Neal's online web-streamed series "Left of Black" which provide an outlet for scholars, activists, content producers, journalists and writers engaged in a range of issues under the rubric of an "alternative" point of view of blackness. Neal's popular blog, "New Black Man (in Exile)" also reshapes conversations around race, identity, and the body politic.²⁰⁹ These entities are vested in black creativity and black imagination and in making these ideals a central part of the contemporary discourse.

Imagination becomes a central theme of contemporary post-blackness, a point articulated years

²⁰⁸See the festival's website <http://www.thecouchsessions.com/event/nyc-festival-of-the-new-black-imagination/>. Web. 10 Mar 2012. Festival participants include artist Wangechi Mutu, who is discussed later in this chapter, cultural critics Greg Tate and Touré who have both written on the notion of post-blackness, and visual artist, Sanford Biggers. Writer Touré released a book entitled "*Who's Afraid of Post-blackness: What it Means to Be Black Now.*" New York: Free Press, 2011.

²⁰⁹New Black Man is now "In Exile." Neal describes his new vision of his blogspace using a powerful quote from Edward Said, "Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation."

ago by Ralph Ellison. In an interview he did alongside Charles Johnson, Ralph Ellison puts it pointedly, “You don't write out of your skin, for God's sake. You write out of your imagination.”²¹⁰

In this chapter I analyze specific works in contemporary film and visual culture which embody post-black practices and which produce their own instantiations of “metaphysical space.” They include portraits of “HeLa” cells which provide a compelling analogy to artist Wangechi Mutu’s series of works that depict collages embedded with female body parts and reproductive organs. Reading HeLa images and Mutu’s work together, I find that both the cellular and artistic possibilities produce a metaphysical template of black female bodies as paradoxically beautiful and vile, diseased and well, procreative and vulnerable. The visible deformation of these bodies speaks to invisible wisdom and trauma that they carry internally and manifests externally. I explore the work of Afro-futurist artist and scholar Nettrice Gaskins whose visual art and new media works move objects and bodies in and out of various spatial, and temporal dimensions.²¹¹ Gaskins’s work imagines a complex reading of the past with a dynamic reading of the future, where both spheres are inflected with sensate experience and limitless ingenuity. Her multidimensional world created in Second Life called “My Steampunk Dream” uses the steampunk aesthetic to imagine historical time travel, community, and musical cultures in a digital format.²¹² Next I identify three music video works by singer and performance artist

²¹⁰ See Charles Johnson’s interview at http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The_M%26C_Interview_1_Charles_Johnson_6_07 Web. 14 Apr 2012.

²¹¹ Nettrice Gaskins is currently a doctoral candidate in Georgia Tech’s Digital Media program in the School of Literature, Communication and Culture.

²¹² Second Life has been a popular site for the creation of avatars and virtual reality. I have observed several explicitly African American-oriented sites, some that describe themselves as “African American Museums.” “Steampunk” is a genre that draws from a number of sci-fi, fantasy, futuristic, literary, and aesthetic spheres, emphasizing time travel and technological machines. Gaskin’s engagement of this notion is an emphatically post-black gesture.

Erykah Badu.²¹³ Badu has been a fixture of a sub-genre of music dubbed “neo-soul” since the late 1990s and her rich, eclectic sound is amplified by her powerful visual persona that remixes Afrocentric and bohemian elements with spiritual and astrological symbolism.²¹⁴ Badu’s performative persona embodies multiple female subjectivities: a cosmic otherworldly being, earth mother, sensual songstress in the tradition of the blues women, socially conscious grassroots activist, and women embodying black Southern vernacular. Her complex and layered subjectivity is fully present in her music videos which often depict thought provoking scenes from a historical context and her personal imagination.²¹⁵ These videos document how Badu’s body re-imagines history, time, and otherworldly subjectivities in relationship to female embodiment. Lastly, I discuss Lee Daniel’s 2005 film *Shadowboxer*, which positions the black body as an affective force existing between the dichotomy of what Sara Ahmed describes as the “I can” and the “I cannot.” While most of my objects in this chapter emphasize female bodies as visual subjects and creative forces, *Shadowboxer* emphasizes black male embodiment, providing an account of a black male subject and its relationship to other bodies.

The images I discuss exhibit specific shared characteristics and do important work in elaborating how post-blackness functions. They are first and foremost dispersed, some like the HeLa cells can be accessed in an online search, while the work of Nettrice Gaskins can only be viewed on new media platforms like www.afrofuturism.net. Others, like the work of Wangechi

²¹³ Badu lives in Houston with her three children Sirius, Puma, and Mars and also assists women in childbirth as a midwife. Her album titles, which are also indicative of her complexity, include: *Baduizm* (1997), *Mama’s Gun* (2000), *Worldwide Underground* (2003), *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* (2008), *New Amerykah Part Two* (Return of the Ankh) (2010).

²¹⁴ Badu’s music, persona, and presence vacillate between the notion of soul and post-soul. She has had significant interaction with jazz/soul artists of earlier generations like Roy Ayers, and bears the mark of generations of blues and jazz female artists like Billie Holiday. Her work is in direct conversation with the past and with futuristic elements of black culture.

²¹⁵ There are other female artists who came before and after Badu who similarly use the power of their visual bodies to create otherworldly, often futuristic subjectivities. They include a 1960s/’70s group fronted by Patti Labelle, called Labelle, which featured Nona Hendryx, Sarah Dash, and Cindy Birdsong, pioneering artist Grace Jones who has been a performer, musician and icon of visual aesthetics since the 1970s, and more recently, Janelle Monae, whose music and visual aesthetics transcend genres.

Mutu, function explicitly as art objects, while others like Daniels, Badu, Blaine, and Basquiat hover along the border between the avant-garde and the mainstream, which challenges how and where the object can be viewed. These works must be sought by viewers and do not often have a “home” or a ready-made audience. Like other visual objects I have discussed in this study, these works upset the notion that black artists and filmmakers produce work for an expectant black audience, which has often expressed disinterest, skepticism and outright rejection of some of this work. Erykah Badu is perhaps one paradox among these artists, as she has sustained a successful career appealing to a large contingency of black music consumers and has been a fixture at black music festivals and venues, yet she faced severe criticism with the release of her “Window Seat” video from black consumers. The “Window Seat” video, now available on www.youtube.com, was initially taken down from the site ostensibly because Badu’s naked body is shown.

Shadowboxer is available on DVD and can be found through online warehouses like Netflix, had a very limited theatrical release and is not widely circulated in the public sphere. Each visual work in its own way navigates the challenges of being a visual object that is always threatened with marginalization, skepticism, censorship, and obscurity. These works nonetheless compel us to discover language to account for their visual power and challenge us to relinquish our racial and cultural assumptions. They bring to life a space beyond racial representation, one that imagines bodies and worlds that exist beyond the limitations of blackness in our visual, historical, and cultural imagination.

Reimagining the Female Body

My first object of inquiry is an image that cannot be seen with the naked eye and one which requires a very different technological medium— a high-powered microscope. The story of the “HeLa” cells is undergirded by a compelling personal and historical narrative and one that

lays the foundation for how we might understand “seeing” the possibilities of black bodies. In her 2010 award-winning book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot unearths the story of Henrietta Lacks.²¹⁶ As a black woman growing up in the American South of the 1930s and ‘40s, Lacks’s story was not unique. She grew up poor in a small rural community surrounded by siblings and extended family. Years later after migrating from her home in rural Virginia to an industrial neighborhood in South Baltimore she would give birth to her fifth child and learn that she had cervical cancer. Lacks sought treatment at the renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital where, without her consent, doctors removed cancerous cells from her tumor, a tumor which Lacks said she could feel growing inside of her, to see if the tumor’s cells might survive and proliferate outside of the human body.²¹⁷ Lacks’s cells proved to be a profound scientific and medical discovery, as they were the first human cells to successfully grow outside of the human body. Through this discovery, doctors and scientists at Johns Hopkins began to revolutionize the study and treatment of human disease and medical laboratories all over the country began using what became known as “HeLa” cells to cure diseases like polio.²¹⁸ Skloot’s book provides a gripping account of the impact of Henrietta Lack’s life and death and how her cellular immortality impacted not only how we treat and cure disease, but also the survival of her young family. The impact of HeLa cells cannot be understated, as Skloot explains:

²¹⁶ Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Broadway, 2010.

²¹⁷ While many have been outraged that this was done without Lacks’s consent, Skloot argues that it was a common practice for doctors to collect tissues samples, among other procedures, from patients who had not consented and were altogether unaware of what had happened. George Gey and his staff are credited with the scientific discovery of HeLa cells and along with countless others they tried unsuccessfully for years to sustain human cellular life outside of the body.

²¹⁸ HeLa cells make it possible to grow the virus. “It was Henrietta Lacks’s cells that embraced the polio virus,” says Roland Pattillo, a former fellow of Gey’s, who is now director of gynecologic oncology at Morehouse School of Medicine. “She made it possible to grow the virus so the vaccine could be developed.” (<http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0400web/01.html>) Johns Hopkins Magazine (April 2000). Web. 10 Feb 2012.

...cells from her cervix living on forever—bought, sold, packaged, and shipped by the trillions to laboratories around the world. I ‘ve tried to imagine how she’d feel knowing that her cells went up in the first space missions to see what would happen to human cells in zero gravity, or that they helped with some of the most important advances in medicine: the polio vaccine, chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization (Skloot 2).

After Lacks’s death in 1951 at the age of 31 her children’s lives were plagued by abuse, poverty, and loss and they endured a contentious relationship with Johns Hopkins, which they believed had deceived and exploited their mother and absconded with the financial rewards. Towards the end of the book, Skloot describes how she and two of Lacks’s children were invited to Johns Hopkins decades after her death to gain a sense of what HeLa cells were all about. Lacks’s children and Skloot viewed stained HeLa cells under a powerful microscope. Seeing their mother’s cancerous cells, a woman who died when they were babies, was a transformative moment. Lacks’s children had seen a few photos of their mother, but had been confused by what her cells were and what had happened to their mother after her death. Was she somewhere frozen? Had she been cloned? Her children had been given many different accounts and none of it had made sense to them. The images of the HeLa cells, which her daughter described as “beautiful” provided a visual template of the humanity of their mother and a fuller demonstration of her body as a tangible force. Her children were able to see her in a way that a photograph could not fully apprehend. A woman they had very little physical contact with or memory of became a vivid expression of metaphysical force. The HeLa cells provide a defining allegory for this project as we learn something of the body’s capacity to arrest our assumptions, captivate our senses, and provide access to a fuller “metaphysical” experience with these images and our own

bodies. They allow us to reclaim the severely damaged intersection of “human” and “black” as a viable category of subjectivity and knowledge and way of being in the world.

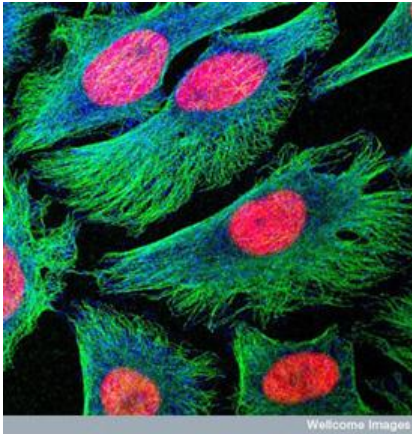


Fig. 3.1 HeLa cells²¹⁹

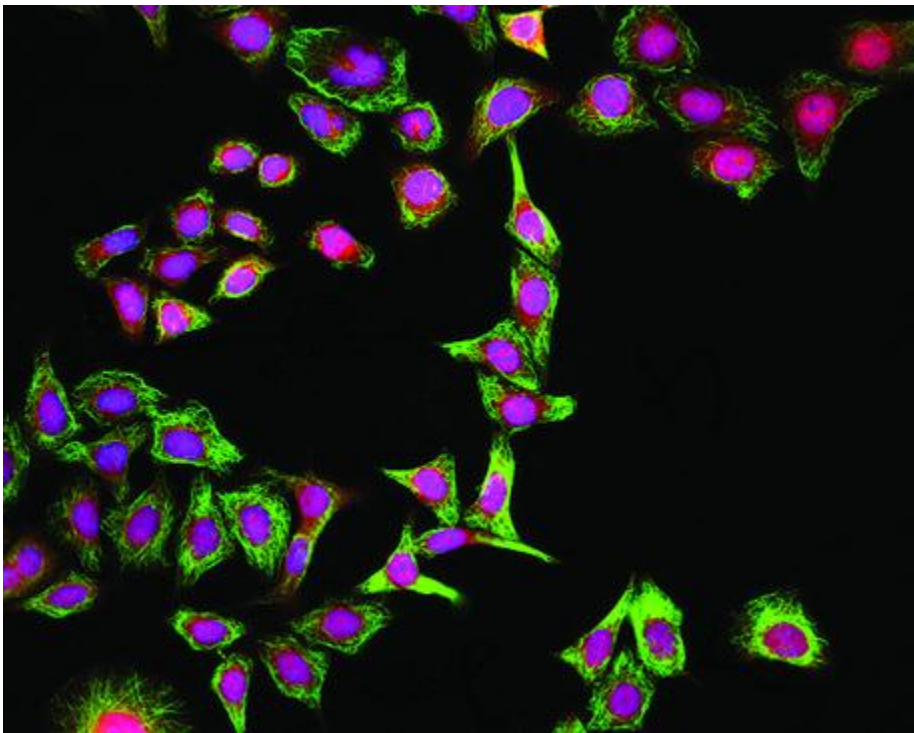


Fig. 3.2 HeLa cells²²⁰

²¹⁹ Image available at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/info/exhibitgallery.asp?exhibitID=157&past=0>. 10 Aug 2012.

²²⁰ Image available at https://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2010/04/04/image_of_the_we_7/. https://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2010/04/04/image_of_the_we_7/. 10 Aug 2012.

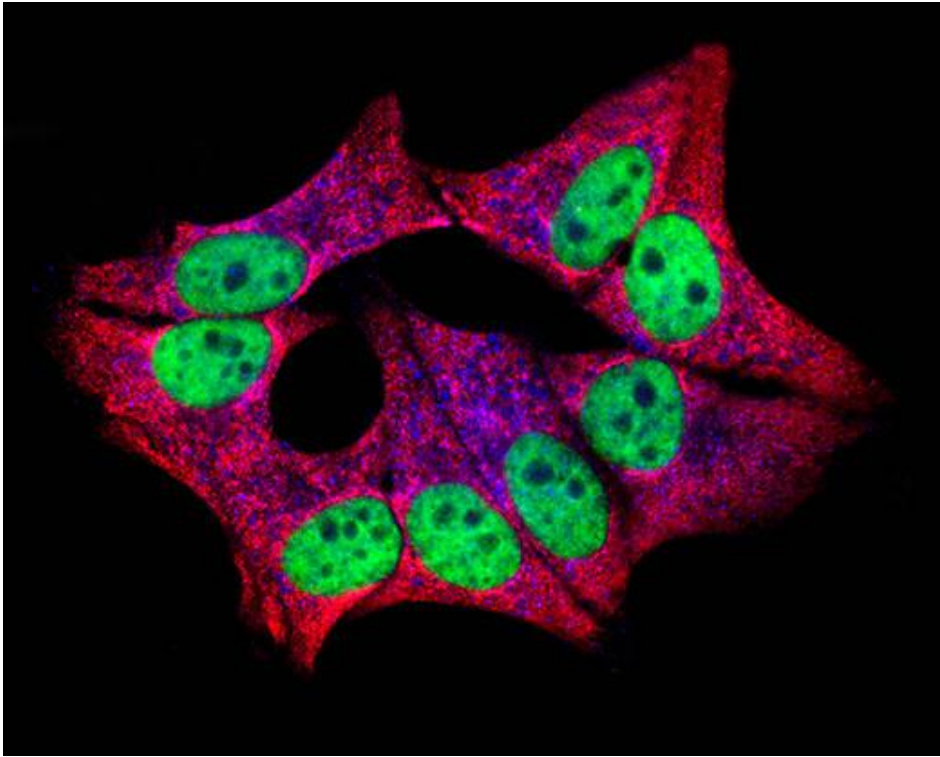


Fig. 3.3 HeLa cells²²¹

²²¹ Image available at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/multimedia/photos/115193624.html?c=y&page=3>.

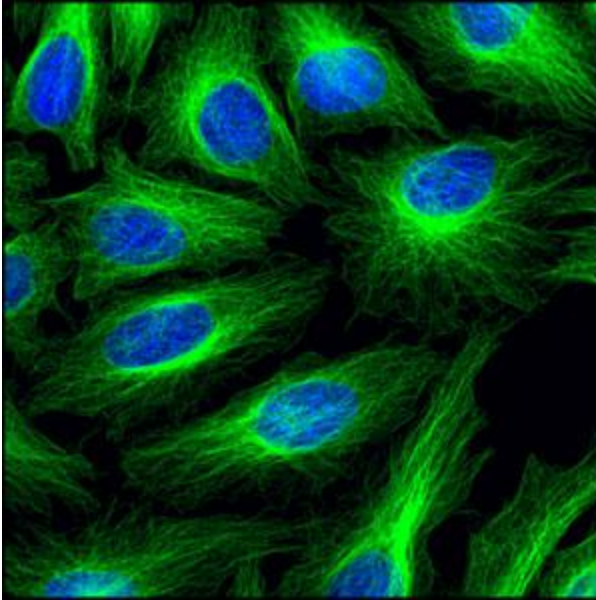


Fig. 3.4 HeLa cells²²²

These images might not be deemed “artistic” if we consider the conditions of their making or their use value, but their color and the structure and composition of nuclei and cellular tissues are strikingly vivid presentations of the possibilities of bodies to “awe”—to make us look and reflect on their making, to capture and transfix our gaze. These images are essentially powerfully magnified views of rapidly growing malignant cancer cells, yet they provide a unique glimpse of the human body. There are millions of HeLa cells frozen in medical laboratories around the world and many images of them in circulation, yet each one, like a fingerprint, is unique. These images capture the ironic beauty and power of cells generations removed from Lacks’s own body. They are both Lacks’s body and a futuristic body, her body and the universal human body, introducing a powerful visual signifier, narrative, and metaphor around the possibilities of bodies as simultaneously universal, female, and black and simultaneously creative, procreative and destructive. The body of Henrietta Lacks and the scientific revolution that her cells spawned attest to the vast set of possibilities that exist within a singular body and

²²² Image available at <http://www.cellsignal.com/products/2128.html>. 10 Aug 2012.

the contact between bodies. Taken together, her life and the medical miracles that resulted in increased health and longevity for people around the world, illustrate what bodies can do. This way of seeing a body marked as “black” contests the dehumanizing narratives and mythologies that have often plagued black bodies; bodies which are often still defined solely by an exterior racial blackness. Seeing the HeLa cells is an exploration of an often unrecognizable, dormant intelligence in the most interior, infinitesimal space possible. Metaphysical space in this context is observing bodies in unseeable and unknowable contexts, through the lens of a new set of visual, ontological, and embodied possibilities which exist at the interstices of life and death, past and future, wellness and disease, stasis and motility, the mundane and the sublime, the carnal and the supernatural, the analog and the digital, and the fleshly and the technological.

While images of HeLa cells might not be considered art objects they do render a unique and aesthetically compelling point of view of a (black) body. This vantage point which captures a cellular portrait poses a direct counterpoint to the prevailing logic of the black female body as primarily a fleshly body. Historical antecedents in the archive of images of the black female body referenced this flesh as a mark of difference, deviance, and hypersexuality. The seminal historical image of these attributes is the image of Saartjie Baartman, known as the “Hottentot Venus.” Baartman became a visual archetype of the black female body as an oddity, a sexual curiosity, and an anthropological “discovery” when she was brought to Europe from Cape town, South Africa in the early 1800s.²²³ Her posterior became the object of much anthropological attention and the perceived excesses of both skin color and flesh became bio-cultural tropes of black femaleness that persist to this day. In a chapter of her book *Troubling Blackness* entitled

²²³ For a discussion on the Hottentot Venus and black female embodiment see Norma Manatu’s *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., 2002, Clifton Craig and Pamela Scully’s *Sara Bartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, Deborah Willis’s (ed.) *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her Hottentot*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. Baartman’s name has often included the first name Sara, or Sarah.

“Black Women Performing Hypervisibility” Nicole Fleetwood contextualizes the notion of “excess” saying, “The explicit black female body is an excessive body (from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker to Millie Jackson, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams in her cat suit” (109).²²⁴ She develops a theory of “excess flesh” in which she explains how uses of the black female body by black artists articulate “the visual and discursive breaches that these enactments make in dominant visual culture, as an important site of engagement with the public sphere” (109). (I also reference this notion of “flesh” later in my discussion of performer Erykah Badu.)

The HeLa cells provide a contrast to the distorted reading of the black female body as an overdetermination of skin color and flesh, as they, along with the work of contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu, displace corporeal blackness and fleshiness as the anchors of a visual identity for black female bodies. Instead the images of tissues and of body parts in Mutu’s work offer a different context and vantage point, one that emphasizes the smaller spaces and tissues of the body which are harder to see, invisible to the naked eye, or internal. These bodies are animated by the influences of science, technology, and anthropology and foreground the interior biological structures, and in Mutu’s case, transpose the interior biology of the body, to the exterior surfaces of the body.

Wangechi Mutu is a Kenyan-born artist who currently resides in the US and was trained as an anthropologist and sculptor.²²⁵ This training manifests in her insightful attention to the body as a site of cultural, tactile, and aesthetic complexity. Described as a collage artist, Mutu’s work collapses a myriad of textual and tactile objects and references including glitter, fur, found

²²⁴ Millie Jackson is a soul singer known for her sexual lyrics and performances, while the others are more famous for their work as entertainers, actresses, and Williams for breaking ground as a top tennis player.

²²⁵ Alessandra Raengo provides a detailed reading of Mutu’s work in the second chapter of *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, forthcoming.

illustrations from medical books and magazines, ink, acrylic, and mylar.²²⁶ Mutu describes her work as “...using the body as a platform to reveal the resilience and physical/mythical power of the female body...”²²⁷ She goes further saying, “I think there is a shift not in using the black body ‘as a political gesture per se, but a movement towards using the black body for a variety of gestures not just pertaining to race or gender in the most obvious manner.’”²²⁸ Mutu explains the intent of her work, saying: “I’m really trying to pay homage to the notion of the sublime and the abject together and using the aesthetic of rejection, or poverty, or wretchedness as a tool to talk about things that are transcendent and hopeful.”²²⁹ Consider Mutu’s image entitled *Cancer of the Uterus*, which powerfully connects to the images of the HeLa cells, as they provide an artistic equivalent to the cervical cancer that ravaged the body of Henrietta Lacks.

Mutu’s work foregrounds the interior structures of the human body with its depiction of cells, organs, tissues, and body parts which are not imposed onto a facial image, but out of which a face is constructed then imposed onto a medical textbook page. Full red lips poke through a throbbing black mass of cancerous tissue, while the eyes are similarly overcome by the diseased substance that spreads across the central region of the female face. Mutu’s work is part of an exhibit entitled, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* where beauty and disease are mapped onto bodies, faces, organs, and tissues.²³⁰ The works in this series do not “represent” blackness or femaleness in a traditional way, instead they collapse “normal” body parts with

²²⁶ This biographical information is courtesy of http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu_articles.htm/. Web. 12 Mar 2012.

²²⁷ See Soraya and Derek Conrad Murray’s essay “A Rising Generation & the Pleasures of Freedom,” 10.

²²⁸ Ibid p 14.

²²⁹ See Aimée Reed, “Interview with Wangechi Mutu,” *Daily Serving*, Apr. 12, 2010 on Thea Liberty Nichols guest blog at [www. http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/25/wangechi-mutu/](http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/25/wangechi-mutu/). Web. 10 Feb 2012

²³⁰ See the gallery website for the art from this exhibit and commentary. I list some of the titles from the works in this exhibit, as they attest to her engagement with female bodies and disease: *Ectopic Pregnancy*, *Uterine Catarrh*, *Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus* and *Ovarian Cysts* (among others). http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm. Web. 10 Feb 2012. Books on Mutu’s work include: *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise*. Ed. Douglas Singleton, Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2008, *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization?* Ed. David Moos, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010.

diseased body parts, where the disease becomes flesh gone bad, contaminated by the superimposition of deformed cultural and gender ideologies as disease—growths, attachments, disorders. Mutu superimposes social dis-eases that women experience with physiological disorders, largely disorders of the female reproductive system. Disease and disorder are mapped as palpable, throbbing manifestations of historical and social experience. Mutu explains, “Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body.”²³¹ Merrily Kerr also explains how the interior and exterior dichotomy emerges in the work saying, “Mutu portrays the inner and outer ideals of self with physical attributes clipped from lifestyle magazines: the woman’s face being a racial distortion, her mind occupied by a prototypical white model.”²³² Mutu’s work is part collage, part embodied archival project that conjoins body parts, objects, and the grotesque with fragments of color, beauty, life and death, the clinical and the mystical. It points to an astute reading of the black body as an entity that gestures *to* other ways of experiencing and seeing images and flesh. I read Mutu’s work and the HeLa images as shifts beyond historical and scientific record to a space where the body reveals, tells, heals and knows. Mutu’s work employs an aesthetic that I might call “identity assemblage” as it collages fragments of, body parts, symbols, objects, and textures to displace antiquated notions of racial identity with a vivid and complex subjectivity.²³³

²³¹ See Merrily Kerr, “Wangechi Mutu's Extreme Makeovers,” *Art On Paper* 8.6, July/August 2004. posted on: [http:// www.akrylic.com/contemporary_art_article73.htm](http://www.akrylic.com/contemporary_art_article73.htm) . See website for this show and the text http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm. 10 Apr 2012.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ I use the term “identity assemblage” to explain how Mutu works in a post-black way by pulling apart the pieces of racial identity only to reconstruct an identity that is not solely defined by blackness, but includes other embodied and disembodied parts. I later found that this expression is also used by Angela Stief in *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image?* Angela Stief and Gerald Matt Eds. Wien: Kunsthalle, 2009.

The Work of Nettrice Gaskins

Subjectivity is also redefined by Nettrice Gaskins, whose work provides a useful model for the exploration of embodiment in art and digital media across time and space, depicting how black bodies do not simply imagine alternative universes (multiverses) and forms of embodiment but create them. In two series of work both created in black and white and then in color, she depicts bodies in the midst of a metaphysical transformation.



Fig. 3.5 *Cry I*, B&W, Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

Here black and white evokes the starkness of the body's grief and trauma which are written on the figure's face. The single eye cries a single tear gesturing mournfully into the cyclical force at

the center of the image. Each component of the image, the body, the branch-like structures, the leaves, the cross imagery to the left of the body are all linked, each a part of the cosmic unity of the piece. The body is not a singular, independent force, but its form is embedded in the structures which it is connected to. Though positioned in a still image, this body is intense and fluid, animating this universe with its melancholic desire and the ambivalent facial expression surrenders to the metaphysical force that gives it form. Gaskins evokes a palpable humanity, one that joins with elements of nature, religious motifs, and a force at the core of the image which holds the composition in balance.



Fig. 3.6 *Cry II*, b&w Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

In *Cry II* we see the similar tree-like structures, here more separated from the bodily forms, yet the bodies are still compelled, bent, bowing to the cyclical core, which seems to draw the body's

life force into its own. Bodies are not given a complete form, instead they exist in continuity with the shapes that surround them. This image also evokes a shifting sense of power as the circular core structure is different here. The lines in the core's structure evoke the spokes of a wheel, a structure that can accelerate the development of industrial progress and is more functional than cosmic.



Fig 3.7 *Cry I*, batik, Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

In the colored images, the batikting technique allows the colors to bleed creating a beautiful effect. Here the body is given more form, fluidity, and definition, and the color also highlights the body's presence as a dynamic figure that co-creates with the forces that surround it. The batikting also creates pixels, droplets that amass across the body and form a kind of mystical pathway between the body and the core.



Fig 3.8 *Cry II*, batik, Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

In *Cry II*, again through the batik we see a sense of bodies that exist between form and invisibility. The figures are ambiguous in some ways without complete features and appendages, yet they are connected to the force that seems to draw the bodies towards its core. The bodies here are spotted with white and black color, differentiating them from one another and from the fiery center.

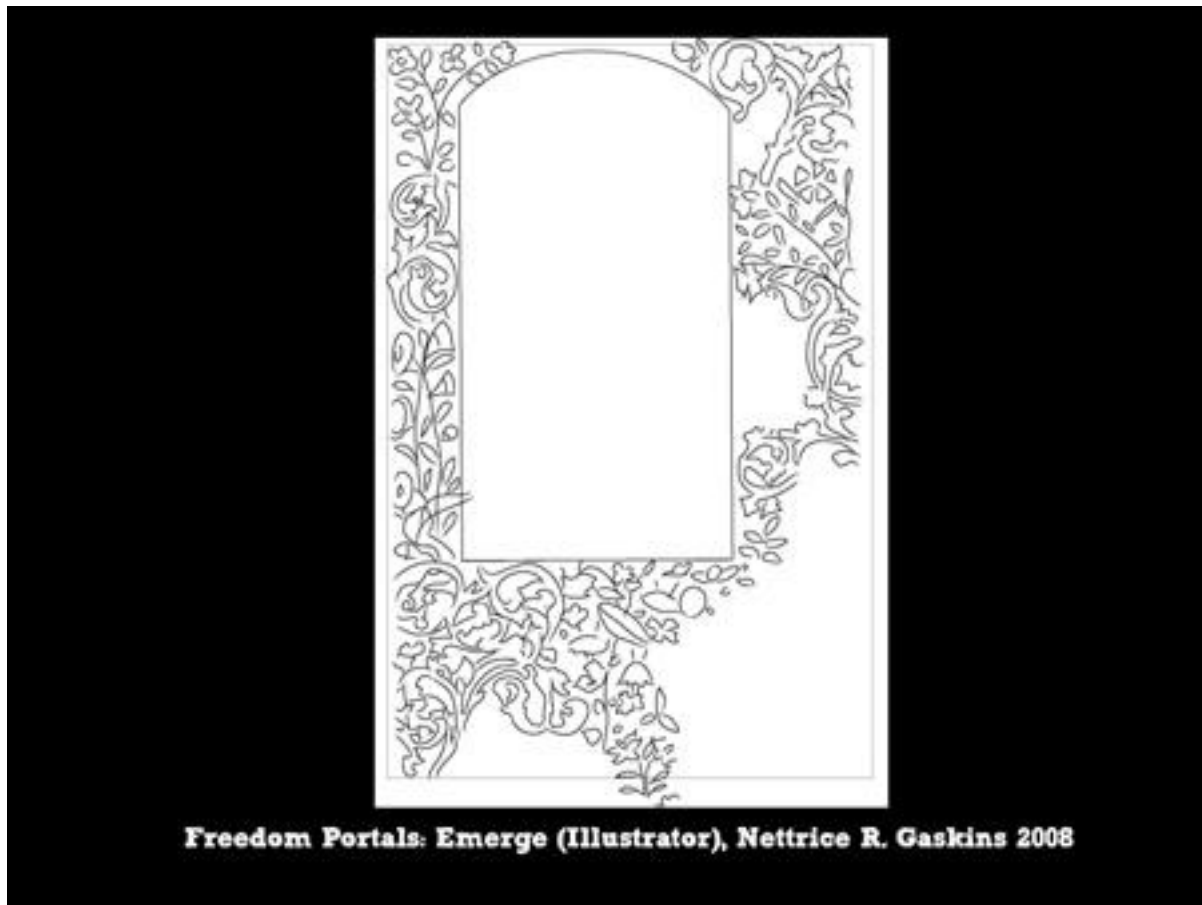


Fig 3.9 *Freedom Portals: Emerge*, B&W, Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

This black and white image of a carefully drawn portal trimmed with a delicate floral design provides a metaphor for the contrast between the safety and expectancy of cultural “blackness” and the unpredictable and less rigid aesthetics of post-blackness. The rigid boundaries and lack of vibrant color speak to a methodical formalism and a safe passage through the confines of the portal, or blackness.

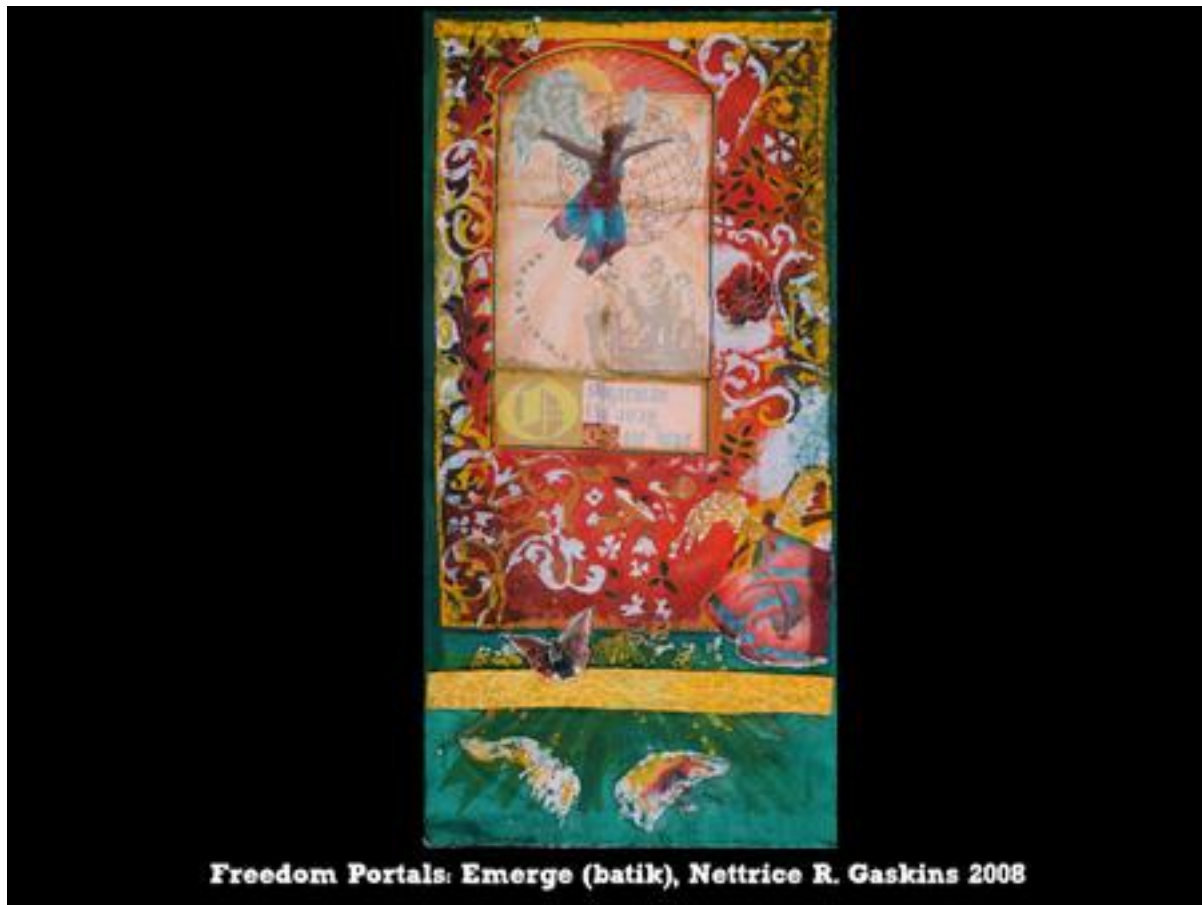


Fig 3.11 *Freedom Portal: Emerge*, batik, Courtesy of Nettrice Gaskins

In this image the emergence of the body is vivid and ethereal and color magnifies this transformation from the stark order of the black and white image that precedes it. Gaskins disperses the ornate designs around the portal more freely and a body with wings takes flight, joyful and free, dancing in the portal, or within the space of passage and freedom. Within the portal the body is imposed onto a spherical image of the world rising above what appears to be a faint, almost imperceptible rendering of the body's enslaved past. Gaskins conjoins a traumatic past with a present and future that have moved beyond racial trauma to a dynamic state of being. The contrast between the black and white and colored images, which share the same title, emphasizes the concept of *motility* as described by Sara Ahmed, as an embodied movement that thwarts the history of racialized physical and social immobility, in this case referencing slavery

and racial oppression.²³⁴ The openings in Gaskins work recall Charles Johnson's use of the term "portal" (mentioned in the Introduction) as an escape from the trauma faced by bodies which challenged the physical restraints, violence, and subjugation of racism and segregation in the South. Johnson also uses the term "portal" in a more intimate and revealing context describing a memory from his own childhood. Recalling his youth spent drawing and looking at images in art books he remarks that "each canvass, each drawing, each image was a portal that ever so slightly changed my way of perceiving and imagining the world."²³⁵ Openings and portals are intrinsic to the metaphysical processes of movement, transformation, and the passage from one dimension to another, or from one subjectivity or state- of- being to another.²³⁶

Gaskins's creation of otherworldly experiences also emerges in her Second Life installation, entitled "My Steampunk Dream" which I describe as "post-black cyber- narrative." Steampunk draws from literature, science fiction, fantasy, and art imagery, reproducing styles of dress and references to futuristic visions of time travel, technology, and post-apocalyptic futures.²³⁷ This digital installation depicts digitized images of a black female body navigating a continuum of experiences, past, present, and future foregrounding technological advancement as a means of propelling bodies and ideas into a world of their own making. Her work is heavily influenced by Afro-futurism, which describes a body of knowledge, a theoretical approach, and an inquiry into how black bodies produce knowledge and express creativity by using and

²³⁴ See Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.

²³⁵ See Johnson interview

[http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The M%26C Interview 1 Charles Johnson_6_07](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The_M%26C_Interview_1_Charles_Johnson_6_07) Web. 14 Apr 2012.

²³⁶ Gaskins has also created an installation called *Alternate Futures: Afrofuturist Multiverses and Beyond*, which she describes as: a collection of virtual 3D visions that presupposes a sustained black culture — past, present, and future. It contains fragments of imagery and sounds that are cosmic, utopian, and dystopian. See www.afrofuturism.net.

²³⁷ For work on steampunk see John Tibbetts, *The Gothic Imagination: Conversations on Fantasy, Horror and Science Fiction in the Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Cynthia Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, "Blending Genres, Bending Time: Steampunk on the Western Frontier." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 39.2 (2011): 84-92 and David Pike's "Afterimages of the Victorian City." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.2 (2010): 254-267.

creating futuristic paradigms and technological pathways.²³⁸ Afro-futurism also influences the work of Erykah Badu as I discuss later.

To briefly chart a trajectory of Afro-futurist thought I begin with Mark Dery, an early technoculture writer and critic who effectively coined the term in his manifesto, “Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0.”²³⁹ Dery traces a narrative of Afro-futurism across science fiction, music, and literary and cultural theory. He explains:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture---and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future---might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism. The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?²⁴⁰

Alondra Nelson, another seminal voice in Afro-futurist discourse, introduced it as a mode of theoretical inquiry, describing it as:

. . . a way of looking at the world, a canopy for thinking about black diasporic artistic production, it’s even an epistemology that is really about thinking about the future,

²³⁸ Afro-futurism examines the work of particular African American artists, musicians, writers, and performers. This can go back to artists like jazz fusion pioneer Sun Ra, funk artists like George Clinton and the female group LaBelle; fiction writers like Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson; and recent performers like Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae. According to Alondra Nelson, the term was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in an essay interview entitled “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose in “Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,” ed. by Mark Dery, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94.4 (1993):738. I find that the coining of the terms post-black, post-soul and Afro-futurism in the late 1980s early 90s is no coincidence as scholars in art, music, and technology were intent on finding new ways to articulate clear shifts in how blackness and racial identity impacted culture and our engagement of it.

²³⁹ This essay is available online at <http://web.archive.org/web/19991023003219/http://www.levity.com/markdery/black.html> and in an anthology which Dery’s edited, called *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Duke University Press, 1994.

²⁴⁰ See Dery’s essay online <http://web.archive.org/web/19991023003219/http://www.levity.com/markdery/black.html>. Web 10 Apr 2012.

thinking about the subject position of black people and how that is both alienating and alienation. . . .²⁴¹

In her Introduction to *Social Text's* special issue on Afro-futurism, Nelson outlines two specific converging strands of Afro-futurist discourse. First she addresses the necessity of interrogating racial subjectivity in the context of emerging virtual/internet cyber cultures and the circulation and exchange of identities in cyberspace and new media arts and performance. A second strand explores how these technologies construct alternative temporal realities for black bodies. Nelson traces the legacies of both techno-digital discourses and those of the Futurists.²⁴² She explains that the enthusiasm expressed in some of the early writing of Timothy Leary and others who posited not a technological utopia, but a freedom from racial embodiment, was not shared by some of the black artists and theorists who did not fully accept the myth of a virtual, digital or futuristic de-racing of bodies.²⁴³ Nelson rightly argues that Leary did not account for how “bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to the freely constructed identity that he advocated” (Nelson 3).²⁴⁴ Nelson’s vision of Afro-futurism connects previous generations of black visual artists, musicians, and performers with the current spate of online and

²⁴¹ See an online interview on www.afrofuturism.net. Web. 10 Mar 2012.

²⁴² Nelson cites Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, 148.

²⁴³ She cites Timothy Leary and Eric Gullichsen’s “High-Tech Paganism,” in *Chaos and Cyberculture*. Berkeley, CA: Ronin, 1994, 236.

²⁴⁴ Other scholars like Kali Tal, Brandi Catanese Wilkins have similarly explained that cyberspace, new media and the prospects of complex virtual identities do not negate the complexities of social and material racial identity. Wilkins points to Hayles’s assertion that “our bodies are no less actively involved in the construction of virtuality than in the construction of everyday life.” See N. Katherine Hayles, “Embodied Virtuality: or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture,” in Moser and MacLeod, *Immersed in Technology*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, 1. In *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*, New York and London: Routledge, 2006 Mark Hansen also interrogates race in the digital sphere, but is optimistic that it can allow for social/digital relations that expand the possibilities of how raced bodies are engaged and processed. Other seminal voices who engage digital/new media performance and subjectivity including Jennifer Gonzalez and Lisa Nakamura are less optimistic than Hansen, suggesting that digital and virtual environments do not diminish the racial logics that have been established in analog contexts. See Jennifer A. González’s, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice.” *Camera Obscura* 70 (2009): 36-65 and Lisa Nakamura’s *Digitizing Race. Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

new media productions, emphasizing that there is a significant thread of continuity in analog and digital blackness, but also places of expanded possibility and imagination.²⁴⁵

Gaskins's Second Life world connects the futuristic to the metaphysical. Using the steampunk allegory of time travel to capture the continuity between multiple generations of experience, she frees black bodies from the rigid, intractable nature of time and space. This is critical as this project argues that black bodies mired in the historical trauma of racism and slavery and in the discourses that maintained their immobility, can escape (even through their imagination) using the constructs of digital space, technology, and time travel to escape past, or present conditions of oppression. Gaskins captures this feeling of inertia where there is seemingly no interruption in the continuum of trauma in the past, present or future generations by embedding a video called *Lailee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* into the installation. This brief video depicts the debilitating outcomes of slavery and the plantation economy that continue to plague present (and potentially future) generations of black families in the South, particularly in Mississippi. The plantation system and the symbolism of the cotton plant becomes a visual referent in the virtual world as cotton plants, resembling floating white tomatoes, hover above the avatar who travels in and out of the past, present, and future.

Gaskins's installation depicts the power of black bodies to reconfigure historical narratives, inserting their presence into spaces in which they are presumed to be absent or insignificant.²⁴⁶ With the simple addition of the pronoun "my" in "My Steampunk Dream"

²⁴⁵ A number of high profile web-based performances/installations have garnered significant attention going back to Keith Obadike "net performance" which he called "Blackness for sale" on internet auction site www.Ebay.com, and damali oyo's www.rentanegro.com. See Brandi Catanese Wilkins's discussion of online performance art, and identity in "How Do I Rent a Negro?": Racialized Subjectivity and Digital Art Performance." *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005): 699-714. More recently web series or webisodes like "Awkward Black Girl" have redefined online performances, which are modeled more after sit-coms, yet raise similar questions about race and subjectivity. See Issa Rae's webisode on www.awkwardblackgirl.com. Web. 2 May 2012.

²⁴⁶ This is a critical argument made of several of the visual objects and artists/filmmakers in this study; hip-hop artists manipulating urban space, Basquiat inserting himself in the institutional art world, Blaine in the magic world

Gaskins's inserts her black female body (in the form of the tiny female avatar) into the narrative of steampunk culture, which as a semi-historical archive of imagery and literature may not foreground many black bodies²⁴⁷ The gesture of inserting oneself into an a set of generic conventions is not only a post-black pivot, but one that suggests that culture, time, space and history are malleable and can be reconfigured at any moment. It also opens the door for rethinking steampunk, or other genres which we invariably perceive as "white," thereby dismissing the possibilities of other bodies. This Gaskins avatar (digital protagonist) places herself as a central force in the proleptic logic of black and post-black culture, that is, she is vital to moving it forward.²⁴⁸

As the avatar walks through the digital world, we are immediately struck by her diminutive size, and her "steampunk" fashions. Her digitized, pixelated body lacks the fluid movements of traditional cinematography (whether 16mm, 35mm, or digital video) and depicts her movements awkwardly. As she turns the simulated pans and tilts mimic her disjointed point of view. The visual landscape of this world is populated with artificial neon colors and placards resembling billboards attempting to create an illusion of three-dimensional space and shattering any expectation of scenic realism. The avatar is a body among objects which mark the past and future, including an image of block-lettered graffiti writing, a woman wearing an afro, and the "high cotton" floating overhead. The music is similarly saturated with layers of cultural signification including a 1970s-styled song, which unites elements of blues, soul, and funk and a re-mixed hip-hop song displaying layering and sampling techniques. This world resembles

and Badu in Dealey Plaza. Each figure directed their creative talents and imagination in and around spaces, histories, and cultural canons which they were never intended to be a part of.

²⁴⁷ I describe it as a "semi-historical" archive because it contains fictional and historical readings (mapping science fiction and fantasy onto a historical era).

²⁴⁸ In Chapter 2 I define the term and applied it to Basquiat and Blaine and the embodiment of a new instantiation of meaning in their domain. Here the term refers to a digital body or archetype.

video game imagery of a certain generation (neither the earliest images, nor the most recent ones) which featured bodies that were awkwardly animated, not quite human bodies traversing a series of platforms, falling from one level or world to another. This space foregrounds the avatar as the guiding point of view in the visual experience. Her face is not seen as she guides the experience and the viewer's point of view collapses onto her own. Her movements and choices animate the exploration of this world as she passes through its dimensions. In just over three minutes, Gaskins Second Life world envisions a world replete with sounds and images from the past which project a complicated view of blackness in a multi-dimensional future.

As black bodies in cinema were often lodged in celluloid at twenty-four frames per second, bodies in digital and virtual space are given some mobility to enter a futuristic aesthetic platform where they do not have to answer to the often painful historical archives of still and moving images. Second Life and other similar platforms are not idyllic—they do not escape what race has come to mean, but they are in constant engagement with technological innovation and reconfiguration, which are emblematic of a proleptic impulse and an alternate set of embodied possibilities. The creation of new subjectivities for black bodies, ones that have not often been seen or circulated before, is not at war with the past, as Gaskins explains, but envisions a way to inhabit the spaces in between the past, present and future.

Baduisms

The self-described “analog girl in a digital world,” “Medula Oblangata,” “Ann E,” Sara Bellum,” and “Manuella Maria Mexico,” singer, songwriter, and performer Erykah Badu is an avatar of a different sort.²⁴⁹ Not solely an analog or digital body, Badu travels through time and space as a trailblazing visual icon and singer of multiple musical genres including, neo-soul, hip-

²⁴⁹ Badu makes this ontological proclamation in her first single “On and On.”

hop, rhythm and blues, and techno. Not a digital avatar, Badu is an avatar in the vein of Basquiat and Blaine, who reconfigures systems of signification around her body, allowing her black female form to embody many ideas and feats.²⁵⁰

In her music video narratives, Badu depicts fictionalized archetypes of the blues woman, a futuristic woman, a maternal figure et.al., and her performances and the images on her album covers suggest not a representational body, but a body that inhabits characters, moving across time, space, and form to capture an essence of these figures. A glimpse of her album covers reveals her astral, afro-futurist, bohemian and Afrocentric influences.

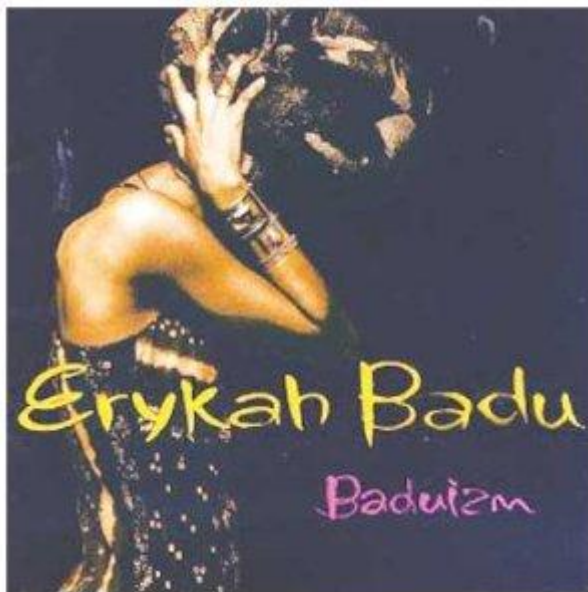


Fig. 3.11 *Baduizm*, 1997, album cover²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ In her personal life Badu embodies a number of “roles” or subjectivities as mother, midwife, performer, and activist. Badu is currently performing with a musical In an interview Badu explains the premise behind the band, “The Cannabinoids, the name came out, because the Cannabinoids are the receptors in marijuana that go to the brain and change the condition of thinking, smelling or hearing or taste or hunger—and we represent the synthetic Cannabinoids which means we are making music that affects the brain. We want the audience to feel the intensity of it and our theme is “Welcome to the Human Brain and the Science of Addiction. We want them to become addicted to what we do, who they are, and how we become one living, breathing organism.”

<http://www.complex.com/music/2012/03/interview-erykah-badu-cannabinoids-sxsw>. collective called the Cannabinoids, who use onstage technology in combination with live musicians.

²⁵¹ The album cover images in Figures 3.11 thru 3.15 can be found on www.amazon.com.

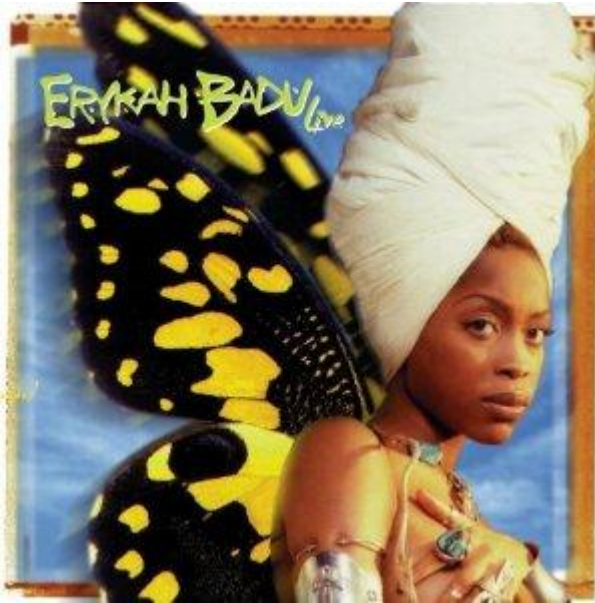


Fig. 3.12 Erykah Badu Live, 1997, album cover



Fig. 3.13 Mama's Gun, 2000, album cover

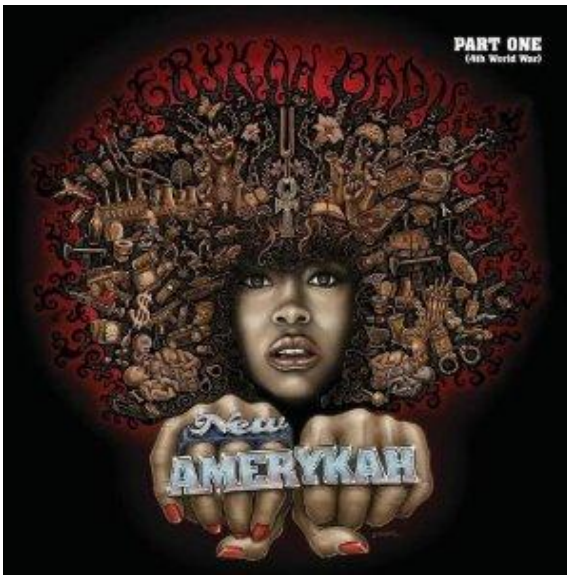


Fig. 3.14 *New Amerykah Part One: 4th World War*, 2007, album cover

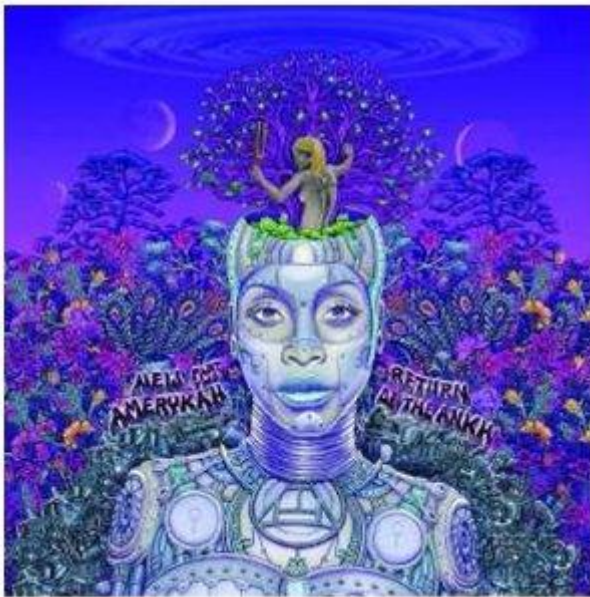


Fig. 3.15 *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh*, 2010, album cover

In each image Badu incorporates an array symbols into the personas she constructs. Each album cover and video contributes to the archival project of Badu as “every woman.” (I revisit this line of thinking later in my discussion of the video for “Window Seat” in which she strips away these figures/personas.) Like Gaskins’s digital universe, Badu’s imagery occupies the past and the future, the earthly and the astral. These personas vividly display the experiences of love, loss, and self-awareness, traversing parallel universes of fantasy, science-fiction, and hip-hop culture. Badu’s body in the imagery in three of her music videos also depicts the spaces in-between past, present, and future, moving between the logic of black vernacular and history and post-blackness. Like Gaskins’s visual works, Badu’s visual presence circulates between the post-black/post-soul, and Afro-futurist paradigms. In an essay entitled, “Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music,” Marlo David discusses Badu’s relationship to both Afro-futurism and post-soul, explaining how Badu’s visual presence enacts a post-humanist category embedded in Afrofuturist discourses as a space that rejects the troubled relationship between the black body and regimes of representation. David argues that Badu’s futuristic vision does not completely reject the category of “human” as an implicitly corrupt one, a stance which some Afrofuturists have embraced.²⁵² Likewise, my reading of Badu and her articulation of embodiment does not rely on the wholesale disavowal of the human body, but on how the body is re-animated by explorations of its dichotomies and an expansion of the body’s possibilities. For David it is at the intersection of Afro-futurism and post-soul that these alternative subjectivities emerge: “Afrofuturist thought posits a reconciliation between an imagined disembodied, identity-free future and the embodied identity-specific past and present, which can provide a critical link through which post-soul artists can express a radical black subjectivity”

²⁵² See Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1999, where he says “the human is a pointless and treacherous category.” (003)

(David 697). My engagement of Badu goes further. Through the post-black/post-soul/Afrofuturist aesthetic paradigms, Badu's visual work goes beyond a recuperation of black subjectivity and presses towards the creation of a metaphysical body.²⁵³ It is the body's metaphysical capacities that come alive in her work. Badu's impact can be measured in the way that she rescues the body from the pessimism of post-human discourses where the body is rendered a corrupted category, towards a space of intense freedom, exploration, whimsy, beauty, humor, irony, and playfulness.²⁵⁴ Badu allows her body to become a new prototype for "human," one that is not "colored," as in colored "black," but *colorful*, vibrant, and intense.

Badu has garnered much attention for her music videos and many are worthy of discussion. I focus first on two videos, "On and On" and "Didn't Cha Know," which are the most explicit articulations of post-blackness and of the body's ability to mark past and futuristic visions of embodiment. My primary case study discusses a third, "Window Seat," in more detail as a contemporary vision of post-black artistic power. In the video for her first single, "On and On," released in 1997, Badu re-imagines Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.²⁵⁵ In a visual world much more vivid and less traumatic than the world of Walker and Spielberg's making, and one that also resembles aspects of the Cinderella fable, Badu plays the role of the protagonist who, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, is initially confined to domestic life on a Southern farm circa 1940. Badu's story does not have the emotional weight and trauma of *The Color Purple* and is instead infused with irony and playfulness. The video is in fact deliberately whimsical in places, infusing anachronistic elements of mise-en-scene to signify

²⁵³ I cross reference post-black and post-soul in my analysis of Badu because as a musical artist her work is deeply connected to the paradox of soul and post-soul musical culture as discussed by Neal and George in the Introduction.

²⁵⁴ Thelma Golden first discussed the trope of "playfulness" as an attribute of *Freestyle* artists in her earliest writings on post-black. Post-black has the knack of injecting humor, and whimsy into "serious" artistic exploration and subject matter.

²⁵⁵ See the "On and On" video at <http://youtu.be/-CPCs7vVz6s>. *The Color Purple* was released in 1985 and starred Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey among others.

how Badu’s world is not meant to be read as a completely historical record of this time and space. The video opens, as do several of Badu’s videos, with the words “A Story by Erykah Badu.” This ironic insertion is appropriate given how Badu’s lyrics in some ways work against the visual narrative she depicts and also signifies the double voiced-ness of the piece where Walker/Spielberg are “authors” in the filmic universe, but Badu maintains an authorial voice in this one. Badu’s playfulness is apparent in her relaxed body language and gestures— she falls in the mud and tends to the hopelessly messy home with a shrug of the shoulders and a slight grin. This playfulness is an explicit post-black gesture, and not a trivial attribute, as it is a hard fought victory of post-blackness to allow black bodies to experience emotions and experiences of exuberance, joy, and whimsy. Yet, the video is not completely whimsical. Badu manages to infuse the emotional complexity of the protagonist’s life in the lyrics of the song itself. The opening lyrics read:

Oh my my my
 I'm feeling high
 My moneys gone
 I'm all alone
 to much oooh
 The world is turnin'
 Oh what a day
 What a day what a day

The bluesy melody and lyrics signify a sense of emotional disorientation, yet not hopelessness. Badu is both “high” whether as a state of intoxication or a state of ecstasy, then low, reifying the

“blues woman” ontology and with its familiar themes of being “broke and alone.”²⁵⁶ This first video, her foray into public life and performance, depicts a “blackness” that is connected to, but not embedded in the cultural vernacular of a Southern past. Badu’s southern woman is not immersed in trauma as Celie is, but a cross between Celie who is relegated to the domestic sphere and a blues woman in her finest clothes headed to the juke joint. Unlike Celie, Badu’s character has an escape of sorts. In the last scene of the video, Badu sheds the “Celie” persona and the homely work clothes, donning her trademark African dress and tall green head wrap. She merges her contemporary African/bohemian persona with the southern black woman from the past, creating her own version of a contemporary “blues woman.” At one point towards the end of the video she even lifts her long dress, revealing rugged boots which were a signature accessory for Badu, but also symbolized her connection to the domain of work and hard living and her ability to be more than one thing at once, that is, to occupy multiple times, and subjectivities at once. In this video, Badu pays homage to Black women of the past, cultivating a persona that was part- domestic worker and part performer, signifying on cinematic and literary traditions where women are at times transcendent, trapped, clever, ironic, and sensual.²⁵⁷

In the video for the song “Didn’t Cha Know,” released in 2000, Badu moves to another visual sphere. She becomes a post-apocalyptic “creature” wandering through a futuristic desert. She is the sole human body in the video wading through deep sand dunes. The cinematography makes use of extreme high angle panoramic shots capturing the desert landscape and extreme close-ups of tiny cracks and crevices in the dry desert to attend to the vastness of the desert space

²⁵⁶ For literature on the historical and archetypal construction of the blues woman see Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. New York: Vintage, 1998; Daphne Duval Harrison’s *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990 and Adam Gussow’s “Shoot Myself a Cop:” Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” as Social Text.” *Callaloo* 25. 1 (2002): 8-44.

²⁵⁷ This video signifies on a tradition of literary and cinematic evocations of black female fictional and historical experiences. Cinematically it conjures additional film adaptations of Morrison’s *Beloved* (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1995), and it also evokes the literary work of Zora Neale Hurston, J. California Cooper, Jamaica Kincaid and Tina McElroy Ansa.

and tiny life forms that inhabit the space. The mise-en-scene in this video is strikingly different from many of Badu's other videos—with little color, few visual or narrative references and the body as a singular, isolated, and unfamiliar figure. Badu is one of Charles Johnson's "fantastic creatures" who have poured through a portal into an unfamiliar science fiction universe. Yet there are signature elements of Badu in the video. Instead of an African-inspired headdress, she dons an extremely tall futuristic headdress, tall boots, and an extremely long coat and train that trails behind her on the ground. The video depicts close ups of Badu with tribal markings on her face, wearing lipstick which marks her as "human" and "female," and other imagery of her in a cocoon or juxtaposed to crawling insects, or the "inhuman." This desert apocalyptic mise-en-scene is reminiscent of the futuristic science fiction films of George Lucas's *Star Wars* universe, *Dune* and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, but also clearly evokes the Afrofuturist paradigm.²⁵⁸ The premise of the video is buffeted by the lyrics of the song, "oooh heeey, I'm trying to decide which way to go, I think I made a wrong turn back there somewhere." Badu walks, searching, then as the sun sets, she lies on the long train and sleeps in a cocoon-like formation. While she sleeps, lizards crawl around her and we see images of ants crawling in the soil. At dawn she awakes, and moments later sings: "free your mind and find a way, there will be a brighter day." The remaining images of the video are of mystical patterns that Badu has traced in the sand, a large watering hole with green water out of which a partially naked Badu emerges, her green eyes now an even more vibrant green. This video extends Badu's complex visual universe to naturalistic elements, spiritual symbolism, science fiction, and Afro-futurism. Her body, music

²⁵⁸ *Dune* was a popular science fiction novel by Frank Herbert published in 1965 and adapted to the big screen by David Lynch in 1984. Badu's video recalls the film's iconography and that of the *Star Wars* desert scenes and the 1985 film *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (Dir George Miller and George Ogilvie) starring Mel Gibson and Tina Turner. As I allude to earlier, the Afrofuturist paradigm is invested in many questions including the possibilities of human and post-human categories and conceptualizations of a future where sound, gaming, and image technologies re-imagine social relations.

and performance conjoin to imagine a futuristic and naturalistic world where black bodies live and roam as complex bodies capable of navigating unfamiliar universes.

Badu's controversial video for the song "Window Seat" is an explicit articulation of how post-blackness reclaims the body, history, and space. This video created a stir as Badu walks through Dealey Park, the iconic scene of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, taking off every item of clothing that she is wearing in front of unsuspecting passers-by. This video inserts Badu's body into a traumatic historical space, one which ostensibly has little connection to Badu's body, performative identity, and musical style, or to the Afrofuturist aesthetic that has often defined her work. While Badu is originally from Dallas and now resides in Houston, we cannot be sure that this fact is what cements this choice of location. The potential resonance that Dallas may have for Badu should be considered in light of the "Rorschach effect," that is, this location can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the viewer's perspective. While the outcome of that day was the death of one of America's most compelling and resonant political figures, the incidents that took place on the day remain murky. Books, feature and documentary films, federal commissions have all attempted to theorize what took place, and there remains a certain mystery about the site.²⁵⁹ It is a space that needs to be figured out, the day's events, characters, and timelines needed to be reconstructed. Badu's choice to film there recalls Jay-Z's choice to place Andy Warhol's "Rorschach" on the cover of his book, *Decoded* which I discuss in Chapter 2. These gestures interrupt the narratives and cultural logic of black bodies, connecting two seemingly disjointed ideas—Warhol and Jay-Z, "Rorschach" and hip-hop, and Badu and Dealey Plaza. These juxtapositions are ironic, as black bodies have often

²⁵⁹ Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) merges many of the narratives that surround the assassination and the cast of characters that surround it into a cohesive feature film. See also Art Simon's book *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, for a treatment of this history in art and moving images.

been expected to “stay in their place,” that is, to circulate only in places that have an explicit connection to black experiences, culture, or identity. For instance, Badu did not follow the racial logic that might have suggested that she choose the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, the site of Malcolm X’s assassination, or the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN, the site of Martin Luther King’s assassination as the site of her own “assassination.” Rather, her gesture reifies the post-black trope of connecting seemingly disjointed ideas and images. Kennedy and Dealey Plaza are no longer sacrosanct iconographies that are “American” in the sense that they undergird the prevailing logic of whiteness, but in Badu’s vision they are references that might be appropriated and repurposed towards other ends. Badu, Jay-Z, and Basquiat relish in re-appropriation and discontinuity as a means to “trouble” cultural assumptions, an act which for me also signifies the capacity of black bodies to *do*.²⁶⁰ Badu’s video also evokes the “troubled” logic of the Jim Crow south and the implicit spatial, visual, and social boundaries that it enacted. Badu’s post-black reappropriation of this space inserts her bodily performance as a challenge to de facto segregation of historical space. Ultimately the iconicity of the Dealey Plaza site and Kennedy are displaced by Badu’s insertion of her own body into this space. Badu re-appropriates the space, not as a historical site, but as a public space onto which she can write her own meaning. The juxtaposition of Badu’s flesh and the performance that she enacts transforms a profoundly “American” historical site to a place that now embodies something more.

Badu’s performance, video, or “stunt” according to some, incited some controversy and she was cited by Dallas police for disorderly conduct. The act of displaying her nude body and the responses by some journalists speak directly to Fleetwood’s argument that black bodies, particularly black, female, and nude bodies, “trouble” social, discursive, and visual space.

²⁶⁰ I use the term “trouble” here in the way it is discussed by Nicole Fleetwood in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*. “Troubling” is to disturb or defamiliarize, or to unearth the troubling ways in which black bodies circulate in social experiences and discourse.

Badu's body was read in many different ways. For instance, in a discussion with NPR host Michele Norris, journalist Robert Wilonsky, senior writer of the *Dallas Observer*, explains how Badu effectively repurposes her body and the space of Dealey Plaza, saying, "The thing that I like most about it is the fact that if nothing else for a few days, Dealey Plaza is no longer known as the place where John Kennedy was killed, but it's simply known as the place where Erykah Badu got naked."²⁶¹ Host Michele Norris then chimes in, "and made art." Norris's comment solidifies that this was not simply a stunt, but an artistic act, an interpretation which was lost on other writers. Rob Sheffield was one such writer, who wrote a piece for *Rolling Stone* that managed to remove the video from Badu's legacy of artistic performance, implying that it was produced to "get tongues wagging and politicians complaining."²⁶² Sheffield's piece, entitled "M.I.A., Erykah Badu Hustle for Clicks," proffers a discussion that collapses two very different, complex artists of color, Badu and M.I.A. (a Sri Lankan artist and musician), whose work performs very different functions and reduces them both to "hustlers"—arguing that they are not performers, musicians, or artists, but soliciting attention, money, or worse. Meanwhile *Dallas Morning News*, writer, Mario Tarradell contextualized a different point-of-view and the artist's intent, in his headline, "Outrage aside, Badu video has an artistic point."²⁶³ Another interesting take on Badu's performance was written by a black woman writer Katti Gray who, commenting on the video wrote, "...pulling off her trench coat, hoodie, shades...bra and panties. Whoa!! It's dumbfounding, weird, sacrilege."²⁶⁴ Gray's commentary enacts the divide between post-black artists and some black viewers, for whom this kind of "artistic" work is not only incomprehensible, but offensive.

²⁶¹ See All Things Considered (NPR), Mar 30 2010. Web 30 Dec 2011.

²⁶² See *Rolling Stone*, p 76, 5/27/2010, *Ebscohost*. Web 30 Dec 2011.

²⁶³ See *Dallas Morning News*, *Ebscohost*, Apr 5, 2010. Web. 30 Dec 2011.

²⁶⁴ See Katti Gray's "Jet Perspective" in longtime black magazine staple *JET*, 2010, 39.

This video performance embodies what I describe earlier as “hovering on the boundaries between the avant-garde and the mainstream” as Badu is a popular, visible, and widely circulated artist, but the nudity in the video prohibits its exposure to mainstream audiences.²⁶⁵ The video again opens with the insertion of the signature title card that reads “A Story By Erykah Badu.” In this case, the title card is designed in the style of 1950s/60s newsreel footage. Badu maps her “story” onto a site with a very explicit and iconic “story” attached to it.²⁶⁶ The first image of the video is a car, one similar to the one ridden in by President Kennedy and first lady Jacqueline Kennedy in the motorcade through the streets of Dallas. Badu is behind the wheel and she puts the vehicle in park and gets out. As Badu steps out of the car, the pivot to the past dissolves as her clothing and passers-by bring us back to the present. Exiting the car, she dons a purple hoodie, black trench coat, and pants. This is a modest outfit, stripped of her larger- than- life head wraps, vivid colors, wigs, and accessories that characterize her performances. She begins walking, but does not sing, instead the song is played. As she walks she encounters passers-by and initially there are just a few people walking through what is likely a heavily trafficked tourist attraction. With each few steps she begins to slowly remove an item of clothing from her body. The mobile camera is initially several feet from Badu at eye level, but off to the side a bit, then gets closer. She does not look at it, but moves down the sidewalk at a brisk pace, her movements captured in slow motion. Every few steps she removes an item, first her black coat, then shoes, tossing them behind her. She passes people on the street, but does not engage them or make eye contact. She reveals a white t-shirt, black bra and underwear, then pulls off the t-shirt. Next she

²⁶⁵ The video currently has 5,589, 691 hits on www.youtube.com as of 3 July 2012.

²⁶⁶ Richard Schurr’s essay “Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art” discusses how post-soul art and performance are often profoundly ironic. He discusses how these works question realism, Afrocentric imagery, and protest art and challenge the social construction of race, using the work of Basquiat as his primary case study. Badu’s work is also ironic, but in way that is more whimsical, than satirical, or overtly confrontational of these other aesthetic paradigms.

passes the camera which captures her from behind revealing words and markings on her body, specifically the word EVOLVING written across her back. She struts now a bit more briskly encountering more passers-by. Now on a crowded sidewalk she removes her pants revealing black underwear. This attracts a few more stares. Next she unclasps her bra and removes it. The breasts are now obscured and she removes her underwear, continuing fully naked through a crowd of people. Then suddenly shots ring out and Badu's body reacts as if it has been shot, reels backwards, and falls to the ground in a heap. The words "groupthink" are written on the sidewalk next to Badu's body. Then voiceover narration explains the idea of "groupthink" as the camera pans over Badu's body, providing a panoramic view of the buildings, then circles back around to find a hazy image of Badu standing with a full wig of braids, standing and smiling at the camera. Badu nakedness is a gesture that symbolizes the freedom of artists to use their bodies in concert with ideas, history, and public space and emphasizes her female body as multivalent body that stands in for many ideas at once.

Badu explains her intention in producing the "Window Seat" video in an online interview of roughly five minutes. A few of excerpts are especially revealing:

Peeling back layers of things that we've learned and separating ourselves from the group is also horrifying....Group think is actually the term that I was protesting. Uh, it was a performance art in the tradition of Josephine Baker or Yoko Ono....Art has so many layers you can peel back one or peel back many layers...Symbolically I assassinated myself in the video after I took off all of the layers of things that people felt I were, I was supposed to be doing or wearing....²⁶⁷

Badu's performance coupled with this treatise on the role of art and embodiment are explicitly post-black gestures defying the literal "policing" of black bodies, evidenced by her disorderly

²⁶⁷ See the www.youtube.com online interview. Web. 29 May 2012.

conduct citation mentioned earlier, which attempt to thwart, confine, and immobilize what they can do. Badu comments on how audiences “assassinate” artistic bodies, surrendering her body as a sacrificial offering, as bell hooks explains of Basquiat’s art and body in Chapter 2.²⁶⁸

While Badu does not mention black or white viewers and mentions race as a euphemism for the human race, a rhetorical device which she often uses, she advocates for the freedom of black artists to create, even in contexts where the black body has been absent or problematized. She exposes a fleshly self, evocative of Nicole Fleetwood’s theory of “excess flesh,” to create a body that is both visible and vulnerable, and exposed and re-writing a new narrative of what female bodies, nude bodies, can mean.²⁶⁹ Badu’s bodily performance and her commentary explaining her intent contextualize this video as “performance art” and can be read as an explicitly political gesture. Her political body provides a powerful ontological shift from one that reacts to one that acts, is active rather than passive, creates instead of bemoans how other representational structures have contorted black female bodies. Badu’s is a metaphysical body that relishes in its physical and ethereal possibilities. Her intellect and sensuality co- exist alongside her maternal, spiritual, and astral selves. She is an ironic, whimsical domestic worker of the early twentieth century and an earthy, Afrocentric blues woman. She is a futuristic science fiction druid, and an insect. She is flesh and thought.

As a post-black artist, she invites criticism of those like Katti Gray, who says of Badu’s performance, “...Badu being her pontificating self mentions the dangers of groups, group think, and pushes for the need for the individual to be respected for her individualism. Fine ideas.

Wrong platform, wrong method...Or is this how one drives record sales...Does selling records

²⁶⁸ In Chapter 2 I cite her essay, “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-remembering Basquiat.”

²⁶⁹ In Chapter 3 of Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision*, her theory of “excess flesh” makes a deliberate move away from what she describes as “an analysis of how dominant visual culture represents black women to a focus on black female cultural producers’ engagement with the image of black female excessiveness and their critique of the racializing and genderizing apparatuses of the visual field,” 109.

require stooping to this low to out-freak the other freak who holds the No. 1 slot on the charts?”²⁷⁰ These critiques are reminiscent of the responses to the work of Collins Prettyman and Basquiat, which challenge the work of black bodies which do not meet particular expectations, or which “trouble” the cultural logic of viewers. I reiterate that these kinds of critiques are misguided, as they are quick to defile the work, character, and bodies without a wholesale engagement of what is present in the visual sphere. Post-black work continues to challenge viewers expectations and runs the risk of not being unengaged, but attacked. Yet Badu remains undaunted, continuing to show and tell, revealing how ideas, meaning, and artistic power can be written on a body.

Shadowboxer: Cinema Beyond Black Representational Space

To articulate how a contemporary black filmmaker is re-imagining cinematic embodiment I return to Lee Daniels’s film *Shadowboxer*, which I first discuss in the opening of this project. *Shadowboxer* creates a racially, socially, and morally transgressive universe populated by a multiracial cast, including main characters Mikey, played by Cuba Gooding Jr. and Rose, played by Helen Mirren. The film begins by immersing the viewer into blackness—a blackened screen with barely audible dialogue. This blackness temporarily obscures the black bodies, which are soon heard, bodies which are brought to life and given context by relying on the viewer’s recognition of their vernacular and of the social pathology of violence which is mapped onto them. Watching the dark screen, viewers hear an exchange between young Mikey’s abusive father and his mother, then the jarring slaps, pleas, and moans from the woman. The father’s vocal affect gives way to a blackness that evokes the “black male as violent deviant” trope, as he says “I’m busting my ass, killin mutha’ fuckas for a living and I gotta come home to

²⁷⁰ *Jet*, 30.

this shit.” This film submerges viewers into blackness as violence and dysfunction, refusing to assuage black viewers, who as Fanon has articulated, experience anxiety as film spectators as they are impacted by expecting and witnessing distortions of themselves on-screen.²⁷¹ In another scene Mikey’s father, who has murdered his mother, becomes angered by his young son’s tears and begins beating him. Unbeknownst to young Mikey who is crouched on the floor, his father’s mistress, Rose, shoots his father in the back. The film fast forwards to a fully grown Mikey, who is now Rose’s stepson, lover, and partner-in-crime—they are now both professional hired killers. Mikey and Rose’s relationship crosses a number of taboos and their influence on each other manifests in an intensely intimate and complicated relationship. Rose is now suffering from the pain of cancer, yet the sexual energy between the two continues to intensify. The cancer becomes a transformational experience for Rose as in the midst of a “job” where she was hired to kill a pregnant woman, Vicki, and her unborn child, she stops short. Upon entering the woman’s bedroom, seeing her pregnant belly poking out from underneath of her black nightgown and the amniotic fluid gushing from her, Rose is paralyzed. Moments later, Mikey enters the room, confused, and Rose immediately barks orders for water and ice. She does not kill the woman, but helps her give birth to the child. Rose decides to “keep” Vicki and the baby believing that sparing and protecting their lives will lead to some redemption for her in her final days. The two killers, Vicki, and the child flee the life they had all known in order to protect their identities and Mikey continues killing to support his new “family.”

Perhaps the film’s most prominent visual theme is its diverse cast of beautiful and often socially reprehensible bodies—white, black, old, young, heavy, and slender. It depicts scenes of violence, taboo sexual relationships, drug addiction, homo-eroticism, and transgendered bodies,

²⁷¹ See Fanon’s descriptions of the implications of seeing black bodies and the accompanying cinematic mythologies of black spectators in Chapter 5 “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skins, White Masks*, 140.

posing an overt challenge to much of the discourse that surrounds black cinematic and cultural politics which expects black bodies “behave” in ways that are “positive” or “uplifting.” In some ways the film mimics the gritty realism of many 1990s films, yet with very little actual grit, as the film is not about urban space or social realism but is first and foremost a film about bodies.²⁷²

My analytical objectives focus on an exploration of Mikey’s complex post-black bodily evolution and its metaphysical relationship to other bodies in the film. I encourage an interpretation of black bodies as active cinematic forces, rather than objects of racial derision, and antiquated cultural mythologies. I first explain how *Shadowboxer* enacts post-black strategies to produce a sense of disorientation around traditional notions of blackness. I argue that as a post-black film, *Shadowboxer* destabilizes notions of racial identity and shared experience. I expound on this premise by explaining its relationship to Charles Johnson’s phenomenology of black experience, describing how Mikey embodies a set of archetypes of black male embodiment. The remainder of this chapter charts Mikey’s metaphysical evolution into a body that is animated by his movement through the racial archetypes which are attached to his body. I explain that these archetypes do not define or limit him, but provide access to a fuller sense of emotion, agency and self-actualization.

Post-blackness surfaces in the film’s complicated relationship with racial identity and the mythologies of bodies. Mikey’s body is an object of desire, often seen naked, working out, and being bathed and caressed by a Rose, an older white woman, who was also his father’s lover. Mikey’s relationship with Rose may challenge an entrenched desire for some black audiences to

²⁷²The aesthetic of “gritty realism” refers to films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Spike Lee’s *Clockers* (1995), but I am thinking here specifically of the work of Albert and Allen Hughes whose first film *Menace to Society* (1993) and later works *From Hell* (2001) and *The Book of Eli* (2010) have mastered a truly “gritty” style that relies on depictions of raced bodies in visually traumatic environments, specifically conflating the blood, gore and flesh of bodily tissues with the grime and debris of physical space. They do this masterfully in *From Hell* and in *The Book of Eli*.

see black bodies loving and caressing each other and it could potentially revive the persistent concern that black bodies are depicted solely as objects of sexual desire. Yet the film does not succumb to these pressures to transform social relations or solve social problems. Much like *Losing Ground*, it allows its characters the freedom to inhabit and navigate the contours of their external and internal spaces. For instance, instead of focusing on pursuing the many criminals in the film, or moralizing about crime and violence, it allows the characters to exist without the imposition of external systems of authority or morality. The film also does not depict the relationship between Mikey and Rose as dysfunctional, socially deviant or without purpose and intimacy, rather it emphasizes their tenderness, monogamy, and fierce loyalty to one another. As I mention earlier, Rose becomes Mikey's surrogate mother after murdering his father. Later she bathes him while visibly in pain, having acknowledging that her pain medication is not working. She is doting and attentive and pondering her death asks Mikey, "Who's going to take care of you?" Mikey is similarly attentive to Rose, at times acting against his own best interest to please her. He reluctantly complies with her desire to take care of Vicki and her baby, becoming the family's sole provider which is a daunting task given his increasing internal turmoil about committing murder. He also makes the ultimate gesture, conceding to end Rose's suffering and take her life, an act which in the moment, splits him in two, as he is devastated by the sense of loss and feels the impact of violence on their lives. (I discuss this scene in more detail later.)

Post-blackness relishes in the unexpected and in the disavowal of social taboos. Beyond interracial sexuality, it casts white bodies as disturbed, hyper-sexual, and criminal, namely Clayton, played by Stephen Dorff, who mistreats, abuses, and murders at will, including contracting Rose and Mikey to murder his wife and unborn child. In this way the film toys with audience expectations attempting to free us from our narrow conceptions of what bodies are

capable of. While the body is perhaps always political, always telling, signifying, contesting, and advocating Daniels's film does not have an overtly social or political intent, but perhaps what I would describe as a post-black "politics of bodily liberation" where white and black bodies circulate beyond the entrenched meanings and boundaries of cultural politics. Post-blackness is deployed to compel viewers to pay attention to bodies and the power that these bodies produce. However, these are nonetheless radical moves for a filmmaker as he or she runs the risk of alienating audiences by perpetuating the very racial mythologies that confine black bodies which other filmmakers have worked to counter.²⁷³ Ultimately, the objective of post-blackness in this film is to destabilize how we ascribe meaning to bodies, freeing them to achieve the freedom to exist beyond boundaries. This paradigm also empowers black filmmakers (and potentially viewers) to create and experience films without implicit boundaries and to imagine a boundless cinematic universe. The potency of Daniels' work allows the black body a level of freedom to move beyond the shadow of what black bodies ought to do—a freedom to be ugly, disturbed, beautiful, destructive, vulnerable, transformed, untethered — a freedom to find new ways to be oriented in and around the world.

Shadowboxer works to detach Mikey from a black bodily identity. We see this most explicitly in his contact with other black bodies, specifically his interaction with the black female bodies in the film. He encounters a character named "Precious" played by actress Mo'Nique, who also stars in Daniels's film entitled *Precious* (2009).²⁷⁴ Precious is the girlfriend of "Dr. Don," played by Joseph Gordon Leavitt. Dr. Don has a medical practice and is also the doctor-

²⁷³ Like *Losing Ground*, *Shadowboxer* challenges many of the objectives and operating principles that compelled black filmmakers of the 1970s, '80s and '90s. This is explained in the Introduction in more detail.

²⁷⁴ In the film *Precious*, based on Sapphire's novel, *Push*, Mo'Nique plays a profoundly abusive mother of the title character Precious, played by Gabourey Sidobey. *Precious* cemented Daniel's status as a cinematic innovator and won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay and for Best Supporting Actress for Mo'Nique's portrayal of "Mary."

on-call for a cast of underworld characters including Rose and Mikey. Like Rose and Mikey, Precious and Don are an unlikely pair by some standards. He is young, slender, fresh-faced and white, she is slightly older, black, and heavysset. We get a glimpse of their relationship as he pulls up in a red sports car on a dark, rainy night blaring a bluesy woman's voice. Precious is dressed in a brightly colored dress, wearing heels, exposing cleavage, and bright red lips. As they approach Rose and Mikey, Dr. Don says "Y'all know Precious." They have met before. She says, "Make it quick, boo, I got shit to do." Dr. Don slips a small vial of white powder into her cleavage, caresses her breast and walks away with Rose while Precious glances after him seductively. Precious then turns to Mikey, as they are both left standing outside of the Motel 6-styled hotel. She transfers the seductive look to Mikey, who, not making eye contact, looks around sheepishly, then reluctantly makes eye contact with her, his lips tightly pursed into a frown. After a cut to the interior of the hotel room, a subsequent cut reveals the exterior of the hotel, now bathed in daylight, then another quick cut back to Precious and Mikey sitting on a bench outside. The cut implies that they have not moved, not interacted, that nothing has changed or transpired between them. They now look at each other, Mikey's jaw and lips still tight as he glances harshly at Precious who is about to utter something, but is interrupted by the hotel room door opening. Dr. Don exits, followed by Rose and kisses Precious who says, "I'm gonna need a drink." Precious and Dr. Don have a very sensual connection, while Mikey stares stoically, almost disgusted by Precious. This scene indexes a disruption of black experience, where black bodies have little in common and their "body language" reflects discontinuity and distance rather than familiarity. Mikey's disconnection from Precious suggests that he does not rely on or share her experience in the world, though they have shared acquaintances and underworld ties. While she is not a stranger to him, his interaction with her reflects a sense of

bodily disorientation. For Mikey, this female black body may mean many things, but by reading his physical encounter with her we see that his body is uncomfortable, ill at ease, immobile, and destabilized in her presence.

Mikey's interaction with a second black woman character, Neisha, played by singer Macy Gray, also emphasizes the fracture between Mikey and black identity. Neisha is the best friend of Vicki, and suspecting that some foul play has come to her, she confronts Clayton. Neisha is then added to Clayton's list of bodies to kill and Mikey takes the job, though he does not initially know of Neisha's relationship to Vicki. While Mikey is always given a picture of each of his potential victims and any instructions or useful information, we do not know what he knows about Neisha. What is interesting is that without knowing her, Mikey concocts an elaborate scheme to seduce and then murder her. He does not simply shoot her from a distance, or follow her to her home, he chooses seduction as a mode of gaining intimate access to his victim. He arrives at a nightclub, frequented by Neisha, as she knows the characters who also frequent the club including the bartender, who calls her "Neish" and complements her new hairdo, and a soft-spoken transgender woman who sits near her at the bar. In Mikey's role as a killer he adopts a variety of "characters"—a ninja-like figure dressed in head-to-toe black in the first killing, and in this scene, he is what Neisha calls a "superstar"—a hip-hop archetypal figure. He dons familiar hip-hop clothing, a backwards Kangol hat, gold chain, earring, shades and form fitting track suit, while sipping liquor resembling cognac and chewing gum. While Neisha talks to the bartender ironically about being stalked, and describes herself as a "crazy-ass bitch," Mikey listens off- screen, then offers to buy her, whom he calls "the crazy-ass bitch," a drink. Neisha is reeled in and before the drinks are poured asks, "Wanna fuck?" This scene enacts another layer of Mikey's reading of the black female body. Upon seeing Neisha's picture and

perhaps being given some information about her, Mikey goes into action, becoming whatever he believes the victim desires, whatever persona will give him intimate access to her. He transforms himself into a smooth-talking, black male body believing that this performance will appeal to Neisha. After going to an apartment, Mikey gives Neisha a drink laced with some kind of poison and after a few minutes of dancing, she realizes that something is wrong and says, “I feel weird...did you put some of that date rape shit in my drink.” Mikey callously tells her, “you’re dying...don’t fight it,” and Neisha gags and gasps her last breaths. This scene offers at least two possibilities of Mikey’s relationship to Neisha’s body. Unlike with Precious, who seems to intimidate him, with Neisha Mikey is assertive, yet unlike in the scene with Precious, he is performing an identity, rather than being himself. Donning the archetypal hip-hop “star” persona, he accepts the socially constructed mythologies of both his body and of Neisha’s to gain access to her. He presumes that his appearance, mannerisms, and smooth-talk will seduce this black female body, and it does. While both women enact the tough-talking, promiscuous, “crazy-bitch,” black female persona that has surfaced over time in a variety of iterations whether through popular culture figures like “Lil Kim,” or any number of reality-show styled characters, neither Daniels’ nor Mikey is moved to engage, re-position, or humanize these women.²⁷⁵ The women are rendered deformed, and dispensable, and Precious shares Neisha’s fate, taking a bullet to the head later in the film, becoming another cinematic statistic. Here, rather than re-imagine the black female body, the film relies on archetypes and distorted perceptions of black female bodies to disconnect Mikey from the notion of shared experience and a connection to a “black” self. It also cements Mikey’s commitment to his ideal self, which at this moment in the

²⁷⁵ The casting of Mo’nique is significant as she had built a persona as a raw, brash, and proudly overweight comedian/actor. Black female bodies in popular culture continue to circulate as angry, emotionally dysfunctional, hypersexualized “bitches” given the recent spate of reality show archetypes in television in the *Real Housewives* franchise, *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip-Hop* etc. For a related discussion of black female embodiment see Fleetwood’s *Troubling Blackness*.

film, is a successful and effective killer, who will embody the dark mythologies that surround his own body to do so.

Mikey's interactions with the black female bodies also connects to Charles Johnson's articulation of the mythological relationship between lived experiences and racial identity discussed in his essay, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body." The essay begins by recounting a story of a black man who wins money based on a bet with some white men about the size of his genitalia. While he wins the bet, this man, for Johnson, is problematically "locked into his body" by our cultural assumptions. Johnson describes experience (specifically black experiences) saying,

Our past experiences as a people can often be understood through its expression in language, myths, stereotypes, symbols, folktales, like this one. As multilayered complexes, they present collectively shared and communicated meanings... Given the universality of these structures for consciousness, *it is reasonable to say that there is neither an impenetrable "white" or "black" experience, which are mutually exclusive, but rather that there are diverse human variations upon experience, which can always be communicated imaginatively or vicariously across racial, political, and cultural lines...*(599-600, emphasis mine).

In this figuration of black bodies, Johnson's phenomenological argument suggests that black experiences are not endemic, but that they are wrought, fashioned out of folktales, mythologies and literature etc. *Shadowboxer* amplifies Johnson's contentions, particularly the notion of an "impenetrable 'white' or 'black' experience..." We see Mikey's disconnect from racial experience in his encounters with Precious and Neisha, yet his own body also wears racial experience in a complicated way.

Mikey's body takes many paradoxical forms. He embodies the joint subjectivity of black male pathology—as a hypersexual and hyper-violent figure.²⁷⁶ He is sexually virulent, as we see Rose reaching orgasm several times in the film and a killer who becomes a loving father. As the male hip-hop archetype he is smooth and dangerous. He is also a stoic and vulnerable figure who resists communicating his emotions. He is the man-child, vulnerable in childhood and adulthood, as he is slapped by Rose, beckoned by her, and bends to her every whim. He endures the physical beating from his father and witnesses the murder of his mother. He becomes a transgender body to lure a victim whom he will murder. Late in the film, he is tortured by Vicki's husband who resurfaces to harm the family, but as the protector, he thwarts the attack allowing the family to escape. While the film relies on his image as the powerful shadowboxing/boxer figure, it is not his physical prowess, but his internal self that is ultimately challenged as he must contend with a body that becomes more human, that is, more vulnerable. His body indexes the mythologies and distortions, as well as the lived and cinematic experiences of the black male body.²⁷⁷

The primary image of Mikey is as the metaphorical shadowboxer and this body is also layered with other archetypes of black masculinity.²⁷⁸ In this context, he inhabits the image of

²⁷⁶ This archetypal black male figure has an extensive history and has been given a narrative body in literature by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes for example who created complex characters around notions of desire and marginalization. Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*, and Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* might be read as phenomenological bodies as their fates are sealed through their awareness and internalization of lived experiences.

²⁷⁷ For recent analytical perspectives on black male bodies in film and media see Keith Harris's *Boys, Boyz, Bois: The Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006 and Ronald Jackson II's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. For a historical discussion on the filmic archetypes of the black body, see Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001.

²⁷⁸ Images in this archive would include the many faces of Paul Robeson in posters, photos, stage performances and sculptures (see Jeffrey Stewart's essay which I discuss later in detail), the posters, and footage of Jack Johnson. See also the work of performance/visual artist Lyle Ashton Harris who has compiled his own artist of artistic renderings of his own black male body as transgendered art object. See Harris's self-titled book with Anna Deveare Smith, *Lyle Ashton Harris*. New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2003. We can also include the photography of

the iconic boxing figures, Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali and others, mirroring their physical and emotional experiences. Like these men, Mikey suffers great losses including the deaths of his mother, father, and Rose.²⁷⁹ By examining the ways in which Mikey's phenomenological body is positioned in the film, we can read his body through an archive of imagery that extends back to Paul Robeson as there are many shared similarities between the imagery that captured Robeson and the images of Mikey in the film.²⁸⁰

Jeffrey Stewart in an influential essay called, "The Black Body: Paul Robeson as a Work of Art and Politics," explains that there is a "long tradition of popular photography and poster art of seminude male athletes, especially boxers. After Jack Johnson won the heavyweight championship in 1908, photographs and posters of the seminude Black champion proliferated"(137). Examining Paul Robeson's body in a range of aesthetic contexts including the photographs of Nickolas Murray, Stewart develops an argument that black male bodies went from being sports bodies to "an object of aesthetic beauty" (138). Often depicted in the nude from the behind or topless, Mikey's body is similarly fetishized in the film and coveted by Rose. His nude and semi-nude images of his body and backside are evocative of the images of Jack Johnson, but even more of the Nickolas Murray's photographs of Paul Robeson. Stewart explains that this reading of black bodies coincided with modernity's expanded reach and investment in black bodies as objects, and with Africanness becoming a modernist signifier. It is

James Van der Zee, Charles "Teenie" Harris, Gordon Parks, Hank Willis Thomas and the visual art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Barkley Hendricks, and Kehinde Wiley among others. For more specific analysis of *Shadowboxer*, see Alessandra Raengo's "Shadowboxing: Lee Daniels's Non-Representational Cinema." In *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, Ed. Mia Mask. New York: Routledge, 2012, 200-212.

²⁷⁹ There are several documentaries and feature films that skillfully capture the physical and emotional pain that these boxes carried. See the many cinematic depictions of Muhammad Ali, including films *The Greatest* (Dir. Tom Gries and Monte Hellman, 1977); *When We Were Kings* (Dir. Leon Gast, 1996) and *Ali* (Dir. Michael Mann, 2001); Ken Burns's *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2004), and an HBO documentary *Thrilla in Manila* (Dir. John Dower, 2008).

²⁸⁰ The rendering of Mikey's body as the various image archetypes also extends the tradition of black male portraiture. See Richard Powell's discussion of black male bodies and portraiture in *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*.

no coincidence that Robeson's body becomes the embodiment of black male figuration of modernity as he was an intellectual, athlete, singer, actor and political figure. Stewart describes Robeson's body as "a site for the doubleness of white consciousness about the Black male body in the 1920s—that was both a site of rejection and identification, both completely Other and one's self" (142). Stewart's analysis also notes how Robeson engages the camera in a photo by Stella E. Simon, saying that Robeson confronts the camera with skepticism, stoicism, and none of the emotional depth, and openness that characterizes some of the earlier posters and photos. In view this gestural shift in Robeson's encounter with both camera and viewer signifies Robeson's increased awareness of being seen, captured and the alienation and "disaffection" that often comes with being seen.

We see an interesting parallel to this image at the end of the opening montage of *Shadowboxer*. After punishing the punching bag, Mikey turns in slow motion toward the camera, his face scantily addresses the viewer, not directly or frontally, but in a fleeting glance. His face is similarly stoic, skeptical, as if the viewer is intruding in his personal space. Stewart observes that "Robeson has moved from the naive representation of blackness to the threshold of becoming a representative Black intellectual"(157). Stewart also analyzes a plaster stature of Robeson by Antonio Salemme (1926) called "Negro Spiritual." The statue pictures a nude Robeson with his arms extending upward in a posture that suggests connecting, surrendering, entreating God. Stewart interprets this statue's objective as "much to contain that body, to limit its racial and sexual energy, as it was to free that body to exist as a mind" (153). For Stewart, Robeson became an increasingly interior, and yet political body. Likewise, as Mikey continues killing for money, the film inserts scenes that emphasize the presence of his shifting interior subjectivity in subtle ways. As he and Rose approach the hotel where Dr. Don will care for

Vicki, Mikey loudly plays gospel music and in a later scene he stares pensively at a crucifix on the wall of a hotel while preparing for the next murder. These gestures seem out of place in a film that foregrounds a tactile, visceral experience than an interior one, but they help to capture Mikey's conflicted internal self. While Mikey's external self projects physical power and assertiveness, one that punishes and pleasures other bodies, his interior self is vulnerable, pensive, conflicted, and at times immobilized by the weight of what he carries. Shadowboxing in the film becomes a metaphor for the battle with these inner and outer "selves" or forces. It also provides a visual and physical release of kinetic energy, which Mikey's body accrues and which compel him to become aware of his own body's experience and desires.

If phenomenology can help us see how bodies move through the constraints of lived experience, it is affect theory that helps us see the "forces" that propel the body into a sphere of fluidity and a more activated sense of itself. Sara Ahmed discusses how a body's "success" and agency are constructed around its ability to do things, to move objects, one's own body, and to affect the physical and sensorial worlds around it.²⁸¹ Her analysis hinges on how bodies are oriented in and around spaces, objects, and other bodies and how the undulations of racism constrain the possibilities of what black bodies can do. She writes:

If Merleau-Ponty's model of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* is about "motility," expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance, "I can," Fanon's phenomenology of the black body could be described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty, and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance "I cannot." The black man in becoming an object no longer acts or extends himself; instead, he is amputated and loses his body (Fanon 1986: 112). In a

²⁸¹ Fanon makes a similar argument in Chapter 5 of *Black Skins, White Masks* "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," which Sara Ahmed also heavily relies on.

way, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as “successful,” as being “able” to extend itself (through objects) in order to act on and in the world. Fanon helps us to expose this “success” not as a measure of competence but as the bodily form of privilege: the ability to move through the world without losing one’s way.²⁸²

I argue that raced bodies and images are often suspended between these two spheres, not simply inhabiting one sphere or the other, but always circulating between them. This circulation also illustrates how the black cinematic body moves between what Darby English has called “the state of transitoriness, as always-passing through.”²⁸³ Using this construct of the “I can” and the “I cannot,” Mikey’s body circulates alongside the archive of the black male body, at times carrying its weight, yet also displacing, or, throwing off those identities. The “I can” is a sphere of privileged mobility granted to white bodies, for whom movement, mobility, presence and space is taken for granted as a natural outcome of skin color. On the other hand, black bodies have often had to overcome the “I cannot” as an alternate reality where movement, mobility, and existence are constrained and often limited by blackness at the surface of the skin.

As the shadowboxer, Mikey is an affective force, acting in concert with the helpless bag and the energy that swirls around him. He is capable of projecting his body in any direction and projecting his visual image onto an awaiting wall, or backdrop. This figure is swirling energy, waiting for the ultimate cathartic release. It dances between the racial unconscious and its ability to undo those traumas. The act of shadowboxing is the anticipation and preparation for the moment of release and contact, thus the image of the shadowboxer is one enraptured by the “powers of affection” and possibility. In the opening title scene, we see a complicated series of cuts and superimpositions of Mikey as the shadowboxing figure and the image of his fit body in

²⁸² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

²⁸³ English 169.

the empty ring, punching at the invisible opponent, while also embodying several archetypes of the black male body—the object of sexual desire and the powerful (sexualized) athlete. Acting out of this set of personas, Mikey’s body moves between the “I can” and the “I cannot” as a corpus of experiences and identities that the black male body has worn. While Johnson’s reading of the “philosophy of experience” can be read as a reliance on the experiences of the black body, here I am considering how the raced body literally passes through a prior knowledge of itself. In other words, Mikey must move through his experience of the body- image as trauma, as the site of visual disorientation, and dislocation in order to exist in the “I can.” Like the images discussed earlier in the chapter, Mikey’s body is metaphysical rather than representational as it embodies many of the same dichotomies of HeLa cells, Mutu and Gaskins’s work, and Badu’s body as it resists reproducing a static racial or cultural logic. These bodies are all oriented around life, flesh, death, and birth, transitioning in and out of these dimensions in order to exist with a fullness that has often been denied.

Mikey’s body demonstrates this sense of visual motility, a sense of motivated movement, actualization, or the existence in the space of the “I can” in a series of scenes late in the film. In one particular scene, Mikey uncharacteristically decides to interact with Vicki’s baby, who is now about one year old and whom he has managed to maintain his emotional and physical distance from. After committing another murder, Mikey enters the house and steps over the playing child, only to back track and look at the child, who is also staring at him. Mikey picks up the child and does not coddle him, rather he holds him up and, looking at him says, “Hi Anthony.” In this moment, his facial expression does not change, but he makes a gesture of recognition toward the child and the mother, whom he has been reluctant to interact with. This is a profound shift in his body’s rituals, which the film goes to great length to document. Mikey’s

body is routinized, doing precisely the same things over and over again. His shadowboxing work-outs, which are shown repeatedly, depict his reliance on these rituals and this break in his routine perhaps signals a break in his emotional or mental state of being. Yet it is also a gesture to Vicki, who has experienced the disconnection between she and Mikey. As he acknowledges the child, Vicki is moved, recognizing that this is also an acknowledgment of her body, her presence and a validation of two lives that Mikey was supposed to take. Vicki's often uncomfortable body language and dour facial expression softens significantly with this simple action from Mikey.

Mikey ability to affect other bodies is palpable in a series of scenes which also document Rose's demise. After interacting with the child, Mikey goes up to the bedroom that he shares with Rose. Rose sits listening to classical music in a moment of deep contemplation, and most likely, physical pain. She has a black scarf wrapped around her hands, binding her in a meditative posture or perhaps gripping the scarf helps her to relieve the intense pain of the cancer. The composition of the room frame creates a peaceful ethos--with flowers, green walls, a window capturing the lush green exterior of the home, rocks and crystals, but these images of peace and harmony are interrupted by the medicine bottles clustered on the dresser. The attempt at tranquility is sealed with the classical music coming from a speaker across the room. As Mikey enters, he instantly perceives Rose's emotions, perhaps a mixture of resignation, contemplation, grief and longing, a longing for the life that is about to be taken and a longing to feel alive. He asks, "Are you alright?" to which she replies feebly "yeah." But this verbal cue does not change what Mikey can intuitively perceive and he uses the tools at his disposal including objects, and his own sexual energy to change Rose's mood. He first changes the music from classical to a pulsating rap song. He dons black shades and begins to remove his suit, a

slow strip tease. As he removes the clothes, he tosses them, rather forcefully to Rose, who seems weak and feeble. As he beckons Rose to him, she is embarrassed, reluctant, then gets up and begins performing in the striptease with him. She grabs the bedpost and swings herself around. He continues tossing clothes, which she smells, then as he gyrates, she reaches for him. This simple act shifts the energy from one of internal contemplation and pain, to a pulsating erotic, tactile experience that moves her out of her own bodily anxieties and into a space where her senses are enlivened. The sensations of bodily pain and pleasure are connected for the viewer through the pulsating music and through the contact between bodies. At one point we see an image of Rose's arm extended, reaching, stretching as far as her fingertips can toward Mikey's body which is just out reach. Her reach is a sweeping gesture that lingers as if the extension of her fingers towards him can ultimately pull him in.

The relationship between Rose and Mikey is one of extraordinary tactile sensation, one that is enlivened by the proximity of their bodies and by witnessing each other's suffering as I have earlier described. As Rose's demise becomes inevitable, she is similarly impacted by pain and pleasure, often in unexpected ways as we see in the scene of Anthony's first birthday party. As "the family" gathers outside with cake and hats, Rose experiences a moment of complete happiness and joy and she breaks down declaring how happy she is. In the film's powerfully "climactic" scene, Rose and Mikey experience an apex of pain, ecstasy, emotion, loss, and bodily intimacy. The scene is executed to foreground breathtaking beauty depicting an idyllic outdoor setting in the woods shot as a naturalistic fantasy. Rose and Mikey are posed on a blanket under a canopy of trees, with Rose wearing a bright red dress leaning on Mikey's chiseled physique while leaves swirl in slow motion around them. After a pained exchange, Mikey begins to make passionate, frenzied love to Rose. In a disembodied point of view shot,

the viewer sees Mikey's face hovering above Rose, yet they are both in this moment and somewhere else. We see this duality on Mikey's face as his physical and psychic worlds collide as he enters her. Knowing that Rose's life is about to end, he sees with great clarity his past encounters and traumas with a profound intensity that is worn on his face. His life experiences reside in this single moment, as through the film's editing they are superimposed, one onto the other. While still making love, he grabs his gun and in the midst of Rose's shrieks of ecstasy, he silences her, giving pleasure and death in an instance. This series of encounters between Rose and Mikey foregrounds what many objects in this study have experienced, moments of a simultaneous investment in external sensate realities and profound interior, psychic and ethereal contemplation. At times these characters appear to be "somewhere else," but are suspended in a metaphysical experience that captures the intensity of their bodily connection and creates a powerful encounter for viewers.

Rose's death also signals a shift in Mikey's relationship to himself and others. His emotional barriers begin to erode in a series of scenes depicting his relationship with young Anthony and his increased contact with Vicki. Now a small toddler, the boy jumps on him early in the morning demanding breakfast. Mikey is seen vacuuming the playroom and playing with blocks. He becomes his primary caretaker while Vicki goes to school, and is shown kissing him, cooking, and teaching him what he knows. The boy watches Mikey shadowbox in the basement, his face in complete awe of Mikey's male power and later, a bit older, the boy shadowboxes on his own. On one occasion Anthony peers through a small opening in Mikey's bedroom door and watches as Mikey cleans his gun. When Vicki observes this, she tells Mikey that is time for him to move out. Mikey's face and eyes are transformed with grief, yet he gathers his stoic sensibilities remembering Rose's admonition to "always do whatever she says," and simply says,

“whatever you say.” He takes the boy to school and his sense of loss is palpable, though he tries to contain it, kissing the boy on the head and sending him off. Later, Mikey confesses to the man who gives him his orders that he “can’t do this shit anymore,” as he no longer wants to kill, in part because he can no longer back the floodgate of emotion that has accrued.

Mikey’s complete break occurs after a scene where he becomes a transgender body to kill his next victim. Mikey arrives at a hotel dressed in heels, a dress, wig, and make-up. A man opens the door and is instantly pleased, softly exclaiming “Perfect” as the image of Mikey’s transgender body fulfills his fantasy. Moments later, Mikey stands at the edge of the bed positioned to have a sexual encounter with the man and instead of consummating the act, he shoots the man in the head. Mikey then sees a card that this man was given by his young child. The image of this man as a loving father shatters him, as he connects this father to his own image of himself. He returns to the home he shares with Vicki and the child and confesses, “I don’t want to leave” and “I killed a child’s father today.” He curls up in a fetal position on Vicki’s bed, distraught and allows her to make love to him.

Shadowboxer illuminates what I have discussed throughout this project, that bodies are capable, they can *do*, despite the discourses, expectations and mythologies that surround them. My objective has been to demonstrate the value of looking through the blackness at the surface of the body to engage the body as a repository of rich experience. This approach does not simply disavow blackness, as we see Mikey internalize these personas, but it uses their intensity to propel him into a “metaphysical space,” which signifies a sphere that surpasses the thresholds of raced bodies. Mikey’s initially *disaffected*, unexpressive persona, becomes a profoundly affective force.

As a post-black film, *Shadowboxer* does not intend to represent “black” experiences, assuage anxieties, or resolve the cinematic legacies of racial misrepresentation and deformity. Instead it foregrounds the intensity of the bodies, their flaws, contradictions, desires and the complex spaces they inhabit. Mikey survives by collapsing these personas, becoming an archetypal metaphysical figure, moving through the trajectories of black pathology and familial violence as a child and on to the Freudian body that desires not just the mother, but the white mother. He covets Rose’s symbolic (white) power, and she covets his black body, yet they also murderously covet other bodies. Unlike the powerful and simultaneously vulnerable black male figures like Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson, Mikey’s body becomes a force that is not held captive by whiteness or by the white gaze that would strip him of even a pretense of masculine power. Instead, Mikey becomes Fanon’s fantasy subject, embodying all of the pathologies that racial trauma engenders, yet also symbolically disavowing racial mythologies and relishing the vulnerability of becoming and being fully alive. Mikey also imagines a world that Fanon could not, one where he does not pay a price for his power.

In this chapter I have discussed how specific examples of contemporary visual art, new media, music video and film share a post-black impulse and re-imagine bodies. I began by using the image of the HeLa cells as a metaphor for the often unseen possibilities of black bodies. Like the HeLa cells, Mikey is a puzzle which cannot be read or understood at the surface. Phenomenological and affective readings of body, gesture and experience do not reinscribe black bodies as lacking the motility of white bodies, but rather they reveal how these images are fluid, literally in transition. Similarly, this analytical process and the terrain that it explores also imagine visual culture as a sphere where, as Clyde Taylor suggests “..repressed dimensions of

the human can be recovered.”²⁸⁴ These bodies are in transition, evolving from a century of misuse, misrecognition, and obligation to a place where they embody intensity, freedom and imagination.

²⁸⁴ Clyde Taylor’s *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract- Film and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, 97.

CONCLUSION: POST-BLACK TO THE FUTURE

I began this study explaining that black artists and filmmakers face a perhaps unforeseen set of challenges. The twentieth century was dominated by a movement to create an alternative archive of images of black bodies and experiences to counter those produced by dominant cinema, media, and the social sphere. But by the later part of the twentieth century, this paradigm was, in some ways, dissolving. Shifts in our social, economic, and cultural fabric along with an infusion of new technologies and increased access to art and film production were changing how we would define race, art, and cultural identity. The troubled past of anti-black racism in social relations and cinema has not dissolved, yet an assertive cultural framework has emerged to challenge more than the filmmaking industry or art institutions; this paradigm also challenges black audiences, critics, and the artists themselves to expect and pursue a broader vision of identity and to re-imagine the possibilities of image and culture production.

I explain that post-black functions as a response to the influential cultural rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement produced an invaluable archive of objects, texts, institutions, and scholarly and pedagogical paradigms which remain useful. Yet its influence is also felt in a set of entrenched definitions and expectations which insinuate that works by black makers adhere to an often unspoken racial contract. English's notion of "black representational space" explains how this contract secures, maintains, and polices the borders of black cultural production, to ensure that certain kinds of art and film continue to circulate among black audiences. Over the years artists, curators, and scholars have debated these issues, yet there has not been a theoretical approach to ascertain what might exist beyond this framework where "blackness" was the central force that inspired the production of film and visual culture.

This study examines how black bodies, marginalized from within and without, produce powerful ways of seeing and being. I deploy a post-black analytical methodology to account for shifts and strategies that have been developed by black filmmakers and artists going back to the early 1980s.²⁸⁵ In my analysis I explore a range of visual objects from films, music videos, art, and still images— excerpts of a compelling archive of post-black texts which share common characteristics. I theorize that at least one outcome of post-black praxis is the creation of a metaphysical subjectivity, a space that unearths the complexity of these bodies and the range of experiences that they produce. These bodies do not eschew racial identity, as race may be woven into their experience, but they thrive on the freedom to take many forms, whether as otherworldly creatures, digital avatars, or embodying states between life and death or time and space. This study reclaims the body, relishing all of its possibilities. These bodies above all else, demand our attention and I have discovered that they are incessantly creative, complex forces debunking the mythologies of black bodies as burdened, encumbered, and perpetually problematic.²⁸⁶ I find that the post-black theoretical paradigm has the potential to revive the relationships between artists/producers, scholars/critics, and audiences/consumers. This triad of discursive publics has the potential to propel film and visual culture forward, but it has become stagnant, mired in the pressures to stabilize and sanitize our artists and filmmakers and our visual sphere, instead of fluidly moving into spaces beyond our comfort zones and anxieties.

To this end I historicize the time frame from 1982 to the present as an era where specific artists, scholars, and performers have developed approaches and practices that free the body from the notions that it must only do certain kinds of work, or embody certain kinds of ideas. I explain that the desires of these artists, beginning with Kathleen Collins Prettyman in the early

²⁸⁵ I discuss how post-black discourse goes back further than the 1980s, but point to the '70s-'80s as the beginning of serious post-black work in film and hip-hop culture.

²⁸⁶ I am interested in bodies as artists, directors, performers, characters, and images.

1980s, often conflicted with others in their artistic communities, leaving their work unseen and marginalized. This contentious reception pattern has extended to contemporary filmmaker Lee Daniels, whose 2005 film *Shadowboxer* and subsequent film *Precious* (2009), similarly challenged the desires and expectations of black (and white) audiences. In chapter one I discuss the historical significance of Collins Prettyman as a pioneering filmmaker and as a dissident voice who did not always echo the sentiments of her counterparts of the influential LA School of filmmakers. I document how Collins Prettyman's work was marginalized by some black cultural critics, dismayed by her claim that race was not the singular driving force of her work or her directorial identity. I claim that post-black films interpret race in complex ways, or not at all, and consequently expand our notions of subjectivity, as we see in *Losing Ground*. Collins Prettyman creates unique, compelling characters that pursue complex inner desires, intellectual curiosity, and sensual experience and compel other bodies to do the same. Her film produces bodies as powerful affective forces, forces that manifest a metaphysical space of intimacy, ethereality, and mysticism. Chapter two illuminates how bodies in hip-hop visual culture produce a metaphysical connection with space and with other bodies through encounters of initiation. I analyze how graffiti arts and music videos for "The Message" and "C.R.E.A.M." produce encounters with viewers, who witness the trauma of poverty and social dysfunction. By seeing hip-hop's many forms of visual culture, audiences are confronted with images, bodies, and experiences that disrupt the traditional pleasures and stabilizing distance of image consumption in galleries and museums, and are offered a distinct viewing experience which emphasizes bodily and spatial disorientation and embodied autobiographical experiences. This chapter also relies heavily on the body and artistry of Jean-Michel Basquiat who most explicitly

articulated the need for a post-black perspective and David Blaine's performances of impossible feats.

In chapter three I discuss how post-blackness produces metaphysical bodies in the images of HeLa cells, in the work of artist Wangechi Mutu, who creates works of art that provide an artistic rendering of disease and bodily tissues, and in Nettrice Gaskins's digital images. I also provide an in-depth reading of images of performer Erykah Badu as a vanguard of contemporary post-black, Afro-futurist visuality. These works provide insight into many possibilities of embodiment, across a range of platforms. Finally I conclude my analysis with a reading of bodies in the film *Shadowboxer*, where director Lee Daniels maps racial archetypes onto bodies, only to dispel the racial mythologies that are invoked. Through the film's main character, Mikey, we learn that black bodies must often struggle to secure the ability to have many "lives" or subject positions. Mikey's body gains its power as he moves through the mythologies of black male embodiment and its excesses.

As an analytical intervention, this project recognizes that there has not been sufficient comparative study of bodies and artists across form, medium, and genre. Moreover, I stress the diminishing significance of the paradigm that images must represent bodies, ideas, experiences and history. Instead, I theorize that bodies, desires, and imagination shape vision and experience. This theoretical perspective aims to intervene in both scholarly and public discourses, bridging gaps between how we study, consume, and are impacted by bodies in visual and popular culture. This project has implications for those interested in theoretical work and those interested in production work, that is, those concerned with how bodies are constructed in film, art, and digital formats and those who deconstruct them. I also hoped to account for the artistic subjectivity of filmmakers and artists and to recover and illuminate their possibilities as

directors, performers, characters, actors, and artists, that is, as creative forces in front of and behind the camera, and as bodies of influence and knowledge. Ultimately, I want to reclaim the black human body and embrace its possibilities which have been dismissed in favor of an emphasis on race and the image as a site of irreconcilable differences, where black bodies are always pre-signified, never able to achieve new spaces of meaning and signification. While the bodies, artists and filmmakers that I engage manifest a range of experiences and states of being—vulnerability, otherworldliness, alien, futuristic—in all of their forms they seek access to a self that is not defined by a beleaguered past, or an improbable future. Black bodies must accept the charge to imagine a world of their own making.

In conclusion, I provide one powerful example of how post-blackness continues into the future. I use Kanye West's short film/music video as an exemplar of how post-blackness continues to produce compelling work. In 2010 Kanye West released what has been described as a film or extended music video for his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. West's work personifies many of the arguments of this project, as he is an active, creative, force in his work as a producer, writer, rapper, and director who has been a driving force in the innovative visual style of his videos. He refuses to be categorized and limited by the popular culture marketplace and in a relatively short period of time has become an iconic figure, social pariah, and symbol of the troubled, complicated configurations of black masculinity.²⁸⁷ West's work, and at times, his rhetoric argue for a truer valuation of the artistry and personhood of black artists. He embodies a seminal claim of this project, that black bodies produce powerful affective visual experiences, yet are often policed, unduly criticized, and marginalized, and their work consequently goes

²⁸⁷ West became notorious for at least two public displays. The first was during a 2005 Hurricane Katrina Telethon where he went off-script on live television proclaiming that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." A second public display occurred at the 2009 MTV Music Video Award show where he interrupted Taylor Swift's award acceptance speech. The Taylor Swift episode, though rude and misplaced, was his attempt to champion an artistic aesthetic in the music video format, which in many ways he has pioneered.

“unseen.” I include his work as his body represents the contradictions and challenges of the earliest male bodies in hip-hop culture mapped onto the hyper-visible contemporary archetype of the hip-hop mogul. He embodies many of the conflicts which I have discussed whether as a “troubling” object, a complicated subject, or one who is ill-at-ease in mainstream settings, and marginalized by media institutions.²⁸⁸ Like Badu, West comments on the criticism, or more to the point, the assassination of ideas, artistry, and imagination that black bodies produce. This project intervenes on behalf of artists like West, who might be described as “quirky,” “arrogant,” or dubbed a “celebrity,” but which nonetheless produce work that enriches the sphere of film and visual culture. West’s film *Runaway* is a rich text which takes the video format in new directions as it is filmed on location in a forest in the Czech Republic, displays super-saturated color and a range of cinematography techniques, and combines naturalistic and surrealistic visual styles. Like Badu’s “Window Seat,” *Runaway* compels us rethink how blackness and artistry are articulated in music videos, going to great lengths to produce a cinematic work that rejects the small scale format of music video and pursues an epic treatment of its lyrical narratives.²⁸⁹ As a post-black work, *Runaway* combines many styles and influences, and most importantly, it explicitly confronts the tensions between black artists, audiences, and critics capturing the impact of rejection on artists, like West, who defy conventions and expectations. The film uses the

²⁸⁸ West has been critical of award shows (the MTV Music Video Award show, for example, which represents an institutional force that polices and valorizes particular kinds of music/visual culture) believing that they are not the truest arbiters of what is “good.”

²⁸⁹ This hybrid video/film signifies on the work of perhaps the most innovative (and successful) music video vanguard, Hype Williams, with whom West has collaborated in the past. Williams, who in his early years was interested in art and influenced by Basquiat, borrowed some of cinema’s conventions and stylistic devices and appropriated them to the music video format. See Derek Murray’s discussion of the evolution of Hype Williams in “*Hip-Hop as High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle*,” 6. The work of Williams has been responsible for creating a signature look in hip-hop music video that transforms how light interacted with surfaces, bodies and produced a distinctive visual perspective around vision and spatial orientation. In “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop,” Krista Thompson explains the significance of Hype Williams: “Starting in the late 1990s, influential music video and film director Hype Williams (Harold Williams) developed a style of cinematography that focused on light and its reflection in surfaces as both subject and form. This aesthetic would visually define hip-hop for the next decade, spotlighting still reigning hip-hop stars like Diddy, Jay-Z, Missy Elliot, and Busta Rhymes,” 483-484.

allegory of the phoenix, “the other” who plummets to the earth in the form of a beautiful woman/bird, in this case the symbol of difference that is misunderstood and ultimately rejected. The phoenix symbolizes West and his angst at being a misunderstood black artist, and it also symbolizes the aforementioned fantastic creatures, described by Charles Johnson, who fall to earth, but are not welcomed. I read this bird, not as West’s lover, but as his externalized self, whose physical difference is contested and mocked. This theme surfaces in one section of this thirty-minute film (which is actually a series of connected vignettes) which is particularly revealing and relevant to my discussion of post-blackness, black bodies, and our treatment of black artists. This scene, which I have termed “The Last Black Supper,” features the song “Devil in a New Dress” and casts West as a vulnerable figure, an artist who shows up to an elaborately staged, elegant feast whose guests are stunning, poised black people representing black racial archetypes— the Caribbean with locks in his hair, the African American with a gold tooth, and the East-African. They chatter quietly seated at a white table being waited on by Greco-Roman white women wearing togas. West, smiling, presents his lover/self, the phoenix, who is a stunning “creature” with all of the beauty of a resplendent bird and a Victoria Secret model, to a silence of awkward stares and muffled smirks. A handsome man, likely from East Africa leans over to West and says, “Your girlfriend is really beautiful,” to which West replies, “Thank you.” “Do you know she’s a bird?” the man asks. “Naw, I never noticed that,” West responds, with a pained expression. The man fires back, “I mean, like leave the monkey in the zoo.” This exchange ironically captures a racial critique of how West and black artistic bodies are received, even at times by other Blacks. It is West, himself, who is on trial here, as he sits uncomfortably in a dapper tuxedo, alienated, in a space of seeming familiarity, by the gamut of black racial archetypes who calmly reject his “difference.” In West’s post-black future,

blackness and whiteness are cruel, complicated, and uncertain and he is liable to be ignored or rejected by a critical public. Ultimately West is undaunted, as it is the intensity of his attachment to his phoenix/self, his hard-driving dance movements, his powerful vocal delivery, and his artistry that animate his body, his art, and his future.

I end with reflections on the increasing significance of freedom, which is a central theme of this project, and which is necessary for black artists, filmmakers, and those who value what art and film can do. Artist Kehinde Wiley writes, “as culture evolves, there are new fields of provenance, new things that become interesting as questions. Right now, our deepest challenge has to do with evolving a vocabulary that is just as effective at being free as it is at being bound.”²⁹⁰ Finally, I reference the lyrics to Erykah Badu’s “Window Seat.” I interpret Badu’s song and video as a clarion call for freedom for black bodies as performers, filmmakers, and artists. Both Badu and West are adamant that their voices and artistic capacities not be assassinated, but that they are allowed to take flight. The lyrics to a verse of Badu’s song express this sentiment directly:

So, on my mind I'm tusslin' back and forth 'tween here and hustlin'
 I don't wanna time-travel no more I wanna be here,
 I'm thinking on this porch I'm rockin' back and forth like Lightning Hopkins
 If anybody speak to Scotty, tell him, beam me up,
 So can I get a window seat? Don't want nobody next to me
 I just want a ticket outta town, A look around and a safe touch down.
 Can I get a window seat? Don't want nobody next to me
 I just want a chance to fly, A chance to cry and a long bye-bye
 But I need you to miss me. I need somebody come get me

²⁹⁰ See Soraya Murray and Derek Conrad Murray’s essay “A Rising Generation and the Pleasures of Freedom.”

I need your attention, yes, And I need your energy, yes, I do

I need someone to clap for me; I need your direction...

These words might be spoken to a lover in a tumultuous relationship, but they also embody what these artists might say to viewers. These artists thrive on the energy of audiences and want freedom and “a chance to fly.”

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