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## A Breathing Body in Ritual Ecology: The Aesthetics and Metaphysics of Black Experimental Film

Julianna Donovan

Connecticut College, [jdonovan@conncoll.edu](mailto:jdonovan@conncoll.edu)

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A Breathing Body in Ritual Ecology: The Aesthetics and Metaphysics of Black  
Experimental Film

An Honors Thesis

presented by  
Julianna Donovan

to

The Department of Film Studies

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Chapter 1: Eternal Projections Circulating and Regenerating: Transcendental Worlds on the Cusp  
of the L.A. Rebellion

I. Argument

*Praise House* (Julie Dash 1991), *Dream City* (Ulysses Jenkins 1981), *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (Barbara McCullough 1981) and *Without Your Interpretation* (Ulysses Jenkins 1984) are metaphysical texts of a certain vein in Black studies that centralizes spirituality, fugitivity, and resonance with earth, living as odes towards a sustainable and divine worldmaking. These film and video works contain hugely potent visceral charges which register them as resonant compositions- lively texts residing and ecstatically circulating in myriad environments. Being expansive suggestions of theory, Dash, Jenkins and McCullough's films cultivate a notion of ritual ecology born from the L.A. Rebellion ethos and climate, where the energy of study as a communal project is inexhaustible and eternal. Ritual ecology is a space of energetic intensity where magnetic attractions of resonance are a mode of communication through all the brokenness of societal restriction and image distribution, emphasizing a temporality and spatiality that are forever fluid. In a global epoch of much unhinged madness where authoritarian regimes, environmental devastations, and negations of human/non-human interconnections fueled by the chaos of mediascapes appear omnipresent, these audiovisual pieces enact liberatory sites for radical coexistence, eased respiration, and soothed corporeal grounding. Breathing with the fullness of ones being in empathetic gatherings engenders affective access to these sacred audiovisual hymns that stake an immortal yet mobile posture in decay

and wreckage. Witnessing and paying homage to the sparkling allure of quotidian material that populates the city streets, forests, performance rooms, universities, galleries, and other sites of kinetic encounter is a project in grasping the reverberations of gestural impact, specifically as the process of filmmaking.

*Praise House, Dream City, Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* are emphatically literal about their intentionality in sketching worlds where individuals can more freely survive, insisting that this worldmaking is noisy, impossibly colorful, and always occurring in spheres of togetherness. In his poem *You are the bottom* from *The Little Edges*, Fred Moten proclaims: “We care about each other so militantly, with such softness, that we exhaust ourselves, and then record, in the / resonance of our slightly opened mouths, the sound of that, in the absence of the enemy that we keep making” (12). Experiencing, sharing, and reveling in these audiovisual gems can operate as methods of enshrouding a haptic permanence of care around ones companions, loved ones, and influences, in hopes of legitimating each others intricacies to foster a protective and fulfilling environment of analytical reading. Sensing the swarming affective auras around individuals in collective contact when viewing the four pieces, one might imagine this haptic phenomenon as concentrated densities of light in atmospheric haziness, visualized more overtly as the gentle rising fabric cloaking *Praise House’s* dancing angels, *Dream City’s* mythical deities, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* performance artists, and *Without Your Interpretation’s* musical prophets. As audiovisual embodiments with prismatic characteristics of diffraction, shine, blur, and luminance, these films are multifaceted divinations fashioned from material and affective excess, or poetry. The project of gathered study tapping from eternal

reservoirs of love, worship, and empathy shapes into and transpires as moments of ceremony, ritual, and performance documented and reincarnated in Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins' cinemas. In the vast geographies of fugitive Black study, these L.A. Rebellion and later films and videos harness abject ecology as ritual's charged lifeforce to show enthralling ways of being in and *with* the earth. Abject ecology is the collective matter in environments which confuses organization and order.

This thesis is a Film Studies project driven by a Black Studies intervention into cinematic material, aesthetic, and composition. Throughout the coming chapters, I examine the four films as behaving in fugitive ways, drawing on Black study scholarship to illuminate the audiovisuals' material intricacies. I am specifically compelled to analyze how Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins take up filmmaking as a medium which enhances documentation of ritual, ceremony, and dance. *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits* and *Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* are all multimedia experiments. In their introduction, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons" to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's seminal text *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, gender studies theorist Jack Halberstam addresses fugitivity as a force animating bodies:

The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself... It is a being in motion that has learned that "organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves" (The Invisible Committee in *The Coming Insurrection*) and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned (11)

“The movement of things” speaks to how McCullough, Dash, and Jenkins bring companions together with devotional material to study how humans are affected by objects in ritual, and to figure out how individuals resignify instruments, fabrics, and pieces of earth. Fugitivity is the condition that charges gesture and touch in enlivening haptic matter, the sense that one must evade oppressive systems in search for resonance with people and ideas. Such haptic matter is the substance texturing film grain, video aging, and electronic distortion, and the ritual essence which flees from documentation and affects spectators in their visceral witness. Marginalized by academic institutions, artistic organizations, and white contemporaries, Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins enacted collaborative practice in “spaces and modalities” through Jenkins’s Othervisions Studio and Senga Nengudi, Barbara McCullough, Maren Hassinger, and David Hammons’s Studio Z collective. Loose gatherings of Black artists supporting and inspiring each other in Los Angeles actualized into Othervisions Studio and Studio Z, sites of communality where beings could theorize “with other friends and colleagues to explore and play out our mind sketches” (Side by Side 410), as Nengudi contextualizes. The studio collectives for these creators opened up unencumbered terrains for spiritual immersion in art, functioning as the atmospheres in Rizvana Bradley’s explication of hapticality which contend with “the violent encounters with racist and xenophobic state structures and colonial and neocolonial imaginaries in ways that anarrange genres, methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies, to illuminate other performative scenes and resistive potentialities” (Other Sensualities 6). Digressions from the art world’s whiteness, *Praise House* is a dance film, *Without Your Interpretation* uses footage from a choreographed piece, *Dream City* is an assemblage from recordings of performance art, and *Shopping Bag Spir-*



*its and Freeway Fetishes* is largely comprised of interviews with individuals in a creative web discussing the meaning of ritual.

## II. Haptic Film Studies

Asserting devotion, ceremony, and ritual as shapes of intellectual practice, the entanglement of songs, dances, poems, concerts, and performances in the four audiovisual compositions are haptically blended with the soil, forest, cement, sweat, loam, sediment, and debris of the environments that appear both in frames and spiritually imbued into the shots. Similar to their L.A. Rebellion contemporaries interests with tangible resources and the texture of quotidian matter in their California communities, Jenkins, McCullough, and Dash are all struck by texture. Coming to filmmaking as painters, musicians, dancers, and teachers, the three artists are intrinsically immersed in cinema's experimental capacities to enliven still image and sound. Demonstrations of more attuned, vibrant modes of existing, *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* take radically expansive compositions in their stretching of film and video boundaries. The four pieces live as: shrines of ancestrally charged artifacts, poetic odes to detritus, worship lyrics to excesses in earthliness, and both sporadic and meditated enactments of celestial realms on earth, where visions of worldmaking are not intangible processes but rather charted and embodied. Alchemical alignment can occur immediately and latently for audiences engrossed in loving the common practices of watching and listening to see what terrestrial beauty and complexity glimmers in the mundane, a task of exciting the images of ecological activity. Through utilizing experimental poetics, radical aesthetics, and porous fabrics of construction, these much overlooked films on

the canonical cusp of the L.A. Rebellion advocate for new ecstatic modes of perceiving interrelation and expansive cognition.

### III. L.A. Rebellion

Fundamental to a rooted understanding of *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits* and *Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation's* Black radical aesthetics and politics, the L.A. Rebellion was an incendiary generative entity of African and African American filmmakers at the University of California, Los Angeles, originating in the late 1960s and stretching into the mid 1980s. In the midst of sociopolitical turbulence marked by the 1965 Watts Uprising, the assassination of Malcolm X, the intensifying Vietnam War, the 1966 establishment of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, among other events, these students in the School of Theater, Film and Television populated a budding Ethno-Communications program alongside Asian, Latino, and Native American artists. The first generation of film school-educated Black filmmakers, this divergent ideological wave had a unifying initiative of devising a comprehensive alternative to mainstream American cinema conventions. Occupying animated frequencies of deconstructive thought and revolutionary possibility of the filmic medium, the L.A. Rebellion sought to overthrow white capitalist audiovisual hegemony in the colossal project of undoing the psychic horrors of identification for people of color on screen. Intimately committed to the founding of a new Black cinema, the UCLA filmmakers cemented a culture of: contemplating the nuances of Black existence in the United States and throughout the African diaspora; investigating the fabrication of conceptions of race, class, and gender embedded in the visual; and developing groundbreaking techniques to embody ritual in moving images. Retrospec-

tively termed the “L.A. Rebellion” to describe the temporal period and explosive phenomenon, the group of cinema pioneers was and is an amalgamation of differing attitudes towards specific craftings of subversive narrative, practice, and style, all exemplifying the diversity of Black filmic ingenuity.

Immersed in discourse and communication with the transnational politics of Third Cinema movements in Latin America and Africa, artists of the L.A. Rebellion exercised varying overt approaches of opposition and confrontation with the racial traumas woven into the hostile landscape of classical Hollywood norms. Channeling the radicalized spirits of global filmmakers impacted by liberation fronts in their respective countries, these audiovisual activists conceived of a new Black cinema sculpted in the reverberations of the Civil Rights Movement. Through employing Black diasporic aesthetic models (such as jazz, blues, griot storytelling, and Black literature), the filmmakers delved into the underrepresented and rarely depicted dimensions of Black working classes and disenfranchised communities (L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema). A pivotal juncture of ardent interrogation of dominant American cinema’s stifling whiteness and of unbridled artistic curiosity in circulating spaces of collaboration, the L.A. Rebellion was birthed from a nascent Ethno-Communications program led by Elyseo Taylor, the first Black professor in UCLA’s film school. Enduring from 1970-1982, the interdisciplinary initiative was forged to train students of color to “use mass communication technologies to document their own communities and thereby increase understanding of and a sense of cultural participation for marginalized groups” (L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema 9). Noted to be comprised of two fields of visionary artists’, the first group includes Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Haile Gerima, Jamaa Fanaka, and Ben Caldwell plus others, and the second wave holds

Julie Dash, Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Barbara McCullough, and Alile Sharon Larkin, among others. Both groups aimed to disrupt features of U.S. racial capitalism in attempts to repossess positions in the economy of Black visual culture to reinvest their monetary gains back into Black communities.

Producing vital works generally considered as pieces in the realms of American independent and avant-garde histories, the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers sensitively and provocatively render elements of populations alienated by Hollywood's subjugating representations. Epitomizing a robust sociality of communal practice, the creatives implemented guerilla production strategies, crewed on each other's projects, and shot, edited, and projected films together. Deeply cognizant of the psychological, spiritual, and physical effects of internalizing stereotypical and dehumanizing media, the radical collective focused on stimulating resonance and identification for Black audiences at structural levels, fixating on processes of attuning narrative emotion to portray the vastness of subjective experience. Stunningly alive and timeless, films of this experimental, political ethos like Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979), Zeinabu irene Davis's *Cycles* (1989), Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977), and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978) generate myriad cultural ripples whose profound and far-reaching radiance is ever-lasting. Residing just a bit outside the contemporarily figured yet always shifting archive of the L.A. Rebellion, Dash, Jenkins, and McCullough's ineffably imaginative aesthetics are also an acoustics, sounding this agile exteriority of their interior occupation of the insurgent movement.

#### IV. Introduction of Films

*Praise House* by Julie Dash weaves together dance, music, and theater to follow the story of a young painter named Hannah whose psyche is enmeshed with her grandmother's cosmic potency and the transgenerational frequencies of her ancestors. A collaboration with choreographer and founder of Urban Bush Women dance company Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the film which I explore in the next chapter is a fluidly temporal entity with hypnotic capacities for otherworldly communication. Initially broadcast on the PBS television program "Alive from Off Center" in 1991, Dash's film delves into the immortalized souls of three generations of African American women in Hannah's daily encounters with wonderment. Bounding in a highly resonant, verdant landscape, *Praise House* performs itself as a tribute to prophetic artist Minnie Evans in centering the proclamation "Draw or Die" as a sacred message in Hannah's engagements with haptic ecosystems.

Ulysses Jenkin's *Dream City* is a video accompaniment to a 24 hour group performance happening at Espace DbD in Los Angeles. Produced in 1981 at the dawn of the Reagan era, Jenkins concocts an audiovisual bricolage of poetry, music, and dance, where "Every three hours between 6 A.M. and midnight, a short ritual was performed during which the audience was encouraged to relate their dreams" (*Dreams 1900-2000: Science, Art, and the Unconscious Mind*). Artists and regular creative partners such as David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Nobuko Miyamoto, and Maren Hassinger occupy the frames alongside "snippets of chess games, punk shows, and shots of the LA skyline - all set to a hypnotic free improvisation of saxophone, percussion, and voice" (*Electronic Arts Intermix Dream City*). The third chapter discusses the piece as an ode to a broken patriotism and the undying insistence of spiritual transport to more livable realms- the

work begins with a distorted clip of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” and spirals into a lulling chaos of woozy polychromatic video effects. Concluding with the emergence of Jenkins’s “video griot” figure, the tonal momentum surges into a mantic caution of the fiscal “stockholders” who control American governmental operations.

Barbara McCullough’s *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflection on Ritual Space* is a documentation of nine Black artists inhabiting Los Angeles and meditating on ritual’s manifestations and powers in Black existence through their artistic approaches. Constructed as an assemblage of interview recording, video, music from Don Cherry, and still photographs, the work is majorly fascinated by the porosity and openness of creative arrangements as permeable products from spiritual engagement, which I attend to in the third chapter. An auteur educated in the second surge of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers who immersed in experimental, avant-garde, and self-reflective practices, Barbara McCullough directed, wrote, filmed, edited, and produced the film. Footage and conversation portraying visual artists David Hammons, Kinshasha Conwill, Houston Conwill, Senga Nengudi, and Betye Saar, and poets Raspoeter Ojenke, Kenneth Severin, K. Curtis Lyle, and Kamau Da a’ood brush together in a swimming amalgamation of fecund thought and emancipated envisioning (L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema). Most prominently influenced by anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston though also informed by filmmakers Julie Dash, Shirley Clarke, and Maya Deren, McCullough’s experimental stylizations with the 16mm film incorporate video effects saturating decaying urban monuments with kaleidoscopic color.

In 1983, Ulysses Jenkins’ performed *Without Your Interpretation* with his Othervisions band at the Art Dock near the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, later fashioning

the taped footage into an entrancing video work. The material remembrance of a musical sociality is a captivating glimpse at an intimate yet public collectivity in the piece which “addresses Jenkins’s concern with paramnesia, or déjà vu” (Long Beach Museum of Art Video Archive). In speaking of the text’s intentionality and essence, Jenkins posits that the video explores the “insensitivity of middle-class attitudes towards the Third World” (Hammer Museum 1). Performing in a subliminal, consuming presentation of psychic thresholds externalized as an ephemeral California dream space, artists such as Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi demonstrate fluid choreography and devotional intermingling as intellectual practice. In the fourth chapter, I explore how *Without Your Interpretation* visualizes and sonically transcribes a heady atmosphere of hapticality, employing the video medium as philosophical transport to critique American apathy towards global injustice.

## V. Methodology

Framing the acts of experiencing and analyzing *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag*, *Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* as versatile engagements with the haptic fuzziness of ritual allows one to view this project as a study in underexposure and opacity. Reading the apparent density and haze permeating the works’ film stock and video surface enable investigations into the radical epidermis of meaning and topography of ontological implications in all the energetic texture of film grain and video blur. Sensitive cognizance to the particularities and implications of the four films’ preferences for diffused light guides an understanding of analysis as a type of steady illumination. In her article “Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility,” art historian Sam-

pada Aranke builds on Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity, writing "Opacity denies complete incorporation, and directs us to ways of being and knowing that are vibrant, untamed, and free-floating. Opacity strives towards an "opportune obscurity" such that a type of aesthetic autonomy and resistant, black inhabitation can exist" (5). Refusing a type of transparent practice in their piercing recognition of white capitalism's voyeuristic exploitations and appropriations conducted in unforgiving light, filmmakers and contemporary artists of the L.A. Rebellion followed trails of knowledge production into observing the liveliness in surfaces of shadow and silhouette. Pursuing this tradition of inquisitive attention in seeing how light (on-screen and in ambient environments) catches reflection in dusk and sundown while losing certain allure in glaring artificial luminance, the thesis's films illustrate worlds in which "a type of aesthetic autonomy and resistant, black inhabitation can exist" as foundational without any trace of societal suppression.

Carefully shining light in theories of critical interpretation and reading what sparkles instead of aggressively flooding the details of Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins's pieces with a harsh light to make quick conclusions is more closely attuned to a praxis of empathy. American cinematographer Bradford Young provides key insight into the ethics of lighting in an interview, stating, "When you underexpose [dark brown skin tones], they pop and resonate and shine in a particular way that you're not going to see when a face is lit in a conventional way... You're doing black folk a great disservice when you overexpose their skin" (Cinematographer Bradford Young on Lighting Dark Skin and the 'Subversive' Power of the Black Church 1). I also assert that approaches towards fugitive Black study and its texts are in disservice by being recklessly overexposed. A graduate of Howard University where he studied under L.A. Rebellion director



Haile Gerima, Young expresses how the sublime and the textures of affect are more palpable and cared for in this gentler, introspective culture of listening to the films in a task of underexposed illumination. Arthur Jafa, Julie Dash, Ben Caldwell, and Larry Clark's formative research into sensitometry, the "science of measuring the sensitivity of photographic materials," (Kodak) displays the rampant dismissals of American cinematographic tradition and the radiant possibilities for more brilliantly depicting people of color on screen. The unfeeling, malicious overexposure tactics and tools of the antiblack surveillance state- security guard flashlights, police car LEDs, fluorescent sirens, and monitor floodlights- unsettle while drowning out nuance and depth of study, exemplifying the brutality in violent, blinding patches of glare. Aranke and Young's sentiments towards opacity and underexposure as ideas of considerate togetherness in lived theory guide one towards cultivating a compassionate atmosphere in solitary and collective readings. Textual illuminations in the ambience of a spectator's mind that figure into hypotheses are better and more healthfully acknowledged in dimmed light and deepened color saturation.

*All of Praise House, Dream City, Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space, and Without Your Interpretation's* gorgeous, complex expressiveness in gradients of visual and sonic tonality is the energy of earth's rhythms and resonances that pulsate and become emotional access towards lucid perception and metabolic comprehension. The films encourage study in this transfixion, in the avant-garde jazz aesthetics of atonality, improvisation, and experimental register that sound out the seismic vibrations of earth material. Explicating some of the divine qualities of the legendary Harlem-born photographer in her piece "Roy DeCarava's Ambient Evenings," Kimberly Juanita Brown muses, "Some of his night images ask the viewer how much they believe it is their right to see, or they force an engagement that takes the

power of a dark space as a photographic right” (6). In reading films in their more gritty, dusty textured light in Los Angeles backdrops and embracing the aesthetics and experiments of visual grain, the infinity of visually resonant material catches reflection and glistens into transfixing meaning. Smoky contours of analysis manifest and prevail in attending to Jenkins, Dash, and McCullough’s camera work, editing, cinematography, mise en scène, and diegesis that know affective realms to be inextricable from cerebral processings.

Held in the drifting sensation that settles in after leaving a movie theater, energy and its meaning abound in keeping study of the earth and its underexposure opaque. I call for a reading custom of evocation and of channeling the ineffable in attending to the four films. Euphoria of emerging from shrouded darkness of an interior arena of reception and rising into the brightness of the outdoors is a type of corporeal transport, seen embodied by Dash, Jenkins’s, and McCullough’s performers in their vaporous passages between earth zones. Building a kind of intimacy in viewership demands recognition and reflection on the dangers of diluting the original artistic potency of a cinematic composition. Encouraging a study that strives to approximate the sensation of becoming readjusted to this surprising and perhaps disorienting light found in exiting the theater or performance room, one is somatically and spiritually suspended in liminal zones more open to the L.A. filmmakers’ alchemy. In *Devotional Cinema* experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky posits, “The rightness of all these shifts of space, the weight of light and darkness, are the meaning, the aliveness, and the beauty of the film. All is present, all is functioning” (45). As mental foginess dissipates after a screening and the enveloping underexposed study of patient attendance moves into focus, one is more conditioned to notice how the luminosity of narrative revelation peels off with each viewing and instantiation of study.

This thesis necessitates a devotional film scholarship that bears witness to the audiovisual pieces' vibrant afterlives in how their radioactive emissions of revelation mingle with current Los Angeles communities and global sociopolitical movements who are some audiences of their impact. Transmitting from an aging entity, the L.A. Rebellion's inextinguishable flame of legacy and influence is a dynamic, abiding illumination that gains alternative valences of transformative significance in its art world revivals and film theory awakenings. Feeling spiritually warmed by the glow of scholars, I seek to survey *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits* and *Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* from a multitude of perspectives and veins of ritual thought. Listening to the films' subliminal and rapturous broadcasts, I am particularly in permanent awe of Fred Moten, whose transmogrifications with ceremonial, performative, poetic, critical, and metaphysical form always focus the act of carrying for each other as multivalent study. Moten's stylistic abeyances before divination temporalize and sublimate, gaining distinction as expansive yet stunningly specific material, a phenomenon which I observe the L.A. Rebellion pieces practicing in many unique manners.

Some forms of analytical explication can dilute parts of a film's intensity and thus detract from a full appreciation of the poetics or intricacies, though this is certainly a phenomenon intrinsically bound up in emotional gaps in language as a mode of conveyance. This project begins and proceeds in a certain reverence for the written word, inflected with a simultaneously forlorn and ecstatic understanding of all that resides and moves outside of linguistics. Excesses of grammar and syntax frequently termed affect or poetry are parallel to sediment and alluvium as articulations of earthliness, both transient and perplexing in their oft-disregarded status. Dirt, dust, ruin, water, sand, and smoke have a language of decomposition and disorder which is tran-

scribed in *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation*, plus cosmically summoned and arrived upon. Fortified composites dense with minerals, the texture of: architectural ruins, ecological erosions, and atmospheric transformation is always indicative of abstracted origins, where aesthetics of exhaustion abide in the presence of the films' endurance in study and theory. In their heavy implementation of recital and choreographic footage, the four experimental compositions evoke performance studies' constant discourse of what escapes record between event and documentation. As original forms of intensity and objective shift in documentation and photographic/video capture, the erosion and weathering of performance and its gestural waves are proven to seamlessly exist as material and haptic movement.

Being steeped in the incendiary spirit of the L.A. Rebellion, the film and video works have a specific and complex relationship to social, political, and spiritual groupings that manifests their existence within and of the ruptures of ideology. The L.A. Rebellion destabilized and continues to subvert theories of knowledge production with its investigations into consciousness through radicalized epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology. Unraveling and combusting the anti-blackness lodged in the filmic apparatus and in American cinematographic history inherently involves the unsettling of hegemonic constructions of race and their ubiquitous grounds in all societal structures, specifically concentrated in the violence of oppressive images. This project is rooted in a sturdy yet evolving awareness of how film is ideology which is language—all three being crucially fluid with often indistinguishable divisions. *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space Part 1*, and *Without Your Interpretation* play in the always already brokenness of ideology, creating in the wreckage

and rupturing the fracture further to show the myriad consequences of epistemology's fundamental failures. These ingenious cinematic bodies then theorize from those ruins of sociopolitical psyches, which, in this void of entanglement and oneness is the matter that they are already in and also shape. These overlooked and infrequently screened films are operating in truly massive manners as texts of earth worship and cultural critique. This thesis aims to tease out and illuminate the vast significance of the cinematic works in their atmospheric totality, specifically with the context of being quite ignored by the bulk of film studies discipline.

*Praise House, Dream City, Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space Part 1, and Without Your Interpretation* arise from modes of collectivity and communality that engender ritual, ceremony, and performance. A key factor in reading these films in community is becoming engrossed in an appreciation of their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, especially when regarding the cinematic works as embodied beings. Conversations between the audiovisual works directed by three artistic contemporaries and collaborators are similar to sound echoing over water, a sort of warbled communication amplified yet unseen across society's flooding reservoir of media information. A blissful joy in the harmonic and discordant noisiness of study's avant-garde jazz aesthetics is in perceiving how the films chart infinite constellations for self-realizations and self-actualizations. My impressions of the acute significance of the films necessitating collective consideration is informed by the research group "liquid blackness," a web of graduate students and alumni committed to studying blackness and aesthetics, activating inquiry in improvisatory and fluid modes of gathering. Initiated by film scholar Alessandra Raengo at Georgia State University in Atlanta, liquid blackness recognizes L.A. Rebellion cinemas as innately social texts- motion pictures which spark a cyclical, circulat-

ing climate of spectatorial interiority in public to learn from each others illuminations and profundities.

Being intensely spirited, dynamic texts, *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space Part 1*, and *Without Your Interpretation* require an unabating drive to communicate their brilliance, which is a principle embedded in rigorous engagement with their extraordinary depth of study. A constantly re-energizing intentionality of ecstatic approach in analyzing the works of cinema is essential to establishing and investigating the parallelisms and simultaneities of their aesthetic and theoretical operations. Reveling in the texts' rambunctious, unruly theories is an act of listening to what the films require of one in interpretation as a spectator experiencing the atmosphere of the artworks' sparkling, alluring natures. Professor of religious studies Ashon Crawley's book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* examines the behaviors of specific aesthetics:

Having been said to be, and to come from, nothing, Blackpentecostal aesthetic practice "ruins" the normative, neoliberal university, "ruins" such a zone of inhabitation in the service of producing otherwise possibilities. As carriers of such an aesthetic practice, black objects are ruinous. We must look to, travel to, journey below surfaces, dig deep in the expanse of capacious blackness, go beyond and look askance. It is there, in the otherwise zones of possibility, where a critical practice of pedagogy is enacted (250)

Throughout the chapters, I will engage with this quote by focusing on how the films are situated in and are expressions of geographical realms of blackness, where "otherwise zones of possibility" exist in the blurry spaces between subjects in the fullness of embodiment. Affect arises and propagates with varying frequencies through "the otherwise zones of possibility" abounding in

subterranean, aquatic, and atmospheric realms, largely determined by the elemental state of a film's material focus. Visual artists and poets in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* exchange beliefs on how artifacts of Black communities with kinetic and ancestral charge circulate and survive through ages of sociopolitical change and infrastructural shift, their vitality regenerating and animating in evolutions.

Studying a type of audiovisual atonality with diverse valences of Black avant-garde musicality in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, *Dream City*, and *Without Your Interpretation* means reading rhythmically with differently informed experimental framings of consonance and dissonance. Scoring McCullough's porous film, American jazz trumpeter and L.A. Rebellion contemporary figure Don Cherry orchestrates the acoustics in the architectures of worldmaking. A practice of immersing in the fullness of cinematic noise is a kind of transport heard rattling around in the resonant airiness tinged with metallic inflections in Cherry's "Chenrezig" during the opening moments of *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*. Acoustics in spaces of entanglement parallel the radical sonic modes of cathartic construction in avant-garde jazz, where release is often deferred to illuminate what happens to the listening body in breathing and watching an ensemble performance. Improvising upon Black radical film's traditions of exhaustive focus on the sonic and its existence in the image which subverts classical Hollywood prioritization of the visual, Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins's texts all assert that audiovisual articulation implies a relation of being heard and listened to which is inherently troubled and reimagined in the ecology of American cinema's racial politics.

## VI. Intentionality and Practice of Alternative/Metaphysical Study

This thesis is also a praxis of feeling, sensing, and thinking into the recesses of expansive, insovereign, and flung gestures which live in the infinite wilderness of ideology that exists in a fluid state. The measurelessness is exhilarating, especially in how it troubles analysis' desire for distillation. A methodical study of the Black experimental films and their authors is deeply serviced by the findings and complications of quantum physics for more attuned readings. To study the makeup of performers' ecstatic stirrings and the staggering amount occurring between the gestures of shots and cuts, one must travel into affect's more molecular domains and observe the microscopic intensity of hapticality with visual acoustics that challenge architecture. Expressive of the PBS title program, "Alive from Off Center" where *Praise House* first broadcast, the metaphysics concept such as ether, plasma, and plenum ground and release an attention to earthly material whose molecular composition is miraculously touching itself. Virtual particles and their spacious masses are fertile for analytical extension, where a study of the void's acoustics and immaterial architecture lives in avant-garde and experimental ontology. The films visualize the appearances and energies of infinity in the act of troubling ontological stability.

The imagined spatiality of the American avant-garde traditions and the institution of the university contain rivulets of spiritual, ritual, and fugitive Black studies, though the full tributary of creative influence is more completely seen and felt in the films' depictions of metaphysical expanses and common spaces. Open fields in *Praise House*, a performance studio in *Dream City*, underpasses in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*, and the Art Dock in *Without Your Interpretation* are all variations of common and overlooked spots where collaborators gather. Thinking through projection and incorporations of nutrient-rich material, structural decay,



and sediment in assemblage and bricolage forms discovers a nexus between Black study and film studies, where similarities in topography and texture between silver halide emulsions and earthly emulsions find fecund expanses of interplay for study. Dash, Jenkins, and McCullough excavate and aestheticize various chasms in societal psyches, employing structures based in earth time, cardiovascular pulse, and gestural rhythm to echolocate the complexities of images all evolving and decomposing in a common ecosystem. Film and video grain in these experimental contexts is a materialization of sediment and detritus, the calcified, nutrient rich terrestrial semblances of metaphysics and poetry.

#### VII. Past abstraction and transgression into the lucidity of disorientation

The haptic, visceral pulse in these films activate regions of the viewer's psyche that are wired to capacities for ontological resonance with cinema, where one is more susceptible to absorbing and noticing the mystical artifacts of everyday happenings. In these sublime states of reception, the severity of rigidity and formalism soften, revealing otherworldly perceptive zones that allow individuals to participate in analysis as more subsuming divination. Strikingly, the films' manners of transference are quite nonconfrontational and more implicit, reminiscent of hypnotic tones in techno music where lucidity is deferred and forms of disorientation are first partially induced, all while the sharp edges of precision are gently diffused. A lulling pulse, the density of revelation, palpitates inside the chaos and whirring noise as the intensity and luminescence of a glowing orb of horizon reverberates at the center. Fugal realms extending from the surging orb are spaces of quietude and focus, as the body in motion locks into a frequency optimal for absorbing meaning and receiving the abundance of information from fluid texts. Edits or

choreographed gestures in Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins' fluid texts permeate and bleed into each other, not as sharp and jarring cuts but as haptic dissolves. Activating these spaces of quietude and focus in and amidst noise is hugely valuable, as study materializes lulled into mental states that decenter sharp fixation on immediate concision and instead prioritize an attuning to universal rhythms. *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation's* depths of corporeal cognition in ritual, ceremony, and exaltation's transference are communicated affectively in subliminal messages.

#### VIII. Ritual Texts

Analyzing all four films as acoustic vessels emphasizes cognizance of the texts' functions in alternative forms of embodiment and insists upon enacting a thorough, gentle attendance to the corporeal nuance, while unlearning conventions of analytic reduction and scaling. Ethical focus on the extremely brutal realities and implications of restricting human respiration in the world is contextualized in Black studies and media theory with notes on the implications of analytic suffocation. Communist philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* beckons:

Let's forget measure, let's forget technical capability social competence and functional proficiency. These measurable entities have invaded the modern mindscape and accelerated the rhythm of the info-sphere up to the point of the current psycho-collapse and techno-fascism. Let's try to think outside the sphere of measurability and of measure.

Let's find a way to rhythmically evolve with the cosmos. Let's go out of this century of measure, let's go out to breathe together (22).

Berardi writes a social call to common residence and empathy in inhalation and exhalation, inviting meditations on the circulatory economies of respiration where sustainable worldmaking champions liberated breathing as spatial and somatic study.

Writing towards the pulse of love is an act entangled with the underlying and eternal life-forces of ceremony and communality in which the films were created and cultivated. In composing film analysis with a means of textual explication and a project of saturating study with ritual and sacred energy, there exists a tricky yet alluring reality of the “finality” of illumination not being a precipice or sharp edge of arrival, but rather what I term a “quickenning horizon.” A fuzzy yet bright channel, the quickenning horizon surfaces in writing towards something less defined and more alchemical, structuring the spectator’s subjectivity and informing their position in being an observer of porous knowledge construction. In *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Crawley proposes: “What if the goal of endless restive movement and vibration is not to reach any mode of stasis and enclosure, is not to stay any where, but to ongoingly approach, to move toward- through varied directions- endless horizontal (of and toward the horizon) thrust? The cool thing about horizons is that they move along with you; any way you turn, there the horizon finds you” (229). Through their limitless cartographies of affect, *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, and *Without Your Interpretation* provide spiritual transport towards a displaced finality and indeterminacy of arrival solidified as divinations. Such assemblies of shrine, altar, love song, and hymn are the physical byproducts of attuned acts which temporalize seen and felt moments of arrival in vaporous textual realizations. This analyzing in motion towards uncertainty is exhilarating and en-

livening, advocating for a theory of noise before it gains classification as music, of alluvium before it shapes into monument, and of wavelengths before registering as colors.

Rebelling against systems of logic, determiners of legitimacy, and structures of governance, Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins's films all communicate how sense is made in the breaking of classical "Sense." Ideology of the L.A. Rebellion established how "nonsense" is often a term ascribed to what is beyond the reaches of ones positioned or willed subjectivity and comprehension, demonstrating the vast and poisoned insecurities of whiteness' surveillance embedded in media histories which subjugate people of color in modes of representation. Rupture and a disruption of sense in the Western notion that deems blackness illegible illustrates how, in its *Bad Faith*, white capitalist governance, ideology, language, and analysis is illiterate. In her article "The L.A. Rebellion Comes to Town," "liquid blackness" researcher Alessandra Raengo posits

Many films share this sense that blackness comes from elsewhere and communicates at levels that do not necessarily belong to an earthly plane; the sense of the possibilities of reassembling disjointed fragments of past no longer within reach; the sense of a beauty that can be constructed from a place of debilitation; poetry that can be fashioned in the midst of the most prosaic, depressing, and endangered environments (5)

Communicating through "elsewhere" registers, the haptics of blackness's aesthetics are a way of being in the world which course through *Praise House*, *Dream City*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*, and *Without Your Interpretation*. In a drive towards finding alternative conceptions of clarity, a more experimental imagining of lucidity traverses past common understandings of spirituality and mystical aesthetics and into the limitless realms of metaphysics. Here, an

applied engagement with messing up the structures eternally bound in Western systems of epistemology that privilege cerebral processing over emotional, corporeal, and affective reading and experiencing is salient. Raengo exposes how attuned manners of reading emerge from a type of mess in displacing the centrality of normative study which removes the trickiness and brilliance of “unscalable matter” (Tsing). I will engage with Raengo’s thoughts in the coming chapters by continuing with her insistence of “sense” in the recognition of what exceeds cerebral comprehension, where the practice of analysis that strives to fully attune to a film’s metaphysical transmissions likely tends to land in zones of approximation- a fertile realm, however, for visions of worldmaking.

Black study’s radicalism of audiovisual language does not harden into cemented vocabulary but stays fluid and contorts. Being ideology and governance, hegemonic language operates in acutely horrific ways as systems of surveillance. I must confront how Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins speak to contaminated structures of communication with their experiments in aesthetic and political language. Huge amounts of vigor, spirit, and passion can abound in being written as disembodiment, the vast space of meaning that lives in and beyond the liminality of a busted orientation suggested by the troubled oppositions in Barad’s metaphysical semantics. Acknowledging the possibilities of reading something that moves past the vernacular of containment with a broken, corrupt, and colonized language is a task that recognizes and appreciates the wildness of its own condition. In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky addresses the magical and illusory gestures of shots and cuts in cinema, revealing that “When the cut works visually, two aftershocks may occur. The first is in the area of dream connectives, or poetry - the way our mind uses images in its own nighttime arena. The sudden shift in space caused by the cut enlivens the unnameable.

This stimulation is beyond the subject on either side of the cut. It is poignancy itself. A great cut brings forth the eerie, poetic order of things” (51). A study into liminal zones between shots and cuts as “dream connectives” imbues both a vastness and a supersaturation into the elemental structure of film and the molecular level of semantics. Learning by sensing into the void which is immensely full as the infinite fullness of all earth, poetic discovery exists in linguistic unsettling and “enlivens the unnameable.”

#### IX. Notes on a Theory of Gesture

Gesture extends beyond its momentary actualization of potential energy realized in an interaction and then lives in immaterial spaces of plenum, wilderness, atmosphere, cosmos. The films are studies of infinite touch, reaction, circulation, and movement, signifying how every gesture displaces particles in air, which is how the artists move and are moved by each other. Specificities of raw experimentation, experimental epistemology, and expanded ontology theorize and shape the infinite realms of possibility that are alluded to in gesture, yet more resonantly endure within fields of metaphysics. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe: “Hapticality, the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem” (98). Through studying the affective functionings of the films as the haptic matter of blackness’s performances in earth whose multiplied broadcasts of feeling are unmanaged by normative systems of governance, a metaphysical approach to the texts in their experimental

medium is also an investigation into “the interiority of sentiment” and the fully entangled gestures of collective sensation. Figures in all four films are shown to “feel through others” in physical and affective manners. Appearing in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* and *Dream City*, artist David Hammons is dedicated to an immersive study of the haptic matter of blackness- the processes and beckoning calls through transmission which tease out the particularities of hazy light and atmospheric thickness in sociopolitical climates and their ritual energies.

Experiencing and servicing poetic texts is an analytic project founded on the acknowledgement of the films performing past their watching, which involves addressing the complexities of how to write of and describe something fleeting in its origins of performance. Poetic attendance to texts that are infinitely curious and alluring centers active states of absorbing, reflecting, and interpreting such alchemical behavior. In *Devotional Cinema*, Nathaniel Dorsky writes, “There is a secret underground of continual transmission that is possible within human society and relative time, sitting magically right in front of us but often not seen. It occurs through someone’s inspiration to put something into the world that is uncompromisingly present, which, in turn, invokes our innate ability to share in that presence” (35). Walking through these secret undergrounds in multidisciplinary ensemble study is a type of theorization that praises the film’s structural language in being prismatic and ephemeral. Infinite questions arise in the coming sections, sublimating from observing the mineral compositions of artifacts assembled in a shrine, the dust rising into the air and cloaking the performers in a haptic haze.

## X. Conclusion

Refusing to weed out renderings and significations often categorized by normative linguistic systems and some dominant experimental film circles as messiness, confusion, and disorder is a praxis of reading into the wildness of gesture, expanse, and possibility. Following and practicing in the midst of anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's praising of "unscalable" and "diverse matter," the project centralizes a reading of unruly ideas, shots, scenes, and messages as the ethos of knowledge production in a terrain of metaphysical wildness. Being a white viewer, I am seeking to always be deconstructing how oppressive gazes are embedded into spectatorship cultures, and to listen particularly closely to artists of color in their creations which theorize towards deeply illuminating acts in gathering and innovate against restriction. Through my engagement with these four films' as experimental and transgressive realms, I aim to completely broaden my conceptions of cinema to really know it as a medium with immense nuanced and cathartic utilities in expression for individuals with marginalized voices. In sustained study of *Praise House*, *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, *Dream City*, and *Without Your Interpretation*, I strive to consider how Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins expand and reevaluate the significance of decolonizing viewing practices. Tsing's thrilling investigations into the matsutake mushroom's ecological and economic threads in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* communicates that "Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making... I need to see lifeways - and non-living ways of being as well - coming together... If history without progress is indeterminate and



multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities?” (23). Through reading “assemblage’s” expansive applications as epitomizing the films’ aesthetic forms, the L.A. Rebellion’s collective structure, and the porous composition of Black study’s qualities of attendance to earth, the entangled and textural ecosystems of interrelated organisms come into light.

## Chapter 2: Together in Expanded Church at *Praise House*

### I. Argument

Julie Dash's *Praise House* (1991) crafts a spun, cycled aesthetic theory of spatial experimentation, where cinema's temporal flow opens to understand its own haptic intricacies. Fashioned in collaborative study with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, *Praise House* broadens the filmic medium into theatrical and dancerly spaces. The euphoric beings on screen cultivate a transgressive avant-garde cinema which acts as a practiced site of attentive listening and empathetic movement. As a cinematic performance theorist, Dash runs circles around ruinous Western colonizing fabrications of individualism, determinism, and subservience in erupting audiovisual form to explore ecstatic socialities suffocated by such toxic ideologies. Founder of non-profit dance company Urban Bush Women, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's employments of choreography in the audiovisual piece best service a gestural, affective filmmaking practice attuned to the fluid structures immersed in nonlinear time. *Praise House* dissolves strict film conventions which standardize more transparent channels of communication to gesture to expansive experimentation. I will engage with film scholars, performance studies theorists, and poets such as Rizvana Bradley, Ashon Crawley, Laura Marks, and Fred Moten to analyze how movement is transferred to cinema and extended in its potency through a recorded space. In designing, writing, filming and editing from a blurred swarm of sign and signifier conditioned by Black study's aesthetic interventions, Dash is the architect of a woozy materiality which emphasizes a praxis of care entangled with radical politics.

## II. Minnie Evans

*Praise House* is a filmic homage to visionary artist Minnie Evans and is strongly inspired by her corporeal and spiritual alignment with the mystical qualities embedded in her southern environment. Living and creating in Wilmington, North Carolina, Evans is frequently described as existing in a type of syntonic relation to her surroundings, receptive to subliminal registers occupying densely historic terrain where she was raised. This syntony defines a mode of being highly sensitive and alive to ones conditions, experiencing resonance with atmospheric forces and understanding the body as an acoustic composition. In her book *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*, dance and theater scholar Nadine George-Graves includes biographical information on Minnie Evans: “As a child, she heard voices and had waking dreams and visions of prophets and religious figures, real and mythical animals, flowers, plants and faces... According to author Gylbert Coker, “There were times when Evans could barely distinguish between dreams and visions, as well as between dreams and wakeful experience” (74). Immersed in spiritual communication with myriad lifeforces, Evans utilized drawing and painting as vital practices for survival, as she once stated “Something told me to draw or die. It was shown to me what to do” (Anton Haardt Gallery 1). Evans’s illustrations of her dream world tap into the earth spirits around her in ecstatic modes of relation. Dash and Zollar materialize a platform in film to remember Evans’s brilliance, and to demonstrate how a multimedia presentation is most needed to deliver the visionary artist’s nuances.

### III. Haptic Aesthetic Theory

Being so saturated with countless modifications of decomposed and reappearing substances of the biosphere make *Praise House* a slippery yet deeply illuminating text in analysis. Dash and Zollar's divine cinema necessitates a devotedly gentle, patient reading that must flow from a psychological space which acknowledges the works rootings in the haptics and aesthetics of spirituality. I will follow lines of thought from media theorist Laura Marks and film/contemporary art scholar Rizvana Bradley to unravel the meaning of "haptic" in an experimental context and to study *Praise House* as a text with haptic intensity. Entering into haptic study brings a spectator further inside film's affective, visceral, and gestural functions and into conversation of metaphysical measures. *Praise House* is immediately striking as a polyphonic narrative, a vibrant structure whose affective workings observed through a metaphysical lens are haptic in their lasting gestures and touches. Bradley attends to movement's interiority in her article "Other Sensualities," writing, "The haptic can be understood as the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work, or the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility for performance" (3). As "viscera," the haptic is the omnipresent, microscopic texture between and within forms, essentially being the particles of dynamics and resonance. The many voices, spirits, and forces in subliminal communication in Dash's polyphonic film reverberate together to produce a composition where vast sources of energy are broadcast through an audiovisual product. I comprehend *Praise House*'s setting as a haptic ecology, a perspective of environment which pays meticulous attention to the magnitude of "material surplus" with humans, air, organic matter, and atmospheric phenomena. Entrenched in the haptic spheres of ancestral frequencies, the potency of Hannah and her grandmother's indivisible psyches dispel any hyperbolic connotation in the

discourse of affect's molecular fervor. As corporeal configurations of extratemporal energy stemming from the total scope of their family line, Hannah and Granny are both incarnations of transmigration, meaning they are truly linked in their embodiments.

Originally shot in color on 16mm film and then transferred to video for its airing on PBS program "Alive from Off Center," *Praise House* magnifies the liminal spaces between humans in motion as active areas for spiritual engagement. With Dash's cinematic innovation, materials like fabric, grass, hair, and light are explored in their energetic importance as being haptically charged. Alongside cinematographer Arthur Jafa and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Julie Dash crafts a world of tactile knowledge, where the film's southern environment is composed of more minute scopes of interaction in haptic ecologies. In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Laura Marks develop theories of sensory impressions and embodied feelings within the audiovisual medium. Marks discusses certain mechanisms of video's captures and lapses:

The main sources of haptic visuality in video are more varied: they include the constitution of the image from a signal, video's low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital imaging, and video decay. The video image occurs in a relay between source and screen. Hence variations in image quality, color, tonal variation, and so forth occur in the space between source and viewer, affected by conditions of broadcast or exhibition as well as (literal) reception (175)

All of these textural components in Marks's unpacking of the image imply that the video surface is a haptic topography, an audiovisual landscape where all of the signals, transfers, and broadcasts "in a relay between source and screen" are part of the cinematic fabric. Reading *Praise*

*House* through a lens of “haptic visuality” deepens the framework of Dash’s tactile knowledge, as the video’s ecstatic lifeforce is better articulated with the chaos of affect. A way of positioning oneself in spectatorship to be more responsive to covert and fantastical communication, a blended study of metaphysical and corporeal highlights the profundity of *Praise House’s* poetry.

#### IV. Dash’s lively practice

Part of Dash’s genius comes from composing a film that one experiences as freakishly alive, almost unfathomably in tune with the miragelike terrain densely charged with ancestral auras and spirits. Hannah and her grandmother’s inextricable synesthetic consciousnesses perceive the wild expanses of Dash’s visionary, divine world as welcoming and vitalizing. The cosmically lush rendered and extended landscape of devotional structures, cemeterial platforms, glimmering city blocks, and spontaneously occurring churches are terrestrial pockets for experimentation and occupation. The infiniteness of blackness, specifically the measureless nature of Dash’s focus on Black female knowledge production shifts in a fugitive relation to filmic syntax, beyond essentialized nominations as politically subversive or transcendent. *Praise House’s* restylings of narrative procedure open up audiovisual language to carry filmic syntax into a looser, more dreamlike association. Shots, scenes, and sequences cling to each other in an expanded continuity that embraces fantasy as something lived. In a sequence beginning five minutes and thirty seconds into the piece, Hannah slowly rises from a reclined position on a couch, her psyche seemingly compelled by her grandmother’s recounting of being “born to this blessed Earth. Born with the gift of sight, least ways as far back as I can remember, I have had this gift.” While clearly transfixed and absorbed in the stirrings of some familiar, beckoning place, the camera

frames the granddaughter in close-up and softly tracks up and pans left as she inches up. Here, the camera movement is entirely motivated by her mesmerized gaze showing her instinctive response to metaphysics and to her enchanted inner world. Hannah's sensory intuition causes her finger to trace and brush against the airy ectoplasm of metaphysical fabric unseeable to the audience. Such light materiality in the haptic ecology is teeming with the radioactive frequencies from women in Hannah's bloodline. Fluidly temporal and eternally intermingling in her special faculties of sight, Hannah's awareness of angels bonds her with Granny, who has the same divine powers of vision. The edit cuts to the grandmother then dissolves into a long shot of Hannah beaming and *already* running in a faded emerald dress, simultaneously whirling and dynamically suspended in the haptic thickness of the mythical atmosphere. Two angels in flowing white garments against multicolored pillars wave enthusiastically at Hannah, joining her momentum and then guiding her to follow their jubilant course. After a succession of shots portraying another angels' pink toenails, details of the painted architecture, and seraphic figures blissfully spiralling in dance together, Hannah is shown in a long shot rushing eagerly towards the characters, an instance both choreographed and improvisational. Hannah springs to accompany the other four waiting angels and they all move as a harmonic unit, seeming to have an ingrained knowledge of the spontaneous dance.



Fig.1, Hannah running with angels, Dash, Julie, director. *Praise House*. Women Make Movies, 1991, <https://vimeo.com/321360452>.

## V. Haptics of church

*Praise House* exists as a theory of dispersed, richly social churchly vitality, a current of worship energy always churning in haptic forms of relation. The underground locality of such magnetic, communal vigor pushes up against and suffuses through the diegetic barriers of conventional filmic reason. Strikingly, Dash's film impacts with a resoundingly gentle, playful spirit, entirely empathetic and unfaltering in its displays of warmth. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's essay "Base Faith" contemplates the nuanced activity of geological time, and applied to *Praise House* the text is seen to illustrate details of its amorphous lifeforce. The two authors explain "This is the base without foundation, its dusty, watery disorchestration on the march, bent, on the run. Down where it's greeny, where it's salty, the earth moves against the world under the undercover of blackness, its postcognitive, incognitive worker's inquest and last played radio" (6). At spots throughout this thesis, I include lines from Moten and Harney as philosophical lyrics in Black study which have a musicality in language strongly connected to Dash, and Jenkins, and McCullough's experimentation. Such "base without foundation" keenly characterizes the haptic vastness of gesture and touch in *Praise House's* cinematographic focus on bodily movement, while also signalling to the film's mystical soulfulness. This soulfulness crackles with an amount of somatic liveliness that transcends the commonly conceived capacities of physical expression in cinematic grammar. Recurrent mentions of green throughout the dialogue and soundscape: "The brilliant green. Look, Hannah! All of this is green and you see it... Green aflowing... Green stones of the valley... The brilliant green!... How green? Evergreen" summon the felt potency of sentient beings abounding in the shared outdoors where Granny, Hannah, and their entangled familial lifeforces freely roam.



Tilling the fecund grounds of Harney and Moten's poetic imaginings exposes a rift in the planetary psyche, so colossal as to often be undetectable within *Praise House's* microcosmic investigations of worldbuilding and revolutionary togetherness. A brutal faultline shows itself in the phrasing: "the earth moves against the world under the undercover of blackness" (Base Faith 7), as the film's visuals move against the frames and the sounds travel underneath the natural ambience. *Praise House's* theories move alongside its performances and textures. Dash is captivated by how sensations in earth material surge and pulsate in the body as a vessel for cognition. Harney and Moten's distinction between earth and world, two words often conflated, addresses a tension with the earth's organic and exploited features, and the world's arranged and managed policies, similar to Marks' noting of lapses between an image and its transfer in video. A throbbing pulse of a potent yet diffused terrestrial composition in the film rides against a sustained tempo, creating a sonic friction heard dispersed throughout the score. Harney and Moten relay a trenchant truth in their assertion of a divided, strained, even discriminatory energy in the liminal zone between the earth and the world.

## VI. Church as form

The audiovisual portraits of an enkindled church are improvised enactments and organic stagings of a roving ensemble, where heaven is lived in scenes on earth in the versatile coordinates for renegade study against systems of governance. Church as a historically weighty notion is adapted into a malleable condition of entangled presence, as Dash's characters arrive into church through sublime alignment, largely in times of spiritual need. Dash extensively practices cinema's affective capabilities of transmission that escape quick analysis. Transcending a single

diegetic world and spiraling past structural constraints, a praise house subverts conceptions of designated structure. In *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*, Nadine George-Graves defines a praise house as “a traditional, informal spiritual gathering, often without a preacher. Different types of praise houses exist, but southern black Pentecostal praise houses are often the loci of very charged worship... Sometimes the spirit takes them and they are inspired to shake, speak in tongues, and cry” (73). A praise house behaves as a fugitive emergence of circulating energies centralized as a happening that takes shape beyond physical structures. Developing as and from a gathering of corporeal reception, praise houses’ forms and theatricals are in their aesthetics, which are aptly honored in film’s convergence of sounds and visuals. Approximately one third through the text, church comes into being in its unruly, intellectual splendour, commencing with a close up of crossed hands clutching a wooden cross with a silver Jesus. Moments before, a sequence of shots from Hannah’s mother’s point of view gaze out a bus window, scanning religious advertisements that read “Faith Temple Rev. A. Jafa Pastor,” “Jesus is the cure to all problems” and “Praying for the sick in the name of Jesus.” After the scene’s initial frame depicting the pinnacle object of Christian iconography, the shot cuts to a medium close up of Hannah entirely consumed by the enthralling magnitude of her higher powers. Steeped in rapt quietude while swaying and wavering in a floaty white dress, her soul revels in the warm relations. Surrounded by the angels all moving others by touching the space around them which is the exhaust of their emanating auras causing the visual smokiness of the room, Hannah dances to experience catharsis.



Fig. 2, Hannah in the manifested praise house, Dash, Julie, director. *Praise House*. Women Make Movies, 1991, <https://vimeo.com/321360452>.

Fracturing dormant ideological rootings in language, the praise house aesthetics of the narrative's composition make up a flexible architecture, qualifying "church" as a descriptor for the haptic discourse crackling on screen. Dash's utilizations of affective, sprightly cinematography spark a desire to theorize the spatiality of this mobile, surfacing church immanent in the landscape. Any insinuated structure of hierarchy lingering in the spectator's projective subjectivity when first glimpsing the emancipatory gestures likely dissipates. In dancing, Hannah and her companions sense scattered points of intergenerational vitality and their souls search for resonant materials in proximity. Hannah's improvisational, cerebral yet embodied act of vulnerable understanding is epitomized through emitting soundwaves accompanied by tossed gestures. During the scene of the arising churchly site situated in Hannah's home, the camera leaps around as an active character, conveying the silent and stirring inner realms of the mostly unnamed participants. Always intimating at each other, all of the dancing beings are woven into the video's haptic ecology that supports them as organisms which feel and identify amongst praise house aesthetics. Hannah's ecstatic movements appear both unrehearsed and galvanized, communicating the body as a wild concentration of love, compassion, and knowledge.

The omnipresence of a transgressive religiosity in *Praise House* embodies a practice of immersing in broadcasted, fluid sites of worship that manifest as atmospherics of rapture channeled into a film. I am studying *Praise House* as a text whose form and narrative structure provoke invaluable questions on closure and composition, as the piece's spiritual flow continues to surge in its performance past viewing. Distanced from a definitive sect or denomination, the religious presences in Dash's work do not announce a single idol for worship, but rather embrace a broad idea of cathartic spirituality. In utilizing cinema as a locus of exaltation through dance, Dash's universes of radical Black feminist divinity and euphoria are modes of theoretical transport, perpetually transfiguring in analysis and illuding finite deduction. As this thesis attends to the intricacies of Black experimental film and video work, the project simultaneously grounds a belief that the audiovisuals, in their affective and metaphysical practices of storytelling, also theorize far past my readings and remain viscerally potent. *Praise House's* audiovisual material is a regenerating and endlessly animating undercurrent of particles that sporadically, yet deliberately, shifts into a congregation of social catharsis. The film's haptic charge with the liveliness of carbon matter in a vibrant landscape feeds into an undercurrent of energy always impacting the frame, often more quiet and subliminal in its effect but occasionally overtly intense. J. Kameron Carter explicates the dynamism of such atmospheres in "Black Malpractice: A Poetics of the Sacred," writing:

"That malpracticed, atheological godlessness bespeaks an interior, collective aliveness constantly ready, expectantly poised for the unexpectant, the experience of the ek-static - to be moved, to be terrified, to love, to hate, to live magically, drunkenly, wanderously,

wonderously, erotically, joyously, childishly, prayerfully, in the radicality of a certain moving stillness, a certain quarreling, in/sovereign quiet” (74)

Dash’s cinematic lovesongs topple and disintegrate a hegemonic weaponized religiosity, splitting open the Eurocentric heteropatriarchy of monotheism, and gloriously sketching the anatomy of Carter’s “atheological godlessness,” a phrasing which exhibits the raw, ardent nature of the angels’ “interior, collective aliveness.” Carter’s listing of ways to “live magically, drunkenly, wanderously, wonderously, erotically, joyously, childishly, prayerfully” are odes to finding so much beauty in others and in ones haptic ecology, as all of *Praise House*’s characters in their differing habits seem to do.

## VII. Malleable film form with ample room to breathe

All respiring entities in the film’s diegetic terrain carry an open, buzzing life force allowing and intensifying the extolling of the southern habitat as fertile land for miracles and possibilities. *Praise House*’s steady attention to the body as a vessel for spiritual conduction intrinsically directs consideration to rhythms in corporeal functionings, specifically in breathing. With conscious attendance to how the actors and dancers respire in the setting’s ambient ecology, Dash’s cinematography attunes to breathing rhythms in the ethereal commons of its mise en scène as a divine act, where perpetual respiration is the inhalation of all lifeforces and the exhalation of expressive power. In his book *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi unfolds an activist theory of seeking ways out from the suffocating effects of capitalist mayhem, delivering a perspective of poetry as the excesses of representations crucial to more empathetic engagement between life forms. Berardi explains:

Organisms are composed of vibrant matter, and the pulsations of an individual organism enter into a rhythmic relation with the pulsations of other surrounding individual organisms. This biorhythmic conjunction of conscious and sensitive organisms is a vibrating relation: through it, individual organisms seek a common rhythm, a common emotional ground of understanding, and this quest is a sort of oscillation that results in a possible (or impossible) syntony (112)

All of the characters exemplify this concept of biorhythms, as Dash contemplates organisms as anatomies of vibrant matter in entangled relations to others who all “seek a common rhythm, a common emotional ground of understanding.” *Praise House* dramatizes Minnie Evans’ syntonic connection with her environment being responsive to the vibrating frequencies of organic matter and higher powers, depicting the cinematic nature of the artist’s intense reception. “Biorhythmic conjunction of conscious and sensitive organisms” means that all animate material is always being recycled and regenerated in the praise house ecology, where atmospheric registers modulate into a collective pulse of unity through resonance. Dash paces the film by the “rhythmic relation with the pulsations of other surrounding individual organisms,” finding the composition’s form and cadence of edit in the syntony. After Granny’s implied death when she speaks of the angels coming to bring her to a different realm, Hannah dances on cemetery grounds while her angel companions circle around and touch headstones. As everyone moves in ranges of communication with divine energies and deceased spirits, all beings appear greatly affected by the haptic charges filling the air in the burial sites. Zollar’s choreography emphasizes syntony with atmospheric oscillations as a type of emotional processing, realizing the human body as an acoustic gathering of lively matter which senses surrounding forces and reacts through movement. Expe-

riencing some convulsions and chaotic frequencies amidst the angels' tranquil gestures, Hannah in her social relation to the dancers discovers physical routes to breathe more freely. *Praise House* aligns eased respiration as symbolic of ones achieved inner peace.

#### VIII. Otherworldly diegesis and camera behavior

The vivid externality of Hannah's fantastical inner world directly parallels the ruptured, porous diegesis barely containable by audiovisuality, far more alluded to than comprehensively portrayed. Beyond the tricky illusions of edenic or idyllic categorization, Hannah, Granny, and the angels reside in unbroken comfort with each other. Dash devises a prototypical image of a compassionate, gorgeous, and inhabitable other world in her *mise en scène*. The recurrent mist of outdoor temples, the soothing vapor of internal rooms, and the glinting steam of city streets relays a metaphysical ambience. Trance synchronicity quietly lulls in the murky rhythmic of sonic superimpositions and spiritual overdubbings, notably in the frequent arrival of lilting guitar strums and the angel choir singing about visions, colors, and dreams. Throughout his tone poem, *Now that the audience is assembled*, David Grubbs demonstrates a musicality of how matter regenerates anew in interaction: "The audience leans in to track inflections and entanglements. A blind spot whistles my name. Both parties emerge altered from each skirmish declared or not, each slackening of the gravitational field like *so* and with every near-miss the odds further incline towards fillings loosened" (70). Grubbs' prose speaks to a visceral life force always broadcasting through and residing between ozone and firmament, a "slackening of the gravitational field." Hannah repeatedly casts sidelong glances at her grandmother, seemingly musing on the felt material residue each body comes into contact with. *Praise House* is a distinctly impactful

ode to youthful curiosity slightly altered as matured observational fervor. “Every near-miss” with unconventional cinematography and dancerly camera movement is a unique delight whose echoes, shadows, ripples, and charges join into the body of the film.

*Praise House's* camera movement strengthens the narrative's focus on the aesthetics of gathering, where beings congregate or loosely assemble to perform the textures of transcendence. Remarkably cognizant of audiences' longing for spiritual gratification on screen, Julie Dash and cinematographer Arthur Jafa utilize the camera as a dancerly apparatus, paralleling Zollar's choreography which exhibits the mobilizing registers of Black feminist study. Dash delivers a survival text for collective escape from systems of regulation in her charting of individuals finding harmony with the ambient frequencies of a southern rural ecology. The social activity of a praise house is inherently experimental in its aesthetics grounding a fluid temporality, as George-Graves details how “southern black Pentecostal praise houses are often the loci of very charged worship” (Urban Bush Women 73). As the praise house energy visually condensed in Hannah's home permeates into her environment, it reacts with the angels' dancing bodies and they respond through guiding Hannah into realms for more invigorating existence. Throughout the whole film, the camera aligns with the performers physical frequencies of ecstasy and quietude to function as the locus “of very charged worship.” Dash and Jafa expand the camera's common actions in mainstream and much alternative film as a mechanical configuration into a more dynamic object which communicates the textures of worship and common praise across audiovisual presentations. In the establishing shots of Hannah's family home, the camera pans across the sky and slowly tracks down to her drawing on top of the grass, imparting a floating feeling deeply connected to the natural soundscape. Next, the shot cuts to a closeup of Hannah's hands, her whole



body visibly affected by atmospheric potency as she shakes. As the scene transitions into Hannah's house, the camera movement is gentle and unobtrusive, showing dancers spinning with their tulle skirts drifting through the air in slow motion. Angels leap around the frame and their delicate fabrics hover with them, all seemingly suspended as the camera remains relatively fixed.

The film's climactic culmination is an assembly of attuned beings performing haptic intensity and colliding in a rapturous yet peaceful musicality of spirits, selves, and past lives. Sprung into worship with a heady layering of angels callings for Hannah, the tempo and vigor slowly amplify, and the women dance through displacing the golden light which bathes the surfaces and transforms the domestic space of a kitchen into an ecstatic zone. Hannah with her friends and angelic guardians enact a style of experiencing selfhood in the fullness of collectivity, where the boundaries of ones sovereign body come into intimate contact with other spirits. Fully motivated by the dancers' motion patterns, the camera traces their silhouettes, ensuring to allow ample breathing room and seeming to notice the enormous amounts of magnetism both quickening and grounding the environment's shuddering pulse. Awash with an amber luminosity, the text begins to wind down, evoking the sensation of physical fatigue with an afterglow spilling into the room. As the speed of movement accelerates, the camera begins to dance more around the performers, then locks into a dreamlike haze which emulates the intense haptic charges in its lethargic pace. Becoming increasingly still, the filming apparatus shifts emphasis from the tangible textures of collective experiences in praise house aesthetics to the atmospheric density charging the space. During the last minute of the film, the grandmother's voiceover proclaims, "And that beautiful spirit told me this light that you see now shall shine around all of you, always. I have dreamed many dreams I have not wrote down. I did not paint them, for I

keep some little thing for myself for what I know would send some people backwards. Draw! Draw or die, draw, draw or die. Draw... or die!” These final moments are temporally suspended through the use of rich overlays, the shots fading into each other in warm, enveloping light. Narrating her memory of this light that “shall shine around all of you, always” Hannah’s guardian figure speaks to the elevating qualities of illumination being a healing force which encircles Hannah in her orbit towards inner peace. *Praise House* spans polyphonic registers in its dispersed worship energy, carving a mercurial territory for exaltation documented into an audiovisual entity. Dash paces the final sequence to the measure of meditation and hypnosis to convey a feeling of comfort in exhaustion.



Fig. 3, Hannah in the hazy light at the end, Dash, Julie, director. *Praise House*. Women Make Movies, 1991, <https://vimeo.com/321360452>.

#### IX. Choreographic Broadcast in film

In this haptic text, the actors’ fluid and self-realizing choreographies bust open the rigid logic of diegesis and indulge in more deeply ecological, liberatory realms of experimentation. Broadcasting dance and boundless motion into the film frame, Dash’s dancer angels are philosophers of a movement carrying the rhythms and sounds of transmigratory entities held in the envi-

ronmental suspensions of rural grounds. In *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, religious studies and African American studies scholar Ashon Crawley theorizes the particulars of “otherwise worlds” in their sonic, performative, social, and visual manifestations. Crawley describes manners of movement: “The geometric circle, the spatializing loci of such dance, lays bare the ways in which centrifugitivity is the desire for spontaneous, spirited dispersal of love, life, after the point of possibility, when possibility has been fully realized and exasperated” (104). This “centrifugitivity” is a displacing of a singular focal point, looking deeper into the broadcasts of ritual energies reverberating in harmony. The writer reflects on theological and spiritual practices as sites where epistemology begins to take shape. “Spontaneous, spirited dispersal of love, life” emits from the dancers and bounces around *Praise House’s* haptic ecology. In their caring attendance to the film’s figures, Dash and Jafa’s camera lets individuals enter the frame to see how they occupy the image free from traditional impositions. At once completely present and dreamily adrift, Hannah devotedly embodies an expanded selfhood in communality crucial to Dash’s worldmaking, where all of the assembled beings are scholars of a special type of ritual study. Enshrouded in gauzy fabric, the angels are theatrical conduits and metaphysical cartographers. Through the duration of the film, sound operates to constantly undergird and calibrate the visual, breathing gradations of worship and the subtleties of resignification in the scenery. In *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandrulekha* by Ananya Chatterjea writes

The call-and-response modality takes on rich overtones as the angels, beginning at different times and at different points in the song, begin to sing of the approaching night and darkness. Each group of angels moves in its own time and with its own movement

phrase, as some develop the song to its conclusion and others pick up a refrain along the way and layer the breath pauses of the entire song with their echoings (64)

The multitudes of the inhabitants' smiling, flung glances gathering and immediately dissolving in the living quarters awakened as a praise house epitomize an alternative theory of accumulation and thus a radical restyling of composition. This vivid mode of sonic layering with chants and echoes is a type of aural topography deepening the meaning of *Praise House's* haptic topography. Whirring ambience is submerged into the frame and matrilineal connectivity reverberates as dense, staggered, corporeal syncopations. Group respiration composes a sonic fabric where the angels, mortals, and healers are unified through immersion in the rich audiovisual terrain.

### Chapter 3: Elemental Overdrive and Ritual Energy: Reading Atmospheres of Gathering in

#### *Dream City and Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*

“We chose a rule of staggered missives. We committed to the non-exclusion of birds. Our model for remote intimacy and ritual is [redacted]. This is our near miss. Communication and mystery folded in the arms of our best regards, our beautifully imagined children, our lovers. Quickly we began to miss one another since we were meant for one another, cornered by one another in an off square, a failed cube and plaza, for circling inside. Our state of grace is a *missive bouquet*, a sound tree in every shade of green, which you are welcome to overhear and [redacted]” (Who Touched Me? Fred Moten and Wu Tsang 7)

#### I. Introduction

Ulysses Jenkins’s *Dream City* (1981) and Barbara McCullough’s *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1979) are audiovisual unfoldings of ether and plenum’s vestibular melodics, glistening universes whose agents caper in celebration of unquantifiable matter. These pieces and their compositions are polyphonic forages through an augmented theory of narrative architecture, where the hypnotic fullness of plenum houses limitless lifetimes of love, ritual, and undoing. Formatted to stay fluidly temporal in edited structure, the poetics of the films’ entelechies commune in the alchemy of enacted ceremonies as study. Jenkins and McCullough exist as authors of plenum’s self-engulfing habits presenting cinematic scriptures in devotion to wild, unscalable flows of performative material often deemed excess. While Julie Dash’s *Praise House* is more a text on energies circulating in churchly commons, *Dream City and Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* perform, broadcast, and visualize the rupture of normative ideologies that establish formal notions

of the world. In their envisionings of more accepting, understanding, and breathable earth realms, Barbara McCullough and Ulysses Jenkins emulate the L.A. Rebellion's ethos sympathizing with global liberation movements. These waves of political surges against nationalist and colonial forces immortalize a determination to never be complacent with one's conditions, and both *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* embody drives to always be theorizing and creating towards more inhabitable worlds. Allusions to breakdowns in relations and incendiary moments of revolt in historical instances such as the 1965 Watts Riots mark the audiovisual entities as ecologically abject palimpsests, meaning that their viscous presentations fantastically muddy lucid interpretation. The community of Los Angeles artists, performers, musicians, and writers inhabiting both pieces are sculptors of the primordial material of earth, imbibing spiritual vapors in the quickening ether of epistemic messiness, or the mess of epistemology that defines cinema conventions. Jenkins documents and edits to the pace of universal entanglement and McCullough to the pulse of empathetic observation, their films living in an improvisatory, rippling conversation extending the L.A. Rebellion's radical poetics and attitudes.

## II. Agile spectatorship

Reading *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* as eternal performances and adorned documentations marked in time requires an individual's attendance to the material in what I will refer to as a prismatic spectatorship. This conceptual lens of viewing places importance on how frames and aural registers catch light in surprising, nuanced manners and arouse sporadic observations in fields of dynamic matter. At once crystalline and reactive,

this spectatorship is a sort of mimesis of the two pieces' alluring intricacy of form. Beams of light often appear dispersed in the frames with the visible spectrum of illuminations manifesting through the density of the film stock or video recording as a prism's optical body. Viewership is inherently composite of experiences and audiovisual memories which react and catalyze realizations in ones inner subjective space. Being multimedia arrangements captivated by human connectivity with haptic resonance, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* understand the body as an intuitive architecture which processes the world as experimental, fluidly temporal media through ocular and aural receptors. Welcoming a prismatic spectatorship that more closely parallels the work's atmospheric vibrancy better services Jenkins and McCullough's audiovisual forms and allows for richer explication in study. *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*' temporalities, spatialities, and geographies are always altering any semblance of stasis, meaning a viewing position must be responsive and agile, as a prism epitomizes perpetual revelation. In latent contemplation and study of the two videos which refuse compositional closure, one may envision memories of the material in analysis as rising from the audiovisual entities, where narrative assertions are found and felt in being intensely present and visceral, yet fleeting. Investing in the blurred distortions and treatments of video and in the blurriness of recollection as a type of transient interiority of cinema's potential illustrates the morphing disposition of internal impressions after viewing. In *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten tells us: "I'm sorry if this is all a blur. I'm so used to my own astigmatism that maybe I can't even talk to anybody anymore... I think I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing, which makes me wonder if I'm seeing what I think. Hopefully, it'll all be all good, in a minute, when I can stop talking to you and start talking with you. Maybe we can go on a whole other listening

walk” (261). McCullough and Jenkins’ projects strongly center around this emotional enigma of believing in a certain communication of images while confronting issues and conditions of sight. Moten’s words act as a lyric on Black experimental films: polyphonic entities perform subversions of surveillance, confinements, and signifiers from positions and flights of fugitive becoming. Reading and knowing from a position of blur is how audiences get visually and sonically immersed in the chromatic video effects and avant-garde jazz rustlings as sites of knowledge that are ether and plenum’s vestibular melodics. In the coming pages, I will step into discussions of ether and plenum as expressions of infinitude which are greatly useful for delving into the activities of Black experimental film. Noticing shapes and operations of blur fashions a more perceptive viewer en route towards approaching *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* as transports to balancing worldmakings. Gradually observing what comes into focus, and how matter moves as hazy, faded, and obscured evocations, the individual’s versatile viewership honors the positioned blur and attunes to how Jenkins and McCullough’s works communicate potently through visceral channels of broadcast.

### III. Ventures into Atmospheres

The atmospheres of broadcast need a metaphysical sphere of study that exists as both microcosmic and macrocosmic in relation to experimental film’s affective orientations. Understanding the video works as emerging from and residing in plenum and ether focuses more accurate and fulfilling ways to approach the atmospherics in the L.A. Rebellion’s everlasting influence on contemporary artists and culture, a type of luminance. With their varying densities, charges, and glows, fluctuating substances of plenum and ether are always dissenting against any



notion of closure and gesturing to their metaphysics as the minute yet vast particularities of haptic interaction. In his article “The Quantum Plenum: *The Hidden Key to Life, Energetics and Sentience*,” theoretical physicist Mark Comings proclaims “It seems to me a very simple and elegant yet profound conceptual leap to conceive that this inner light is actually higher dimensional light and has a physics to it which can be elucidated mathematically” (7). In a similar manner, it appears that the atmosphere and permeating, recirculating energy of the L.A. Rebellion and some of its more peripheral works hold certain acoustics that are favored specifically by alignment with plenum and ether. Observing and drawing conclusions on *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* in this thesis as artworks which make “profound conceptual leaps” through subtle and cacophonous messages guides spectatorship into a more far-reaching space for reflection. Such haptic entanglement between performers like Maren Hassinger, David Hammons and Senga Nengudi enacting ceremony in public installations and ritual are demonstrations of the material for McCullough and Jenkins’ videos that reify togetherness as that which is “higher dimensional light and has a physics to it” (The Quantum Plenum 7). Reading along Comings’ musings, blurry elucidation occurs in wonderment of the enigmatic texts by considering them and their elemental byproducts shown in light as spiritual vehicles, psychic transports for a ritual that never fully ends, just reverberates and shifts presentation. This thesis uses an experimental framework for analytical comprehension of multimedia haptic portraits.

Moving in sacred orbits of plenum space, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* are and temperamentally inhabit vaporous materialities that disembodied temporality, diegesis, and narrative to bathe in visceral legibility. A visceral legibility from blur, quantum physics knows plenum as the immensely potent essence of all emotion, energy, and charge

that brilliantly suspends the contents of all lifetimes in its consciousness. Appreciating and honoring the body as a vessel of endless knowledge production, Jenkins and McCullough's filmmaking strategize methods of exhibiting the infinitesimal electric spirit of ritual and performance that often slips away from archived memory without documentation. Routinely mistaken as nothingness, void, or vacuum, plenum is polymorphous and impossible fullness, the fullness of all earthly and celestial possibility. I employ plenum and ether as universal fabrics which offer broad prospects for interdisciplinary and textural thought. Mark Comings wanders through scientific conundrums and theorizes towards a quickening horizon to ponder the massive complexities of life energetics and to forward enlightening elaborations on plenum. The physicist states: "It appears that the fundamental nature of so-called empty space is enormously energetic," (5) "radiant," and of "extreme energy density" (6). Comings' radical stirrings and questionings on the essence of lifeforces as an individual unraveling the accepted security of form exists in full parallelism with McCullough and Jenkins' focuses on the infinite paths of creation in cinema, and of ritual objects as ancestral connectors with qualities that allude contained articulation. The L.A. Rebellion is certainly a phenomenon of high energy density that electrified the city's multiracial coalitions of the 1960s, where innovation with materiality, interrogation of media history as accumulations of copious identificatory detriment, and insistence on destabilizing outside/inside or interior/exterior positions for reflection proliferated and continued as inexhaustible discourses today. The alluring irony of plenum being ubiquitous, wild, and dense yet deemed empty nothingness illuminates a poetics of quietude and subliminal intensity where all the metaphysical activity is eternally engaged yet critically dismissed.

Metaphysical, ethereal gatherings and plenum texts, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* are cinemas of their own boundless feelable constitution, where mise en scène, cinematography, and editing are all swimming in ever-deepening psyches. Fundamentally fluid and untethered yet emotionally charged with ancestral customs extolled in ritual art assemblages largely of the 1970s and 1980s, these psyches beckon to the material and haptics heard, seen, and felt resonating in the magnitude of cosmic creation. All unrecorded and uncapturable conversations between L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, slightly more marginal video artists, and their contemporaries are absorbed back into the rambunctious atmospherics visible on screen in both pieces. Corporeally affecting the spectator, no material exchange is fully lost in the energetic circulations that become a cinematic composition. Rather, matter is repurposed in video space's augmented sense of architecture to saturate and revise the worldmakings. This chapter progresses as stagings of conversations between *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* and *Dream City*, with curious cognizance in spectatorship to perceiving the metaphysical frequencies of the videos riffing off ideas posed by each other and listening to their reactions. In Fred Moten and Wu Tsang's poetics of distanced communication "Who Touched Me?," theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva puts forward: "Let me consider a possibility: What if, instead of The Ordered World, we could image The World as a Plenum, an infinite composition in which each existent's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existents, with which it is entangled beyond space and time" (42). Ferreira da Silva's airing of "The World as a Plenum" has audiovisual manifestations as diegeses of robust worldmakings. McCullough and Jenkins tap this power of expanded diegesis to orchestrate fused images and sounds which suspend simple signification, as they search for the nuance in gradations between meanings.

Both artists portray formulated yet improvisational plenum spheres for their performers and characters to study ritual action and its effects on each other in replenishing empathy. As absolutely eternal matter without cemented structural formulation, the influences of *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* carry charges of conductivity through video planes to outward pockets of analysis.

Being plenum and ether gatherings, Jenkins and McCulloughs' filmic entities are solvents of psychic and cultural sediment, channeling myriad emotional registers of representation and identification that become more raw and resonant with temporal erosion. Ritual celebrations of incomputable matter or of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of "unscalable" materiality, these ether and plenum films resist pure diegetic determination in their shrines to what settles in the atmosphere and what slowly breaks down from monuments, ruins, and insurrections. Curator Naima J. Keith's article "Rebellion and Its Aftermath: Assemblage and Film in L.A. and London" from the catalogue *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* expresses that, "As John Outterbridge noted, 'What is available to you is not mere material but the material and the essence of the political climate, the material in the debris of social issues. At times even the trauma within the community becomes the debris that artists manipulate and that manipulates the sensibility of artists'" (2). The soul of all shots, scenes, and conversations not physically included in Jenkins's and McCullough's final configurations haptically subsist in the imaginative ethos of a final product. All this is always cycling in the plenum and ether of the video works: L.A. Rebellion students' inspiration from Third Cinema revolutions, McCullough's endeavor to shoot footage of Senga Nengudi's installation and performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* though

technical issues prevented its fruition (Stillman 3), and ongoing conversations between Ulysses Jenkins and David Hammons at studio visits.

Practices of conceptualizing metaphysical aesthetics and affects, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* carry and constantly overturn sacred matter in their essences to study the haptic dynamism of loose detritus, rubble, and fragments as artistic fuel and generative impurities. *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* begins with a segment of McCullough's earlier project *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979) shot on 16mm black-and-white film, "a landmark of Black and feminist experimental filmmaking" (Stewart *Shopping Bag Spirits* 1). Composed of footage from L.A.'s Watts neighborhood, the clip features performer Yolanda Vidato conducting symbolic, spontaneous ceremonial actions in a reclaimed realm. Crafting a dreamscape and illuminating the immanent surrealism in the site of abandonment, "McCullough suggests that sites of urban blight can be activated as consecrated ground" (Stewart *Water Ritual #1* 1). Sounds of chirping crickets weave together with jazz trumpeter Don Cherry's track "Chenrezig," the audio landscape lush and reverberatory as an absorptive sonic gauze with Hakim Jamil's bass driving under Cherry's humming incantations. A low echoing metallic rumble of Cherry's ensemble scores Milanda, Vidato's character diegetically dislocated or located in disorientation while passing through the deteriorating frames of shelter. The video effects' violet, emerald, golden, and cobalt hues materialize hypersaturated gestures swimming in the totality of vaporous ether and turbid plenum. A medium shot of Milanda on the ground among a collection of sanctified objects cuts to a panning shot of rock arcs, tracking to her feet and hands grinding material for the ritual and blowing it outward. Mixing the fine, dusty substance and dispersing it into the atmosphere of ceremony, Vidato's performances

in charging ritual objects through energizing the kinetic potential of the decomposing infrastructure now wild with weeds amplifies her spiritual connectivity. Set in a space originally intended for construction of the I-105 freeway though forsaken and neglected by the city, this inflected ecology of structural desertion is hugely full of eroding and broadcasting energy from the sediment of memory and community. In a liminal zone activated and sparked as ritual grounds, Milanda appears alone, though the rich aural accompaniment signals to the video as composite interrelations between organic and fabricated material in plenum and ether, blurring any absolute distinction between human and nonhuman sovereignty. *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*' first scene repurposed from McCullough's younger work visualizes prismatic tones of sediment as concentrated, weathered substance and works to explore ritual's inner worlds that pass into public suspension.



Fig. 4, Milanda amongst ceremonial matter, McCullough, Barbara, director. *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*. Barbara McCullough, 1981, <https://vimeo.com/7777082>.

*Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* live as experimental atmospheres of sublimation, where the figures in the video are in ideological whirlpools evoked as dreamscapes, always modulating between tones of ecstasy, precarity, and synchronicity. Imbibing potent frequencies in the ether and plenum, McCullough and Jenkins' collaborators are constantly diffusing their own inventive registers into matter with no pure differentiation from themselves, engaging with haptic entanglements as occupants in collective respiration. As Comings' puts it, "This infinite potential and radiance is continuous with who and what we are" (12). Through their attuned performances and dialogues, artists such as Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, and David Hammons embody how humans are anatomical instruments or assemblages of plenum, the flesh behaving as the permeable boundary between the corporeal unit and the cycling immensity of all extant substances. Forever creating and reacting in the fusion of illusory yet temporalized environments, the visionaries immerse in their contemporary John Outterbridge's address of "material and the essence of the political climate, the material in the debris of social issues" (Keith 2) concocting their vespers of floating particles as suspended togetherness to decompose dormant notions of ontology. Comings charts a metaphysical perspective of sublimation, the immediate transition of matter from solid to gas which bypasses the liquid stage, becoming an aesthetics with Jenkins and McCullough. In his consideration of light's vestibular characteristics, Comings notes: "These so-called vacuum photons or virtual photons are spontaneously arising and then being re-absorbed back into the quantum plenum extremely rapidly" (8). There is striking parallelism between behaviors of vacuum photons in this quantum theory and activities of particles rising from sediment and detritus in *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*, charging the image. Both units of haptic matter texture and

dissipate into the atmosphere and are immediately aired into the video recordings, making both films truly experiential texts. Meaning and particular clarity are suspended, as both pieces value the rawness of visual noise before readable music, or of messy speculations before articulated conclusions. Through my analysis of *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes*, I maintain an insistence on studying material perhaps regarded as abstract or as excess.

Learning from McCullough and Jenkins's investigations of ritual and performance as both vast and specific sites of theory, this project chooses to sit with the abundance of signified potentials in discourse. McCullough's video includes a voiceover of Nengudi describing Ceremony for Freeway Fets' inception joined by a montage of still photographs from the performance. As the artist mentions the dirt under the overpass on top of which her contemporaries enacted ritual study, clips and images of preparation for the commingling of spirits portray dynamic togetherness in action on the day of the installation. While the filmed artists dance and kick up dirt from the ground, parts of performance in the ambience of knowledge production fossilize into earthworks or sculptures while other traces continue crumbling, releasing dust which amasses into hazy light. The appearances of fuzz and vapor in light indicate the phenomenon of everything always being recycled and regenerated in the clutch of atmosphere. In editing scenes of movement, McCullough sees the textured light in the frames as visible poetics of spiritual catharsis which ritual seeks to reach.

#### IV. Assemblage form

*Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* are textural assemblages, functioning on various discreet yet energetically potent levels as speculative divinations in the



midst of plenum and ether. Assemblages as divinations temporalize moments of energy density, being crystallizations of haptic concentration into something to commune and think around.

McCullough and Jenkins's assemblage video works are decompositional poetics of plenum and ether, where organic, sourced, and recorded elements are fused together in dreamscapes eternally transforming in their metaphysical reverberations. Curiously hyperactive yet routinely unsensed by surveillance in public space, assemblages operate in video as mobilized cinemas that simulate experimental film's intuitions as structural shrines, ones that acknowledges their own inevitable chemical alteration with time's passage and garner excitement in the metamorphosis. Nick Stillman contemplates the transcendent happenings in 1960s Watts as a creative nucleus in his article "Senga Nengudi's 'Ceremony for Freeway Fets' and Other Los Angeles Collaborations," writing "For Purifoy and other Watts-based artists who collected multiple tons of rubble from the razed neighborhood, the riots politicized their form of junk assemblage sculpture and make it necessary to consider how the Watts Riots functioned as an *aesthetic* event. Junk assemblage was inexpensive to make and suddenly laced with local significance" (2). In their resourcefulness, assemblage artists like Noah Purifoy, Barbara McCullough, and Ulysses Jenkins behave as prophetic sculptors of rubble and earth material, bearing witness to its charm and grit and extending its audience through film. All that gets absorbed in the creators' environments are aesthetic nutrients for composition, simultaneously molecularly ecstatic and pulsating on metaphysical frequencies that inform the emotional charge of gestural and haptic encounter. As Purifoy's "junk assemblage sculptures" cultivate the blasted remnants of a type of dehiscence being the explosive rupture of accumulation in: lethal race relations, police brutality and government corruption, the clustered material from which they draw has neither positive nor negative net charge,

but rather is “sacred” as J. Kameron Carter posits throughout “Black Malpractice (A Poetics of the Sacred).” Carter details a thinking of the sacred as a means for sensing blackness’ gestures to worlds of existence against normative systems of restraint. *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* as textural assemblages perform detritus and sediment, displaying filmic realms in material aggregations of insurgent, combusive chaos emphasizing the intrinsic brokenness of “The Ordered World” (Who Touched Me? 42). Rising from affective visualizations and surfacings of multifaceted subjectivities, the interior nature of assemblage is at once vaporous and stabilizing, an energetic composition that is always changing to reach elucidations en route towards the quickening horizon.

Engulfed as self-referential figures in textures of assemblage through their video modes, Ulysses Jenkins and Barbara McCullough are fluidly situated in the plenum and ether of the transpiring art forms in emotive phases of becoming. In their various crafts as directors, cinematographers, musicians, visual effects artists, performance artists, and editors, and through their multiple modalities of alchemy, the two filmmakers are cultivators of wild, unruly matter and philosophers of assemblage’s purpose and utility. Orbiting each other and their universes of suggestion materialized in visuals and soundscapes, McCullough and Jenkins flow through atmospheric dialogues as contemporaries and collaborators. In her piece “The L.A. Rebellion Plays Itself” from the book *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart describes the functionings of the companion artists: “their visual and sonic presence is frequently characterized by oblique portrayals and destabilizing gestures. Our glimpses of the makers are brief, partial, and/or unexpected; we hear but do not see them (or vice versa); they do not speak directly into the camera; they play fictional roles; they offer themselves as vehicles for telling

other people's stories" (257). In their ritual practices as presenting impressions of inner sensitivity and outward finesse in fluctuating means of conveyance, McCullough in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* and Jenkins in *Dream City* exhibit visceral intimacies as essential to composing from performances. Foraging for assemblage items is a "listening walk," (Black and Blur 261) tracing from Moten's words, where the acts of observing in watching, hearing in ambling, and internalizing in absorbing are all occurring in the liveliness of liminal and abandoned realms.

Jenkins is repeatedly physically present in *Dream City* as a type of messenger, and towards the conclusion he delivers a short monologue: "The lawnmower's coming! The parade is rosy! Real estate carries psychological equity that will be paid and when that truth has come it will expose investments and stockholders. A griot's video, this griot's riot." Returning back to Jenkins every few moments, the sequence cuts to: an individual in a nightgown pushing a lawnmower down a corridor, a figure in angelic costuming stretching their extended arms standing on a traffic island with a Jesus Saves sign in the background, an oil pump jack in front of rocky hills, a conference room with a large table and television, and a screen of information from "US/Canada Money Markets." In his exposing of American psychic fractures through nuancing iconography with comic inflections, Jenkins' "oblique portrayals and destabilizing gestures" (Stewart L.A. Rebellion 257) emphasize divergence from state allegiance as a simultaneous assertion of terraforming other desired worlds where untroubled respiration is foundational. McCullough shows up at the start of *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* to describe her guiding intentions after the segment from *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification*. The L.A. Rebellion filmmaker is also the accompanying speaker during interviews with artists

and poets and she appears in person again towards the end in a conversation with Betye Saar, a trailblazer who clearly inspires the young creative. McCullough's omnipresence yet infrequent onscreen appearance through *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* speaks to the L.A. Rebellion's central teachings of always questioning conceptual boundaries and the infinity energies beyond order. Always acting on ritual is a process of bringing elements from environments into performance, and both *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* epitomize efforts of terraforming the documentation into audiovisual imaginings.

#### V. Radical cinema structures

*Dream City* is a holographic body transmitting choreographed notes on an augmented theory of architecture, illustrating the enfolded courses of experienced, haptic earths which bleed into each other and sustain a loose temporality. Jenkins's text is an education on the metaphysics of world-becoming, where the oozing inner contents of portals, black holes, and echo chambers circulate in rowdy motion, simultaneously nourishing organisms with visceral intensity and complicating systems with vast implications. Within her essay "In the Raw," Denise Ferreira da Silva writes: "Blacklight, or ultraviolet radiation, works *through* that which it makes shine: for example, it has the capacity to transform at the DNA level, that is, it reprograms the code in the living thing exposed to it, and causes mayhem in their self-reproductive capacity at the cellular level" (4). In its flow into interaction with oppressive grammars of societal reason, blacklight as an elemental medium confuses magnetic poles of binary judgment and messes up measuring instruments beyond repair. Compasses for navigation become uncalibrated, metronomes for precise time are broken from regularity, and cartographic tools for surveying scale are found useless.

Noxious epistemology and ideology constructed with fundamental mechanisms of Western colonialism over spatial, sonic, and territorial grounds are rendered defunct in their applications towards comprehending the affective gesturings and fluid theorizations of Jenkins's work. As cinematography is the orchestration of light to capture images, *Dream City's* total experimentation with the film form necessitates a radiant shift in analyzing image recording to apprehend how illumination is nuanced in audiovisuals of Black studies.

Steeped in whimsy yet magnetically guided by a sort of omniscient hum, *Dream City* slyly disobeys structural rhetoric that refuses to engage in study of mystifying earth matter, instead channeling all energy towards worship of performance's atmospheric registers. At the head of the film, a giant door loudly creaks open revealing a corridor leading to a staircase with the phrase "Dream City: In the time it takes to show change it's happened!" superimposed onto the image. Rumbling, anticipatory drumming colors the soundscape as the shot is painted awash with syrupy black visual substance, initially tinging patches of the threshold electric green then fully pooling and dissolving into a totally dark liquidity. In teasing the spectator on the brink of spatial entrance with immediate transport to a scene of undisclosed firmament, *Dream City* writes into the blacking out of diegesis, savoring something both sweet and brutal in the clouding of consciousness. Immediately, subjective and spectatorial entrance is abstracted and engagement with the onscreen matter takes a suspended position as the blurry spatiality of plenum. *Dream City's* establishing shots play with the viewer's probable desire for diegetic footing, lifting up a quick grasp of the story to think through multimedia documentation in degrees of confusion. Jenkins's experimental theory is shaped as blacklight's versatility- an interiority swallowing its own exteriority and releasing a metabolized mix of haptic matter presented in varying

tones. Teachings and expressions surface from the blacked out screen, especially if one interprets the darkened frames as spot for cosmic speculation to come to light in their prismatic spectatorship. In Jenkins's worlds, energy does not calcify and harden into meaning instantly but rather stays loose and constantly effluxes in the solvent of a capricious subjectivity, as the filmmaker refuses an easily placeable authorial voice.

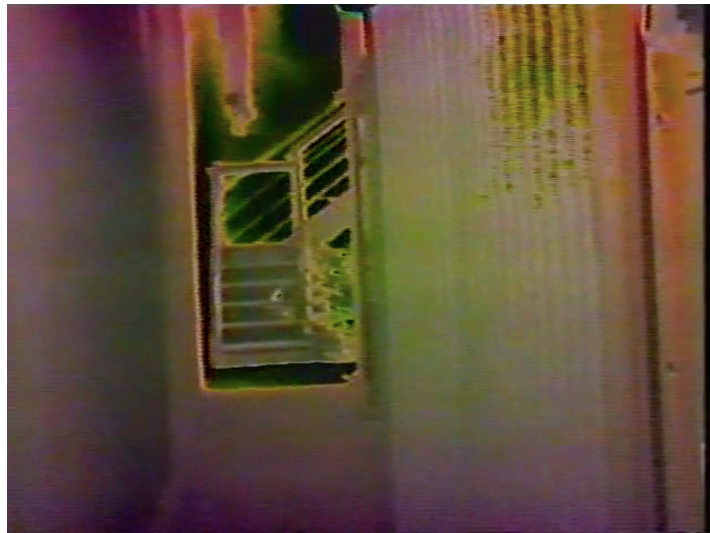


Fig. 5, Opening door with saturated effects, Jenkins, Ulysses, director. *Dream City.*, 1981, <https://vimeo.com/13690408>.

*Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* are churning philosophies of narrative fluidity and ecstatic experimentation, asserting modes of diegesis that rebel against the notion of adherence to a singular filmic universe. Beyond the summation of all irreducible energetic origins and into an unmoored territory of both frenetic and lulling wonderment, Jenkins's and McCullough's plenum texts theorize in the occupation of evacuated space, a residence of phantasmic and revisiting histories. Sanctified in their ritual studies, evacuated spaces like the underpass in Senga Nengudi's "Ceremony for Freeway Fets" gain recognition as a sublime lo-

cale for devotional exploration. With internal and external sonic sources consumed and often undifferentiated in the uncontrollable behavior of plenum, the act of dividing diegetic and non-diegetic sounds in *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* is inevitably futile. Rather, focusing on exhaustive breaks with syntax is paramount in attending to the films' measureless nuances. Here I will read the videos in conversation with questions posed by media scholar Michael Boyce Gillespie. In his book *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, Gillespie travels through the medium's innumerable beacons of potential, asking: "What if black film could be something other than embodied? What if black film was immaterial and bodiless? What if black film could be speculative or just ambivalent? What if film is ultimately the worst window imaginable and an even poorer mirror? What if black film is art or creative interpretation and not merely the visual transcription of the black lifeworld?" (5). Gillespie's questions open up cinematic discourse on blackness and ontology to pose exciting possibilities which come to light in an intertextual relationship between Black studies and Film studies. "By worst window imaginable and an even poorer mirror," the author references much of mainstream film's brutal history in subjugating people or color and of offering disastrous sites of identification. Visiting or residing in Gillespie's cyclings through "immaterial, bodiless, speculative, and ambivalent" frequencies, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* exist and then return to the viewer in states of response, repeating and recycling the transience of post-viewing emergence in daily realms.

Epitomizing the bodiless space of plenum where everything is always conceivably occurring or on the precipice of arrival, a section in *Dream City* is marked by a disembodied voice declaring: "In the time it takes to show change, it's happened and all those years it's taken it might

get mistaken as any other illusion. Dream city, dream. Dream, it seems. We wanted a hero. We wanted a scenario and all you did was a real bad variety show. Nothing with guts, nothing with soul...” Entering the audio mix over a manipulated still of a cityscape tinted with fluctuating purple and magenta, the voice gains association with a performer after a medium shot of Jenkins walking into frame unclothed carrying a box, placing it down and stooping over to handle its contents. Cutting to the individual delivering the monologue reveals the tricky stability of the presumed floating voiceover, as the speaker has appeared in three fragments prior to this grounding moment. A shot of a revolving psychedelic carousel follows, later returning to a medium close up profile of the orator whose cheeks are tinged with dynamic patches of vivid green, the matter displaying the film’s liquid state of representation. Mark Comings elucidates various intricacies of metaphysical behavior again in “The Quantum Plenum: *The Hidden Key to Life, Energetics and Sentience*,” asserting, “When we come to understand that space is a highly potentialized energetic medium shining with vast luminous force and shimmering with intrinsic sentience, this certainly engenders a completely different sense of what underlies our physical organism” (12). I believe that Jenkins and McCullough’s compositions show that one could substitute the word “film” for “space” in Comings’s sentence, and catch a glimpse of the magic of cinematic production which sits with abstraction and charts an expanse for vulnerable study. Together, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* illustrate the plenum’s suspended materiality depicting how metaphysical being is the omnipresence of all positions and forms of knowledge production that live as the performers’ interiorities absorbed from the environment and then externalized as expression. Comings’s writings on “a completely different sense of what underlies our physical organism” (12) is especially exemplified in Jenkins’s work



portraying the rawness and the fleshy nature of spiritual metabolization. Jenkins and McCullough honor space as “highly potentiated energetic mediums” (12) in their sites of recording, documenting, and preserving to communicate how no image is sovereign from its infinity of meanings, implications, and reverberations in mobile points discovered in plenum.



Fig. 6, Narrator with ensemble, Jenkins, Ulysses, director. *Dream City*, 1981, <https://vimeo.com/13690408>.

## VI. Painterly manipulations of cinematography

*Dream City*'s mise en scène is in the undersurface of touch, relation, suggestion, proposition, and reception as plenum, being flung worship and love always arising and disintegrating in auras of luminance, fade, and afterglow. This ancient and immortal activity informing the film's arrangement and design feeds the piece's fashioning, where performers, lightings, settings, and adornments are all interacting in emotional and vibrant animation. Regarding experimental film traditions and aesthetics of nonlinear temporalities, destabilized significations, transgressive rhythms, and disorienting relations of sound and image, *Dream City* lives in and as the visually

abject material of these ruptures from cinematic convention. Jenkins's language for articulation is through a practice of forever expansive cinema, so dehiscence is the bursting event of classical film and societal codes of reason, their diffusing substance intermingling with the sediment of weathering buildings and decaying relations. Rebecca Peabody's overview in "African American Avant-Gardes, 1965-1990" explains some specifics of *Dream City's* beginnings:

Every two hours an artist or group took the stage for fifteen minutes; each performance was videotaped, and the recordings were then screened during the hour and forty-five minutes that elapsed before the next performance. As audiences changed throughout the day, so too did the meanings that emerged from the increasingly rich and complicated juxtaposition of live and prerecorded performance (214)

This cycling pattern and study in repetition fashions an experimental palimpsest where all elements of the *mise en scène* are adrift and magnetic. A procession of images appear to swim in the ether of time: two individuals play checkers in a dimly lit room one seemingly wearing a veil, the jazz group performs together, potential partners have a heated encounter, and a character strides and beckons to an unseen cluster, possibly leading a movement session. After the infrared video effect repeated with the musicians, the figures in a tense moment are steeped in deep purple hues that distort their surroundings and the teacher moves through glowy orange shades. Rather than adhering to crisp calculations of structure, determination, and calculation, *Dream City's* *mise en scène* riffs on atmosphere and mood, reanimating theses on the embedded magic that textures light manifest in the twilight and dusk ambience that sets the tonal cohesion.

A beautifully speculative compendium of decomposition, the cinematography of Jenkins's 1981 work is a subterrestrial, heavenly, and nocturnal impulse of earth matter resounding

the deep tonality of audio and visual oneness. Chords of resonance spurred by the meetings of artists such as Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Cam Slocum, Roger Trammell, David Hammons, amongst others in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s become a text settled and infinitely dispersed that we read as film. “Influenced visually and conceptually by McCullough's *Water Ritual #1*,” (Peabody 214), *Dream City* through its cinematography displays how the origins of causational material have no clean, calculable derivatives in plenum, but rather attune to aesthetic innovations and create fruitful problems for temporality. As cinematographers, Jenkins and McCullough are also illuminators, utilizing underexposure tactics and theorizing in blacklight—the suffusing dark liquidity that pools onto surfaces and appears under intentional glow. Jenkins is always reminding of the dangers of pushing something into metaphor, constantly forwarding in overt and subtle manners that everything is really happening in too many shades of color and sound to count. *Dream City's* artistry regards this phenomenon of overabundance as miraculous and as needing further prominence in cinematographic practice. The foundation of manipulating light to create motion pictures, cinematography in Jenkins's lifeworld is a communality of the shots, stylings, and gestures through a disrupted apparatus, always indexing plain coherence in experiment and adaptation. Compositions in *Dream City* are loose, shot scales are mobile, and camera movement allows for turbulence. These factors service the various possibilities that cycle through in the soulfulness of the film's sociality: the figures may be at, heading to, or leaving: a party, a riot, a concert, a practice, a meeting, or a rehearsal. All speculative imaginings, unrealized interactions, and fantastical happenings in sensing gratifying alternative worlds are theorizations in the exhaust of gesture, settling into a metaphysical focus in the experimental cinematography.

Through use of hallucinatory glitches, molten shades, and subsuming broadcasts, video effects in *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* improvise aesthetics as a type of mobility, composed so a frame's blur and fuzz communicates on myriad channels. Jenkins and McCullough harness the elegance of visual distortion to produce structural blur with their effects, parts of the frames appearing still liquefied and eternally dynamic. Depictions of ritual grounds as underpasses, performance spaces, and city streets are displayed as off-kilter murals for energies felt in Los Angeles where the paint never fully dries, but stays haptic and smudges fixed meaning. In her article "Introduction: The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism," cinema scholar and director of the Black Film Center/Archive Terri Francis describes how "Afrosurrealist films can look as though they've been buried in earth and have come up through the ocean" (105). Surreal documentations as temporal emblems of catharsis and transcendence, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* strike as being infused with mud, water, silt, and sand that moves freely in the environments around the artists. The presentations and sounds of ecologically abject material bring a sense of fugitive possibility into the final product, suggesting that the performers are picking up signals from the charged earth where they assemble. Shadowy and phosphorescent, each site, performance, and zone of McCullough and Jenkins's cinematic art pieces is a punctured pocket with gaseous and volatile ecstatic fullness always coming into contact with its non-borders, brushing up against itself in the plenum of total absorption. Non-borders are both the previous and succeeding frames, plus the phantasmic impressions of other worlds the artists allude to and pass by in their universes of infinite expansion. Video effects imbue footage with the aesthetics of touching in plasmic forms of togetherness, showing a practice of rubbing up against community portraits to emphasize the superimposition

of assemblages and palimpsests. Calibrated and whimsical, the function of painterly additions to the original image cultivates space where the performers gather in diverse expression to rediscover magical ambience in the echo chamber of edited assembly. During a moment in *Dream City*, Jenkins bends to place down a box, the image gradient in the frame first the standard appearance of video footage, then shifts on a whim to a more infrared display, potently suggesting other modes of vision in an assemblage that layer multiple worlds in conversation. While the colorful and plasmic effects are more sparse in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* and most regularly occurring in the background of title slides that introduce sections, both video works depict themselves as palimpsests of worlds permeating into each other. Fully consumed by their own infinite absorptive potential, the haunted lapses in literal transfer of both pieces from video to DVD produces a radioactive buzz circulated back into technical saturation.

## VII. Conclusion

McCullough and Jenkins's ritualized assemblages are lives of Fred Moten and Wu Tsang's "staggered missives," (7) all their "communication and mystery folded" (7) in shapes of plenum and ether through video experimentations. In questioning and destabilizing the structures of frames, statehood logics, editing techniques, sonic materials, and approaches to sediment, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* theorize the interior nature of radical atmospheres together yet apart. These video texts guide audiences towards slowed deliberation, treating visceral responses to audiovisual matter as the mysterious communication before and after analysis. Suspended and felt worlds in both pieces gather individuals, beings, sounds, and substances together as the aggregate basis of ritual study.

Ephemeral yet mobilized, *Dream City* and *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* have metaphysical holds on common socialities, immersing in warbled broadcasts to each other and outwards through expansive poetics.

## Chapter 4: *Without Your Interpretation's* Ambient Energies and Collective Frequencies

### I. Introduction

Ulysses Jenkins's *Without Your Interpretation* (1984) is a practice in performance of video as a medium for communicating the power of ritual energies as the foundation of diverse worldmaking. With cross-cultural dynamics in collaboration as the grounding spirit of the video's creative pulse, Jenkins's work charts a theory of subliminally confronting political violence with the poetics of being together. As a video document of a 1983 performance at the Art Dock on Center Street in Los Angeles with Jenkins's band Life in the Park with Debris, artists gather to displace the rigidity of tradition in their praxis of companionship and support as acts of ritual. In this chapter I explore how, through challenging a sanctity of critical practice with the whimsy and flexibility of gestures, *Without Your Interpretation* discovers transgressive junctures in video composition as a mode towards expansive film documentation. Employing more devotional registers of video performance art fused with instrumentation enable Jenkins and his featured collaborators like Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger to broadcast their radical messages through experimental frequencies which require a versatile spectatorship. The 1984 video project is a political critique through metaphysics that embraces its own abstraction without forfeiting the potency of precise expression. Brimming up from Jenkins, Nengudi, and Hassinger's inner lifeworlds that abound in friendship, ritual, performance, and digital media, the video's aes-

thetics are a display of the fatigue and invigoration from the artists' lifelong struggles with institutional neglect. Overturning stereotypical conceptions of Black cultural production as assertive and aggressive, *Without Your Interpretation* through its covert registers moves expanses past mere subversion to cultivate an atmosphere where individuals can seek more sustaining ways to respire. Throughout the chapter, I will detail the intricacies of the video's ethereal practice as a call for residing in the medium's metaphysical openings to breach modern criticism's enclosures.

## II. Poetics of Exhaustion

Existing as an audiovisual poetics of exhaustion, *Without Your Interpretation* illuminates a new grammar of cinema as ritual gathering in ecstatic study. *Without Your Interpretation* acknowledges and resists a spectatorial impulse and scholarly pressure to be labelled esoteric and have its complexity dismissed, presenting itself as dispersed theses with myriad portals for affective and curious access. Set in an embodied dream land at the Art Dock in downtown L.A., a liminal space behind a studio on a loading dock, the video is described as a piece which “addresses Jenkins’s concern with paramnesia, or déjà vu, the incapacity to differentiate between moments of lived experience and fantasy, a memory equivalent of astigmatism” (Hammer Museum). Film theorist Alanna Thain in her book *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema* explains, “A disjunction of sensation and perception, paramnesia produces the inescapable sense of having already lived a moment in time, or being a witness to one’s own life” (53). Steeped in an apparent fantasy environment, the video illustrates the haptic wildness of gesture that lives in underexposure, the dancers and performers always slipping between contact with each other and visualizing the residual textures of glances. *Without Your Interpretation* as a paramnesia text



transfigures any fixed notion of temporality or diegesis into infinite times and worlds for inhabitation. The video begins with a purple tinged crescent moon, a graphic of the earth orbiting in space, then cuts to a flipped sliver of moon which phases into the previous crescent. Grand images of clouds with color effects cut to a panning shot of buildings nestled in clouds and haze, then a pink looming wall and a medium shot of Jenkins with his ensemble Life in the Park with Debris, an early formation of the Othervisions Art Band. All of these establishing shots are shifting, suggesting the musicians as the floating city's residents dislocated in geologic time. Footage of the videotaped performance interspersed with choreography, nature scenes, and televised news, the final work becomes a shrine to the figures dispossessed by many of L.A.'s cultural gatekeepers yet held together in the coherence of friendship. Dancing and gesturing with each other in the threshold space of the loading docks, Jenkins's choreographed piece is imbued with tones of intimacy and solace which extend its affect beyond the margins of the video document. All of the visual and sonic static is the texture of labor in exhaustion which recirculates in the air on the sidewalks where the figures dance and connect. The relatively mellow and hazy tone of *Without Your Interpretation* in relation to *Dream City's* frenetic character is a slowing down of Jenkins to say: I'm trying to show folks all the abundances of energies circulating in Los Angeles, and broadcasting between L.A. and New York and to Japan and many reaches of the world so they feel it and think from it, but I also need them to want to see and sense the energies. Poetics of exhaustion breach conventional boundaries for experimental visions of narrative.



Fig. 7, Buildings standing in clouds and haze, Jenkins, Ulysses, director. *Without Your Interpretation.*, 1984, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/263758/video/13690709>.

### III. Structural Abandons of Patriotism

In both striking and quiet manners, *Without Your Interpretation* functions as an active breaking of patriotism and a disavowal of normative syntax preserved in multimedia video form. Arising from the rejection of statehood logic which essentializes and dilutes for authoritarian management, worldbuilding with Jenkins is a total disruption of codified, colonized sense that overexposes and determines legibility to repress diverse voices. Jenkins centers sense as ritual study and friendship which he prioritizes in the rupture of cemented meaning. Appearing sleepy and lethargic yet overtly charged with political interventions, *Without Your Interpretation* is an audiovisual hymn to a worldbuilding in experimental disorientation. Echoing a type of lyrical devotion to the bittersweet failed nation state, Aria Dean in “Written and Bitten: Ulysses Jenkins and the Non-Ontology of Blackness” transcribes the video artist’s 1978 work *Mass of Images* “You’re just a mass of images you’ve gotten to know / from years and years of TV shows. / The hurting thing; the hidden pain / was written and bitten into your veins / I don’t and I won’t relate / and I think for some it’s too late!” Continuing my considerations on dehiscence from the

previous chapter, this mass of images is the accumulation of antiblackness, hegemony, and psychological oppression as inseparable from American media landscape's spatial formation, being a mass of products. To envision and craft a more livable and euphoric realm in which to reside, the mass must burst. *Without Your Interpretation* is the dreaminess and haze after the chaos of dehiscence's bursting episode, the spillage of matter settling into a slowed, divine pace of composition.

The hugely full and toxic accretion of "hurting, hidden, written and bitten" (Mass of Images) matter in Jenkins's script describes Denise Ferreira da Silva's theory of the "The Ordered World," a known entity whose suffocating ideology is constantly perpetuated in film. Jenkins's "video griot" figure wears an American flag scarf around his waist and airs a nonchalance at the fatigued knowledge of the country's broken psyche since the nation's origins in settler colonialism and exploitation of Black bodies. Jenkins's lyrics on a nationalism cracked open, singing that you broke with "your freedom and left the colonial state" and "you know they play the game" infuses the composition's images of global freedom struggles, Cold War iconography, and U.S. troops bowing in formation with the absolute necessity of manifesting more breathable realms for life.

In being an audiovisual flight from and repulsion of American nationalism, *Without Your Interpretation* stands as a text for peace studies as worldbuilding. Jenkins's anarchy occupies subliminal registers, an allure of contrast to the frenzy of an experiential dehiscence. Abiding as a porous text for the energy of this worldbuilding further past the revolutionary actions of the L.A. Rebellion and into a territory of messy experimentation, the film carries an insurgent subjectivity which Jenkins displays, a motivating force needing to explode the mass of poisoned im-

ages. The intensity of the breaking moment in dehiscence signals the instantaneous arrival of new worlds in metamorphosis. Fred Moten begins his essay “Black Op” with: “Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and on its edge; its broken, coded documents sanction walking in another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. “The cultivated nature of this situated volatility,” this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret” (1743). *Without Your Interpretation* is Jenkins’s open secret. His film is a “cultivated nature” of ritual and speculation’s “situated volatility,” where visuals and soundscapes place the vastness of movement in a cathartic product, volatile in being sporadic and unpredictable. “Walking in another world while passing through this one,” performers Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Frank Parker, May Sun, Ulysses Jenkins and others join in the video to imagine and enact the interior nature of Moten’s “emergent poetics.” These individuals in congregation reify easy breathing, friendship acknowledged as study, and healing dancing to map the pulse of the director’s incantation. Jenkins’s 1984 video document of cross-cultural togetherness is a breaking of exclusionary and dismissive energy in mainstream criticisms and institutions that seek to dismiss Black radical aesthetics as incoherent and unworthy of meticulous analysis. Jenkins, Hassinger, and Nengudi maintain the right to be challenging. “The cultivated nature of this situated volatility” is shown in the choreographed performances as gestural stagings of collective unknowns and questions about the complexities of existence within and in proximity to cultural institutions which do not fully honor and respect Hassinger, Nengudi, and Jenkins’s artistic practices. Abandoning patriotism and all of its suffocating surveillance structures transport *Without Your Interpretation* to the expanses of ecstatic worlds.

#### IV. The Material of Worldbuilding

A sensory forage through multimedia channels in the spirit of exhibiting Black studies' open secret, *Without Your Interpretation* is Jenkins's mediation into hegemonic visual vernacular that insufficiently contends with ritual's power of language. Captured in video and theorized upon as the grounds for cinema as a looser, more open architecture, ritual energies in the piece's choreography bring Black study's flowing potential into the filmic medium, upending strict American media syntax. Put differently, the work manifests an intervention of Black studies's metaphysical vein into experimental film as a type of dislocation to produce more visceral resonance in materiality. *Without Your Interpretation* insists upon its own metaphysical expression as the ever-replenishing source of potency in reception often stained with an exclusive art world dismissal. The video's inhabitants are artists devoted to the beauty and complexity locked in quotidian objects and matters like sediment, rubble, and detritus. Their assembly into a performance later lives as an ode to the textural knowledge of friction, erosion, and suspension in its cinematic documentation. As Hassinger, Nengudi, and Jenkins are bonded in suspension through their collaborations in ritual study, particles of water vapor and detritus over the Art Dock are similarly elevated in the thickness of a politically, artistically charged city landscape. *Without Your Interpretation* graphs a language of excess in the history of the Black avant-garde, the film harnessing ritual intensity's ways of coming together. Molecules, particles, scraps, found objects, and film frames are all valued as the rudimentary material of this audiovisual syntax. Sparked in 1976 with Senga Nengudi, Barbara McCullough, Houston Conwill, David Hammons among others, Studio Z was a gathering of Black artists improvising and experimenting with oft

dismissed physical materials and spaces. A Los Angeles collective which typically convened in Hammons' studio on site of a past dancehall, Studio Z assembled to envision worlds of transcendence in webs of empathic support. Curator Allie Tepper's "Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi" from the catalogue "Side by Side: Collaborative Artistic Practices in the United States, 1960s-1980s" includes a photograph of a written "Studio Z Statement." I am reading these words as a gospel for the desirable world's metamorphosis:

elements of now are posted onto the scenes of our thoughts, our thoughts include the absolute, we are dealing with pieces of a dream manifested into the reality of a physical presence. an individual collective is the unit from which we function. a spiritual presence hovers over the collective energy gathered like the grasshopper becomes the locust: we are about a collective energy working toward change... change to open up our awareness to our own thought processes and environmental influences and the interaction of ours with others until ours are others and others are ours. becoming the bright light that makes us realize we have been touched by the presence of the gods (9)

The Los Angeles ritual topography of the 1970s-80s held the L.A. Rebellion and Studio Z as companion movements for improvisations. Both groupings were spheres attuned to unity and convergence in film, video, and performance art as explications of the city's concentrated molecular, affective, and corporeal ecology. Different scales of particle, eroding, and bodily matter come into focus under Studio Z's statement in their attention to "pieces of a dream" emanating from a unit which disperses into their individual practices as physical and spiritual presence. Illuminated through "becoming the bright light that makes us realize we have been touched by the presence of the gods," the group's "collective energy working toward change" is immortalized in

video as a temporal document. Galvanized around an assertion of purpose which relies upon a poetics for full effect of communication, Studio Z's avant-garde operations define *Without Your Interpretation's* ambient atmosphere. Absolutely political and affecting yet historically degraded in much reception and criticism due to an apathy in interpretation, Jenkins's video exists as a curious interplay of working in the periphery of cultural establishments which ignore the nuance of Black artists fueled by an inexhaustible belief in the powerful charge of ritual makings as potent assemblages. In being only partially sensed by such hegemonic institutions because of their own astigmatism that seeks to sharpen, assess for value, and neglect what remains in blur, as much of Jenkins's work does, *Without Your Interpretation* shadows its anarchy against colonial ideals in underexposure and haze in video. Sediment, detritus, ether, and plenum are the substances and materials of an augmented theory of architecture for breathable worlds.

#### V. The site of friendship, the video movement of love

In its ephemeral depictions of performers, friends, and collaborators moving through an aspirational world in underexposure, *Without Your Interpretation* proves the haptic potential for video as a site of friendship. A mobilized document which can be carried to museums, galleries, theaters, classrooms, and community spaces, the video inscribes the movements of love into its archiving of gesture and touch. Ulysses Jenkins implores audiences to pay careful attention to gestures in a performative gathering as residual glances and to be moved and encouraged towards social activism- a political mobilization in observing. *Without Your Interpretation* is also a call for spectators to comprehend themselves acutely as feeling, breathing bodies in analysis. Continuing an attunement to nearly invisible yet vital matter in his breaking with normative film

vernacular, “Jenkins confronts Americans’ indifference to events outside their own country, particularly to crises and need in poorer nations” (Hammer Museum). In bearing sensitive witness, one might notice other paces at which to breathe and other mentalities with which to sympathize with distant individuals encountering oppressive forces. The affect of friendship has a conductivity which pours into ritual, ceremony, and study as various means of coming together to respire and experiment in the midst of those who protect each other while critically dismissed by privileged zones of recognition. Jenkins, Hassinger, and McCullough’s collaboration and joined improvisations accompanied by *Life in the Park with Debris* sound out a hymn of solace for pain in communities in the face of broken statehood. These hymns sprouting from companionship as dispersed authorship are an activation of a needed expansion in audiovisual forms as healing sites which allow repeated viewings and listenings.

Art historian John P. Bowles’ article “Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger” examines the relationship between the two artists as a vibrant realm of knowledge production, discussing how “Much of the early performance work of Hassinger, Nengudi, and their friends has existed as an absence in the history of art, resisting interpretation and commodification, circulating as rumor and hearsay in a way that refused to comply with the atmosphere of silence imposed upon African American artists by the people and institutions that refused to acknowledge them” (411). Bowles forwards that, in a more intuitive study of “Hassinger, Nengudi, and their friends” (including Jenkins’s) art practices and the specifics of their largely cold reception in the mainstream art world, individuals can understand their labor as eternally questioning and bounding past the rigidity of conceptual thresholds. While many experimental filmmakers and performance artists of the American avant-



garde, often studied as the white avant-garde, were driven by fascinations into materiality with the sediment of mass media culture as both conceptual and physical debris and detritus, interdisciplinary creators like Hassinger, McCullough, Nengudi and Jenkins are underrepresented investigators of insovereign matter's racial significance and politics of abasement. These "atmospheres of silence" are also the stifling epistemologies which disregard Black ingenuity with theorizations of metaphysical matter yet praise white artists for their radical innovations with a borrowed or uncredited history of form.

Coming to video and filmmaking as a muralist and musician, Ulysses Jenkins focuses attention to the highly affective archive of all that evades obvious visibility on screen. Metaphysical spirits activate the piece's videotaped footage of a small concert and collaborative performance with an energy of unsettling the perpetuated and damaging mess of American media syntax. In the film's cloudy images and fuzzy appearance of emergent video technologies made with the initial consumer cameras in circulation, *Without Your Interpretation* preserves the life-force of friends as people in residual relation, always coming in and out of communication and company. In a publication "VideoStudio Playback," art history scholar Abbe Schriber speaks to the creator's subliminal zones of practice "Though Jenkins's work spans an incredibly diverse range of media, it is linked by an investigation into physical and digital forms of public space - from the screen to the sidewalk - as sites for myth-making" (13). The Art Dock is realized as a space for myth-making as the textual fabric for new imaginings of world as ways to occupy earth. A gauze-like architecture of enduring connections in friendship grows in contact with ignorant climates of reception, the disembodied video form living as an aggregate of decomposed or changing matter.

## VI. Breathing with editing

Spiritually impacted by the climate of national animosity towards artists of color yet always tending to their network of empathy in resonance, the beings in *Without Your Interpretation* evince an ecology more compassionate to respiration and expression. Cognizant breathing as a site for study and myth-making in the characters' togetherness demonstrate an editing with body movement and the pulse of corporeal gesture. As Ulysses Jenkins, Vinsula Kara, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Michael Delgado and other contemporaries come together in experimentation to find ways to breathe better in common, they rebel against the confines of professionalized spaces which seek to swiftly decipher and commodify audiovisual poetry. Here I will utilize Franco Berardi's *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* to tease out Jenkins's editing styles as composition through ritual, attuned breathing. Berardi's project is a nonmilitant yet ardent insistence of locating and praising such potency and messiness as critical to a liberated move towards world-building. En route to fashioning a deeply hospitable environment for visceral, sensitive, and celebratory epistemology to arise, Berardi and Jenkins's inventive praxes echo each other. *Breathing* meditates on the mechanisms of statehood's syntax being inherently antithetical to a poetic project. Berardi writes, "poetry is an attempt to tune into this cosmic vibration, this temporal vibration that is coming and coming and coming" (17), and "Poetry reopens the indefinite, through the ironic act of exceeding the established meaning of words... Poetry and irony are tools for semiotic insolvency, for the disentanglement of language from the limits of symbolic debt" (32). Hegemony's obsession with surveilling and maintaining subjugated subjects whose language is largely incomprehensible and illegible to capital means of decoding manifests as an

attempt to suffocate creation. The neoliberal surveillance state is freakishly afraid of poetry as expansive, ephemeral excess, as Jenkins acknowledges and visually elaborates upon in his focus on the “indefinite.” Sharply aware of these surveillance forces mirrored in art criticism and the need for alternative realms to produce spiritually gratifying work, Berardi’s text on poetry’s movement, spatiality, and insurgency speaks to my concentration of *Without Your Interpretation* as fluid structure of community.

*Without Your Interpretation*’s pace of editing is entangled and in harmony with the pulse of its hypnotic breathing as study in company. Affective demonstrations in breathing through observations in plenum and ether near the Art Dock are modes of editing alongside body movement and the pulse of body gesture. By compiling the atmospheres and happenings in the 1983 performance together, Jenkins aligns paramnesia, a distortion in memory that produces a mental blur, with his editing fixation on doggerel, an irregular measure. During an interview in *California Video: Artists and Histories* Jenkins explains his initial curiosities with doggerel as an opening of communicative potential in audiovisuals: “the time when maybe they’re not using dialogue, or the in-between time when they’re moving within the narrative and there’s nothing being said, or maybe there are gestures that you can’t understand” (113). Read together with lines from J. Kameron Carter’s “Black Malpractice (A Poetics of the Sacred)” analysis of *Without Your Interpretation* can recognize the energy between bodies in ritual as transferring into cohesion and bond between the frames in Jenkins’s editing. Carter posits: “These coinages are meant to index that “play of dislocated identity” that marks diaspora (which is to say, black social life) as dwelling in the “quantum gap” of “subjective, qualified I, an alternate, unmortared I... This strangeness points to that which is ever incomplete and incompletable” (95). Here, Carter’s no-

tion of the “quantum gap” is illustrative of the liminal yet molecularly vast spaces between shots and frames, especially with attention to the “play of dislocated identity” with the American psyche in Jenkins’s experimental paths. This excerpt from Carter speaks to Jenkins’s idea of doggerel being , a “strangeness” emphasizing “that which is ever incomplete and incompletable” (95). Black study’s attention to Black malpractice constructs a differently sacred pulse to edit along. The frames in Jenkins’s 1984 piece are crystallized together in a video assemblage that appears disinterested in even adopting or declaring a temporality, instead pioneering a Black study into editing which is “in-between,” without speech, through gestures, and “dislocated.”

In this staged conversation between Jenkins and Carter, the latter scholar’s act of illuminating a “strangeness” in syntax as Black malpractice articulates the interiority of time to which Jenkins attends. *Life in the Park* with Debris’s sound churns together for the first four minutes residing in delicate instrumentation rather than a more transparent structure of a song. Fusing into an organic rhythm led by Jenkins’s vocals, the visuals and sonics display a moment of dislocation as the consistent texture of the whole experiment. Jenkins sings “Somehow, somehow, somehow you feel, somehow you feel what’s going on...,” delaying an impulse for narrative reveal by lingering in the space of possibility. An over the shoulder shot slips into a low angle of two individuals dancing together, the camera movement circling around them yet always avoiding an intrusive tone. Cutting back to Jenkins knelt and delivering lyrics with his fellow musicians maintaining the pace, scientific footage, airplanes, maps, folks grieving loved ones, and a slide reading “I have executed the launch. The target is destroyed,” pass through the structure. Establishing the video piece as a journey into being dislodged in time and refusing the very lin-

ear organization of nation states which stifle Black breath, Jenkins harnesses the excitation of harmony in being in sync with conventions of narrative reveal and in time with each other. Doggerel is a type of offbeat lucidity and Jenkins's editing practice is disillusioned by the sanctity of continuity, positing a disjointed way to join sequences as more cathartic and evocative. The frames seem to breathe in common at an irregular measure. Visuals and sonics in conscious respiration coalesce into the interiority of a new psychic world.

## VII. Rhythm/Pace of composition

*Without Your Interpretation's* rhythm in composition is fully sensory as audio and visual oneness made more alive and electric during ritual performance. Editing to keep a loose time attuning to felt grooves from his fellow artists moving together amidst frames of repurposed archival material, Jenkins finds a spiritually livable cadence for composition. White capitalist media's suffocating pace of accumulation is brutal and relentless, seeping into the art world as sites which distinguish value for profit. Poet and curator Anaïs Duplan in their essay "Communication after Refusal: The Turn to Love and Polyvocality" expresses "In Jenkins's rhythm-conscious works, melody is substituted for a polyvocality that results from the inclusion of disparate vocal and visual samples from popular media, advertisements, and news clips alike" (3).

Polyvocality is a more breathable departure from singular melody. Affective visualizations and surfacings of incendiary subjectivities in polyvocality, the fully sensory assemblage is at once vaporous and stabilizing in this "turn to love." Duplan's title "Communication after Refusal" evidences an interiority of energetic composition that is always decomposing towards a type of quickening horizon, the metaphysics past subversion and into new orientations. Hassinger, Kara,

Nengudi, and Jenkins in their gestures exhaust various hypotheses on Black study as space for social and metaphysical experimentation. Eluding precision in elements of cinematography as a videotaped assemblage, *Without Your Interpretation* questions the stability of a finalized composition when its basis in performance is fleeting. Doggerel editing honors the matter escaping the frame as still energetically imbued inside of it- a video as frames in rapid succession which show the immensity of ritual contents that live outside film as an archive.

The performative document *Without Your Interpretation* continues to experiment a pace in harmony with bodily presence as it is also an impression of past liveliness and intensity. Editing to an organic rhythm of respiration means that frames merge into one another without precise correspondence, as a human heart rate carries some irregularities in its sonic frequencies. In their text “Black Ether” J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak wonder “What would it mean to think about blackness as that which experimentalizes being, that which, following Denise Ferreira da Silva, Nahum Chandler, and Alex Weheliye, moves as unfettered ur-matter, unthinkable exorbitance, and deregulated transubstantiation?” (204). These ruminations connect to Michael Boyce Gillespie’s questions from *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* included in the previous chapter, where he wonders “What if black film could be something other than embodied? What if black film was immaterial and bodiless? What if black film could be speculative or just ambivalent?” (5). Together, these proposals all gesture to the massive potentials living in the filmic medium, especially when broken down to their elemental charges that complicate discussions of blackness and ontology. Charting the particulars of the work’s attuned rhythm is a more accurate means of graphing a temporal shape of a video which rejects stasis, even as a fixed art object. On a microscopic level, each compiled shot from a mo-

ment of performance is a gathering of particles revolving in the atmosphere. Six minutes into the video, dancers in a staggered line move their outstretched arms in unison. The camera records them shrouded in a thick haze, gently illuminated and appearing to displace charged atmospheric substance, which is air with a certain complexity. The knowledge emanating from their gestures looks and sounds vaporous in the nighttime underexposure. The dancers position a wildness of interaction where their gestures are “unfettered” or released from surveillance in underexposure, ritual is understood as devotion to “exorbitance” being physical poetry, and divine movement is “deregulated transubstantiation.” *Without Your Interpretation* channels rhythmic attention in composition to the ecstatic forces of gestural and choreographed study.



Fig. 8, Dancers in a staggered line, Jenkins, Ulysses, director. *Without Your Interpretation.*, 1984, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/263758/video/13690709>.

### VIII. Form of Narrative as Porous Structure

With its aesthetics of ritual Black study being its poetics and politics, *Without Your Interpretation* fabricates a uniquely open form of experimental narrative. While much avant-garde film often blatantly opposes claiming a narrative, Jenkins's piece crafts a performative infrastructure for narrative without enclosures or sharp borders. All of the companion artists occupying space in the original filmed event and portrayed in the video's frames are depicted in suspension, residing in a phantasmic zone in perpetual transition and opening. Film scholar Akira Mizuta Lippit illustrates the unclaimable territory arising between performance and documentation in avant-garde media in his publication *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*. Ex-cinema's materiality, Lippit proclaims, "delineates neither outer nor inner space, but the space between the two, the imaginary space that opens between a film from a film, ex-film. This is not the space between frames but that which engulfs the frame, a space at once originary and imaginary. It is the outside or outer space intrinsic to cinema, Tscherkassy's remarkable discovery" (7). Liminal yet vast, this "imaginary space that opens between a film from a film" and "engulfs the frame" shapes *Without Your Interpretation's* composition as narrative abstraction. A disparate assembly which complicates crisp analysis, Jenkins's video is fully absorbed in the act of obscuring Western modes of knowledge production in a mobilizing document. Functioning as a description of plenum and ether's high energy density, Lippit's writing of "a space at once originary and imaginary" motions to a more attuned comprehension of the visionary substance charging *Without Your Interpretation* as a political confrontation through porous narrative.



More permeable for eased breathing, the video's visible structure takes an otherly shape of narrative as a space and occupation that allows audiovisual matter (the musical performance and choreography) to stay suspended in the wavelengths of broadcast. The video's interplay between density in assemblage and lightness in movement bonds into a film which appears quite delicate yet carries immense weight in meaning, theorizing the undoing of normative visual association contained in a tormented national psyche. Similar to the webs of artistic collaboration in Los Angeles which connect McCullough, Jenkins, Nengudi, and Hassinger, the narrative's gossamer material holds space for all potential energy in ritual and devotion to interact. Duplan speaks to expansive possibilities for structure again in "Communication after Refusal: The Turn to Love and Polyvocality," observing how "Jenkins's treatment of narrative, much like a non-treatment or anti-treatment of narrative, in *Inconsequential Doggereal*, formally enacts a social critique by way of a failure to produce a "legible," or univocal, speaker." Strongly too in *Without Your Interpretation*, Jenkins's porous, experimenting approach to narrative produces an implicit commentary on the expectation to carry a singular voice or direction in authorship. I prefer the language of "open narrative" over "non-treatment or anti-treatment of narrative" (Duplan) in studying Jenkins's conceptions of spatial formation, though I understand the prefixes non and anti as likewise addressing the fruitful tensions in terminology. *Without Your Interpretation* as an aerated presentation of narrative provides ample room for the performers as its inhabitants to gesture to the metaphysical activity abounding in the space between them and all around the environment.

## IX. Dispersed Authorship of bodily presences

As the credited author and director, Ulysses Jenkins's video griot figure performs a fatigued god presence, gesturing to his own cinematic body made mythical in video preservation. Grappling with consistent institutional neglect from curators, cultural gatekeepers, and historians who seem uninterested and often antagonistic to his counters to "make sense" in a Eurocentric manner, Jenkins embodies a calm resiliency as the symbolic figure uniting dissonant images. Against the constitution of sense as grammar and claimable legibility which typically upholds the classical standard of a singular creator, Jenkins's authorship is in the displacing of codified logic to free bodies from narrative restraint. Sitting down, reclining, and bowing, Jenkins inhabits and theorizes within the document's porous structure, his opening of the narrative as an opening into a mesmeric bodily presence. Investigating the particulars of polyvocality, a situation comprised of multiple voices through audiovisual form, Duplan advances: "Black independent media artists, I argue, have an established history of producing these "images of duration" by working through subversive and rhythmic reappropriations of popular media material in the creation of avant-garde artworks" (2). "Images of duration," in sustained imprints of dancers and lingering portraits of Jenkins as the video griot, convey a certain fatigue alleviated by artistic practice in common. The artist's body in cinema gains a godly distinction standing in time and made eternal in art. In his authorship attuned to polyvocal matter, Jenkins journeys through fluctuating frequencies of collectivity to locate a musicality at the core of new worldbuildings. As the edit repeatedly returns to Jenkins amongst his bandmates, the video's pace is tugged along by his omnipresence and visibility, sometimes at a distance. During the piece's last moments, Jenkins places down his microphone and bends towards the ground, indicating a finality after collec-

tive exertion in musical conversation together. Impressions of the performers in video on screen are both an intensification of ritual's significance and a noted fading of the potent moments of action, collapsed in spectral affect in underexposure.



Fig. 9, Jenkins performing at ease with “Life in the Park with Debris,” Jenkins, Ulysses, director. *Without Your Interpretation.*, 1984, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/263758/video/13690709>.

## X. Form in Video Language

A radical investigation into affective communication, *Without Your Interpretation* generates a transgressive video language which enables Jenkins to illustrate the parallel between ritual aesthetics and meanings. The 1984 assemblage tracks an avant-garde syntax along its soundscape, imbuing the visual composition with tones of improvisation and poetry. Taking up audiovisual poetry as its vernacular, the video collapses dormant distinctions between image and sound to find communication in resonance. Frames, bodies, instruments, materials, shots, and gestures all reverberate together and collect into a new style of signification. Akira Lippit and Franco Berardi both tease out aesthetics as a manner of broadcast which are then preserved in types of cinema language. Lippit in *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*

unravels and asks vibrant questions on linguistics: “Or, as the Latin *video* (“I see”) suggests, is the language of video seen - perceived in the phonic registers of visuality? A visuality that sends signals and *signs* from the depths of an ocularcentric order - a sonic visuality? Ex-audio, a sound of the outside that arrives in the form of obscured vision?” (107). Here, the scholar is curious about where sound and visuality come from and how exactly they gain such intense charge in film. *Without Your Interpretation* draws viewers to question the sources of origins with an element that “arrives in the form of obscured vision,” and then gains captivating meaning amongst other frames and aesthetics. Berardi in *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* exposes how “Poetry is the excess of language, the signifier disentangled from the limits of the signified (32). Immersed in the haptic collisions of sound samples and archival footage, *Life in the Park with Debris* along with the many performers sound out the infinite and “excess” in audiovisual ambience. Video effects imbue footage with the aesthetics of performance, where human touches are echoed in fades, overlays, and superimpositions of frames, shots, and sequences. Saxophone riffs, guitar fuzz, and the residual touches between dancers tap into “the phonic registers of visuality,” the video body that “signals and *signs* from the depths of an ocularcentric order” to illuminate the expanses within and beyond film grammar as *Without Your Interpretation*’s poetry. Recognizing the 1970s-1980s Black radical art realms in Los Angeles as charting a vast language for film in expression situates authors like Dash, McCullough and Jenkins as figures liberating signs and signifiers into an atmosphere for perpetual interpretation.

## XI. Sound in Suspension

*Without Your Interpretation*'s soundscape aggregates into an incantation of sonics moving above and below the image, suspending ritual textures to intensify resonance in the video's audiovisual grammar. Melodic with atonal moments, Jenkins's video sustains the sound of performance as a resonance between companions, shots, and movements. Life in the Park with Debris's concert scores the collaged footage and expands the fluid diegesis. The ensemble propels the visual energy towards spiritual overdrive, more of a smooth incantation in relation to *Dream City*'s discordant sonics. In *Without Your Interpretation*'s audio geography, the violin, saxophone, chapman stick, and synthesizer play out a high-pitched electronic feedback of broadcast, "a sound of the outside that arrives in the form of obscured vision" (*Ex-Cinema*). Guitar and drums charge below Jenkins's vocals preaching universal interconnectivity, as the music scores the energy circulations centralized in 1980s Los Angeles. The sounds in collectivity transport towards free jazz spirits as rambunctious shockwaves through plenum and ether's activity of atmospheres.

## XII. Conclusion

*Without Your Interpretation* is always moving past fixed comprehensions in analysis as a metaphysical text of Black study. Ulysses Jenkins utilizes polyvocality of myriad perspectives in form, narrative structure, authorship, and sound to illustrate revolutionary modes of coexistence in new shapes of world. Locating his theories of audiovisual expansion as entrenched in his companions' multifaceted subjectivities which come to light in performance, Jenkins formulates *Without Your Interpretation* as a text for living in attunement. Subliminal registers in form, nar-

native, and sound disarm modes of surveillance in criticism, making the video versatile in its potency. The video artist's lyrics meshed with Life in the Park with Debris' instrumentation stand as liner notes for crafting a film as a historic shrine drawn from dispersed energies. *Without Your Interpretation* questions how audiences receive audiovisual matter in relation to a spectatorship inevitably affected by images holding ruinous racial politics, and brings individuals to a space for reimagining communication deeper past the rejection of conventions and into spiritual cohesion.

## Conclusion

During time spent last summer at an experimental and artist-made film distributor, I became fully enthralled by a whole culture of cinema on the West Coast in the 1960s which grew from a casual series of projections in a California backyard. Folks would gather as a loose group of filmmakers, friends, and artists to watch each others' work and experience the magic of successive images pulsing along in the dark. This history of community through audiovisual experimentation seems to be a sustained moment where individuals, longing to cultivate radical channels of expression in cinema, came together to manifest their own dream universe. And the elation I kept feeling in seeking to become slowly more familiar with these visionary energies really reminded me of being almost overwhelmed with awe during my freshman year of college taking film classes for the first time. The significance of the medium completely shifted in my mind and was illuminated by professors, texts, and screenings as a form with truly infinite potential. Speaking of a divine, revealing alignment which can occur in orchestrations of images, sounds, and lights in his book *Devotional Cinema*, filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky writes "If we do relinquish control, we suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us. In a flash, the uncanny presence of this poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us. Everything is expressing itself as what it is. Everything is alive and talking to us" (40). Dorsky's ruminations on cinema as a lens where presences, phenomena, and messages surface or attract attention in an altered mindset encourage audiences to really linger with the mysterious forces sensed in film as a vessel for dense meaning.

At a screening of Amy Halpern's "Falling Lessons" (1992) the same summer, I saw Julie Dash's name roll by in the credits and had a flash back to watching *Praise House* sophomore year in Professor Liz Reich's course "Changing the Image: Black Cinema." A film whose dense meaning felt curiously balanced with a visual airiness, *Praise House* immediately struck as a fundamentally unique approach to cinema, one which appeared to be theorizing above and below its own material surface. Dash's creation looked fully absorbed with spiritual potency so deeply focused on the charges between humans and entities, echoing themes of the director's groundbreaking and best known work *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). My perceptions of audiovisual media continued to widen through analysis of the immense psychological and political discourse living in compositions especially by artists marginalized by societal structures. Film often aestheticizes and charts fantasy and speculative realms which individuals in viewing can extend to their lived experience. Put differently, cinema can map out spaces for worldmakings which gesture to subliminal communication between noise and sight, zones that locate more expansive ways of being on earth. Archives of American avant-garde and experimental film are often drastically lacking work by artists of color, and I felt specifically compelled to study the creations of Black filmmakers during a certain historic shift in filmmaking of the 1960s. Through a study of Julie Dash's *Praise House* (1991), Barbara McCullough's *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1981), and Ulysses Jenkins's *Dream City* (1981) and *Without Your Interpretation* (1984), I have sought to attend to Black experimental film's metaphysical and affective matter which contacts the ineffable in myriad modes of broadcast. The project is strongly inspired by Black study's propositions to stay in the messes and lapses of epistemology and observe what becomes more lucid in spectatorship, rather than conceivably rush



conclusions for a tidier, quicker comprehension. Excesses, flairs, and improvisations comprise audiovisual poetry which is a type of theory, fugitive in its divergent relation to systems and ideologies.

A major drive of this thesis has been to think closely through the materials, substances, and textures of worldbuilding and worldmaking. In this study, circulating projections, collective frequencies, ambient energies, elemental overdrives, and expanded churches come to light and interact in the atmospheres of gathering. Towards the beginning of *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, McCullough says “In terms of understanding what ritual is, I can only say that for me ritual is a symbolic action that I’ve dealt with in terms of my own internal state to help me release myself and move from one space in time to another.” I desire to carry this sentiment through the body of the project, honoring ritual as a place for eased becoming and ecstatic knowledge production. Dash, McCullough, and Jenkins’s universes of imagination make curious contact with the sublime, and in a patient focus to the particulars of their entrancing spiritual exhibitions on screen, audiences can find cathartic rhythms for their own dwellings on earth.

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