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Radical Immersion in the Work of Melvin Van Peebles, Isaac Julien, and Steve Mcqueen

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Abstract
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RADICAL IMMERSION IN THE WORK OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES, ISAAC JULIEN, AND STEVE MCQUEEN

Charlotte Ickes

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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation theorizes immersion as a Black radical aesthetic. More specifically, it traces how transatlantic filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles and a subsequent generation of transatlantic artists and filmmakers, notably Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen, use immersion to both visualize the lateral, interconnected relations of what Édouard Glissant would call "creolization" *and* explore how Blackness, as an aesthetics and politics, occupies the position of object *within*, rather than distanced from, the scene. Standing in sharp contrast to the dominant understanding of moving-image immersion as an agent of late capital, Van Peebles's landmark film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Julien's three-channel installation *Baltimore* (2003), McQueen's first feature-length film *Hunger* (2008) and his installation *Western Deep* (2002) chart an alternative version of immersion in the movie theater or museum, a model of space and relations that transgresses, condenses, and ultimately creolizes the space separating spectatorial subject from displayed object. In so doing, these works imagine another world, a creolized world out from under the hierarchical order of our current one.

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INTRODUCTION

This project in many ways began with—and is still sustained by—an effort to better understand my own preference for a particular kind of art: time-based installations full of beautiful imagery, digital surround sound, multiple screens, and an overall aesthetic of sensory excess. Spectacle, in other words, was what I wanted to see, and all these qualities activated my desire to be fully *immersed* within these installations. Some of the work I was most taken with ran up against what much dominant contemporary art scholarship has deemed to be politically radical art practice. Moving-image spectacle in both art and popular culture has long served as target practice for some of the most eminent scholars in contemporary art. In many respects, this critique hinges on the question of immersion: seduced inside an installation of sensory plentitude, viewers sacrifice the distance of critical reason for the pleasures of identification and mystification, leaving behind the social, historical, and political realities of the world outside.[1] Moreover, immersion into spectacles of Blackness in film and art, the primary focus of this dissertation, have also merited much skepticism, the stakes of which are particularly high given the vast and violent visual history of Black stereotypes on screen and the real, material consequences offscreen.[2]

"Radical Immersion in the Work of Melvin Van Peebles, Isaac Julien, and Steve McQueen" attempts to historicize and theorize immersion as a Black radical aesthetic. This

[1] Examples, many of which I will discuss in more detail, include Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Control, by Design," *Artforum* 40, no. 1 (September 2001):163; Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," *Artforum* 51, no. 4 (December 2012): 253–261; Liz Kotz, "Video Projection: The Space Between Screens," chapter 10, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985,* ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985); Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Art Since 1900*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 2:698–700; Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2013).

[2] Examples that I will discuss in more detail include bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," chapter 19, in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993); Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974); Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

project maintains that immersion is much more complicated than the binary thinking so often applied to it would suggest. Another premise is that cinemas, museums, and galleries represent more than just havens of cultural capitalism. I look to the ambiguous areas *within* and *between* the black box and white cube, popular culture and art, as well as spatial and ontological boundaries, ambivalent spaces where alternative aesthetic modes, traditions, and histories of Blackness move. More specifically, I trace how Blaxploitation progenitor Melvin Van Peebles and a subsequent generation of artists and filmmakers, notably Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen, use immersion to connect art and film, visualize the lateral relations of diaspora, and explore how Blackness, as an aesthetics and politics, occupies the position of object *within* the "scene of objection."[3]

I borrow the phrase "scene of objection" from Black studies theorist Fred Moten, whose spatial dynamic of Black radical aesthetics helps place immersion in a framework apart from the one it customarily occupies. Erupting from the moment people became property during and after the transatlantic slave trade, Blackness, according to Moten, manifests as animated, material objects performing resistance within the "scene of objection" to the distanced, decorporealized, and omniscient vision of the subject, a critical trope to which I will return.[4] In addition to Moten's choreography of Black radical aesthetics, my project relies upon another related spatial construct: how the unprecedented rupture of slavery across the Atlantic and in the New World fundamentally changed space and relations, creating the horizontal network of the African diaspora. These collisions across borders, countries, and cultures are what Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant calls "creolization," a process most conspicuous in his native Caribbean but capable of unsettling other geographies across the globe.[5] I inflect Glissant's creolization with Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers's lateral "law of the Mother" that flattens the vertical Law of the Father, making patriarchy an unstable construct in conceptions of Black

[3] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1, 255.
[4] Ibid., 1–2.
[5] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11–12.

masculinity and kinship structures.[6] I will discuss these theoretical frameworks in greater detail in the following pages of this introduction and will elaborate upon them in the context of the artists and their work in each chapter.

Objecthood and the lateral lines of the African diaspora are key tropes that have helped map the formal and conceptual affinities oscillating among Van Peebles's feature film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Isaac Julien's three-channel installation *Baltimore* (2003), and the films and time-based installations of Steve McQueen, in particular *Hunger* (2008) and *Western Deep* (2002). These works immerse viewers into the "scene of objection" through horizontal movements, intense close-ups, and often equally intense soundtracks. As a result, these works transgress the space of spectator and spectacle as a model for creolized relations in the hierarchized, vertical order of this world, one in need of lateral lines.

The first chapter, "Sweet Sweetback's Seductive Song," considers Van Peebles's landmark film in relation to and distinct from Blaxploitation, the genre of urban Black heroes and heroines fighting forms of oppression and violence, which emerged around the same time critiques of spectacle surged in the 1960s and early 1970s. *Sweetback* was a widely successful independent film, shot in Los Angeles after the director's sojourn in France, where he made his first feature-length film. *Sweetback* tracks the titular character, played by the director, running from the Los Angeles police toward sanctuary in the desert on the Mexican border. Throughout his escape, Sweetback, a former sex performer, has various explicit sexual encounters with women, including with the White female president of a motorcycle gang. *Sweetback* garnered criticism for its spectacle of violence and sex and acclaim for what Black Panther Huey Newton described as the film's "revolutionary language."[7] The director himself was determined to spark radical consciousness through his audience's identification with Sweetback's political awakening. I examine how Van Peebles, who transformed his own body into an erotic object on screen, fills

[6] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 34.
[7] Huey Newton, quoted in Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004), n.p.

his film with close-ups, drawing viewers into an identificatory and/or desirous relation with the character. Furthermore, I trace how Van Peebles uses experimental techniques, like triple-screen effects, to stretch the horizons of Los Angeles's highways and the Californian desert, immersing his audience in a distinctly *horizontal,* rather than perspectival, embrace. Coming off the heels of the nationally televised Watts Riot of 1965, *Sweetback*'s horizontal embrace imagines a creolized space out of a deeply hierarchical one, continually upheld by the racist housing laws and excessive police force that spurred Watts and balkanized Los Angeles.[8] This form of immersion also points to how the film disrupts the machismo and patriarchy advanced by *Sweetback*, Van Peebles, and very often Black Power politics of the 1970s, leveling the vertical succession of the Father for what Spillers might call "the Law of the Mother," smuggled within the film's experimental adventure along California's horizons.[9]

The second chapter, "The City in Creole," foregrounds Julien's *Baltimore,* a multiscreen, time-based installation made for museums and galleries. *Baltimore* accompanies none other than Van Peebles himself on a circuitous journey through three of the city's cultural institutions: the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, the George Peabody Library, and the Walters Art Museum. Unfettered by the single-screen format of the cinema, Julien elaborates Van Peebles's formal experimentations with triple-screen effects in *Sweetback* through digital technology that facilitates nonlinear editing across several screens. As a result, viewers watch Van Peebles move *across* one screen, as well as from one cultural institution, to the next. In reality, however, the urban fabric of Baltimore is far from tightly woven. The Peabody and the Walters sit across the street from each other in the wealthy Mount Vernon Cultural District, while the Wax Museum resides in east Baltimore, a Black neighborhood historically neglected by the local government and the relatively recent influx of capital in the city's Inner Harbor area.[10] Upending the city's dissection

[8] Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198–215; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 37–46.
[9] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[10] Marcus Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums: The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum as a Test Case," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-*

into zones of White and Black, rich and poor, high and low culture, Julien stages a creolization of space similar to what Van Peebles did on screen in *Sweetback*'s segregated world of Los Angeles. The three screens and horizontal movements of the camera foreclose the spectatorial distance of perspectival shots and the social distance between the neighborhoods so as to transport viewers into a fantasy vision of lateral landscapes and undone borders.[11] Viewers are further immersed within Julien's mise-en-scène through the close-up. The camera hovers near the wax figures that have migrated from their home at the Wax Museum in east Baltimore to spectate together at the Walters. Ida B. Wells, Billie Holiday, and Frederick Douglass, who all mounted radical "objection" in one form or another, appear as animated objects, brought to life by Julien's camera. And Van Peebles discovers the object within when he comes face-to-face with his own wax figure, evoking the imbrication of personhood and objecthood that lies at the heart of the Black radical tradition. Some of the language in the chapter—in particular the part on Julien's two-channel installation *Vagabondia* (2000)—comes from a previously published short text from a special issue of *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*.[12]

McQueen's dense and diverse oeuvre comprises the subject of my third chapter, "McQueen's Matter(ing)." I focus in particular on how McQueen's first feature-length film, *Hunger* and his acclaimed time-based installation *Western Deep* exist in a framework apart from the biopolitical one of "bare life" that has often been applied to these works, a critical pattern that has relegated the histories and figures pictured so vividly on McQueen's screens to a deathly absence, spectral objects devoid of animation or agency.[13] Instead, I consider how both *Hunger*

Slave Studies 29, no. 2 (June 2008): 152. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 121–24, 133–44.

[11] Kobena Mercer, "Avid Iconographies," chapter 1, in Chris Darke, Isaac Julien, and Kobena Mercer, *Isaac Julien* (London: Ellipsis, 2001), 18.

[12] Charlotte Ickes, "Sonic Stitches: Isaac Julien, His Mother, and Her "Creolized Sound," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 258–262.

[13] I am drawing upon in particular the notion of *homo sacer* or "bare life" elaborated upon by Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben, as well as the related notion of the "social death" of slaves, introduced by Orlando Patterson. The chapter on McQueen goes into these concepts in much more detail. For more information, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and

and *Western Deep* stage what Moten might call Blackness's "scene of objection" to the biopolitical through the textures and acts of touching that course through both works. The residual consequences of colonization and global capital are posed in *Western Deep*, which witnesses the abhorrent labor conditions in a South African gold mine. McQueen records the miners' elevator ride up and down, in and out of one of the world's deepest mines.[14] Vertical ascent and descent remain specters of oppression—the very means by which this vestigial and yet altogether vivid form of raced labor is enforced and reproduced.[15] I consider how the vertical rise and fall within the mine encounter another type of immersion: the installation itself, often bathed in a dense, thick darkness when the camera is deprived of light deep down in the mine. When there is light, the grainy quality of the Super 8 film mirrors the grainy environment in the depths of TauTona, tethering the materiality of McQueen's medium to the matter of the mine and surrounding viewers in those textures. I then turn to the haptic gestures of objection to domestic forms of colonization in *Hunger,* centered on the 1981 Irish hunger strikes against the treatment of Irish Republican Army prisoners in the notorious Maze prison just outside Belfast.[16] With painstaking attention to the vagaries of the flesh, McQueen's camera shows the figure of Bobby Sands as an abject colonized object of resistance. I argue that textured immersion and objecthood tie these two works together despite the historical, geographic, and racial differences that also separate them.

In this introduction, I outline the discursive genealogies of immersive spectacle and the arguments advanced by its most vehement critics. I then shift gears to explore Black studies and Black feminism, two intersecting modes of thought that provide the analytical tools to pose and ponder questions about the immersive moving-image environments of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen. Unlike several current art historical critiques of immersive spectacle that cling to a

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Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*: *A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[14] T.J. Demos, "The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen," *October* 114 (Autumn 2005): 61.

[15] Art Institute of Chicago, "Steve McQueen: October 21-2012-January 6, 2013," exhibition packet.

[16] Tim Oglethorpe and Jane Mackichan, "A Hunger to Shock: The Men behind the Film Depiction of Bobby Sands' Hunger Strike Explain Themselves," *Daily Irish Mail*, October 31, 2008; Brian O'Doherty, "Terrible Beauty," *Artforum* 47, no. 5 (January 2009): 61.

critical position of distance, the work of contemporary Black studies and Black feminist theorists interrogates the very notion of an outside, a place of mastery and individualism, freed from the constraints of the body and others, a transcendent position generally reserved for normative subjects coded as White and male.

A word on the temporal gap between *Sweetback* and the work of Julien and McQueen: with no initial intention to write about feature-length film, I was led to Van Peebles through Julien's fascination with the famed filmmaker and his formidable film. Watching and re-watching *Baltimore* piqued my own interest in Black films and Black radical politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ways in which the Black Panther Party, for example, drew upon and textured Marxist tenets while using popular culture and mass media—or what Amy Obugo Ongiri calls "spectacular blackness"[17]—parallel in some ways Van Peebles's activities in Los Angeles as a former Hollywood director, independent filmmaker, and supreme marketing maestro of *Sweetback*. This moment of Black radicalism lends a historical backdrop to my discussion of subsequent artistic practices, namely that of Julien and McQueen, and points to another aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s. Opting out of a neat trajectory linking one moment or filmmaker to another, I look back and forward to map reverberations that suffuse several decades of Black artistic practice. These chapters are to be read as a constellation and not as a strict linear history or grandiose narrative of influence. For instance, by thinking about close-ups onto objecthood in McQueen's work, I have come to better understand the function of the close-up in Van Peebles's and Julien's film vocabularies. Writing about how Julien abolishes deep perspective for lateral lines revealed the horizons latent in Van Peebles's film and McQueen's work, formal affinities that I had not previously seen before.

These artists/filmmakers and their work in many ways taught me to see and think about questions I had not anticipated when I began this project. They led this dissertation into

[17] Amy Obugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 16–21, 29–54.

unexpected, imaginative, and deeply thoughtful places. In other words, I approached these artworks and films as a student rather than an authoritative, omniscient scholar, a masterful subject position that this dissertation—and I believe the artists in it—have aimed to jettison or offer alternatives. The dynamic of vertical and horizontal, subject and object relations not only guides this dissertation's theoretical framework but also its methodological one, something that I am particularly conscious of as a White art historian studying the work of Black artists and filmmakers. In his scholarship on Robert Scott Duncanson, a Black nineteenth-century painter based in Ohio, David Lubin discusses the potential "pitfall" he negotiated as White art historian writing about a Black artist: the site/sight of the "white knowing subject" toward a static, passive "object of knowledge:"[18]

> The alternative might seem to be silence: white art historians could imply agree not to write about black artists and thus steer clear of the racial subject-object dichotomy. But surely silence is not the only alternative. One might aspire instead for *dialogue* in which the white art historians neither enthrones himself (or herself) as all-knowing, all-seeing authority nor plays it safe by abdicating inquiry and speech altogether. In bell hooks's estimation, "Problems arise not when white [scholars] choose to write about the experiences of non-white people, but when such material is presented as 'authoritative,'" With this proviso in mind, I have tried to write about Duncanson, as about all the other artists in this book, not as someone who can be known fully and whose art can be fully understood, but as a site of inquiry at which various relevant questions (including those involving the social production of race) come together and play off one another.[19]

Lubin cites bell hooks's essay on a similar topic, which begins with a discussion during a course she taught on "women and race," and the conversation turned to "whether or not white women should or should not write about black women's lives." "It is this notion of "authority,"" she writes, "that we began to critique and discuss in class" and how it can run the risk of manifesting as a "politics of domination."[20] I endeavored not to replicate the position of the "white knowing subject" surveying above, vertically hovering over these artworks and artiste. Rather, the works of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen have unrelentingly shown me an immense amount not only about

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[18] David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), 109.
[19] Ibid.
[20] bell hooks, *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 42—43.

art and horizontal relations but also what it means to be a humanities scholar while still recognizing the my race, class, gender, and background inherently inflect my perspective on how I see, feel, and write and how I will never have "the authority of lived experience," or, rather, experiences, of being Black in the world.[21] I chose not to be silent about what I think are critical questions prompted by these films and installations; rather, I hope to be in a more lateral conversation with the creolized relations embedded within and exuding from *Sweetback*, *Baltimore, Western Deep/Caribs Leap*, and *Hunger* to think about high-stakes, urgent questions that relate to our world today.

Throughout this dissertation, I have decided to capitalize the word Black, particularly after reading a recent opinion piece in the *New York Times* by Professor Lori L. Tharps, who teaches journalism at Temple University. "When speaking of a culture, ethnicity, or group of people, the name should be capitalized," Tharps writes. "Black with capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color." "Ever since African people arrived in this country," she continues, "we have had to fight for the right to a proper name." Tharps also referenced W.E.B. DuBois's letter-writing campaign to newspapers, book publishers, and magazines to have the word 'Negro' capitalized to "confer respect on the page as well as in daily life." As Tharps points out, DuBois was successful, and now that "we've traded Negro for Black," why wouldn't we, she asks, "capitalize Black as well?"[22] As such, I will also capitalize the word White, and only use a lower case 'w' or 'b' to refer to colors or when I am quoting a text that uses lowercase for these terms. I capitalize Blackness *and* Whiteness because not doing so would help promote Whiteness as the norm, the universal, unmarked subject from which all other identities deviate, "the figure of disembodied, metaphysical transcendence," to use John P. Bowles's description in his introduction to a forum in *Art Journal* on "art history and the limits of whiteness."[23] Language

[21] Ibid., 44.
[22] Lori L. Tharps, "The Case for Black with a Capital B," *New York Times,* November 18, 2014, accessed December 19, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html.
[23] John P. Bowles, "Blinded by the White: Art and Art History at the Limits of Whiteness," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4: 39.

and naming matter, and since words are my tools to convey ideas, I feel that it is important to make this distinction clear.

* * *

Art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has launched some of the most searing condemnations of the "spectacularization of contemporary art." In his 2001 review of the Venice Biennale in *Artforum*, Buchloh took many of the time-based installations in the exhibition to task. "Their solicitation," which I read as a synonym for immersion, particularly troubled him:

> Exhibition value has been replaced by spectacle value, a condition in which media control in everyday life is mimetically internalized and aggressively extended into those visual practices that had previously been defined as either exempt from or oppositional to mass-cultural regimes, and that now relapse into the most intense solicitation of mythical experience.[24]

By referencing "exhibition value," Buchloh ventriloquizes Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."[25] Benjamin's argument and its ambiguities are worth revisiting, since Buchloh and others continue to draw upon it for their critiques. "The Work of Art" celebrates aura's demise at the hand of reproductive technologies, a slow death that began with the printing press, continued with photography, and was taken to new heights with the advent of film. Although Benjamin's definition of *aura* remains elusive, it circles around the question of distance between the artwork and its spectator.[26] This distance first manifested as the mystifying shroud surrounding icons and other objects of religious ritual. The secular version of distance surfaced in high culture's elitism and the myth of the artist genius. With the invention of reproductive technologies, however, artworks came closer to the masses, but did so at the cost of losing their aura.[27] "The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of aura" Benjamin

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[24] Buchloh, "Control, by Design," 162.
[25] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," second version, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3:106.
[26] Ibid., 105.
[27] Ibid., 101, 105–6.

writes, “is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.”[28] While the decay of aura heralded the death of art’s uniqueness, it also signaled the birth of the mass-produced commodity, part and parcel of the capitalist mode of reproduction that would offend Benjamin’s Marxist sensibilities. Greater access to art in reproduction indicates an expansion of capitalism, a paradox that illuminates the sheer complexity and contradictions within the pages of this rich essay and across Benjamin’s other writings.

The majority of Benjamin’s essay adheres to a Marxist account of reproductive technology as a great equalizer between art and the masses. But in parts of “The Work of Art” and quite explicitly in an earlier essay from 1931, “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin struck an elegiac tone regarding the diminishment of aura. Early photographic portraits, such as daguerreotypes, were “one of a kind” and exuded “incomparable beauty,” unavailable in the industrialized process of mass reproduction.[29] In Benjamin’s other theory of photography, agency lies with the photograph itself as a material and “magical” manifestation of the sitter, rather than with the viewer, whose powers over the object increase significantly when aura bids its final farewell.[30] In place of early photographic aura, however, another type turns up, and a dangerous one at that. Observing the rapid rise of Nazi Germany, Benjamin detected aura within the cult of the Führer, fortified by mass rallies and other spectacles of fascism, such as the imperial aerial shots in Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* (1935).[31] It also emanates from Hollywood spectacles, which surround stars with what Benjamin unforgivingly describes as a “putrid magic.”[32] When fascism and capitalism appropriate the revolutionary potential of film, all we get, Benjamin seems to propose, is a decidedly degraded aura, generated by the very same

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[28] Ibid.,105.
[29] Ibid.,108.
[30] Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings,* ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2:507–18. See also Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 111–13.
[31] Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or, The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 5–6.
[32] Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 113.

reproductive technologies that also damaged the original, purer kind. Although he fails to distinguish between the two, Buchloh seems to detect the arrival of a degraded aura in the spectacles of time-based art, many of which simulate the older aura of "outright mythical religious themes" to distract us from the fact that these installations remain "in the service of spectacle and commodity production."[33]

Buchloh's 2012 essay "Farewell to an Identity" echoes his earlier argument against spectacle but with even greater urgency. He includes a photograph from a production by German poet, playwright, and theater director Bertolt Brecht, an avid interlocutor of Benjamin's, to help substantiate his claims.[34] Brecht's concept of "distanciation" or alienation ("A-effekt") contrasts with Benjamin's auratic distance; in fact, Brecht's epic theater in many ways deconstructs the elements that make up aura, such as magic and mysticism.[35] Brecht's A-affekt intends to foment fundamental social change through epic theater. Brecht's epic theater has been mobilized as a pillar of politicized art, transforming passive spectators into active observers. Epic theater exposes representation as a constructed illusion rather than an "unrehearsed" event or the natural order of things.[36] Critically distanced from the scene, audience members put their reason to work, bringing about sociopolitical consciousness, formerly suppressed by the weight of dominant ideology. "The first condition for the A-effekt's application to this end," writes Brecht, "is that the stage and auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic

[33] Buchloh, "Control, by Design," 162.
[34] Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," 256.
[35] Bertolt Brecht and John Willet, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71, 85, 139. See also Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* (New York; London: Routledge, 1996), 84–87. Brecht's alienation is not to be confused with Marx's theory of alienation, which pivots around how workers in a capitalist mode of production lack ownership and agency over their own labor, estranged not only from the product of their work and the process of its production (performed for someone else) but ultimately from each other and their own subjectivity, once tied to their labor. For more information, see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 132–55.
[36] Brecht and Willet, *Brecht on Theatre,* 22, 75, 136.

tensions' should be set up."[37] Brecht's A-effekt destroys the last remaining embers of art's mystery, now vulnerable to the audience as active agents of deconstruction.

As with Benjamin's ambivalence about aura, Brecht's approach to the dynamic of distance and identification was also rather knotty. As film and media scholar Dana Polan has argued, "Brechtian art is an art of identification."[38] He goes on to qualify that there are two identifications, "one empathetic and unquestioning—the one connection to the reified vision of the world—and a critical one—a new perspective of knowledge from which the old way is scrutinized."[39] By empathy, Brecht meant the audience's connection to the emotions of the character, a conventional form of identification that had no place in epic theater. Instead, he asked the audience to "identify itself with the actor as being an observer" of the world, in short, to identify with the actor's own critical detachment from the scene and gain pleasure from the consciousness that this relay provides.[40] Critical consciousness arrives with "knowing that the world can be remade."[41] While distance prevails as Brecht's endgame (even though immersion serves as a stepping-stone to get there), Polan's account uncovers the complexities of epic theater, so often overlooked, like the ambiguities of Benjamin's aura, in the current critique of spectacle. I therefore distinguish between Brecht and Brechtian approaches: when I refer to Brecht, I mean the latter, a canonized version in which distance and reason are unequivocally prized over immersion and affect.

In addition to Benjamin's aura and the Brechtian A-effekt, Guy Debord's manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* of 1967 has been used by some of immersive spectacle's staunchest opponents. Writing on the eve of the student-worker protests in France, Debord paints a bleak picture of social life desperately in need of revolutionary camaraderie. In a society whose

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[37] Ibid., 135–36.
[38] Dana Polan, "Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 1 (1974), n.p., accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/BrechtPolan.html.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

members are “alienated” from each other and their own selves, the “spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.”[42] Debord warns that “the spectacle,” as he refers to it, serves as the “fulfillment” of commodity fetishism, masking with its “shimmering diversions” the fact that capitalism has reduced the social relations of human labor to the “fantastic form of a relation between things,” in Marx’s words, rather than between people.[43] As a result, “the spectacle,” the cultural embodiment of capitalism, evacuates traditional forms of social life, generating this dire sense of homelessness, an estrangement from the self and one another. Debord’s language to that effect bears repeating: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” As the “guardian of sleep,” the spectacle not only pacifies humanity, but it also “subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them.” No longer “living men,” the members of Debord’s society exist in the realm of the “non-living,” governed by capitalism’s relentless pursuit of profit and unaware of their own classed oppression. And, like capitalism, the scale of Debordian spectacle is vast. “Spectacle,” Debord warns us, “is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life.”[44] It far exceeds just the film industry, advertising, or other modes of mass media; spectacle’s reach restructures the world.

Debord’s primary examples are images and objects. Sucking the life out of society, spectacle leaves an accumulation of what Debord derisively terms “image-objects” in its wake. Images, then, fare no better than the commodities they picture or sell and should be treated with equal suspicion. Even the world itself has become an “image-object,” a “pseudo-world apart,” “an object of mere contemplation,” and a “world vision objectified.” And yet these “image-objects” seem so alive, with an animation that embellishes their allure. His examples range from “the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism” (akin to Marx’s “flight into the misty realm of religion” to “analogize” commodity fetishism[45]) to celebrities who have inherited

[42] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), n.p.
[43] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 165.
[44] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* n.p.
[45] Marx, *Capital*, 1:165.

some of the idolatry once paid to religious fetishes. Although Benjamin distinguishes the "cult value" of religious ritual from the "cult of the movie star," who represents little more than the "phony spell of the commodity," Debord, in contrast, tethers the two. "Spectacular technology has not dispelled the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves," Debord writes. "It has only tied them to an earthy base." In terms of cinema, the star transforms into an "image-object" and serves as "an object of identification" for spectators, who have forgotten their own alienation, pacification, and mortification.[46]

In the same essay in which Buchloh cites Brecht as a superior model of politicized art, traces of *The Society of the Spectacle* inevitably infuse Buchloh's thinking on the intertwined realities of finance capital, spectacle, and the stolen subjectivity in today's society, over forty years after Debord's. Embracing "spectacularization as the foundational modus of their practice," many artists today remain responsible for "making their audiences masochistically celebrate their own proper subjection to spectacle as the universally valid and incontestable condition of experience."[47] He names several artists, notably Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, and Richard Prince, for positioning themselves as "the chosen representatives of the culture of these social strata," namely "the emerging subclass of Wall Street financiers, real estate speculators, and state-sponsored plutocrats in Western societies."[48] One needs to look no further than record-breaking sales of artworks by these very artists to prove Buchloh's point. In 2013, Christie's sold Koons's *Balloon Dog (Orange)* (1994—2000) for $58.4 million, at the time the most expensive art work by a living artist to sell at auction.[49] Or take another landmark sale: in the midst of the economic crisis of 2008, the very day Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy,

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[46] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* n.p.
[47] Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," 256.
[48] Ibid., 255.
[49] Kathryn Tully, "The Most Expensive Art Ever Sold at Auction: Christie's Record –Breaking Sale," *Forbes,* November 13, 2013, Accessed April 23, 2016, *http*://www.forbes.com/sites/kathryntully/2013/11/13/the-most-expensive-art-ever-sold-at-auction-christies-record-breaking-sale/#548ba99c1f9c.

Sotheby's, despite negative predictions, sold 223 works by Damien Hirst for £111 million, breaking the world record for an auction sale of a single artist.[50]

Buchloh's conception of spectacle is as totalizing as Debord's, armed with the ability to reach "deeper into the registers of subject formation" and "every fiber of the constitution of the subject."[51] The "image-object," in other words, threatens subjectivity with its own abundant art object–ness, subjugating spectators to the oppressive ideologies that hide behind its glimmering façade. Seduced by spectacle and immersed within it, viewers have no critical distance left to leverage, losing themselves inside the nefarious force of capital in the guise of culture. Few viewers are safe from the suffocating logic of spectacle—nor are many artists. Buchloh names Harun Farocki and James Coleman as two time-based artists who make critical and political art, as well as those artists following in the footsteps of the anti-aesthetic tradition of Conceptual Art, such as Andrea Fraser and John Knight.[52]

Buchloh solidified his stake in the intersection of Marxist politics and the "annihilating force of the anti-aesthetic" decades prior in his essay of 1990: "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." Buchloh positions Conceptual Art as a withdrawal from art objects, which had become mere commodities complicit with the art market. As an alternative, artists like Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth gravitated toward the dematerialized letter of language as an "assault on the status of the object":

> Because the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work of analytic proposition), it

[50] Adam Sherwin, "Historonomics: How Damien Hirst became a cash cow again," *The Independent,* October 11, 2013, Accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/hirstonomics-how-damien-hirst-became-a-cash-cow-again-8874714.html; Stephen Adams, "Damien Hirst sale makes £111 million," *The Telegraph*, September 16, 2008, Accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/artsales/3560707/Damien-Hirst-sale-makes-111-million.html.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 256, 261.

> thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of the object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution.[53]

For Buchloh, Conceptual Art's "prohibition of any and all visuality" would remain an "inescapable aesthetic rule for the end of the twentieth century"—but a rule now continually broken in the twenty-first century by a new generation busy producing elaborate multiscreen, time-based art installations, "image-objects," so to speak, that pander to the next iteration of "the society of the spectacle."[54]

Other voices have joined Buchloh to critique spectacular immersion. Art historian Hal Foster uses *The Society of the Spectacle* to theorize the rise of ostentatious—and incredibly costly—buildings for museums. To compete with increasingly spectacular art, the museum "inflates" itself and transforms into a "gigantic spectacle-space."[55] Foster's critique of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao applies Debord's reasoning to the present condition of art and institutions. "Thirty years ago Guy Debord defined spectacle as capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image," writes Foster. "With Gehry and others the reverse is now true as well: spectacle is an image accumulated to such a degree that it becomes capital."[56] A monumental structure inspiring "touristic awe" and "corporate revival," Bilbao and other mega-museums lend tectonic form to the needs of advanced capital.[57] Andrea Fraser brilliantly parodies the spectacular nature of the Guggenheim Bilbao and the mythology build around Gehry, its 'starchitect' (Fig. 1) In the video *Little Frank and his Carp* (2001), Fraser wanders through the atrium of Bilbao listening to the official audio guide that gleefully contributes to the attention lavished upon Gehry's structure: "Isn't this a wonderful place? It's uplifting. It's like a Gothic cathedral. You can feel your soul rise up with the building around you…" After being told to feel a

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[53] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art, 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 107.
[54] Ibid., 119.
[55] Hal Foster, "Why All the Hoopla?," *London Review of Books* 23, no. 15 (August 23, 2001), accessed January 25, 2013, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n16/hal-foster/why-all-the-hoopla.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

pillar, Fraser lifts her dress and rubs against the stone surface of the pillar, mimicking the erotic description of the "powerfully sensual" curves of the building's design. What's more, the building itself is positioned as a pacifying palliative against the "demanding, complicated, bewildering" nature of modern and contemporary art. Bilbao, in contrast, "tries to make you feel at home," much to the detriment of the collection within its walls.[58] "For many people, Frank Gehry is not only our master architect," Foster writes, alluding to the resources given to and critical energy paid museum architecture rather than artwork, "but our master artist as well."[59]

Similar language is deployed in a chapter devoted to time-based installations in the second volume of *Art Since 1900,* the primary textbook for modern and contemporary art, co-authored by Buchloh, Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and David Joselit, all editors of *October,* the Marxist-oriented and highly influential journal focused on modern and contemporary avant-garde Western art. In the section entitled "The spectacularization of art," the authors turn to Debord to question today's time-based installations but also the contemporary museum as a "gigantic space-event that can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole."[60] In this chapter, Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay is also used to explicate how moving image work "continues to strive for more intense effects of immediacy through ever more elaborate forms of mediation" with the result, for some, of "mystification," mimicking the religious mysteries of early aura to even more immersive and seductive heights with the help of new digital technologies.[61] The prime example comes from the work of Bill Viola, much of which combines oblique or outright references to religious experience, such as baptisms, with technologies of "seductive luminosity and immense projection" borrowed from Hollywood, taken to even more "enveloping" extremes in the museum rather than movie theater.[62] The authors call his work an "ahistorical vision of spiritual transcendence," and in large part they are right, an appeal to universal themes and

[58] "Andrea Fraser: Little Frank and his Carp (2001)," *Tate,* Accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/fraser-little-frank-and-his-carp-t12324/text-summary.
[59] Foster, "Why All the Hoopla?"
[60] Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 2:700.
[61] Bois et al., *Art Since 1900*, 2:700.
[62] Ibid., 699.

experiences enhanced by the all-encompassing, "derealiz[ed] environment of his projected images that pull viewers in while allowing them to forget the specific and historical material realities of the world outside.[63]

Digressing from his co-authors' more uncompromising approaches, David Joselit harbors a more forgiving stance toward immersive spectacle as well as popular culture. In a roundtable for the most recent edition of *Art Since 1900*, he insists that artists can still operate within spectacle to create politically radical work. Joselit maintains that spectacle carves out "a new visual environment in which to act." "It is possible," he continues, "for artists to create 'events' within the spectacle."[64] Joselit identifies "events" or "acts" in film and, most especially, television, mass media most often controlled by corporate or government interests but in reach of a wide audience and ripe for artistic intervention. As I shall discuss in the first chapter, Joselit points to *Sweetback* as exemplary of inhabiting and, concomitantly, pushing back against mass media industries. Van Peebles managed to accomplish this critical intervention while still making money, thanks to the character of Sweetback, a "cipher," as Joselit puts it, of intense identification with an audience that came to see this unconventional hero in droves.[65] To a certain extent, Joselit's alignment with politics and aesthetics inside "the spectacle" informs my subsequent discussion of how *Sweetback* encouraged its eager audience to adventure within the "scene of objection," resistance that reverberated with objections outside the space of the cinema on the streets of Los Angeles.

In addition to Joselit, several other art historians have diverged from the dominant critique of spectacle and immersion and expressed a need for more nuanced paradigms to address the state of contemporary art. In March 2007, Claire Bishop and Mark Godfrey convened a conference at the Tate Modern devoted to the "spectacularization of contemporary art." In his talk, Godfrey examined three types of artistic practices that run alongside or even within the

[63] Ibid., 700.
[64] Bois et al., *Art Since 1900*, 2: 773.
[65] David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 126–29.

parameters of spectacle as defined by Debord—but always with a subversive edge: "description and critique of spectacle," "self-critical spectacle," and "spectacular art against the society of the spectacle."[66] Bishop focused less on specific artists and more on the ways in which the binaries surrounding spectatorship might be destabilized. She is particularly skeptical of socially engaged practices that presume viewers' participation as an inherently radical act. Bishop turns to French philosopher Jacques Rancière's model of education to disabuse us of the notion that spectacle automatically produces apolitical, passive spectators, while participatory art activates them, an assumption made on the notion that viewers lack capacity for interpretation and critical thought without the help of an artwork and artist (or intellectual, for that matter). Rancière emphasizes how both teacher *and* pupil might possess equal intelligence and knowledge; in fact, the schoolteacher might be "ignorant" to begin with, as indicated in the title of his book *The Ignorant Schoolteacher: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation.* His pedagogy aims to eliminate hierarchies across different intelligences and knowledge bases.[67]

Rancière later applied these ideas on education to spectatorship in "The Emancipated Spectator," an essay for the March 2007 issue of *Artforum*, and in a subsequent book of the same name. In the essay, he questions longstanding binaries of spectatorship and spectacle, in particular the Brechtian one of bad spectators, passively immersed in the fiction on stage, and good observers, poised for action in a state of high consciousness. He also questions Debord, in particular, as well as notions of "looking as the opposite of knowing" and "representation as the alienation of the self."[68] He calls these diametric extremes "partitions of the sensible": "Why identify the fact of being seated motionless with inactivity, if not by the presupposition of a radical gap between activity and inactivity? Why identify 'looking' with passivity? Why identify hearing with being passive?" "Put in other terms, they are allegories of inequality" as well as "capacities or

[66] Mark Godfrey, "Three Responses to the Spectacularisation of Contemporary Art" (paper presented at "Rethinking Spectacle," Tate Modern, London, March 31, 2007), accessed February 1, 2013, http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/rethinking-spectacle-video-recordings.
[67] Claire Bishop, "Spectacle and Participation" (paper presented "Rethinking Spectacle," Tate Modern, London, March 31, 2007), accessed February 1, 2013, http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/rethinking-spectacle-video-recordings.
[68] Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (March 2007): 272, 278.

incapacities."[69] Spectacle can help level the "unequal" dynamic of spectator and "performer," serving as a "crucial third term…to which the other two can refer," a "meditation between them" that spurs "intellectual emancipation."[70] Rancière seizes upon spectacle itself to soften the binaries that have congealed around the critique of spectacle. His is a position "from the inside," *between* and within these polarized terms, sensations, and ways of experiencing art and others.[71]

Rancière's commitment to equalize the position of spectator and stage certainly resonates with the lateral relations and spaces that unfold throughout my dissertation; his interest in a place "from the inside" and between binaries also reverberates with the immersive invitations of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen. In the following pages, the possibility of an "emancipated spectator" remains a present—if unnamed—theoretical figure, and I hope to join Rancière as part of a larger "fabric," to use his vocabulary, of scholars keen to texture the current and historical critique of spectacle.[72] Although I foreground spectatorship (as much film theory has always done) in my analysis of both film *and* time-based art, I am less concerned than Bishop and Rancière with states of active and passive and more with the detached position of the subject and the immersed one of the object. I also depart from how they approach the balance of power between spectator and image, which, I believe, very often tips in the favor of the former, spectators fortified with dangerous illusions of mastery over the world before them. I want to take seriously material, spectacular "image-objects" engaged in resistance to the all-knowing, transcendent vision of the subject. I want to calibrate the stakes of the debate to alternative models of immersion and objection proposed by the field of Black studies and the work of Black artists. Both Godfrey and Bishop remain tied to a White Western model (Godfrey, for instance, names nearly all White American and European artists as his primary examples, and his definition of spectacle remains within the orbit of Debord's);[73] I hope to question that model

[69] Ibid., 277.
[70] Ibid., 278.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," 280.
[73] Godfrey, "Three Responses to the Spectacularisation of Contemporary Art."

altogether as well as to refract immersive spectacles through the overlooked lens of Black radical aesthetics.

In addition to the art historical critiques of spectacle, my project also necessarily considers ones from feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," a founding text of feminist film theory published in 1976, argues that Hollywood films are organized around patriarchy. Inflecting Debord's "image-objects" in terms of gender difference, the essay details how the female character almost invariably serves as the passive object of the male subject's active look. She surfaces as spectacle, frozen in a state of "to-be-looked-at-ness."[74] Only male characters drive the narrative, while female characters stand as "bearers" of meaning rather than creators.[75] Mulvey deems identification with characters on screen, the crux of the conventional cinematic experience, to be a politically suspect affair. She ends the essay with a call to weaken the immersive seduction of spectacle with "passionate detachment."[76] Distance, then, demystifies how "the magic of Hollywood style" sutured viewers into normative gender positions, sorted into active male subjects and passive female objects.[77]

Since Mulvey penned "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," her relationship to cinematic pleasures as both a scholar and cinephile has evolved, and she has been the first to admit some of the essay's shortcomings.[78] One such lacuna is the essay's (color) blindness to racial difference. Just a handful of years prior to the publication of Mulvey's text, Toni Morrison had already articulated—in fictional form—the gap between Black female spectators and the White screen in her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye,* published just a year before *Sweetback* arrived in movie theaters across the country. Morrison provides several examples of how identification posed a distinct problem for Black women faced with the idealized White female characters that

[74] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed., Language, Discourse, Society (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19.
[75] Ibid., 20.
[76] Ibid., 27.
[77] Ibid., 16, 26–27.
[78] Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 31–32.

Mulvey critiques as well as the stereotypes of Black characters that she overlooks in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In the novel, the protagonist/narrator Claudia expresses an "unsullied hatred" for images of White actresses, specifically the "silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" featured on her milk mug, a resentment disavowed by her sister and neighborhood friend Pecola, whose "self-hatred" of her own Black skin and longing for blue eyes like Shirley's give the novel its name. Another instance comes later when Pecola's mother gets from cinema not only escapism but also "education in the movies," a lesson on "the scale of absolute beauty," a biased spectrum that favors White skin. "In equating physical beauty with virtue," Morrison writes, "she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap." Through cinematic "self-contempt" passed down from Pauline to her daughter Pecola, Morrison sketches an intergenerational dynamic of Black female spectatorship in which the silver screen imparts deleterious ideologies of race and gender, breeding self-dissolution and destruction.[79]

Around the same time that Morrison and Mulvey published their respective texts, the "First Wave" of Black film theory emerged with the publication of Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* in 1973.[80] *Sweetback* served as a primary target of Bogle's critique in his last chapter, "The 1970s: Bucks and the Black Movie Boom." While Bogle acknowledged that Sweetback and other Blaxploitation heroes presented a transformation of the silver screen by showing "sexually aggressive" Black men who "met violence with violence and triumphed," he concludes that "at heart, its hero [Sweetback] was the familiar brutal black buck," a well-worn stereotype whose animalistic sexuality and unbridled aggression menaced the purity and virtue of White woman.[81] More history than theory, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* traces the trajectory of these stereotypes in film, beginning with Edwin S. Porter's twelve-minute picture, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

[79] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970), 19, 122.
[80] I borrow the terms "First Wave" and "Second Wave" from film scholar Frank B. Wilderson III. For more information, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 59–62.
[81] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 235, 236.

(1903), featuring White actors in blackface.[82] The roster of cinematic stereotypes in Bogle's title discloses the stakes of Black film scholarship of this early period: to reveal how caricatures of Blackness on screen reflected and even induced not only symbolic but actual violent objectification of Black bodies in the world outside the cinema.[83]

Soon thereafter, several other publications joined *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, including Daniel Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Like Bogle, Leab defined the "black experience" in terms of stereotypes, as opposed to the favored mode of realism: Sambo, the "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy" caricature of Black masculinity and his militant opposite, Superspade, the excessively violent and virile iteration of the "black buck," enacted most vividly by Blaxploitation heroes.[84] With few exceptions, notably films centered on male-headed nuclear families such as *Sounder* (1972)—a "positive approach" toward the struggles of a Black sharecropping family "warmly embraced by Black leaders"—stereotyped objectification dominates Leab's history of Black bodies on film, evolving with each successive era of cinema.[85] These publications marked a significant moment in film scholarship, which had long overlooked or outright ignored—as with the critical enshrinement of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915)—questions of race and racism. They also set up certain binaries around cinematic images that, as we shall see, echoed the prolific criticism of *Sweetback*: positive and negative imagery, real and stereotyped representations.[86]

The "Second Wave" of Black film theory departed from the historical approach of the first and explored reception, subjectivity, and resistance to anti-Black racism in the cinema.[87] In her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" for the influential volume *Black American Cinema* published in 1993, bell hooks explores how Black female viewers might relate

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[82] Ibid, 3–4.
[83] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 60–62.
[84] Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 1, 4, 239–56.
[85] Ibid., 260–62.
[86] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 60–62.
[87] Ibid., 60, 63–64.

to *and* resist gendered ideologies differently from White female viewers, a disparity neglected by the majority of "mainstream feminist film criticism."[88] A "traumatic relation to the gaze has informed black spectatorship," hooks declares at the beginning of the text; "distance" offers the means to combat this trauma.[89] Spectatorial pleasure remains a resource in hooks's account, but it appears only as distanced critique. Unlike Mulvey's "binary opposition," in hooks's words, "of woman as image and man as bearer of the look," the history of Black female spectatorship unravels this paradigm by "looking from a position that disrupted," although hooks's "oppositional gaze" resembles something along the lines of Mulvey's "passionate detachment."[90] In hooks's account, critical distance must be preserved to "no longer feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized" and "to affirm subjectivity."[91] The dynamic of distanced subject over and against immersed and complicit object shapes this important text of Second Wave Black film theory.

"Representation is a place of struggle," hooks wrote in her earlier book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, and the most formidable opponent emerges as the commodification of Blackness in mass media.[92] She focuses in particular on how the commodification of Black women intersects with the history of slavery: they are "objectified," she argues, "in a manner similar to that of black females who stood on auction blocks" and "reduced to mere spectacle."[93] Imagery of Black men, however, follows a somewhat different route through mass media. She cites films influenced by Black Power that celebrate Blackness as well as normative masculinity, attacking racism while leaving sexism in tact. In a description that could easily be applied to the character Sweetback, the "would-be male rebel" manifests as a "phallocentric idealization of masculinity." "Liberation," she continues, "is a task for men."[94] In an interview included in Julien's documentary on Blaxploitation, *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002), hooks condemns what she considers to be Van Peebles's pure profit motivation, evidenced by the ease at which he

[88] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," 295.
[89] Ibid., 288, 289.
[90] Ibid., 295.
[91] Ibid., 299, 302.
[92] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 3, 21.
[93] Ibid., 62.
[94] Ibid., 94, 98–99.

commodified his own body, echoing many period critiques that I shall explore in greater detail in the first chapter.[95] In hooks's account, "an oppositional gaze" must be yielded to combat objectification and reclaim "subjectivity," stolen by racist spectacle.[96]

Manthia Diawara largely concurs with hooks's notion of "oppositional" looking for his essay in *Black American Cinema*, but he shifts his attention to the Black male viewer, who must become a "resisting spectator."[97] Because much conventional Hollywood cinema advances racist ideologies, Black spectators can find no pleasure in identification and therefore should translate this inherent distance into "active criticism."[98] Yet unlike hooks's skeptical stance toward *Sweetback,* Diawara argues that Van Peebles generated a productive form of identification for Black audiences, whose enthusiasm contributed to the film's box office success. Based on a narrative of "empowerment," *Sweetback* stands apart from the vast majority of films featuring Black characters, who "always lose."[99] Van Peebles "transforms the ghetto, where Black people are objects," writes Diawara, "into the community where they affirm their subjecthood."[100] While Diawara complicates the intersecting binaries of distance and immersion, alienation and identification, radical and complicit, he preserves the one of subjecthood and objecthood. Subsequent theories of Black studies and *Sweetback* itself*,* as I shall argue, explore what it means to occupy the position of object instead of that of the subject, whose individuality must be guarded at all costs in contradiction to the "community" that Diawara identifies in *Sweetback.*

Since the 1990s, some of the most incisive Black film theory has come from the pen of Frank B. Wilderson III. His book *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* traces how cinema reproduces a "grammar of suffering" derived from "the U.S. and its foundational antagonisms;" namely, the unequal and violent power dynamics that have

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[95] bell hooks as quoted in *BaadAsssss Cinema,* directed by Isaac Julien (New York: Independent Film Channel; Minerva Picture Company Ltd., 2002), color digital video.
[96] bell hooks, *Black Looks,* 7.
[97] Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Black American Cinema*, 211, 219.
[98] Ibid., 219.
[99] Ibid., 24–25, 214
[100] Ibid., 24–25.

structured the relationship between White settlers and "Red natives" and White masters and Black slaves.[101] Wilderson's hermeneutics parse cinematic language to show how Blackness on screen and offscreen always remains captive in the purgatory of "social death."[102] He borrows this term from Orlando Patterson's study *Slavery and Social Death*, which maintains that slavery—and slavery alone (not even oppressive wage-labor systems)—produces "social death," a "secular excommunication" from not only "any legitimate social order" or "formally recognized community" but also the realm of the human.[103] For Wilderson, "social death" translates cinematically into "outside of relationality" and "the very antithesis of the Human subject, a banishment even in the most radical of films."[104] Wilderson also turns to Frantz Fanon to articulate how "social death," part and parcel of "U.S. antagonisms," shapes not only the formal grammar and narrative arc of film but also all realms of everyday life. "Look, mama, a Negro; I'm scared!" a White child yells on the street, the primal scene in Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, where the identification with Blackness, cast as "animal," "bad," "wicked," "ugly," and altogether inhuman, takes searing effect.[105] Fanon echoes this scene on the street with one in the cinema when he sees himself in a stereotype of the "Negro groom" on screen:

> I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim.[106]

"I am slave not to the 'idea' others have of me," he reminds us, "but to my appearance."[107] Fanon's totalizing account of a toxic visual field, filled with the pain of being seen as something less than a human subject, echoes the inescapable structures of "suffering" that govern Wilderson's account of cinema.

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[101] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 6.
[102] Ibid., 17, 21.
[103] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 5–7.
[104] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 7, 10.
[105] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 92–93. See also Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 27.
[106] Ibid., 14.
[107] Ibid., 95.

Wilderson has been placed under the rubric of "Afro-pessimism," a wing of Black studies that seizes upon the "social death," or to put it another way, the negative modalities of Black objecthood forced to live outside the contours of humanity.[108] On the other side of the debate moves Fred Moten, who is "reticent" but amenable toward the phrase "Black optimism" or "Afro-optimism" to schematize his position around Blackness as objecthood, lived as the promise of social life, in opposition to subjecthood, which must safeguard its autonomy and individuality in an act of social death.[109] For Moten, both Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism converge and diverge around the question of "whether blackness could be loved," an admiring "echo" of Bob Marley's musical query.[110] While Wilderson might consider that very proposition "an impossibility," Moten, conversely, views it as a "condition of possibility" for a life lived in common with others: Blackness as the very essence of sociality.[111] In the chapter on McQueen, I will return to the debate about "social death" and "social life" in terms of the artist's later films and installations that encounter colonial histories in South Africa and Northern Ireland.[112]

"The Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," the introduction of Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,* provides the theoretical resources to understand Black radical aesthetics as a performative breach of subject and object positions, beginning when people became property and performed resistance. As a human treated like a commodity, Aunt Hester's scream against her torturer in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* proves Marx wrong: not only can commodities speak, but "objects can and do resist" as well, revealing the thorough imbrication of personhood and objecthood at the heart of Blackness.[113] Moten explicates the chapter on commodity fetishism in Marx's *Das Kapital,* which concludes that since commodities cannot speak they hold no inherent material value. But Marx

[108] Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black,* 56–59; Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 738.
[109] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 738.
[110] Ibid.; Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Could You Be Loved?," Tuff Gong/Island, 1980.
[111] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 738.
[112] Ibid., 740.
[113] Moten, *In the Break,* 1.

neglected the historical fact that some commodities have also been people. Here are Moten's words on the matter:

> According to Marx, the speaking commodity is an impossibility invoked only to militate against mystifying notions of the commodity's essential value. My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide the separates slavery and "freedom."[114]

He hears "the rich content" of the "object/commodity's aurality," Aunt Hester's wordless shriek, as evidence of the inherent material value of enslaved objects and their capacity to resist.[115]

Moten's project proves to be an incredibly ambitious one, taking on Marx's figuration of commodity objects and the larger legacy of Marxism, often blinded by tunnel vision focused on questions of class. To do so, Moten builds upon the pioneering work of Cedric Robinson, whose monumental study *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* shows how transatlantic slavery was constitutive to the formation and growth of capitalism, rather than to a prior economic system, which Marx called "primitive accumulation."[116] Marx considered slavery to be an "embarrassing residue of a precapitalist, ancient mode of production," writes Robinson in the preface to the 2000 edition.[117] Slaves, therefore, were "disqualified" from "historical and political agency in the modern world."[118] For Black radicals of the twentieth century, Marxism's Euro-centric vision lacked global reach, making it an "insufficient explanatory of cultural and social forces," particularly "freedom struggles" beyond the "metropole."[119] Robinson's project aims to "recuperate radical theory from its blunders," opening it onto the "Black radical tradition."[120] By tethering capitalism to slavery, a connection disregarded by Marx, Robinson also attunes Marxism to race and racism, as well as communal traditions of Black radicalism, from *marronage*

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[114] Ibid., 5–6.
[115] Ibid., 6.
[116] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxix.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., xxx.
[120] Ibid.

movements in the West Indies to thinkers and activists like C.L.R. James to Richard Wright to W.E.B. DuBois, whom Robinson labels as "internationalists," broad in their understanding of resistance across space and time, a diasporic radicalism.[121]

Both Moten and Robinson reveal how Marx and orthodox Marxism ignore forms of radical resistance to capitalism that emerged inside slavery and outside the borders of Marx's European cartography. Within the "scene of objection," material objects object to subjectivity itself, which Moten defines as "the subject's possession of itself and its objects," a masterful, disembodied, and dematerialized ontology, a pure pair of eyes aligned with Western Civilization and Western Man.[122] "Blackness," he writes, "is the strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence between personhood and subjectivity" with a force so great that the subject suddenly becomes estranged or "possessed…by the object it possesses."[123] Resistance to the subject emerges from an object *within* the "scene of objection," a key spatial distinction that allows us to view immersion in a new light, carving out a space for radicalism to coalesce from inside. While Moten animates the shrieks and other powerful sounds of resistance that erupt from within the "scene of objection," my project considers this framework of Black radical aesthetics in terms of immersive visuals (as well as, in some cases, sound) in the work of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen.

The question of spectacle, Blackness, and the "scene of objection" also comes to the fore when Moten "invokes and departs" from Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery*, *and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America.* Similar to Moten, Hartman is equally invested in dismantling the hierarchies that the (White) subject has erected and lorded over the (Black) object. To be more specific, both Moten and Hartman demonstrate how the critique of the slave economy and its claim to objects parallels a critique of the liberal

[121] Ibid., xxxii, 310–14. *Marronage*, a "highly overlooked form of flight from slavery," writes Neil Roberts, "conventionally refers to a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society in order to create a fully autonomous community, and for centuries it has been integral to interpreting the idea of freedom in Haiti as well as other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries…" For more information, see Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3–4.
[122] Moten, *In The Break,* 1–2.
[123] Ibid., 1–5, 255.

subject and its claim to autonomy and transcendence.[124] But I believe one significant place where Moten and Hartman differ is how Hartman associates subjection not just with subjectivity but also with spectacle itself. What Frederick Douglass calls the "terrible spectacle" of his Aunt Hester's torture makes an appearance in the very first sentence of Hartman's book: Douglass "was born" and thus assumed the status of enslaved subject during this "spectacular" scene of extreme pain. Hartman however, moves away from the enslaved subject forged in the more obvious or "shocking spectacles" to the one hardened in the mundane and quotidian spectacles of singing at the slave auction block or dancing for the master, moments seemingly filled with human affects of pleasure, agency, and individuality and yet nefariously subtended by the systems of control, domination, and violence. She calls these deceptively innocent amusements "spectacles of mastery."[125]

It is difficult however, to separate Moten's notion of Black performance as "transgressive publicity" from spectacle. It seems just as difficult to isolate spectacle from "the terrible spectacle" of Aunt Hester's scream, which inaugurates Moten's train of thought: a spectacle simultaneously of abjection but also one of objection.[126] If sonic resistance comes from within the "scene of objection," then my project argues that visual resistance can also erupt from within an immersive scene of spectacle, prying open Debord's "image-objects," Buchloh's "status of the object," or Marx's "commodity" onto Blackness that "can tend and has tended toward the experimental achievement and tradition of an advanced, transgressive publicity" with the untrammelled force of objection.[127] When Julien encourages us to leave the distanced subject position of Renaissance perspective for that of the object within and across his three-screen installation or when Van Peebles and McQueen decline the confines of the subject and fashion themselves into erotic objects inside *Sweetback* and *Bear* (1993), the artist's first moving image work*,* respectively, we

[124] Ibid., 1.
[125] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3, 7–8, 17, 22.
[126] Moten, *In The Break,* 1, 233–34.
[127] Ibid., 1.

witness a Black aesthetics of immersion. This force of objection "infuses" and "deforms" us, all the while foreclosing the detachment between scene and spectacle and softening the edges that cleave spectatorial subjects from immersed, displayed objects.[128]

Moten's choice to begin his project with Aunt Hester's scream points to a feminine force that haunts Black masculinity. This force, I contend, complicates Van Peebles's connection to the machismo of the Black Panthers and his patrimonial relationship with his son, Mario, a fellow filmmaker and collaborator. And it likewise shapes the constellation that comprises the nonlinear structure of this project's three chapters and the affinities among Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen. I extend Moten's linguistic declension of the reproductive labor of *mater*nity and the reproductive *mater*iality of the audio recordings that form the basis of his study to the reproductive *mater*iality of film, the shared medium of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen. "*Being maternal,*" Moten exhorts, is "indistinguishable from being *material*," an argument that travels with and beyond a biological understanding of reproduction and toward a more capacious notion of media and the frank materiality of objecthood, even in the thick of revolutionary machismo or moving-image patrimony.[129] Moten's etymological pursuits serve as an unremitting reminder of the material, even corporeal nature of Black aesthetics and Black masculinity, unavailable in the dematerialized, transcendent aspirations of the (White, male) subject.

The hidden maternity of Black masculinity stems from Spillers's notion of the "female within," which she presents in her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In Spillers's account, the unimaginable natal alienation of slavery deprived Black men of the vertical Law of the Father and the patriarchical family unit, sundering claims to the linear time of origins and paternal inheritance. Yet it also rendered these men "the only American community of males which has the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself."[130] These men must nurture the "power of "yes" to the "female" within" as the "shadowy evocation of the cultural

[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., 16.
[130] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

synthesis long evaded—the law of the Mother."[131] A caress that lurks within masculinity, the "law of the Mother," which Spillers also refers to as "the touch of the mother," takes flight as a lateral movement the moment slavery "dispersed" kin in a web of "horizontal relatedness."[132] The wound of slavery also wounded patriarchy, leveling its lines of inheritance and alerting masculinity to the "female within." Following this argument, I contend that the male gender identities of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen, as well as some of their paternal proclivities, fail to conceal the "touch of the mother" and the "female within" their work; their shared formal vocabularies of lateral cinematography across one or several screens might reveal the Black feminine within these masculine enterprises. "The Black feminine is a purloined secret of sorts, it hides in plain sight," writes Black studies scholar Rizvana Bradley, an "intellectual and artistic labor" that has "always afforded the project of Black aesthetics."[133] My focus on three male artists/filmmakers is a deliberate decision. I hope to show the vital presence of Black *mater*nity in the material choices and forms of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen. In other words, I want to show how their work is irreducible beyond the "female within."

The spatial orientation of "within" also points to the way in which the objects of my study invite us into the "scene of objection." These films and installations occasion a distinctly lateral version of immersion, which unsettles the grandiose illusion of masterful vision, granted by deep shots and distanced perspective. As art historian Rosalyn Deutsche argues, geometric perspective's optics of omniscience remains reserved for "an autonomous subject who views social conflicts from a privileged and unconflicted space." "He seems to stand outside," Deutsche continues, "not in the world."[134] Moreover, film theorist Kaja Silverman connects this type of supreme viewing position with the "mythically potent symbolic father," whose "knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power" resembles the distanced gaze that

[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Rizvana Bradley, "Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave, and Thornton Dial," unpublished manuscript.
[134] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago and Cambridge, MA,: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; MIT Press, 1996), 197–201, 205–6.

critics of spectacle turn to as a resource to combat ideological interpellation.[135] As I will show in each chapter, the palpable horizons of Van Peebles's, Julien's, and McQueen's formal languages abscond detachment for immersion as a gesture of radical gender politics, betraying the perspective of the "mythically potent symbolic father" for the "female within."

As Spillers's essay implies, the lateral lines of the African diaspora not only sabotage the larger legacy of patriarchy's vertical orientation, but they also propose an alternative model of space, "diffusion" and connections across countries and cultures now in closer contact.[136] To further elaborate this supposition of diffusion across space, I turn to the concept of creolization. Édouard Glissant couples creolization with the action of "spreading," a lateral spatial, relational, and, as I hope to show, spectatorial model special to the borderless network of the African diaspora. The heart of creolization lies in Glissant's native Caribbean.[137] In particular, Caribbean plantations represented "one of the wombs of the world," to borrow his maternal rhetoric.[138] "An always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle," creolization on the plantation "created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance."[139] As with Spillers and Moten, Glissant considers how the travesty of slavery also generated more lateral relations and geographies, founded on condensation and collision, "knots" and "tangles," an alternative to "linear order," "hierarchies," and distances that have so forcefully come to determine the shape of the world.

Drawing upon the rhizomatic model of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Glissant proposes the "network spreading" of the rhizome as the shape of creolization or what he also terms a "Poetics of Relation."[140] The opposite of the rhizome is the "intolerant root," whose motion maintains a "hierarchical order" or "absolute forward projection." Glissant conveniently translates this dynamic of horizontal and vertical in art historical terms. Riffing upon Deleuze once again,

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[135] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 204.
[136] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 74–75.
[137] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.
[138] Ibid., 63.
[139] Ibid., 71.
[140] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 11, 15.

Glissant relates the lateral nature of creolization to the energetic diffusions of the baroque, while "hierarchical order" and depth cohere to Renaissance perspective. "Baroque art was a reaction against the rationalist pretense of penetrating the mysteries of the known with one uniform and conclusive move," he writes of Renaissance perspective and its "ambition to master reality."[141] In contrast, the baroque "produced a "being-in-the world," rather than distanced from it, "spreading into the world," rather than above and outside it. Here, Glissant articulates how these two modes of vision each confer lateral or vertical "relations."[142]

I propose that Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen use immersion in the cinema or museum to model creolized relations. Far from an apolitical capitulation to capitalism, lateral immersion in their works dismantles the very vertical hierarchies that capitalism instantiates, such as Black and White, woman and man, rich and poor, West and the rest, subject and object, to name but a few that had come to structure Van Peebles's Los Angeles, Julien's Baltimore, and McQueen's Northern Ireland and South Africa. Immersion thrusts us into the "scene of objection," an objection to the vertical order of the world, and forces us into "being-in-the-world." Spectators are interwoven into the scene, given little choice by the expansive soundtracks, seductive imagery, and wide-screen or multiscreen embrace characteristic of these artists' and filmmakers' aesthetics, much of which has explicitly harnessed the excess of baroque tendencies, as I will explore in the following chapters. Theirs is an art of the diaspora. To be more specific, their work unfolds through the lateral lines of diasporic creolization: a terrible gift, a wound, and a dream.

Scholars from the Black British cultural studies tradition have also adopted a diasporic approach to theorizing Blackness, many of whom have influenced Julien's work, in particular (I will return to this dialogue in the next chapter). Paul Gilroy's influential text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) considers the Atlantic Ocean, the watery stage of the Triangle Trade, as constitutive of and a paradigm through which to understand Blackness and modernity. In an attempt to "repudiate the dangerous obsessions with 'racial' purity which are

[141] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 77–79.
[142] Ibid., 78, 79.

circulating inside and outside black politics," a desire for origins and a fear of "intermixture," Gilroy looks to the Atlantic as a special space that "yields a course of lessons as the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade," a watery expanse of "intercultural and transnational formation."[143] Like Glissant, he is interested in the space between and collisions among countries and cultures, transgressing "national borders" in an effort to grasp Black identity as Blackness; in other words, as always and already constellated, enacting "fragmentation and differentiation" in and through the African diaspora.[144]

Other English scholars, most notably Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, have also called for capacious, denationalized frameworks, and Hall himself discussed the concept of creolization at "Documenta XI: Platform 3," a conference held in St. Lucia during which Julien also spoke on the same topic. While Hall acknowledges overlaps between diaspora and creolization, he also points out some of the key differences, including the fact that diaspora can apply to a wide range of cultures and peoples, while creolization refers specifically to the African diaspora and emerges from "massive disparities of power."[145] Few diasporas have resulted from willing exodus, but the African diaspora was a matter of violent force, as was the process of creolization. Certain diasporic communities remain separate from the dominant culture, while creolization implies fusion and contact.[146] In another talk at the same conference, Hall also wonders whether creolization can be tied to other examples of cultural contact, and he provisionally concludes that creolization is "distinctive" to the "brutal impact of colonization, transportation, and slavery," which "produced," he adds, "a specific cultural model."[147] While many of the case studies in this project focus on spatial segregations and racial oppressions in American cities that themselves resulted from the economic and social system of antebellum slavery in the United States, I also hope to

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[143] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix-xi.
[144] Ibid., 35.
[145] Stuart Hall, "Creolization, Diaspora, and Hybridity in the Context of Globalization," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11: Platform 3,* ed. Okwui Enwezor et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz, 2003), 186.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Stuart Hall, "Créolité and the Process of Creolization," in *Créolité and Creolization*, 41.

extend the paradigm of creolization to other examples of colonialism and cultural contact, from South Africa to Northern Ireland. In addition, I consider the mixing of spectatorial subject and displayed object in these works as a choreography of creolization that has profound consequences for the world outside the walls of the movie theater or museum. I take Glissant's lead in his understanding of creolization as an ongoing process that is able to relate to art historical phenomena as readily as it subtends the vibrant cultural contact of the Caribbean.[148]

Immersion in the work of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen *is* creolization. Their installations and films stage lateral encounters *across* spatial and ontological borders. A lateral embrace into a "scene of objection," viewers find themselves confronted with Blackness, "image-objects" who object to the very notion of the subject as discrete, detached, and omniscient, the very same subject who has masterminded vertical hierarchies of our past and present global order. The position of the outside remains not only untenable for an aesthetic of the Black radical tradition but also, moreover and perhaps more importantly, undesirable. Immersion—a betrayer of boundaries, distant to distance, and intimate with objecthood—allows these three artists/filmmakers to imagine new worlds, lateral worlds, worlds of Blackness.

[148] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 34.

SWEET SWEETBACK'S SEDUCTIVE SONG

"Melvin's got guts," photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks remarked in a documentary devoted to maverick filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, whose *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) about a sex performer-cum-Black radical made history as one of the highest grossing independent films in its time (Fig. 1).[149] The debate still rages as to which Black director, Parks or Van Peebles, invented the Blaxploitation genre, mostly populated by films with White directors and produced by Hollywood studios.[150] Historians acknowledge the significant roles both Parks's *Shaft* (1971) and Van Peebles's *Sweetback* played in creating the genre of urban heroes and heroines who combatted police, drug dealers, and other avenues of corruption with wits, fists, guns, karate, or seduction (Fig. 2). A battle over the merits of both films was waged on the turf of the *New York Times* among critics Clayton Riley and Vincent Canby as well as Parks himself. According to Canby, a White critic, the "mindless and politically exploitative" *Sweetback* has only one aspect in common with *Shaft,* "the good Saturday night movie": an "awareness of the audiences for whom they were made."[151] For Riley, a Black critic, *Sweetback* "wins in a walk" because it depicts "a painful truth." This truth revolved around the harrowing journey of the titular character, who spends the majority of the film on the run after beating and killing members of the Los Angeles Police Department for abusing a Black radical named Moo-

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[149] Gordon Parks as quoted in *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It),* directed by Joe Angio (New York: Breakfast at Noho LLC, 2005), DVD.

[150] Blaxploitation is considered a subgenre of the larger genre of exploitation films, which have been produced since long before 1971. Exploitation films, which become a definitive category of movie production in the 1920s, are considered formulaic films with low production values and small budgets that address sensational or taboo topics. These films were very often marginalized from the Hollywood studio system and produced and/or distributed independently. Eric Schaefer points out that the term *exploitation* was "derived from the practice of exploitation, advertising, or promotional techniques that went above and beyond typical posters, trailers, and newspaper advertisements. In the 1960s, the specific form of exploitation was indicated in the prefix and attached to the term: 'sexploitation,' 'Blaxploitation,' and so forth. These types of films intensified in the late 1960s and early 1970s precisely because of the end of Hollywood's main censorship arm, the Production Code. For more information, see Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 3–6; Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 9–11, 73–74.

[151] Vincent Canby, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: Does It Exploit Injustice?," *New York Times*, May 9, 1971; Vincent Canby, "'Shaft'—At Least, a Good Saturday Night Movie," *New York Times*, July 11, 1971.

Moo. As Isaac Julien points out, *Sweetback* made cinematic history as the first film to show a Black man kill a White man without getting jailed or murdered in return.[152] Presenting a "soothing falsehood," in Riley's words, *Shaft* makes urban Blackness not only bourgeois but also palatable for White audiences: Parks's protagonist, detective John Shaft, works for the law and lives in a swanky apartment in Greenwich Village in sharp contrast to Van Peebles's underdog, a sex performer and inadvertent outlaw from the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. "Films like *Shaft* provide Whites with a comfortable image of Blacks as noncompetitors, as people whose essential concern in life is to make Mr. Charlie happy," contends Riley.[153] In a direct response to Riley's searing critique, Parks cites *Shaft*'s acclaim among critics who lauded its realism and Black viewers who queued up in record lines. "Sheath your borrowed sword, Mr. Riley," Parks concludes. "Your brother is not your enemy."[154]

The war of words in the *New York Times* provides a small window onto the critical energies devoted to Blaxploitation and the significant formal, material, and political differences between the genre's two founding films. Although both *Sweetback* and *Shaft* proved to be some of the only Blaxploitation films directed by Black filmmakers, the former was filmed independently, while the latter was produced within the studio system. In addition, Parks endows *Shaft* with a linear narrative, conventional formal program, and setting in the vertical topography of Manhattan, a far cry from the repetitive temporality and fragmented aesthetic of *Sweetback*, which is laden with split screens, color solarization, jump cuts, and other experiments that visualized the outlaw's escape through the lateral topographies of Los Angeles, as well as the flat desert separating Southern California and Mexico, a landscape repurposed from the Western film genre. *Sweetback,* unlike *Shaft,* staged a direct encounter between an unconventional visual language

[152] Isaac Julien, "Oedipus Directs: Isaac Julien on Baadasssss!," *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (Summer 2004): 55.
[153] Clayton Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?," *New York Times*, May 9, 1971; Clayton Riley, "A Black Movie for White Audiences?: A Black Critic's View of 'Shaft,'" *New York Times*, July 25, 1971.
[154] Gordon Parks, "Aiming Shafts at a Critic of 'Shaft,'" *New York Times*, August 22, 1971.

and a conventional setting of Hollywood cinema.[155] In *Shaft,* the titular character works for the New York City Police Department as a detective, navigating Harlem gangs and the Italian Mafia within the vertical topography of the city. Rather than proceeding across space, Shaft, a "bourgeois" figure, as Riley reminds us, moves vertically, from his swanky pad downtown in the mostly White neighborhood of Greenwich Village to his beat uptown in the historically Black neighborhood of Harlem. Moreover, Shaft remains wedded to the hierarchies of police law, emblematized by his vertical motion along the island of Manhattan, filled with tall buildings rather than the horizontal stretches of highways and flatlands in Southern California.[156]

The iconic opening scene of *Shaft,* when viewers are introduced to the detective in his element—the streets of New York—contrasts mightily with our introduction to Sweetback as a radical—his political awakening, or, in Van Peebles's words, the moment "the pattern of Sweetback's destiny changes."[157] *Shaft* begins with a striking aerial shot, rivaling the height of Manhattan's tall buildings caught on camera and echoing surveillance strategies of law enforcement. The camera soon moves in slightly closer but still hovers above the ground, and it generally adopts a lofty point of view for much of the opening credits, tracking Shaft as he navigates the crowded streets of New York. We occasionally get long shots and a handful of closer views of Shaft on foot, but an element of cool distance still prevails, compelling viewers to survey and observe from afar. Furthermore, the shots progress in a coherent and linear fashion, mimicking Shaft's straightforward journey through the long stretch of Broadway.

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[155] Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 90–94.
[156] Peter Stanfield, "Walking the Streets: Black Gangsters and the 'Abandoned City' in the 1970s Blaxploitation Cycle," in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, ed. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 283–84; Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 83–86; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 239; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 92.
[157] Melvin Van Peebles, "The Shooting Script," in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto* (New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 2004), 141.

Van Peebles provides a very different kind of introduction to Sweetback's radical transformation. In exchange for police favor, Sweetback's boss, Beetle, the owner of a brothel, has just given the LAPD permission to pretend to arrest Sweetback, take him into jail, and then release him a few days later so as to appease calls by the Black community to identify a suspect for a recent homicide. On their way back to the station, the police pick up Moo-Moo for "stirring up the natives," as one officer informs him. After an extended sequence in the police car, there is an abrupt cut to a shot of industrial machinery, depicted in psychedelic colors thanks to Van Peebles's experiments with color solarization. As the colors suddenly shift to a more realistic palette, the police pull over and physically abuse Moo-Moo as Sweetback looks on. The characters are dramatically lit, but otherwise the scene is shrouded in darkness, leaving viewers unsure of where exactly they are and how this unspecified location is connected to the machines glimpsed just before. Without warning, Sweetback then beats the police with his handcuff. His repetitive thrashings are broken up by flash cuts of machinery tinted with psychedelic hues. The camera zooms in and out, showing Sweetback in a medium shot and then in a close-up so proximate that the beige color of his jumper and a spray of blood on his hands are the only legible elements of the shots. The image also shifts in and out of focus, a blurriness that approximates the chaotic and unexpected intensity of the scene through rack-focus shots. Van Peebles then cuts back to close-ups of the psychedelic-inspired industrial landscape. The imagery quickly resolves to realistic colors as Sweetback begins to run laterally against the same industrial background. What follows is a staccato series of jump cuts that depict Sweetback fleeing at various angles, an anxious rhythm that translates the anxious affect of his flight. These experiments continue throughout the film, making the protagonist's escape increasingly difficult to follow, filled with gaping ellipses and incomplete fragments of a seemingly endless journey.

As film critic Elvis Mitchell points out, Van Peebles's jolted and jittery editing style, an unorthodox mode of storytelling, reverberates with the aesthetics of French New Wave filmmakers. "There is in no sense of the word a conventional narrative. Certainly, I think in this way it ranks with Godard because it broke down the expectations Black people had about

movies," remarked Mitchell on *Sweetback's* "revolutionary" nature and connection to the premiere director of the French New Wave, Jean-Luc Godard.[158] This link to French filmmaking is made plain by the fact that Van Peebles directed his first feature-length film in France, *La Permission* or *Story of a Three Day Pass* (1967), which stars actress Nicole Berget, who also plays a significant role in 1 French New Wave classic *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960). Prior to his arrival in Paris, Van Peebles moved to Amsterdam in 1959 to study astronomy, after having his directorial ambitions dismissed in Hollywood. There, he changed his name from Melvin Peebles to Melvin Van Peebles in homage to his new home in the Netherlands. Eventually, he settled in France upon receiving an invitation from Henri Langlois, co-founder of the Cinémathèque Française. Langlois had viewed some of Van Peebles's short films, and the young American filmmaker, "with two cans of a film and not a penny to my name," was given a "glimmer of possibility" in Langlois.[159] "Paris fitted him like a well-made suit," said Janine Euvrard, a friend and former girlfriend from his time in France, "the Paris of the little people, the Paris of the bistros, the Paris of the street."[160] Van Peebles immersed himself in French culture, learning the language, working as a journalist for *Hara-Kiri*, the predecessor of *Charlie Hebdo*, and writing novels, one of which would eventually turn into *Story of a Three Day Pass.* The film premiered in the United States at the San Francisco Film Festival in October 1967. Much to the surprise of the American audience, Van Peebles was neither French nor Dutch but a Black American, revealing both the expectations of many festivalgoers and the consciously creolized identity of the director.[161]

Not only do Van Peebles's visual experiments betray an affinity with those of French New Wave filmmakers, but so, too, does his invocation of Hollywood genres. Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player,* for instance, interwove American action and detective thriller genres with unconventional filmmaking techniques that in part emerged out of necessity due to small budgets

[158] Elvis Mitchell as quoted in *BaadAsssss Cinema,* directed by Isaac Julien (New York: Independent Film Channel; Minerva Picture Company Ltd., 2002), DVD.
[159] Janine Euvrard as quoted in *How to Eat Your Watermelon*.
[160] Ibid.
[161] *How to Eat Your Watermelon*.

and short shooting periods, material constraints facing Van Peebles as well.[162] In *Shoot the Piano Player,* Truffaut combined references to Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941)*,* Nicholas Ray's take on the Western genre, *Johnny Guitar* (1954), early film gags of Chaplin and the Marx Brothers ("a respectful pastiche of the Hollywood B-films from which I learned so much," in Truffaut's words), and the wide-screen effect of CinemaScope often seen in Hollywood's Westerns.[163] Layered within this web of allusions to mainstream American cinema was an unorthodox formal and narrative program, such as confusing voice-overs, sudden flashbacks, and other forms of discontinuous editing.[164] Truffaut's interest in Hollywood reflects a much broader phenomenon in postwar France: an economic boom oriented around an "American way of life" and its commodities. American capitalism's "fantasy of limitless development" was exported to France in part through the silver screen. Hollywood films flooded French movie theaters and "filled" them with "an illustrated catalog of the joys and rewards of American capitalism."[165] Many French New Wave directors also filled their films with these "joys and rewards." In Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960)*,* for example, the protagonist exhibits a particular preference for stolen (and stealing) American cars, idolizes Humphrey Bogart, and pursues a beautiful American expatriate named Patricia.[166] In the 1950s and 1960s, film also served as a conduit to circulate what Vanessa Schwartz calls the visual clichés of "Frenchness" around the world, including French actress Brigitte Bardot, whose immense popularity and visibility in the States helped introduce

[162] Benjamin Wiggins, "'You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback,': On *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and Revolutionary Filmmaking," *Black Camera* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 30.
[163] François Truffaut as quoted in Annette Insdorf, *François Truffaut*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 26. See also Wiggins, "'You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback,'" 30.
[164] Richard Neupert, *A History of French New Wave Cinema,* 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 189, 194.
[165] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 5–6, 7.
[166] Ibid., 37–38, 46. As Ross points out, Godard's stance toward American capitalism's commodities—enshrined in the car—would soon make an about-face: *Weekend* (1967) begins with an eight-minute tracking shot of a car wreck. For more information, see Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies,* 46.

French New Wave films to American audiences.[167] The transatlantic dynamic between French and American cinema created the foundation for "cosmopolitanism in both film images and postwar production practice."[168] *Story of a Three Day Pass* and *Sweetback,* which were both popular among French moviegoers, can therefore be considered within this transatlantic and cosmopolitan context wherein French New Wave films had already acclimatized American and French audiences to the curious mixture of aesthetic experiments with references to mainstream American cinema.[169]

Coming off the heels of his achievement abroad, Van Peebles returned to the United States and landed a three-picture contract with Hollywood's Columbia Pictures, further confusing categories of mainstream and independent (not to mention nationality). His first and soon to be last film under the studio was *Watermelon Man* (1970), a comedy about Jeff Gerber, a racist man whose white skin suddenly turns black overnight and who quickly faces the consequences of his previous behavior. Although produced and distributed by a major studio, *Watermelon Man* defies—at times surreptitiously and in other moments glaringly—the racist representations that had dominated the silver screen. Van Peebles rejected Columbia's idea of casting a White actor, who would wear blackface, as the lead. He also lied by claiming he shot two endings: the original one for the studio in which Gerber wakes up relieved to discover his transformation was just a nightmare, and the other one that the director actually filmed, where the protagonist not only "remains" Black, but also joins a Black radical group. Van Peebles delayed filming the original ending to the point that his preferred one had to be used due to time limitations.[170] As Racquel Gates argues, *Watermelon Man* is "evidence that it *is* possible (if admittedly difficult) to create a Black-oriented film with progressive racial politics from within the Hollywood system."[171] As a

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[167] Vanessa Schwartz, *That's So French! Hollywood, Parism, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5–7, 15, 153.
[168] Ibid., 6, 8.
[169] Miram Rosen, "Raphael Bassan Discusses Black American Cinema in France," *The Black Film Review* (Fall 1987): 239–41.
[170] Racquel Gates, "Subverting Hollywood from the Inside Out: Melvin Van Peebles's *Watermelon Man*," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 9, 14.
[171] Gates, "Subverting Hollywood from the Inside Out," 11.

"bridge between the worlds of the studio and of independent filmmaking" with a nod toward Black radicalism, *Watermelon Man* lays the groundwork for the genre-bending, as well as revolutionary politics, of *Sweetback.*[172] Breaking his contract with Columbia to finance and film *Sweetback,* Van Peebles transformed from a quasi-French filmmaker to a Hollywood director to an independent filmmaker in a matter of four years.[173]

While *Sweetback* may have given birth to Blaxploitation and most certainly deploys aspects of Hollywood cinema, it also stands apart from the studio-system films of the genre, including *Shaft,* by occupying the creolized space *between* mainstream genres and independent practice. Not just independent, *Sweetback* rested on what the director, period reviews, and recent scholarship often refer to as "guerrilla" or "outlaw" ground.[174] Beyond the radical nature of the plot, its production history also signals a "guerrilla" mode of filmmaking, even though the director made a film a year prior with a major studio and filled his film with references to Hollywood genres. In order to circumvent the rigid and often racist rules of the unions, Van Peebles turned to a low-budget pornography film distributor to have 50% of his crew, in his words, "made up of third world people." Shot in 19 days on an extremely limited budget, *Sweetback* initially ran in two theaters but soon surpassed box office records thanks to Van Peebles's aggressive marketing campaign and popularity among a hitherto untapped audience: Black urban youth.[175] A tangle of allusions to experimental and dominant films, *Sweetback* positions itself against any binary models or faulty "bifurcation," in film historian David James's words, of industrial and alternative cinemas of the 1960s.[176] In opposition to a conception of "alternative practices as autonomous,

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[172] Ibid.
[173] Charles Peavy, "An Afro-American in Paris: The Films of Melvin Van Peebles," *Cineaste*, (Summer 1969): 2–3; George Alexander, "Melvin Van Peebles," in *Why We Make Movies* (New York: Harlem Moon, Broadway Books, 2003), 17–24.
[174] Penelope Gilliatt, "The Current Cinema: Sweetback," *New Yorker*, June 19, 1971; Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*; Joselit, *Feedback*, 127.
[175] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 68; W. R. Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37–38; David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch, and Chris Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 168.
[176] David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press*,* 1989), 22.

self-regarding, and self-producing" and categorically "independent of industrial production," an analytical framework that James claims "distorts the historical field of cinema," *Sweetback* instead proposes the interplay or "multidirectional scales" between industrial and alternative, one that shows the impossibility, particularly in the city of Los Angeles, of completely separating one from other.[177]

I delve into Van Peebles's transatlantic biography and transgressive aesthetic because they so forcefully illustrate a creolized approach that informs much of the formal language in *Sweetback*. Moreover, Van Peebles's work and life also refute the binary thinking that has structured the larger questions around immersion in film and art, then in the 1970s and now in 2016.[178] This chapter considers how Van Peebles, a transatlantic independent and commercial filmmaker, textures polarizations hardening around immersion, spectacle, stereotypes, and objectification. At the heart of my study is how *Sweetback* destabilizes detachment as a privileged position from which to enunciate and enact radical politics. Instead, the film shows how a certain kind of immersion—what Fred Moten might call the Black radical tradition's "scene of objection" in which resistance to ontological hierarchies comes from within, rather than outside, the scene—brings things, people, and spaces into a creolized tangle, no longer beholden to the distances that structured Van Peebles's—and our—world.[179] In addition to the "scene of objection," the lateral lines embedded in Glissant's creolized "spread" provide a formal and political language for the film to dismantle and ultimately creolize hierarchies, beginning with that of subject/object, continuing with those hierarchical orders of space and relations that segregated Los Angeles of the 1970s, and finally taking on the space separating spectatorial subject from displayed object in the movie theater.[180] *Sweetback* draws us in not through a linear narrative or a coherent sense of time and space—viewers are never granted the illusion of stability or omniscience. Rather, the

[177] Ibid., 21–22.
[178] Melvin Van Peebles as quoted in Lerone Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony,* no. 26 (September 1971): 112.
[179] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
[180] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 11.

film transports us *inside* through visual and sonic experiments that could be framed as an iteration of distanciation when considered in terns of a Brechtian tradition, for example. But in the Black radical tradition's "scene of objection" and through the spatial contacts inherent to creolization, detachment is impossible when faced with the radical intimacies that Van Peebles's version of immersion yields.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore the stakes of the film's vehement and often vicious critical reception, much of which centered around how *Sweetback* advanced racism and sexism by propelling spectators into scenes saturated with stereotypes derived from Hollywood spectacle and its inventory of Black caricatures, most notably the hypersexualized, aggressive "Black buck" or "Black stud." I then turn to how Van Peebles uncovers the radical potential within these stereotypes to both unsettle subjecthood and animate Black objecthood. First and foremost, as the actor playing Sweetback, Van Peebles levels and creolizes the uneven space separating director from actor, distanced spectatorial subject from immersed displayed object. Van Peebles also explores the creolized ontologies and so-called categories latent within stereotypes like the Black stud and Black buck to propose horizontal alliances between human subjects and nonhuman, animal objects as well as Black and White, queer and straight."[181] Van Peebles makes visible the unyielding intensity of immersed objection in excess of conventional cinematic stereotypes that gave critics fodder for their condemnations of the film. *Sweetback* revels in the complexities of Black male erotic objecthood and invites viewers to do the same.

The subsequent section builds on the lateral alliances in the prior one to examine how the horizontal orientation of the film's immersive embrace reflects the horizontal "dispersion," in Hortense Spillers's words, of the African diaspora and reveals creolized forms of kinship apart from a patriarchical model of familial relations.[182] These lateral lines put pressure on the critics' charges of misogyny, all the while flattening the vertical Law of the Father that has infused Van

[181] Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
[182] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.

Peebles's own rhetoric as well as his son's, fellow filmmaker Mario Van Peebles, who at a young age made a brief but infamous appearance at the beginning of his father's legendary film.[183] Through *Sweetback*'s lateral lines, Van Peebles sabotages his own identity as the "godfather" of soul cinema.[184] What remains hidden and haunting is the "female within" Black masculinity and its precarious hold on patriarchy.[185] Inadvertently, perhaps, the film opens onto the capaciousness of Black masculinity through close-ups onto the fleshy objecthood of the "female within" the Black male and an experimental visual language that spreads the lateral lines of the Californian landscape.

I then consider how *Sweetback*'s lateral embrace builds a creolized space within the mise-en-scène, leveling the destructive vertical hierarchies, binaries, and borders that have governed much Black life in urban locales, particularly in Los Angeles and the Black neighborhood of Watts, economically and isolated from the rest of the city in the 1960s and early 1970s, in large part physically due to lack of public transportation and the freeway system's dissection of the city. The lateral "spread" of creolization characterizes the immersive effects of Van Peebles's stretched formal language, resulting in transgressions across boundaries within the larger city of Los Angeles, the charged—and sprawling—setting of *Sweetback*.[186] Geographers claim Los Angeles as "a new kind of metropolis" founded on horizontal dispersion, rather than vertical density, simultaneously anchored around the entertainment industry and deeply segregated by race and class.[187] David James maps the two-way dynamic of

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[183] Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); George Baker, "On Lateness and Longing," unpublished manuscript; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65-66.
[184] Mario Van Peebles, "On *Baadasssss!* and His Dad," in Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 45.
[185] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[186] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11–12. 34. Benjamin Wiggins has also noted how *Sweetback* often oscillates between conventional cinematic space, structured around perspective, and what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call "smooth space" with "rhizomatic movements" as opposed to "striated space." Of course, through Glissant, I, too, draw upon Deleuze and Guattari, but I connect what Wiggins calls "smooth" and I call "lateral" or, via Glissant, "the spread," to a specifically diasporic or "creolized" mode of space and relations. For more information, see Wiggins, "'You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback'," 33-36.
[187] David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

appropriation and resistance, attraction and reversion reverberating between the mainstream film industry and alternative cinemas in Los Angeles onto the geography of the city itself, oriented around "the centrifugal pull generated by the dispersed, semiautonomous residential and cultural communities and the centripetal pull of the city's center," that city center being dominated by Hollywood.[188] The "minor alternative cinemas" that flourished in Los Angeles "directly depend[ed] upon" and reflected this "spatiality," in large part because city streets, rather than studio sets, became their stage.[189] Van Peebles's career as a Hollywood director and an independent filmmaker, as well as the genre-bending and experimental aesthetics of *Sweetback*, participates in that spatial and aesthetic negotiation.

By creolizing immersion, *Sweetback* calls for the types of lateral and porous spaces and relations that emerged from the African diaspora to unfold in both Los Angeles and the social space of the movie theater. The film assembles what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the "undercommons" of the Black radical tradition, a tradition delineated in many ways by several Black study theorists, notably Glissant, Hortense Spillers, Cedric Robinson, and Moten. All four, including Moten, elaborate to greater or lesser degrees a Black radicality forged in the wound and the weave, the cut and the connection that is the Atlantic Ocean, the watery expanse where the lateral relations of a collective and creolized diaspora take form and flight. In the final section, I explore how *Sweetback*, via immersive effects, alluring lateral (e)motion, and unexpected identifications, orchestrates a communal space—an undercommons out of an underclass—in the black box of the movie theater. Sweetback's resistance is not singular but shared with—spread within—the community of Watts.

Interwoven throughout this chapter are the ways in which Van Peebles layers various cinematic allusions and appropriations throughout the film, from nods to French New Wave filmmaking to the trails, trials, and tribulations of the Western genre's heroic cowboy. The transatlantic transmissions among Hollywood genres, French New Wave filmmaking, and Van

[188] Ibid., 7.
[189] Ibid., 16–17.

Peebles's project thus propose a creolized Blackness—and a Whiteness and "Frenchness," for that matter—that intersects with the creolized space proposed throughout the film. It is my contention that although Van Peebles gets left out of accounts of French New Wave filmmaking, he is most certainly a part of its story, transmitting, translating, and utterly transforming a European art film aesthetic within the Californian context of both Black radicalism and Hollywood cinema. As a former Hollywood director at the helm of what would prove to be an incredibly profitable independent film, Van Peebles remixes genres, techniques, and vernacular traditions in a mode akin to what Glissant described as creolization's "limitless *métissage*."[190] In *Sweetback,* Van Peebles doubly interrogates the "miscegenation of cultural forms," in cultural studies scholar Amy Abugo Ongiri's words, through forms of ontological, racial, sexual, and gendered "miscegenation."[191] By marrying creolized content and form, *Sweetback* creolizes cinemas, geographies, and ontologies as a mode of radical objection to racial policing on screen, on the street, and in print. What results in and through this process, I argue, is a creolized version of immersion that betrays all these boundaries, beginning and ending with the movie theater as an alternative to detached spaces and relations.

The Critical Reception of *Sweetback*

Van Peebles's plot is relatively straightforward: after witnessing unjust police brutality against a Black radical, Sweetback, a sex performer raised in a Watts brothel, beats two police into a state of unconsciousness, and then proceeds to flee, get caught again, escape again, and

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[190] James A. Miller, "From *Sweetback* to *Celie*: Blacks on Film in the 80s," in *The Year Left 2: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1987), 144; Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)*,* 77; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 34. Translator Betsy Wing defines Glissant's concept of *métissage* as "a word whose primary use describes the racial intermixing within a colony and its contemporary aftermath but which Glissant uses especially to affirm the multiplicity and diversity of beings in Relation. On a larger scale, the inclusion of various sorts of writing—the familiar, the poetic, the hortatory, the aphoristic, the expository—without placing more value on one than another, works toward a similar synthesis." For more information, see Betsy Wing, "Translator's Introduction," in Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, xviii.

[191] Robert Hatch, "Films," *The Nation*, May 24, 1971; Amy Obugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 181.

eventually make his way to safety across the Mexican border with the help of friends and strangers whom he meets along the way. It's critical reception, however, is not, multivalent and complex as the imagery itself. Period and recent discussions of *Sweetback* invoke the injurious effects of immersion, which have been resurrected in current condemnations of immersive spectacle in time-based art. Critics from mainstream, left wing, and alternative sources, as well as prominent Black cultural nationalists, wrote passionately, politically, and in great detail about and usually against the film, often through the critical lens of good or bad, true or false imagery.[192] Even in his celebratory review, Riley conceded that in 1971 many screenings were greeted by "shock" and "disgust." "Black people have been stung by the film's relentless vulgarity," Riley writes, obliquely praising the film. "There is little positive Black imagery in *Sweetback.*"[193] As film historian Edward Guerrero notes, many of the most prominent reviews by Black critics emerged from middle-class or cultural nationalist milieus that brushed up against the underclass status of Van Peebles's unlikely hero.[194] "The colored intelligentsia was not too happy about it," Van Peebles remarks, pausing to take a puff of his cigar in Julien's documentary on Blaxploitation, *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002), "and the Nationalists were not too happy about it. I didn't say the Panthers. The Panthers stood up for the film and made it required viewing for all of their members." Here, Van Peebles provides a partial view onto the complex terrain of Black politics in the late 1960s and 1970s. By featuring a "lumpenproletariat" protagonist who violently crosses boundaries of all stripes, *Sweetback* in many ways reflected the anticapitalist, multiracial, alliance-based revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party (BPP) rather than the bourgeois sensibilities of the "colored intelligentsia" and the more separatist politics of cultural nationalism.[195]

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[192] Jon Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation in Critical Responses to Sweetback," *Film History* 6 (1994): 392.
[193] Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?"
[194] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness,* 87.
[195] The range and nuances of differences in various ideologies and groups of black nationalism and black power in the period are too vast to cover thoroughly in this chapter. Briefly, the public opposition between black cultural nationalists and the BPP's revolutionary nationalism came to a head during an armed confrontation between BPP members and LA-based cultural nationalist

Many of the film's critics focused on entrenched cinematic stereotypes that seemed to pervade nearly every inch of film reel. "Instead of giving us new images of black rebels," wrote Lerone Bennett in his damning review of the film in a 1971 issue of *Ebony,* "it carries us back to antiquated white stereotypes, subtly and invidiously identified with a black reality."[196] Three years later*,* Bogle accuses the film's protagonist of promoting "the familiar brutal black buck," encoded most forcefully in the character Gus of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, lynched by the Klu Klux Klan for the attempted rape of a young Southern belle.[197] The Kuumba Workshop, a Black cultural nationalist theater group in Chicago's South Side founded in 1968 by Val Gray Ward, dramatist, actress, and former director of the African-American Cultural Program at the University of Illinois in Chicago, also accused Van Peebles of creating a "stud, a hustler, a pimp" whose sexuality is "filthy" and "graphic," debased by "animal gratification."[198] The critical preoccupation with stereotypes has persisted even today, decades after the film's initial release. Writing in 2004, criminal justice scholar Dennis Rome takes Van Peebles to task for reviving the well-worn "black demon" stereotype—but this time more "deviant" than ever.[199] References to the "buck," "stud," and "demon" conjure up unbridled, animalistic, or monstrous sexualities, overflowing eroticisms

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group US Organization, led by Mualana Karenga, on January 17, 1967, at the University of California, Los Angeles. Huey P. Newton characterized cultural nationalists as those who "feel the African culture will automatically bring political freedom…" With a focus on socialism, anti-imperialism, armed struggle, and forging alliances with other liberatory groups, the BPP contrasted with the cultural nationalist ideologies of separatism as well as an interest in African roots or heritage. For more information, see Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*; Jessica C. Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 210–11. The "lumpenproletariat," marginalized, unemployed, lowest of the lower class, an underclass that Marx and Engels dismissed as incapable of class consciousness and revolutionary struggle were precisely the people that the BPP aimed to target for their radical agenda, calling them "brothers on the block." For more information, see Jennifer B. Smith, *An International History of the Black Panther Party* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4, 35.

[196] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 112.

[197] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* 236.

[198] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop Charges Racial Sabotage in 'Sweet,'" *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1971. For more information on Val Gray Ward and the Kuumba Workshop, see Francis Ward and Val Gray Ward, "The Black Artist - His Role in the Struggle," *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 5 (January 1971): 24; S. Brandi Barnes, "On Stage: Kuumba Theater's Comeback," *Chicago Reader*, October 31, 1996, accessed November 17, 2014, http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/on-stage-kuumba-theaters-comeback/Content?oid=891932.

[199] Dennis Rome, *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 88.

beyond the pale not just of propriety but also humanity. These racist caricatures not only resuscitate a deep-rooted history of silver-screen racism, but they also yoke Blackness, specifically Black masculinity, to an inhuman and altogether menacing sexuality that was often punished off screen in the form of castration, lynching, and other material violence done to Black male bodies in the service of White Power.[200] In fact, Van Peebles himself made this connection visible in a documentary about cinematic stereotypes of Blackness, *Classified X* (1998). At one point, the filmmaker narrates a montage of lynching photographs bookended between images of racist depictions of Black characters in early cinema. "Why is he so scared? Why are we always so scared? Well, wouldn't you be?," Van Peebles remarks as the haunting images fade from the screen.

Tucked within the withering language of *Sweetback*'s critics lingers a distinct skepticism of sexualities that fall outside the supposedly decorous ones of the middle-class family unit. Van Peebles takes viewers on a tour through seedy sections of Los Angeles, beginning with a Watts brothel. There, viewers are privy to a sex show featuring a cross-dressed "Good Dyke Fairy Godmother."[201] Eventually we witness what critic Robert Hatch in 1971 referred to as the "fucking duel" between Sweetback and the female leader of a White motorcycle gang, a scene complete with screaming orgasm, dramatic lighting, and theatrical costumes like a bowtie and bowler hat.[202] As a sex performer and member of the underclass, Sweetback's aberrant, "filthy" sexuality linked the protagonist to the "brothers on the block" that the BPP celebrated and radicalized.[203] This class affiliation was not lost on critics at the time. In a 1971 interview with Van Peebles, poet and critic Horace Coleman noted how the film "kind of made a corollary with the Panthers," specifically because of the shared "lumpenproletariat" allegiance. "One of the things I liked most about the movie was that it didn't deal with middle-class nor upper-class blacks," remarked

[200] Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 92–97; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 288–90.
[201] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 138.
[202] Hatch, "Films," n.p.
[203] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop."

Coleman, to which Van Peebles responded, "No, it dealt with the people."[204] Decades later, Van Peebles reminds us in *BaadAsssss Cinema* that "the Black media was very insulted that I didn't choose a more respectable segment of the Black condition," directly linking his decision to film Los Angeles's underclass with a rejection of the respectability politics of some of the film's staunchest critics.[205] What's more, the film's distribution via a pornography studio and its X rating gave *Sweetback* an even lower reputation in the eyes of its detractors.

In addition to animalistic, excessive, and underclass sexuality, many critics then and now have argued that the film advanced conservative gender ideologies rooted in the patriarchal politics of the BPP. Huey Newton's celebratory review of the film in the *Black Panther,* the official party newspaper, provides ample evidence for this particular point of contention. He is especially taken with the opening sequence in which the young Sweetback, played by Melvin's son Mario, finds shelter in a "whorehouse" in Watts.[206] The women feed him, nourish him, and one eventually has sex with him, a primal scene during which he earns the curious moniker 'Sweetback' for his sexual prowess. Sweetback, a future revolutionary, comes one step closer to radicalism, "baptized into manhood" by women "symbolic of Mother Africa" who possess the "potential to raise their liberator."[207] "The size of their breasts signifies how Africa is potentially the breadbasket of the world," Newton continues, mobilizing the erotic charge of a woman's body and biology as essential assets for male-led revolution. The cofounder of the BPP establishes a gendered framework for liberation: women serve as vehicles to empower Black men, generating what film historian Stephane Dunn calls in her 2008 book on Blaxploitation a "racialized patriarchal culture" that lies at the heart, and, in the case of *Sweetback*, the birth of the Blaxploitation genre. This patriarchal pattern of radicalism continues to unfold throughout the course of the film's 97-minute run. Sweetback partly dodges the LAPD through sexual encounters

[204] Horace Coleman, "In-Depth: Interviews with Artists: Melvin Van Peebles," *Journal of Popular Culture* 5 (Fall 1971): 372.
[205] Melvin Van Peebles as quoted in *BaadAsssss Cinema.*
[206] Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," in *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service* 6, no. 21 (June 19, 1971): n.p.
[207] Ibid.

with women, transforming from an apolitical sex performer into a militant liberator. Indeed, one of the more troubling and difficult to reconcile moments in the film is when Sweetback appears to rape or simulates sex with a Black woman in order to avoid the police while hiding in the bushes at an outdoor music festival. These aspects of the narrative lead Dunn to trace the film's plot—"the affirmation of the hypersexual machismo and traditional gender politics"—to the BPP's revolutionary strategy of masculine struggle.[208]

Critics in 1971 used similar language to deconstruct how the film's hypermasculine story line merely feigned (and thereby failed) radical politics. The Kuumba Workshop argued that the film "dehumanized women to the most despicable level" and only served to "further damage the liberation struggle."[209] In *Ebony,* Bennett, who also acted as a board member of the Kuumba Workshop, pejoratively dubbed *Sweetback* an "emancipation orgasm," one that equated sexual prowess with an "instrument of liberation."[210] Writing for a 1971 issue of *Black World,* Don L. Lee, Black cultural nationalist poet, essayist, and publisher, echoed the indictments of Bennett and the Kuumba Workshop, warning his readers of the "danger" of "confus[ing] manliness with being able to screw well" and accusing Van Peebles of promoting "sex that borders on pornography."[211] Throughout many of these reviews, the excessive masculine sexuality of the Black stud maps onto what Black feminist and cultural studies scholar Michele Wallace considered in 1978 to be the "Black Macho" that overdetermined Black Power's liberation agendas: "Manhood was essential to the revolution—unquestioned, unchallenged, unfettered manhood," Wallace reminds

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[208] Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 3, 66–67.
[209] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop."
[210] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 106. For Bennett's involvement with the Kuumba Workshop, see "From Sweetback to Superfly: KUUMBA and the Fight against Blaxploitation Films in Chicago," Northwestern University event description of lecture by Professor Gerald Butters, accessed November 17, 2014, http://planitpurple.northwestern.edu/event/451897.
[211] Don L. Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweetback/Or, Shake Yo Money Maker," *Black World*, (November 1971): 46.

us.[212] The imbrication of Black radical politics, stereotypes, and Black masculinity was staged on the pages of the film's most prominent period reviews.

In addition to the Black stud stereotype and the patriarchal rhetoric of the BPP, the film's critics often allude to another model of machismo: Hollywood's trope of the lone White cowboy, adapted by Van Peebles for the purposes of marketing what appeared to be a Black hero on a solo quest for liberation. In his lengthy review, Bennett cites "John Wayne rugged individualism hero crap," an assessment rehearsed by film historian Thomas Cripps many years later when he charged Van Peebles himself—not just his on-screen character—with "trading on his outlaw legend."[213] Lee, too, frames the film in terms of mainstream Western spectacles, inaugurating his review with references to Wayne as well as famed filmmaker John Ford, premier director of the genre. In addition to Van Peebles's nod to Hollywood, several cultural nationalist critics also expressed disappointment in the director's transatlantic affiliations with French filmmaking, equating Van Peebles's European training with his misunderstanding of the Black community. "European sensibility masquerading through the eyes of Van Peebles as Blackness," wrote Lee, "Nonsense personified!"[214] These pointed citations of Wayne, Ford, and Van Peebles's time in France indicate how both White mainstream and experimental aesthetics only offers, at least in the eyes of these critics, false representations of Black life, distorted through the prism of White models like Wayne, stereotypes like the Black stud, or European filmmaking like Godard's and Truffaut's.[215] Bennett, for one, places *Sweetback* in a space closer to fantasy or what he condemned a "wonderland," far from an authentic Black reality. To prove his point, the critic claimed that sex in *Sweetback* is not "natural enough, not black enough," a conclusion similarly

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[212] Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: The Dial Press, 1978), 13.
[213] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 112; Thomas Cripps, "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Changing Politics of Genre Film," in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 245.
[214] Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweetback," 46.
[215] For more information on the intersection of individualism, masculinity, the frontier tradition, the Western landscape, and the heroic cowboy myth, please see William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History & Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 55, 61–62; David Lusted, *The Western* (Harlow, Essex, UK: Pearson Education, 2003), 21, 29.

drawn by the Kuumba Workshop, which implied that Van Peebles's choice of a White wife exposed his "impure" Blackness and aesthetics.[216] Bennett goes on to claim that the narrative contains no practical information about how really to escape the police and revolt. "*Sweetback* is neither black nor revolutionary," Bennett concludes, a summation shared by many critics of the time, including Lee and the Kuumba Workshop, who also disparaged the film's "skewed reality," leading the latter to ask Van Peebles: "Do you have any deep and serious identification with black people, or have you spent the bulk of your time living with and learning from whites?" Their answer is resolutely in the negative, and the review proceeds to critique the film for its inauthentic aesthetic and "violat[ion] of every principle of black art."[217]

White critics also rebuked Van Peebles's embrace of commercial cinematic tropes as a sign of disinterest in the grave realities of the world, an assessment that reinforces an entrenched mandate placed upon Black filmmakers to embrace social realism and avoid fantasy, fiction, and romantic narratives and aesthetics.[218] "As far as Sweetback's surviving or the mouth of reality are concerned," wrote Hatch in *The Nation*, "it is largely nonsense because *Sweetback* exists only in the realm of romantic popular entertainment that includes the likes of Wild Bill Hickok and the sheriff's posse."[219] Yet Hatch's critique emerged from a different context, apart from the Black cultural nationalist one of Lee or the Kuumba Workshop, both connected to the period's Black Arts Movement. Calling for an authentic Black aesthetic or "principle of black art" unencumbered by the dominant culture's standards of taste and the effects of commodification in mainstream mass media, many participants in the Black Arts Movement demanded an aesthetic revolution to match and even exceed the political one on the streets. The monumental task of inciting cultural change fell to Black artists, from writers like Lee to the dramatists of the Kuumba Workshop, whose board included Bennett as well as Black Arts Movement leader Hoyt Fuller and poet

[216] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop."
[217] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 112, 116; Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop."
[218] Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 52–54.
[219] Hatch, "Films," n.p.

Gwendolyn Brooks.[220] It's no surprise, then, that poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, decried *Sweetback* as "reactionary," like "imitative" Black poetry, both of which were extracted from inauthentic, whitewashed sources. Many voices in the Black Arts Movement attempted to carve out a space for Black aesthetics that was so often erased or ignored by White ones.[221] For cultural nationalists like Lee, Baraka, and the members of the Kuumba Workshop, Van Peebles failed to meet this pressing demand.

The director's ambivalent connection to the commercial sphere has led many past and present critics to impute a profit motivation to Van Peebles's success, evidenced by his marketing zeal. In *BaadAsssss Cinema,* cultural critic bell hooks asserts that Van Peebles's motivations for making the film were purely profit-based: "He did it for the money. . . . The foundation of why this film was made and why it was a success was all about money."[222] David James largely concurs: *Sweetback,* despite its maverick and independent status, represents a "commodity" in the form of "the isolated entrepreneurial determination of a single man."[223] Van Peebles's embrace of mass-marketing techniques provides ample evidence for these claims. The director heavily advertised the film on the radio, and he prereleased the soundtrack to drum up publicity and general interest. Van Peebles also published a film guide, posters, and other paraphernalia that carried the director's memorable tagline, "Rated X by an All-white Jury." Van Peebles even tapped into the retail market, selling sweatshirts and nightgowns adorned with the identificatory statement "I am Sweetback."[224] In his celebratory review of the film*,* Huey Newton encouraged his readers to purchase the accompanying record and book, providing information on the price and publisher. Furthermore, Van Peebles often centered his advertising campaign on his own self-made myth, billing himself as an "outlaw legend" to promote the film during production. "From script to

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[220] Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 15–17, 91–97; "From Sweetback to Superfly."
[221] Amiri Baraka, "Black Revolutionary Poets Should Also Be Playwrights," *Black World* 21: 6 (April 1972), 4.
[222] bell hooks as quoted in *BaadAsssss Cinema.*
[223] James, *Allegories of Cinema,* 193.
[224] Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, "Explorations Underground: American Film (Ad)Ventures Beneath the Hollywood Radar," in *Underground U.S.A: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press/Wallflower Book, 2002), n.p.

screen," writes Cripps on Van Peebles's promotional presence, "every day there seemed to issue forth another outlaw story."[225] Decades before the assessments by Cripps, James, and hooks, Lee's review underscored how the film's ability to "shake your money maker" disclosed an inauthentic aesthetic or "distorted view of the Black Community." "That's nothing but commercialism and exploitation," Lee added in the same breath. "A limited, money-making, auto-bio fantasy." *Sweetback*, then, stands many steps removed from the Black Arts Movement's call, to which Lee added his voice, for an authentic Black aesthetic, purified of dominant conventions and commercial media.[226]

What was at stake in many of these cultural nationalist critiques was not simply the base imagery of Black masculinity in the film and the commercial imperatives behind it. It was also the fear that Black youth, presumed to be impressionable, would confuse their reality with these very same false fantasies. Critics honed in on how the film preyed on the particularly susceptible audience of young, lower-class Black men, pointing to the perceived threat of identification via immersion into *Sweetback*'s seductive spectacle.[227] Lee described how *Sweetback* facilitated avenues of deleterious identification, encouraging "Brothers" to call "each other 'Sweetback' on the streets," a "reenactment" that might lead audiences astray. The Kuumba Workshop, too, noted the "crushing damage done to the minds of black youth who are likely to be influenced by 'Sweetback.'"[228] In his overview of the Blaxploitation genre in a 1974 issue of *Psychology Today*, Harvard psychologist and prominent Black intellectual Alvin Pouissaint would directly correlate a spectator's degree of immersion to her or his class position: "Low-income youngsters who have no real role models to emulate, and in impoverished home life, may mistake fiction for reality," in contrast to those "average middle-class youth," who could distinguish fact from "fiction."[229] Questions of class, sexuality, identification, and representational binaries of negative fallacies and

[225] Cripps, "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Changing Politics of Genre Film," 247.
[226] Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweetback," 44, 48.
[227] Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation," 382, 386.
[228] Lee, "The Bittersweet of Sweetback," 44.
[229] Alvin Pouissaint as cited in Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness,* 165.

positive truths thereby determined just how much power Van Peebles's version of spectacular immersion was believed to yield.

In a 1982 roundtable with Van Peebles at the Center for Afro-American Studies at Ohio University, independent filmmaker Haile Gerima also commented upon what he considered to be the flawed imagery of the film, accusing Van Peebles of promoting a "false manhood" rather than "uplifting" the audience with "positive images."[230] Gerima's words echo Bennett's demand a decade prior for "ideal images of the black man and black woman" as "directive images…that shape and mold behavior in desired directions."[231] This appeal, according to the critic, fell on the deaf ears of Van Peebles, who instead seemed to embrace a curious combination of negative Black stereotypes and idealized White models. Both Gerima in the 1980s and Bennett before him enunciated coterminous binaries of authentic and inauthentic Blackness, positive and negative imagery, commercial entertainment fantasy and indie film truth.

Gerima's opposition to *Sweetback* is hardly surprising given his parallel yet altogether divergent artistic context as a staunchly independent filmmaker, trained at the University of California Los Angeles and identified with the LA Rebellion School of Black Filmmakers. Emerging from the wake of the 1965 Watts Riots, this group of young Black filmmakers were influenced by both the Black Arts Movement and the collective, socialist, and anticolonial politics and aesthetics of Third Cinema.[232] Positioned "outside and against the System," in the words of its founding manifesto of 1969, Third Cinema allied itself with people of color living in the so-called Third World and offered an alternative to the commodified standards of Hollywood's bourgeois cinema and the individualist auteur model of European art films, two modes of production that Van Peebles marshaled to greater or lesser degrees by inhabiting a space at

[230] Van Peebles et al., "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Development of the Contemporary Black Film Movement," in *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, ed. Gladstone Yearwood (Athens, Ohio: Center for Afro-American Studies, Ohio University, 1982), 60.
[231] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 110.
[232] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 52.

times *inside* "the System."[233] Although working in the same place (Los Angeles) and the same time (1970s), Gerima and Van Peebles approached radical filmmaking in different ways. While Van Peebles envisioned a film that "not only instruct[s] but entertains," Gerima, however, asserted "his interest as a filmmaker is not to entertain."[234] In Gerima's view, the entertaining spectacle of *Sweetback* presented an inauthentic aesthetic divorced from reality and radicalism and infused with apolitical—or worse, oppressive—ideologies of mainstream cinema, itself conditioned by capitalism.

[233] The term Third Cinema was coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, members of the Grupo Cine Liberación, in their manifesto "Toward a Third Cinema" published in 1969. They define First Cinema as "a specific ideology, of a specific world-view: that of US financial capital" and the "reality as it is conceived by the ruling classes." Second Cinema, or "author's cinema, expression cinema, *nouvelle vague, cinema novo,*" attempted to chart out an "alternative" to first cinema with "non-standard language." Second Cinema, however, had become "absorbed" by the "System" and is too responsive to the individual rather than the collective. Third Cinema offers a cinema completely attached to socialist, revolutionary, anticolonial politics. Solanas and Getino argue for a cinema deeply connected to, rather than detached from, radical politics: "Real alternatives differing from those offered by the System are only possible if one or two requirements is fulfilled: *making the films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the system."* Third Cinema must be "outside and against" the System as a cinema of "liberation." For more information, see Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," *Cinéaste* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1970-71): 4–5; Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 1–2, 6. For information on the influence of Third Cinema on L.A. Rebellion, please see Manthia Diawara as cited in "Manthia Diawara," in George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema* (New York: Harlem Moon, Broadway Books, 2003), 518. There has been subsequent critical scholarship that has investigated the less schematized and more complex and porous filmmaking aesthetics of so-called "Third World" directors that do not necessarily fit into the neat categories elaborated by Solana and Getino. Anthony R Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake's edited collection of essays, *Rethinking Third Cinema,* is devoted to the topic of complicating the "assumptions made on behalf of Third Cinema" and the "homogenization of terrain of the Third World." Sada Niang explores how African films of the nationalist period from 1954 to 1974, influenced by the work of Solanas and Getino, also demonstrate a "hybrid composite"… "as much as they may have wanted to be perceived as authentically African." American B movies such as Westerns and gangster films, as well as French New Wave cinema, particularly influenced francophone African filmmakers, many of whom received training in Europe. Niang argues that although the politics of these films were overtly anticolonial, their aesthetics reveal a range of sources, some taken from the very colonial powers they sought to resist. For more information, see Anthony R. Guneratne, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 10, 18; Sada Niang, *Nationalist African Cinema: Legacy and Transformations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), xvi–xvii, 1–3, 47, 69, 76–79, 83, 119–20.

[234] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 68; Haile Gerima, "On Independent Black Cinema," in *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, 112.

In the same roundtable at Ohio University, Van Peebles disputes Gerima's call for an authentic, unified, and positive model of Black manhood. "No, no, no, no," Van Peebles retorts. "Sweetback is not an anthology of black men." "As a filmmaker, I am not an anthology for blacks," he announces in the same breath.[235] This statement echoes an earlier one from an interview in 1971 conducted soon after *Sweetback* was released. "Blackness isn't singular," Van Peebles asserts. "It's plural."[236] In this statement, the filmmaker deconstructs the notion of real or true Blackness, a reductive logic at times adopted by proponents of the Black Arts Movement and *Sweetback*'s many critics—"we have no sense of what a black man or black woman should be," despaired Bennett in his review.[237] Furthermore, Van Peebles's statement also complicates and even illuminates his own claim that the film was made from some sort of unified, homogenous "black aesthetic." As a transatlantic independent and commercial filmmaker, Van Peebles levels the hierarchical binaries governing Black aesthetics, as well as those of immersive spectacle, two discourses that circulated and often converged in the same moment of the 1960s and early 1970s. *Sweetback*'s aesthetic hovers in and around the lateral space of the "and"—to "instruct *and* entertain"—rather than the binary construction of "or." Through stretched lines and other immersive strategies, enumerated by Coleman in 1971 as "eye-dazzling cinematography, jazzy, high-powered score, explicit and raunchy sex, and graphic violence," Van Peebles molds a Blackness—and a Black form of spectatorship—whose essential property is its in-essentialism, its lateral "creolization."[238]

Sweetback's "Objectionable" Objection

[235] Van Peebles et al., "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* and the Development of the Contemporary Black Film Movement," 63.
[236] Coleman, "In-Depth: Interviews with Artists," 370–71.
[237] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 110.
[238] Coleman, "In-Depth: Interviews with Artists," 369. Wiggins also notes the pluralities of Blackness presented in the film: "Through his unique signification patterns, Sweetback presents the most "positive" image of blackness ever seen on screen—that is, a multifarious blackness, an unreconciled blackness that refuses to be singular, a blackness that gives blacks mutable subjectivities, and agency to change over time." For more information, see Wiggins, "'You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback,'" 41.

The criticism of objectification and stereotypes in *Sweetback* is notably coterminous with a larger suspicion of objecthood in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes, "the Spectacle," the fulfillment of "commodity fetishism," produces "image-objects," that occupy the hellish world of the "non-living" and fare no better than the commodities they picture.[239] As the "guardian of sleep," spectacle turns once active subjects into passive objects, subordinating them to capitalism's ruinous and reifying logic through immersive and seductive illusions. As we have seen, Laura Mulvey would qualify Debord's notion of objecthood and immersion several years later in her germinal essay of feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." "Woman displayed as sexual object," she writes, articulating a gendered dynamic of oppression, immersion, passivity, and objecthood, "is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle."[240] And with the emergence of Conceptual Art of the 1960s, which is still favored by many current critics of spectacle, objects became dematerialized to avoid the exigencies of the market. Conceptual Art came to be defined, in Benjamin Buchloh's words, as an "assault on the status of the object."[241]

The "assault on the status of the object" in the late 1960s and early 1970s significantly differs from the "scene of objection" that Van Peebles inhabits around the same time in 1971. In contrast to the reduced aesthetic of Conceptual Art, objecting objects lie at the heart of the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition. Moten reminds us of this in the very first line of his book: "The history of blackness," he writes, "is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."[242] I am interested in how *Sweetback* animates radical Black objecthood, offering lateral immersion into the "scene of objection" filled with "image-objects," most often manifested in the form of stereotypes, as many critics of the film were quick to point out. Even in his celebratory review, *Times* critic Riley not only called the film "objectionable," but he also described Sweetback as a

[239] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), n.p.
[240] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures,* 2nd ed., Language, Discourse, Society (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19.
[241] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art, 1969-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 107.
[242] Moten, *In the Break,* 1.

"man whose politic has been his body…his crotch," a reduction to corporeal, erotic objecthood also doubly enunciated in the film's evocative and enigmatic title: "sweetback," a moniker for penis, and "asssss."[243] The "objectionable" character of the film exceeds Riley's connotations and cedes to an erotic politics of immersed objection: resistance to and creolization of vertical hierarchies that have separated subject and object, animate and inanimate, being and environment, man and matter, spectator and screen.

Extreme close-ups throughout *Sweetback* underscore the erotic character of objecthood and objection in the film. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane argues, contrary to popular belief, the close-up can enhance the objecthood of the character. "The close-up underwrites the crisis of subject and object," Doane asserts. "The close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing," relinquishing the "mark of individuality or subjectivity" and embracing, most especially through facial close-ups, something beyond humanity. "The face is inhuman," Doane writes, "no longer the pathway to the soul."[244] Many of Van Peebles's close-ups occur during sex scenes, placing the spectator in an intimate encounter with flesh. For example, in the opening scene when the sex worker screams the memorable line, "You've got a sweet, sweet back!" the camera presses against her face, seized by pangs of pleasure. Not only is her status as a laboring sexual object elicited through the close-up, but so, too, is Sweetback's: he is named, granting him a subjectivity—but one attached to the bodily, erotic commodity of his "sweetback."

About halfway through the film, Van Peebles adopts a similarly proximal approach to eroticized body parts during the infamous "fucking" scene in which Sweetback has sex with the "Pres," the White female leader of a biker gang. With an eager audience of male bikers, Sweetback, donning only a bowler hat and bowtie, mounts the Pres under a highly theatrical lighting schema, dramatic flourishes of shadow and brightness that emphasize the performative sceneness of the encounter. Abounding with loop-printing, double-exposures, freeze frames, and

[243] Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?"
[244] Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 94.

quick cuts, this complex montage interweaves an array of corporeal fragments: close-ups of her feet wrapped around his waist, as well as shots of their cheeks, touching in a caress of flesh. This series is interrupted by long shots of Sweetback's illuminated "asssss." The "fucking duel" reaches a dramatic conclusion with the woman's orgasmic screams—"Sweetback, Sweetback, yes Sweetback, Sweetback!"—echoing those of the sex worker in the opening credits. The duel ends in Sweetback's victory as the protagonist puts his hat back on and stands tall, exposing his entire naked front—and with it, the phallic icon of the Black buck stereotype.[245]

The theatrical nature of this scene, emphasized by Sweetback's costume and the crowd, coupled with overt references to stereotypes and irrational fears around Black masculinity, point to the ultimate perversion of the minstrel tradition and its latent anxieties. A "mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation," in cultural historian Eric Lott's words, blackface minstrelsy above the Mason-Dixon Line in the nineteenth century served as a space for working-class Irish male immigrants to transgress Victorian gender and sexual norms by adopting the trappings of heightened masculinity: the "phallic power" of the Black male penis.[246] A volatile space of desire and fear in and around Black masculinity, the performance of blackface minstrelsy "was less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure."[247] The fucking duel exploits and even enhances the instabilities inherent to the minstrel tradition. Van Peebles maps the Black buck stereotype, embedded within the "erotic economy" of blackface performance, onto one of minstrelsy's stock characters, Zip Coon, the urban cocky dandy, whose hat and bowtie resemble those of Sweetback's. As Lott points out, the Black dandy character was readily associated with abolitionism and amalgamation, a fear also proposed by the Black buck stereotype and assuaged through the mockery of Blackness in blackface. While the minstrel tradition merely mimicked caricatures of Blackness and thereby afforded White performers and audience members a safe distance from the threat of Black masculinity, the

[245] Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 98.
[246] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.
[247] Ibid.

fucking duel dissolves that distance and stages—indeed enacts—what remained sublimated behind the mask of burnt cork: White pleasure around Black manhood in the flesh for all to see.[248] Sweetback therefore resists his physical imprisonment within the White biker gang and symbolic imprisonment within the Black buck and dandy by "willingly occupying" the representational matrix of these figures, as film theorist Linda Williams argues about the use of Black male stereotypes in interracial pornography. Shedding much of the phobia of miscegenation prompted by these well-worn caricatures of Black excess, Van Peebles himself refashions the minstrel tradition's "familiar brutal black buck" image, as well as that of the cocky dandy, through his own erotic objectification and interracial performance in a "scene of objection" of his own making.[249] "I took every stereotype," Van Peebles asserts, "and stood it on its head."[250]

As the terms buck and stud make clear, animalism subtends this stereotype, placing Black masculinity on the margins or even outside the borders of the human subject and closer to the nonhuman object. In addition, Sweetback's survival, as well as his sexuality, verged on the beastly. For instance, in one of the desert scenes, Van Peebles hones in on Sweetback decapitating and then ingesting a lizard for sustenance. "Is Van Peebles trying to show," the Kuumba Workshop asks, prompted by this scene, "that black survival in the face of white oppression costs blacks their humanity and that they subsequently revert to pure animalist survival of the fittest?"[251] As the review points out, racist discourse has long associated Blackness, particularly Black masculinity, with animality, encapsulated most overtly in the Black buck stereotype. As queer theorist Mel Chen asserts, however, this conflation of Blackness and animality simultaneously bears the marks of oppression and carves out a radical aperture onto other modes of intimate ontologies and ecologies; namely, objecthood and "the ways in which racialities, animalities and sexualities interplay. . . ." Raced animality therefore stages a "crisis of

[248] Ibid., 8, 52, 57, 134–35.
[249] Linda Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 284–85; Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 68–79; Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 73–87.
[250] *How to Eat Your Watermelon*.
[251] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop."

humanity" and proposes "zones of encounter" or "improper affiliations," an implicitly horizontal attachment of subjects and objects that so often assumes form in the film through the "inhuman" close-up shots.[252] This persistent slippage across and "affiliations" among certain orders of being in *Sweetback* point to a creolized motion, a "spreading," in Glissant's words, of the vertical spatial constructs upon which these distinctions rest. Through the stud or Black buck image folded into the film's "pure animalist survival," *Sweetback* explores how this particular intersection of animality, stereotypes, and cinema also yields the power to fray, to creolize, the devastating vertical scale separating human subjects from nonhuman objects, like a stud, a buck, or a lizard. An intimacy with animality lingers within the ambivalence of the Black buck stereotype found in *Sweetback*—its history of violence and the possibilities for lateral, radical relations.

The animal presence alongside and within Sweetback also conjures up a larger Black vernacular tradition centered on survival, cunning, and animality—what historian and folklorist Lawrence Levine calls "animal trickster tales."[253] "An African-American fairy tale of sorts," as one scholar described *Sweetback*, the film references Black folklore heroes, particularly the trickster figure of Br'er Rabbit.[254] "Born and bred in the briar patch!" Van Peebles exclaimed in his 1971 interview with Horace Coleman, an allusion to Br'er Rabbit to whom Van Peebles would often compare himself and his Black audience—"Br'er," as he called them.[255] As a trickster figure, Br'er

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[252] Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 89.
[253] Cripps, "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Changing Politics of Genre Film," 245.
[254] Courtney E.J. Bates, "Sweetback's 'Signifyin(g)' Song: Mythmaking in Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 2 (January 2007): 174; Gladstone Yearwood, "The Hero In Black Film: An Analysis of the Film Industry and Problems in Black Cinema," *Wide Angle* 5, no. 2 (1982): 44; Amanda Howell, "Spectacle, Masculinity, and Music in Blaxploitation Cinema," *Screening the Past*, no. 18 (July 2005): 9.
[255] Coleman, "In-Depth: Interviews with Artists," 381; Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 68. Br'er Rabbit is a relative of Henry Louis Gates's "Signifying Monkey," the traditional animal trickster figure related to West African trickster traditions, who deviously "signifies" upon Western literary conventions with recourse to a distinctly black vernacular. The Signifying Monkey deals in intertextuality, a "double-voiced," "double play," or repetition with a difference. These texts contain multiple meanings and play with pastiche and parody, honoring various traditions. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), ix–xxv; Chen, *Animacies*, 98. See also Dorothy C. Broaddus, "Exposing Himself: Sweet Sweetback's Body," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 26, no. 1-2 (March-July 2003): 213-221.

Rabbit uses brains, rather than brawn, to survive. The former, in particular, offers a vernacular alternative to the heroic outlaw figure, signifying upon the whitewashed commercial cowboy of mainstream cinema.[256] Adapted by enslaved men and women from African folklore traditions, the anthropomorphic character Br'er Rabbit overturns seemingly inflexible power hierarchies through trickery or wits. Sweetback likewise escapes the law in large part through his own ingenuity, such as when he swaps clothes with a White passerby in the desert; rides atop a truck, unbeknownst to the driver; makes friends with Mexican migrant workers who give him a free ride; illegally jumps on the side of a moving train; or kills an armed cop with the only weapons available to him: pool sticks (Figs. 7, 8).[257] The folkloric figure of Br'er Rabbit inhabits an ambiguously animalistic realm of the not-quite-human akin to the ontological space occupied by the stereotype of the Black buck. The major difference—a vernacular of resistance as opposed to a stereotype of oppression—begins to blur as Sweetback performs the buck and Br'er in the same film, revealing the horizontal relations between human subject and animal object that activate both. Van Peebles repurposes the Black buck stereotype with the Br'er Rabbit vernacular. In his hands, the former becomes, as Williams has pointed out in her analysis of *Sweetback,* "no longer owned by white man."[258]

While the hypermasculinity of the Black buck or Black stud stereotype might appear to instantiate the period's politics of the "Black Macho," its courtship with nonhuman objects also builds a "scene of objection" to normative masculinities, creating an avenue onto what Mel Chen might call "queer animality" or distinctly "queer bonds." What results are unexpected kinships and animated objects: "I have often encountered intimacy," Chen writes, "that does not differentiate, is not dependent on a heartbeat."[259] Often treated as outsider objects that challenge the corporeal coordinates of the White, heterosexual subject, raced and queered bodies enact "interobjective"

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[256] Yearwood, "The Hero in Black Film," 44.
[257] Lawrence L. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 102–16.
[258] Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border," 284.
[259] Mel Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): 278.

and antihierarchical relationships. We see these bonds quite clearly when Sweetback relies on a combination of his wits and the resources of his surroundings to survive in the desert, embodying the anthropomorphism of Br'er Rabbit and forming ecologies between his body and the earth. In the same scene that offended the Kuumba Workshop, Sweetback not only eats a lizard, but he also applies urine-soaked sand to heal his gaping wound, combining the fleshy materiality of skin with the dusty materiality of the desert, living and nonliving matter, in a close-up so extreme that the bloody mess of his wound nearly dissolves into textured abstraction. *Sweetback* therefore might unsettle the rugged individuality and normative masculinity of the lone outlaw with one who forges—not forgoes—"queer bonds," "wrong marriage[s]" and "improper intimac[ies]" with nonliving objects.[260]

Additional unexpected queer bonds come forcefully to the fore when the hypermasculinity of the Black stud stereotype gets yoked to a queered spectacle during the sex show scene at a Watts brothel, Sweetback's place of employment. Sweetback performs in what David Joselit dubs the "Lesbian Sex Pageant."[261] The show begins with two performers, a Black woman with an Afro and the "good dyke," a Black woman in a suit and fake beard who undresses down to her bra and dildo. After a brief sexual encounter, the bearded performer prays to become a "real" man. The prayers of the good dyke are answered in the form of a "Good Dyke Fairy Godmother," dressed in drag. Her wand (i.e. sparkler) possesses the power (i.e. film editing) to transform the ambiguously gendered supplicant into Sweetback, with real moustache rather than fake beard.[262] The show foregrounds the queered movement between Van Peebles as directorial subject and erotic displayed object, and it blurs the lines between man and woman, homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as real and fake, true and false manhood.

What's more, these queered transgressions occur in the underbelly of polite society: a whorehouse, home to an underclass eroticism that clearly offended many critics' middle-class

[260] Chen, *Animacies,* 14, 106; Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," 266, 280.
[261] David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 128.
[262] Van Peebles, "Dialogue," in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 163

sensibilities. While reviews by Lee or the Kuumba Workshop refrain from mentioning the sex show, the "animal lust" attributed to the characters in the film, as well as the fact that the hero emerges from the status of "a stud, a hustler, a pimp" among other "creatures," points to the way in which this scene and the film more generally choreograph raced and queered sexualities that lie on the social periphery as "aberrations in black," in the words of queer-of-color theorist Roderick Ferguson.[263] As a commodified, sexualized, and racialized object, the Good Dyke Fairy Godmother approximates the drag-queen sex worker, Ferguson's queer of color ur-figure who springs from the violent, radical disruptions of capitalist modes of production. Representative of the "socially disorganizing effects of capital," the drag-queen sex worker oversteps the normative bounds of middle-class sexuality and gender with the energy of capitalism's social "heterogeneity."[264] Something similar could be said of many of Van Peebles's roster of characters, such as the figure of the Good Dyke Fairy Godmother and even the three self-identified "militant queens" from Watts who cover for Sweetback when questioned by the LAPD. The Good Dyke Fairy Godmother, in particular, represents raced, queered, and classed commodity objects. As an erotic commodity, Sweetback also orchestrates a "scene of objection" to the politics of respectability and the normative notions of Black masculinity that subtend the film's critical reception.

In addition to the sex show, the subsequent fucking duel also breaches the barriers that guard gender, sexual, and racial norms, establishing not only interracial but also queer bonds. In this scene, Van Peebles draws out the implied homoerotic investment in the Black male body at the heart of the minstrel tradition and latent in the sheer delight expressed by the White male onlookers during the fucking duel. As Lott notes, "the implicit and explicit appreciation" for Black masculinity and sexuality in the minstrel performance facilitates but also exceeds identification between White working class and Black manhood, for it could "slip into homoerotic desire."[265] Van

[263] Kuumba Workshop, "Black Workshop"; Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
[264] Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black,* 1–2.
[265] Lott, *Love and Theft,* 120.

Peebles teases out this tension between admiration and pleasure, homosociality and homosexuality by showing the reactions of the eager audience, part of a self-identified marginalized and male underclass not completely unlike the working-class Irish men who used blackface minstrelsy to solidify their own class and gender identities. The camera oscillates between close-ups of the performers and shots of an attentive audience, who sit extremely close to the Pres and Sweetback as they engage in their duel, dramatically illuminated by a swarm of motorcycle headlights. Moreover, the soundscape is mostly comprised of the bikers' delighted cheers, jealous jeers, and claps, a noisy suggestion of queered bonds and desires that both upholds and undermines the "principle of brotherhood" so central to the "machismo" of the biker bond.[266] Once again, the film denies these viewers the distance from erotic Black masculinity that the mockery of blackface minstrelsy provides. Out from under the safety of blackface and into the open under bright lights come intimacies of a wayward sort—queered and interracial pathways of desire.

The Pres, the leader of the mostly male biker community, also violates conventions of gender and interracial sexuality. Assumed to be male, she suddenly takes off her helmet to reveal long locks of red hair, troubling boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and, as we soon see, Blackness and Whiteness. When Sweetback mounts the Pres in this scene of public sex, he also quite literally mounts a pointed "objection" to the Hollywood Production Code of 1930 that had previously censored interracial intercourse on screen.[267] Item #6 of the Production Code under the heading "Sex" reads: "Miscegenation (sex between the white and black races) is forbidden." Abandoned in 1968, the end of the Production Code gave Van Peebles the opportunity to protest its previous prohibitions.[268] In the fucking duel, the director stages an extended, theatrical, and public performance of interracial sex, a transgressive act foreshadowed a year prior in Van Peebles's *Watermelon Man* when a White character, played by a Black actor

[266] John W. Schouten and James H. McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 1 (June 1995): 51.
[267] Williams, *Screening Sex*, 73–74, 92–98.
[268] "Hollywood Production Code" as cited in Williams, *Screening Sex*, 92.

in whiteface, transforms into a Black man and shares his bed with his White wife. In her discussion of the fucking duel, Williams links Van Peebles's spectacle of sexual objection to the Hollywood Production Code with the spectacle of Sweetback's objection to the law. "Mixed-race inner-city audiences (especially young males) roared at the spectacle of a black man escaping the law," Williams writes, "and screwing his way to freedom."[269] Van Peebles's spectacular, seductive, and sexual performance energizes an outlaw's "scene of objection" to the laws that policed Black sexuality and Black life both on screen and off, creolizing the bonds between black and white flesh in the form of "unruly intimacies."

The "fucking duel" stands in sharp contrast to the period's more mainstream depictions of interracial desire (or rather, lack thereof). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) furnishes one of the clearest examples of how Hollywood banished interracial intercourse.[270] In the film, Sidney Poitier plays a respectable bourgeois doctor, Dr. John Prentice, who refuses to marry his White fiancé without the approval of her father, thereby relinquishing any agency in his personal affairs (Fig 9.). The film goes on to reassure viewers of the purely platonic nature of the relationship thus far: Joanna, the daughter, announces that she and Dr. Prentice have not gone to bed together, putting her mother's (and, by proxy, the audience's) fears to rest. A former sex performer from the ghetto wearing a velour jumpsuit rather than a doctor's suit, Sweetback is neither respectable in the most classist sense of the word nor desexualized, and he expresses no interest to enter into a marital contract with Pres. Nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, part of the critical success of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was therefore perhaps purchased at the price of Poitier's sexuality, while Van Peebles's unyielding attachment to lumpenproletariat, queered, and excessive Black male sexuality rocketed the director-cum-actor to celebrity status and raised the possibility of actual objection through erotic objectification.

As film scholar Sharon Willis points out, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* set in San Francisco, evacuates the historical realities of the civil rights movement as well as the local

[269] Williams, *Screening Sex*, 98.
[270] Ibid., 92; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness,* 72–77.

presence of the BPP, founded in Oakland a year prior to the film's release.[271] In place of these images of mass, collective resistance to violent oppression in public urban space, this film offers a "fantasmatic reparation of racial conflict," what Willis also calls a "drama of reconciliation" and "idealized resolutions" that takes place within the melodramatic framework of the family, inside the home and between individuals rather than within larger "solidarities."[272] Poitier's films, in other words, mitigate "white hysteria about racial integration" without making White characters do any hard work or critical thinking about structural racial inequalities. Willis cites *Sweetback* to show how it serves as a foil to Poitier's representation of Black masculinity and Black politics.[273] However, Willis, drawing upon Robert Reid-Pharr's critique of *Sweetback,* asserts that the eponymous character is just as "asocial" and ahistorical as John Prentice.[274] Sweetback epitomizes, in Reid-Pharr's words, "a black character without subjectivity."[275] Van Peebles, however, invokes the larger history of Black objecthood *as* objection. Rather than negotiate integration and interracial desire through a set of personal intersubjective exchanges in the safe space of a White bourgeois household as in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* Van Peebles takes this drama out into the street, in his neighborhood. In so doing, he makes a tangible protest to an institutional law that forbade such exchanges on the silver screen. Sweetback is not simply the eroticized alter ego of John Prentice. His means of protest, his place of protest, and his target of protest are radically divergent as well.

Writing just five years after *Sweetback*'s release*,* James Baldwin offers a theory of interracial affinities, objectification, and immersion that departs from the anti-immersive foundation of much film theory of the same period as well as the criticism of Van Peebles's film. Baldwin's 1976 essay, "The Devil Finds Work," articulates how White on-screen celebrities affirmed, rather than negated, the author's Blackness. This essay helps complicate the

[271] Sharon Willis, *The Poitier Effect: Racial Melodrama and Fantasies of Reconciliation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7, 40, 54.
[272] Ibid., 21, 41.
[273] Ibid., 5, 7.
[274] Robert Reid-Pharr as cited in Willis, *The Poitier Effect,* 64.
[275] Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 160.

accusation leveled at Van Peebles for advancing a "brown Clint Eastwood," an identification that the director himself espoused as well. Baldwin opens up the possibility of identifications between Black spectators and White stars (and vice versa). [276] At a young age, Baldwin, for instance, began to love his own "frog eyes" by objectifying—via animality—Bette Davis's similarly amphibious eyes, diminishing the distance between Black male and White female corporeality. His recognition of their shared "ugliness" helped heal the trauma of his father's criticism of his eyes, which resembled Baldwin's beloved mother's, a maternal ocular objecthood—a "female within," perhaps—that the writer saw in himself. Moreover, Baldwin raced and indeed stereotyped Davis's movement as well as her "popping" eyes. "When she moved," he wrote, "she moved like a nigger," an assessment echoed in his discovery of the Blackness in Henry Fonda's gait with which he could "identify": "White men don't walk like that!"[277] Immersed in the space of the movie theater, Baldwin in many ways ecstatically fails to resist the lure of Hollywood's stars. This failure stages a radical amalgamation in which the actor or actress performs not his or her Whiteness but rather a hidden Blackness that resembles Baldwin's own. This is not to say that Baldwin was blind to the extreme racism of mainstream cinema, and indeed he tempers his fascination with celebrities with incisive criticism of ideological interpellation in racist films like *The Birth of a Nation*.[278] Yet Baldwin's between-ness, "limitless *métissage*," his outright ambivalence regarding the immersive experience of cinema, resembles something along the lines of the ambiguous affects elicited by the character Sweetback, who occupied the lateral space of interracial desire and identification as well as stereotyped objectification.[279]

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[276] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 116; Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness,* 159.
[277] James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1998), 481–82, 493.
[278] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 532.
[279] James A. Miller, "From *Sweetback* to *Celie*: Blacks on Film in the 80s," in *The Year Left 2: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1987), 144; Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)*,* 77; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 34. Translator Betsy Wing defines Glissant's concept of *métissage* as "a word whose primary use describes the racial intermixing within a colony and its contemporary aftermath but which Glissant uses especially to affirm the multiplicity and diversity of beings in Relation. On a larger scale, the inclusion of various sorts of writing—the familiar, the poetic, the hortatory, the aphoristic, the expository—without placing more value on one than another, works toward a similar synthesis."

In the Name of the Father

As critics then and now have consistently pointed out, the story of *Sweetback* ostensibly centers on a "black stud" "fucking his way to freedom" at the expense of numerous women who serve as literal pit stops on the road to liberation, including, in one of the most disturbing instances, the concertgoer who is brutally subjected to Sweetback's rape or pantomime rape, his knife pressed against her ribs.[280] Women and femininity are also marginalized in the birth, life, and afterlife of the film, while patriarchy and patrimony flourish nearly unabated. Van Peebles's son, filmmaker Mario Van Peebles, calls the elder Van Peebles the "godfather of soul cinema," and film historian W. R. Grant refers to subsequent Blaxploitation films as "Sons of Sweetback," phrases that could be adapted to Gordon Parks, whose son, Gordon Parks, Jr., was also a filmmaker and directed Blaxploitation classic *Superfly* (1972).[281] Blaxploitation thus came into being from the power of its fathers, Van Peebles and Parks, and was perpetuated by their sons.

In addition, *Sweetback* was supposedly conceived, so to speak, while Van Peebles was masturbating in the Mojave Desert in Southern California. According to Van Peebles's *Guerrilla Filmmaking Manifesto,* he received his arid inspiration in the "solitude" of the "real desert" with "his prick in his hand."[282] The younger Van Peebles, too, found creative catalyst in the landscapes of the American West in his film *Posse* (1993), which also features Melvin, who plays the role of the father of Mario's character's love interest. Leading a band of former Buffalo Soldiers, Jesse Lee (played by Mario Van Peebles), travels westward to hunt down the men who lynched his fictional father, King David, the founder of a Black settlement on the frontier. Moving up and down the vertical line of paternal generations, the actual relationship between Melvin and Mario acts as a framework for the central plot: a son's revenge on behalf of his murdered father. *Posse* upholds

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For more information, see Betsy Wing, "Translator's Introduction," in Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, xviii.

[280] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 118.

[281] Mario Van Peebles, "On *Baadasssss!* and His Dad,"*,* 45; Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema*, 40.

[282] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 60–63.

the frontier myth as a construct of "ideal masculinity" by featuring mostly male heroes and patrilineal vengeance.[283]

The patriarchal conceit of the Western was not lost on and was in fact reinforced by French New Wave filmmakers, many of whom also served as critics for the prominent film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. In a 1958 issue of *Cahiers,* critic and French New Wave director Jacques Rivette admired the "exclusively masculine world" of Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948). This milieu is established right at the beginning of *Red River* when Tom Dunson, played by actor John Wayne, leaves his lover to establish a cattle ranch in Texas. This is one of very few scenes to include a female character. Soon thereafter Dunson meets his adopted son, who would eventually inherit the ranch, a patrimonial relationship that serves as the engine of the film's narrative. In several *Cahiers* reviews of other Westerns, the on-screen hero also acted as a worthy surrogate for the auteur director's unbridled vision. The "moral solitude," noted Truffaut in his description of the cowboy in *Johnny Guitar*, mirrored the director's own affective and moral registers.[284] As Geneviève Sellier has argued, *Cahiers* critics (and subsequent directors) identified with both the cowboys in and directors of American Westerns precisely because they so forcefully staked out a position for "male subjectivity," a "first person masculine singular" likewise enunciated in the pages of *Cahiers* as well as within the films of the French New Wave.[285] By aligning themselves with their counterparts across the pond, French New Wave filmmakers solidified an American patrimony founded on a model of autonomous, whole, untroubled male subjecthood, or, in Rivette's words on Hawks's cowboys, "the strength of the hero's willpower is the assurance of the unity of man and spirit."[286] This transatlantic alliance also enabled an Oedipal drama that conveniently distanced New Wave directors from the "cinéma de papa" of their immediate film forefathers. Instead, Rivette, Truffaut, Godard, and others looked to

[283] Michael K. Johnson, *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 10.
[284] François Truffaut, "A Wonderful Certainty," in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s, Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 107.
[285] Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema,* trans. Kristin Ross (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2008), 7, 29.
[286] Jacques Rivette, "The Genius of Howard Hawks," in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 130.

American directors like Hawks or Nicholas Ray, "fathers as far away as possible from one's 'natural' fathers" of the French filmmaking tradition.[287] Westerns provided the symbolic resources to articulate conventional male subjectivity and fortify patrimonial inheritance for French New Wave filmmakers *as well as* Van Peebles, who interwove references to the Western and visual experiments reminiscent of those in French New Wave filmmaking.

Posse was not the last time Melvin and Mario would collaborate and frame their professional partnership in terms of patrimony. Mario's *Baadasssss!* (2003), a semifictional dramatic film about the production of *Sweetback,* also fulfills the vertical line of paternity, as well as an "oedipal anxiety," as Julien calls it, lingering between the two ever since Mario lost his "cinematic cherry" during the opening scenes of *Sweetback* when the 13-year-old is bedded by a sex worker.[288] Not only does Mario direct *Baadasssss!,* but he also plays his father (and by proxy, the character Sweetback) in the film. (Fig"It was as if I had some paternal umbilical cord," Mario noted in regard to *Baadasssss!*, "wired into my hard drive allowing me to channel directly."[289] Moreover, the director features his son Mandela Van Peebles as an "angel muse," extending a "paternal umbilical cord" to yet another generation of Van Peebles males.[290] Another collaborative effort came with Mario's 1995 film *Panther,* which adapts Melvin's novel of the same name, a work of historical fiction about the rise of the BPP in Oakland. Not only does the film feature a cameo of the elder Van Peebles, but its marketing and other ancillary materials also center on the vertical relationship of paternity. One such example is *Panther: A Pictorial History of the Black Panthers and the Story Behind the Film*, a book filled with pictures of Mario and Melvin working together on set, as well as a section entitled "The Genesis," Mario's account of the film's beginnings and partnership with his father. "Ultimately, the film was better for having two fathers,"

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[287] Sellier, *Masculine Singular,* 2, 26.
[288] Julien, "Oedipus Directs," 55.
[289] Mario Van Peebles as quoted in "Preview Screening and Pinewood Dialogue with Melvin and Mario Van Peebles," American Museum of the Moving Image, May 8, 2004, http://www.movingimagesource.us/files/dialogues/0/28633_program_resources_file_31.pdf.
[290] Mario Van Peebles as quoted in Cynthia Fuchs, "What the Battle Was About: Interviews with Melvin and Mario Van Peebles," *Screening Noir: A Journal of Black Film, Television, & New Media Culture* 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2005): 162.

concluded the younger Van Peebles, whose choice of language emphasizes the film's paternal origins or "genesis." In this section, the younger filmmaker charts a linear temporality, a vertical line of patrimony directly connecting *Sweetback*, his father's maverick film endorsed by the BPP, to his own film *Panther*. Mario also relays his discovery of the *Black Panther* newspaper with the aforementioned review by Huey Newton. "Having the actual *Sweetback* Panther issue in my hands brought it all home somehow," remarked Mario. "Not only had Huey written about Old Melvin Van Peebles Movies but inside is a faded picture of a small boy who acts in the film. Huey writes about the kid, and the kid happens to be me."[291] The picture he is referring to, of course, is pulled from the infamous opening scene with young Sweetback and the sex worker. Mario therefore not only relentlessly redraws the vertical line of paternal inheritance, but he also aligns his filmmaking practice, as well as Melvin's, with what many consider to be the patriarchal politics of the BPP.

In contrast to the blatant "Black Macho" suffusing Huey Newton's review and the patrimony pervading Melvin and Mario's relationship, certain strains of Black feminist thought have questioned the degree of power that patriarchy holds in Afro-diasporic culture. In her essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," written from jail and first published in 1971, radical activist Angela Davis details how the slave economy rendered "male supremacist structures" nearly impossible in a system driven to extract as much labor as possible from both male and female enslaved bodies. As "one of the supreme ironies of slavery," Davis notes, the Black woman, likewise targets of "this deformed equality of oppression," had to be "released from the chains of the myth of femininity."[292] With no conventional household to head, men were also untethered from the myth of masculinity, and even during Reconstruction, recent scholarship has shown how male and female gendered divisions of labor were moot in the

[291] Mario Van Peebles, "The Genesis," in Mario Van Peebles, Ula Y. Taylor, and J. Tarika Lewis, *Panther: A Pictorial History of the Black Panthers and the Story Behind the Film* (New York: New Market Press, 1995), 159, 172.
[292] Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, Mass; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 116–17.

incredibly restricted means of the sharecropping economy.[293] In a subsequent essay, Davis also notes how the "tradition of extended families" in the Black community of slaves and after Emancipation supplemented the nuclear family unit, structured around paternal authority.[294] Black feminist Hortense Spillers has similarly theorized the radical reconstitution of the family unit after the unimaginable yet altogether real ruptures caused by the Atlantic slave trade—stolen lives, divided families, and unending captivities. In an extension and enlargement of Davis's "extended families," Spillers spatializes the entire African diaspora as networks of "horizontal relatedness."[295]

Much of Spillers's argument rests on inverting the logic of "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," published in 1965 by politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan and known simply as the Moynihan Report, a contentious document of racial and gender politics and policy recommendations that appeared just a handful of years before *Sweetback* hit theaters.[296] Issued by the Department of Labor, the Moynihan Report linked the absence of male-led nuclear families in Black culture to urban poverty. The Panthers either directly or obliquely cited the Moynihan report as further fodder for reclaiming their manhood in the face of symbolic castration from Black "matriarchs" in addition to White supremacists.[297] Spillers, however, turns the Moynihan Report on its head, demonstrating how a "law of the Mother" emerges from the radical disintegration of patriarchy within Afro-diasporic culture. Since slavery made the vertical Law of the Father in many ways inaccessible to African-American men until after Emancipation, it also transformed these men into "the only community of males which has the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself"—what Spillers calls in another breath "the law of the Mother," a lateral law born out

[293] Susan O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–2, 183–85, 193–97.
[294] Angela Davis, "Surrogates and Outcast Mothers: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 214.
[295] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.
[296] Ibid., 66.
[297] Tracye Matthew, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *Reconsider Panther History: The Untold Story*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 275-276.

of slavery's violent "dispersion."[298] Building directly upon Spillers's maternal "trace," Fred Moten frames the masculine rhetoric of much Black radicalism, such as that of the BPP, as a "response to, repudiation of, and repetition of the violation of Black maternity," a "trace of maternal" or an "absorption and transfer of matrical experience" within the Black radical tradition.[299]

Both Newton's review of *Sweetback* and the formal language of the film itself stage the encounter of the "female within" a "Black Macho" along distinctly lateral topographies. For instance, the way in which the illustrative film stills are positioned *across* the pages of *The Black Panther* might strain the vertical line of patriarchy that overdetermines Newton's language. Notably, one of the stills in the review shows Sweetback in the desert, and this barren horizontal landscape also proposes a resource for the film to "explore masculinity and its undoing." I borrow the phrase from José Esteban Muñoz's description of Isaac Julien's three-channel installation *1* (1999). A send-up of Westerns, the installation features two cowboys whose relationship perches on the border dividing the homosocial and homosexual. Much of the installation takes place in the Texas desert, which Muñoz calls a "liminal"—and I would add lateral—space where normative notions of masculinity begin to fray and the diasporic "female within" awaits.[300] In *Sweetback*, the horizontal stretches of the American Southwest act in opposing ways: reinscribing the protagonist's heroic Black masculinity, as well as the story of the film's desert genesis, and

[298] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[299] Moten, *In the Break,* 215.
[300] Jose Esteban Muñoz, "Meandering South: Isaac Julien and the *Long Road to Mazatlán*," in *Isaac Julien,* ed. Enrique Juncosa, Jose E. Muñoz, and Giuliana Bruno (Dublin: Irish Museum of Art, 2005), n.p. Muñoz's description of the desert as a site of unstable masculinity echoes the efforts of early twentieth-century Black writers who reimagined the American frontier myth, in literary scholar Michael K. Johnson's words, as "space where the masculine ideal can be interrogated" instead of a site and experience reserved exclusively for heroic White manhood. Johnson moves from early examples such as Nat Love's *Life and Adventures* (1907), Oscar Micheaux's *The Conquest* (1913), and Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* (1902) to later examples, such as William Gardner Smith's *The stone face* (1963) and John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* to sketch an overlooked Black American narrative tradition that employs and revises the frontier myth. The Black frontier, in Johnson's account, is not limited to the American West—it extends to South Carolina, Paris, and Africa. *Sweetback* plays a part of this tradition—but on film rather than in writing. The film not only interrogates White masculinity and reveals the hidden presence of Black masculinity in the mythic space of the American West, but it also goes one step further, disclosing the impossibility of a masculine ideal and the inseparability of the "female within" and the Black male trhough the lateral lines of the Californian desert. For more information, see Johnson, *Black Masculinity*, 10.

troubling his vertical ascent to the status of the lone male radical, flattening the film's narrative thrust and registering the precarious state of patriarchy in Afro-diasporic culture (Figs. 11, 12).

Despite the vertical orientation of the patriarchical and patrimonial rhetoric of the Western genre, French New Wave filmmaking, and Mario's and Melvin's intertwined cinematic trajectories, a troubling lateral presence resides within the elder Van Peebles's own description of his masturbatory muse. He refers to the Mojave Desert as the "sky-meeting-desert-horizon," a horizontal signifier that haunts the film's paternal origins as well as its subsequent son—*Posse*—also set in the "sky-meeting-desert horizon" of the American West. Within the diegesis of *Sweetback* itself, Van Peebles contrasts the lateral lines of the desert with the vertical position of the police helicopter, tracking the protagonist in the wide-open expanse of the Mojave. Through this contrast, the film makes explicit the helicopter's aerial optics of omniscience or "elevated distance," reserved for an "autonomous subject."[301] Hovering above its target, the aerial vision of police surveillance powerfully instantiates the vertical dominance and "transcendental vision," in Kaja Silverman's words, of the "symbolic father" to which Van Peebles for the most part coheres rhetorically and departs from formally.[302] Offering an alternative viewing position of lateral immersion, Sweetback's intimate proximity to the desert itself underscores his place *within* the horizontal stretches of the film's mise-en-scène: he drinks water from a small hole in the dirt, lips pressed upon the earth; he lies prostrate on the ground, covered in dust. As viewers, we, too, occupy a similar space: when Sweetback lies on the dirt, we lie with him, for the camera is positioned low near the ground, rather than high above, right next to his face. Haunted by the precariousness of Afro-diasporic patriarchy, the male hero fails to retain the optical trappings of the "symbolic father." Instead, Sweetback and perhaps even his spectators forgo the helicopter's privileged si(gh)te of dominating detachment for one of an object within the horizons of Southern California, inflected by the African diaspora's "female *within*" the Black male instead of the *paternal without*.

[301] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago; Cambridge, MA: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; MIT Press, 1996), 197–201, 205–6, 210.
[302] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 204.

Even though he eventually wears cowboy boots by the end of the film, Sweetback lacks the other essentials of the heroic cowboy, whose confident mastery of the rugged terrain "exercises and legitimizes the existing systems of power," according to Gladstone Yearwood in his essay on the differences between the "cult" of mainstream and Black cinematic heroes, including Sweetback himself.[303] Rather, in the desert we witness the hero at his most vulnerable, a weary traveler with a long journey ahead. Wounded, parched, and exhausted, he stumbles to his knees, barely able to summon the strength to stand. Viewers see his pain through extreme close-ups of his strained face and the large wound in his abdomen: fleshy, dirty, and bloody. This intimate shot moves with and along with what Spillers considers to be the special affective and material endurance of Black female flesh. However debased by the institution of slavery, sold on the market, or lashed on the plantation, Black female flesh concomitantly acts as a generative vector of memory, attuned to the present and the past—in other words, "the trace of the maternal" that lingers within Black masculinity. For Spillers, the Black male must recognize the female who "stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed"; he must recognize, even centuries after slavery's abolition, the bond he possesses with the female object inside.[304] Sweetback displays his wounded flesh, connecting his persecution by the police to the historical persecution by slave law, a reverberation brought to the foreground through the background music, "Wade in the Water," a spiritual with specific instructions for fugitive slaves.[305] The extreme close-up of Sweetback's wounded skin serves as an aperture onto the "female within": the materiality of Black female flesh that disturbs his outlaw heroics. These creolized collisions take place precisely on the lateral lines of the desert, itself an arid analogy of the African diaspora's horizontal dispersion across the vertical institution of patriarchy.

Watts, Segregation, and the "Creolized" Space of *Sweetback*

[303] Yearwood, "The Hero in Black Film," 43.
[304] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[305] "Pathways to Freedom: Maryland & the Underground Railroad: Secrets: Signs & Symbols," Maryland Public Television, accessed August 6, 2014, pathways.thinkport.org/secretsmusic2.cfm.

Although Sweetback escapes to the Mexican desert, he hails from Watts, a neighborhood in Los Angeles with a significant history of radicalism. The extreme economic and racial disparity in Los Angeles sowed the seeds for the city's "urban unrest," known as the Watts Riot. Beginning in the hot summer month of August 1965, urban unrest manifested as a spatial crisis, a violent response to a city balkanized by economic inequality and laws that institutionalized racial segregation.[306] Police brutality, inadequate public transportation, uneven postwar economic development, White flight, and the recent repeal of the Fair Housing Act contributed to how Watts became *distanced* from the rest of the city.[307] In California at the time, especially in Los Angeles, many Black citizens were subject to gratuitous violence, unfair policing and despotic visual structures, such as constant surveillance. In addition to the LAPD, the National Guard was called in to contain the unrest, which lasted from August 11 to August 17, 1965. A week of violence resulted in thirty-four deaths, one thousand injuries, and four thousand arrests, the vast majority being Black citizens.[308] Van Peebles concretizes these modes of visual police power throughout the film, as in the shots of the police helicopter or the scene when a police officer points a gun at Sweetback from afar on a long, narrow bridge, deepened by a strong perspectival shot.[309] *Sweetback* reflects a reality faced by Van Peebles's own production team. While filming on site in Los Angeles, Black and Puerto Rican members of the crew were targets of police harassment and even arrested for the bogus charge of grand theft and militant activity.[310]

Van Peebles sited much of his film in the radical Black neighborhood of Watts, just a stone's throw away and yet a world apart from Hollywood, where the director once reported to work. While the story of Sweetback's political awakening bears the obvious influence of the Watts

[306] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 62.
[307] Proposition 14, passed in 1964 by California voters, repealed the Rumford Fair Housing Act, passed by the California Legislature in 1963. Proposition 14 therefore institutionalized in many ways segregation within the state. For more information, see Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprisings and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 37, 46; Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 202–3.
[308] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 3, 13–16, 27, 187, 19396, Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 3, 201–15.
[309] Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 26.
[310] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 105–6.

Rebellion, the formal language of the film—its horizontal grammar—also betrays a kinship to the insurrection, mounting an aesthetic and political challenge to the vertical hierarchies of space and subjects that segregated and distanced the neighborhoods of Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. The director delivers the sideways movements of Sweetback, shaped by the lateral lines of the citys highways, California's desert flatlands, and the larger lateral border transgressions that mark diasporic displacement and dispersal.[311] In so doing, the film imagines a new spatial prototype along the lines of Glissant's "Poetics of Relation" as "all the threatened and delicious things joining one another," a horizontal "spread" in contrast to the "hierarchical order" imposed on the urban fabric of Los Angeles.[312]

For instance, right after the pivotal scene when Sweetback beats up two police officers and begins to run through an industrial hellscape of heavy-duty machinery, a complex montage of the protagonist's horizontal flight unfolds. It starts with a shot of an airplane gliding laterally on the tarmac. Suddenly Sweetback pops into view, followed by a quick cut to the protagonist jogging parallel to the horizontal line of the tarmac. Suddenly there is cut to a car stopped at a light under a freeway overpass. The camera then swings around to show several houses in the neighborhood and a brief glimpse of Sweetback. The camera pans over to several parked police cars as Sweetback attempts to pass by nonchalantly. Then, superimposed over lateral tracking shots of underpasses, overpasses, and other evocations of the city's car culture, a color-sensitized image of Sweetback's legs moves across the screen. The legs continue to come in and out of view in flashes throughout a sequence of jump cuts of Sweetback running laterally along Los Angeles's streets—all to the tune of sirens and the upbeat tempo of Earth, Wind & Fire's instrumental soundtrack. While Van Peebles provides a confusing montage of Sweetback's frightful journey through the urban jungle of Los Angeles's infrastructure and modes of transportation, he anchors this sequence with the consistent lateral lines of flight, which knit together different spaces of the city, from airport to residential neighborhoods to freeways.

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[311] Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 81–97.
[312] Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation,* 81.

Another striking example of the film's "spread" arrives when Van Peebles stages perspectival shots of Los Angeles's industrial detritus only to subvert those same shots seconds later with sideways motion.[313] The camera pans out to reveal long lines of train tracks, leading the eye through the topography's hazy expanse. Yet right after this deep take, the camera sweeps around horizontally, moving against the grain of the receding lines. After cutting to a train steamrolling across the screen, the screen divides in two to reveal the front and backside of Sweetback, followed by a series of lateral movements (Figs. 15, 16): Sweetback running across the screen, a truck progressing across a bridge, and the current of a creek moving from one side of the frame to the other. The triple screen then suddenly erupts, a technique that Van Peebles developed by putting three Movieolas together in anticipation of the multiscreen editing technology used in immersive time-based installations.[314] Van Peebles's experimental techniques thereby stretch the lateral effect of the camera movement through this industrial space, which would subsequently appear to be site of the car chase scene in Blaxploitation hit *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), released by Warner Brothers. Unlike the lateral pull and multiscreen effects in *Sweetback*, however, the camera in *Cleopatra Jones* emphasizes the perspectival nature of the space's bridges and corridors. Without Van Peebles's dogged pursuit of horizontal movement and visual experiments in (and to) spite of the reality of aerial surveillance, this industrial no-man's-land loses its lateral potential and assumes a fully perspectival orientation in the hands of both Warner Brothers and a protagonist like Cleopatra Jones, a federal agent, who directly contrasts with Sweetback's outlaw status. *Sweetback*'s constant negotiation between the perspectival and lateral also registers as one of distance and immersion, vertical and horizontal, the "commanding vision" of the police subject and the embedded resistance of the surveyed object who moves further into his lateral surround.[315]

The way in which *Sweetback* deploys the horizontal spaces of California to build a "scene of objection," as Moten might describe it, to the vertical hierarchies embedded within the racist

[313] Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 97.
[314] Fuchs, "What the Battle Was About," 157.
[315] See also Wiggins, "'You Takin' Revolution, Sweetback,'" 35–36.

laws and economic segregation of Los Angeles offers a sharp contrast to many other Hollywood Blaxploitation films set in the city, like *Cleopatra Jones.* These films not only refuse to stray past city limits and journey into the surrounding desert environs, but they often also sacrifice the lateral lines embedded within Los Angeles itself for conventional cinematic space structured around deep perspective. Some of the most prominent Blaxploitation films set in and/or filmed in Los Angeles—*Cleopatra Jones, Blacula* (1972)*, Coffy* (1973)*,* and *Truck Turner* (1974), to name but a few—so often ignore what was then Watts's very recent history of radical, lateral resistance to vertical hierarchies and institutionalized segregation, despite the fact that some of the protagonists in these films claim outlaw status, fighting racist systems of oppression, from the police to the drug trade.[316] In contrast, by stretching California's lateral lines to unexpected horizons through formal play, Van Peebles mined the radical history of that space, imagining a protagonist who flattened, foreclosed, and creolized the laws of the state and capitalism that segregated White from Black citizens in the post–Civil Rights era.

When the film shifts to the desert locale in its final third, Van Peebles further emphasizes the lateral environs of Southern California's desert, with immediate multiple panning shots of its flat expanse and uninterrupted horizons. Van Peebles doubly underscores the particularities of the landscape in the scene when Sweetback, having recovered from his wound, walks directly into the "sky-meets-desert" horizon. This is a composition anchored around the flat line separating the dusty earth and the blue sky. It is nearly identical to the scene in which Sweetback drinks from a small puddle of water to sip from and, once satiated, strides into the lateral landscape. Eventually the protagonist's horizontal motion moves him to freedom over the border separating California and Mexico, the ultimate creolization of countries and cultures. Yet Sweetback promises that he will return, to re-creolize or re-transgress that boundary and come home to Watts with the warning written in all caps at the very end of the film: "WATCH OUT / A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES…" Sweetback's outlaw

[316] Cedric J. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," *Race & Class* 40, no. 1 (1998): 5–6.

movements, as well as the camera's lateral motion, formally and spatially unsettle the vertical logic of unjust laws and borders that held Black citizens of Watts captive and that segregated the city, the state, and the nation.

The dramatic stage of White cowboy heroics in Hollywood, the symbolic terrain of the West, however, proved to be particularly problematic for many of the film's critics. This was because of the entrenched racism and imperialism of the American frontier myth, a symbolic and historical construct in which "civilized" Whiteness conquered the red man's savagery and secured, as well as advanced, the borders of the American nation.[317] This myth was often imagined in films featuring White male heroes as "settler[s] on the frontier" who, in Gladstone Yearwood's words, "extend society's boundaries and laws within acceptable outlines."[318] French New Wave filmmakers and *Cahiers* critics also described—and celebrated—the frontier myth at the heart of the genre. Eric Rohmer, in his 1955 essay "Rediscovering America," enumerates themes "dear to American cinema," with recourse to imperial language like "race of conquerors," "destiny," and "action and adventure," and he analogizes "the first colonizers of the Mediterranean" with "pioneers of Arizona." Rohmer notably clings to a heroic narrative of empire and discovery precisely when France was in the throes of decolonization and the bloody Algerian War for independence.[319] In an essay published a year later in *Cahiers*, Rohmer uses examples from Hawks's Westerns to translate his colonial/settler rhetoric into spatial and cinematic terms: "fine straight lines," "calm progressions," and "noble bearing." Rivette presaged this sentiment in a 1953 essay called "The Genius of Howard Hawks." This genius reveals itself in the "smooth, orderly succession of shots," which reflects "the heroes' movements along the path of their destiny."[320] The spatial and temporal linearity of Hawks's aesthetic unfolds in the first several minutes of *Red River,* a favorite of Rohmer's: an intertitle appears introducing the two main characters, the hard-bitten cowboy Dunson and Matthew Garth, his adopted son, followed by a

[317] Johnson, *Black Masculinity*, 4, 7–8; Wiggins, "'You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback,'" 37–38.
[318] Yearwood, "The Hero in Black Film," 43.
[319] Eric Rohmer, "Rediscovering America," in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 90.
[320] Jacques Rivette, "The Genius of Howard Hawks," , 129.

shot of a tome called “The Tales of Texas,” whose first page establishes the year, 1851, and location, the northern border of Texas where Dunson has joined a wagon train headed for California through “Injun” territory. Then comes a grand view of the landscape framed by a perspectival shot of the wagon train as it approaches the viewer, moving along its linear “path of destiny” to appropriate and settle lands stolen from indigenous peoples. Several scenes later, after Dunson arrives to settle his ranch, a montage begins with several shots of the men raising cattle in the foreground and the vast expanse of the Texan hills in the background. These scenes progress as Dunson’s voiceover describes the “work,” “sweat,” “time,”—“lots of time”—necessary to raise “enough beef to feed the whole country, good beef, for hungry people.” Then we return to a shot of Dunson, Garth (a new actor), and Dunson’s sidekick at the Red River Ranch, in the same position we left them, but we soon learn nearly fifteen years has passed in that short montage. Despite this temporal condensation, this fast-forward presents a coherent sense of time’s forward march. Hawks establishes a linear progression of shots, mirroring the strong lines of the landscape and the narrative assurances of Dunson’s voiceover.

Compare the opening scenes of *Red River* to those of *Sweetback*. The film begins in the brothel as sex workers feed the young Sweetback, a scene swiftly interrupted by a shot of Sweetback as an adult in flight, a volley that continues throughout the opening sequence and credits. During the sex scene between the sex worker and the young Sweetback, the sights of their encounter and the sounds of her ecstatic screams, mingled with “Wade in the Water,” are continually broken up by flashes of Sweetback’s feet in motion and sounds of a police siren. Instead of the “calm progressions” in *Red River,* Van Peebles provides a disorientating sense of time and space. Hawks’s “smooth, orderly, succession of shots” that so appealed to Rivette or the “fine straight lines” and “colonizers” invoked by Rohmer have no place in a film about an urban space and experience far from “smooth” or “orderly” where the “hero’s destiny” is not about

"conquerors," but rather revolt against the "white man" who has "colonized," in Van Peebles's words, "our minds."[321]

As a citizen of a city that had been segregated partly because of the divisive effects of freeways, Van Peebles approaches the idea of wide-open space and the open road differently from the Western genre or, for instance, Michel, the White petit-bourgeois protagonist in Godard's *Breathless*.[322] In the opening scenes, Michel, who models himself after American gangster characters and actors like Humphrey Bogart, drives a stolen American car as he dodges police. To a great extent, Godard orchestrates the scene through the abrupt pace of the jump cut, largely alternating between close-ups of Michel or long perspectival takes of the country road. While Rivette's notion of an "orderly succession of shots" is certainly absent in these sequences, the intensely perspectival views of the road anchor viewers in a deeply familiar spatial construct, a backdrop or mise-en-scène readily available on the streets of Paris, in particular, which were restructured to accommodate the automobile. Immigrants from former French colonies in Africa served as the workforce for construction projects like the *Peripherique*, the highway that encircled the Parisian bourgeois in the center of the city and relegated immigrants to the outskirts in the *banlieue*. The great perspectival lines of Baron Haussmann's nineteenth-century boulevards, coupled with building projects a century later, provided *Cahiers* critics with the American cowboy's heroic vision of space right in their own backyard.[323]

Sweetback, in contrast, is never shown in the driver's seat in control of his own destiny. Instead, he hitches rides with Mexican workers, illicitly travels on top of trucks or trains, or simply runs. His fugitive flight from police takes a horizontal course through what Van Peebles takes care to show as the lateral terrain of Los Angeles and its western environs, jettisoning the omniscient optics of deep perspective. Consider the scene at night when police are pursuing Sweetback, oriented around Van Peebles's experiments with triple-screen effects once again: the

[321] Van *Peebles, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 66.
[322] Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies,* 46.
[323] Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies,* 6, 11, 53–54, 126, 141–42.

left and right sections alternate between close-ups of a police siren and neon signs; in the middle runs Sweetback, barely distinguishable in the dark, an effect that condenses and flattens space, leaving viewers with no sense of depth. While *Breathless* and *Sweetback* share a fragmented language of jump cuts and other aesthetic fractures, these formal concerns take on added meaning in the latter, filmed in the wake of a rebellion against spatial fragmentation in the city. Sweetback flees the police on political grounds, beating and killing cops because of their oppressive racist tactics, while Michel, in contrast, is a cavalier criminal, a cop killer and "Rebel without a Cause," so to speak (the title of an American film set in Los Angeles and a favorite of Godard's).[324] Van Peebles pieces together fragments of his film along lateral lines to both connect and level segregated and hierarchized space, taking what could have produced something like Brechtian distanciation to bring spaces and relations closer rather than calcify the distances already at work in the city. The frontier imaginary of the heroic outlaw's journey on the open terrain—whether out West or in France—gets used and then abused in Van Peebles's hands and within the context of post–Watts Riot Los Angeles.

Just as the frontier imaginary found new life in the pages of *Cahiers* or in the reels of French New Wave films, it also reemerged in America through another exploitation genre, the biker film or the "biker-western," as it was alternately called, which Van Peebles explicitly references during the fucking duel between Sweetback and the female leader of a motorcycle gang. Peaking between 1966 and 1970 just before Blaxploitation ascended, the biker-exploitation genre handily translated tropes from the Western. The cowboy's "rugged individualism"; machismo, and outlaw inclinations; his masterful movement across desert terrain; his patriotic advance of authentic American values like liberty and uninhibited motion all dovetailed with the bikers' escape from societal constraints and postwar conformity for freedom on the road.[325]

[324] Jean-Luc Godard, "Nothing but Cinema," in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 116; Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies,* 46.

[325] There were non-exploitation films produced by Hollywood studios, most notably *Easy Rider* (1969) and *The Wild One* (1953) that contributed to the stereotypes around bikers. For more information, see Art Simon, "Freedom or Death: Notes on the Motorcycle in Film and Video," in *The Art of the Motorcycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 74; Martin Rubin, 'MAKE

What's more, many actual biker clubs, which arose as a distinct phenomenon after World War II in California, drew directly upon cowboy mythology to legitimate their own rebellious and restless heroics as patriotic extensions of a distinctly American tradition. Biker lexicon referred to motorcycles as horses, and motorcyclists often sported cowboy accouterments like cowboy boots, leather chaps, and saddlebags. Instead of cowboys riding through the wide expanse of the American West, biker genre films show motorcyclists on the road racing directly toward the viewer as an updated symbol of untethered machismo, freedom, and individualism, manifesting in the perspectival shot regularly used in the opening sequences of films like *The Wild Angels* (1965), *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967), and *The Cycle Savages* (1969).[326]

While "deviant" motorcycle club members often embraced marginalized identities as rebels against a dominant system of values, many also claimed to inherit an American frontier myth that explicitly propagated, rather than upset, the very system and society the bikers sought to abandon.[327] As scholars have pointed out, despite a mild flirtation with counterculture movements in California during the 1960s and early 1970s, the prominent Oakland chapter of the Hell's Angels, for instance, publicly condemned the local peace movement, supported the government's Vietnam War efforts, and worked with police to help dismantle the BPP, their neighbors in the Bay Area. Although the Panthers shared with the bikers a symbolic investment in the leather jacket as a representation of power, masculinity, and rebellion, their insistence on radically transforming structural inequality diverged from the bikers' devotion to the symbolic and actual American state. Similarly, while Sweetback and his captors (the motorcycle gang) both occupy society's peripheries, the film's brief but significant allusion to the biker-exploitation genre brings into relief the variety of significations upon the Western as a representational matrix of the

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LOVE MAKE WAR: Cultural confusion and the biker cycle," *Film History* 6, no. 3, Exploitation Film (Autumn 1994): 355–62, 375–77; John Wood, "Hell's Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 37, no. 2 (2003): 337, 348; Schouten and McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption," 51–53.

[326] Simon, "Freedom or Death," 72; Wood, "Hell's Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture," 348.
[327] For more information on the difference between conventional and deviant motorcycle clubs, see *North American Criminal Gangs,* ed. Tom Barker (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2012), 187.

nation, the law, outlaws, and rebellions.[328] Unlike White male bikers, who can choose to abandon the restraints of stationary domestic life and travel on the road, Sweetback has no choice but to run, hunted by police who intend to kill or jail him.[329] Van Peebles ushers in, jumbles, and untethers these historical and cinematic references for the story of a Black outlaw, on the road to save his own life.[330] Although the frontier myth has often served to bolster divisions of gender, race, and nation, *Sweetback* stages a "scene of objection" to those boundaries, creolizing them through the lateral orientation of the landscape and the figure of the Black outlaw. What once reinforced distances is here used to bring Los Angeles's spaces and citizens, as well as Hollywood's cinematic genres, as "all the threatened and delicious things joining one another," in creolized congress.

Immersed Undercommons

[328] Schouten and McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption," 51–53; D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne, and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 5 (2010): 947, 951; Wood, "Hell's Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture," 336–40.

[329] My thinking here is influenced by Janet Wolff's analysis of how the "undirected mobility" of the road is gendered as the province of men. I want to build upon her argument and extend it to raced bodies who also do not have uninhibited entry to mobility. "…free and equal travel is itself a deception, since we don't all have the same access to the road." For more information, see Janet Wolff, "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism," *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993), 229, 235.

[330] The biker-exploitation genre was paradoxically spurred on by an underground film that gained mainstream recognition, a trajectory not unlike that of *Sweetback*: Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964), filmed in Los Angeles. Anger was always interested in Hollywood's cult-like star system, but he trained in France and worked for Langlois, similar to Van Peebles. Unlike the aforementioned films from the biker-exploitation genre cycle, *Scorpio Rising,* like *Sweetback,* casts an ambivalent eye upon mainstream cinema and popular culture. It also presents, in David James's words, an unstable "collage" of meanings surrounding the "hyperbolic masculinity" of biker culture. Teetering between homosocial and homosexual allusions, leather jackets and S/M references, to the tune of cheesy pop songs and intercut with fascist, Satanic, and Christian iconography as well as scenes appropriated from Hollywood films, *Scorpio Rising* refuses categorizations of mainstream and alternative cinema, just as it muddies references to normative and marginalized masculinities and sexualities. Ambiguity reigns in this tangle of references, propelled by a frenetic formalism of rapid cuts toward the end of the film, similar to how *Sweetback* stages the creolized collision of cinemas to tell an alternative story of the forced exile of an outlaw in Los Angeles and its environs, refusing the heroic linearity of its predecessors while still acknowledging its entanglement with the industry of the city. For more information, see James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde,* 197, 371; James, *Allegories of Cinema,* 149–56.

Authored by a state commission assembled in response to Watts, the 1965 McCone Report deployed the conclusions of the 1964 Moynihan Report to link "the sickness in the center of our cities" to the problem of Black patriarchy (or lack thereof). "Once he goes," the McCone Report stated, "the family unit is broken and is seldom restored." According to the 1965 report, the father's gaping absence resulted in Black underclass pathologies, manifested in the escalated levels of violence during the Watts Rebellion.[331] Yet in place of a "broken" nuclear family unit, *Sweetback* delivers, instead, a common effort, an "extended family," in Angela Davis's words, that first formed during the film's production process. Despite the fact that Van Peebles possessed a large amount of authorial control as producer, editor, director, actor, and scorer of *Sweetback*, a fact David James asserts excludes the film from "community praxis," the director, however, consistently foregrounded the formation of his diverse crew, made up of "third world people" who created a "living workshop."[332] Van Peebles's *Manifesto* features a picture of this group, complete with the names of every crewmember, the mark of the self now multiplied and dilated.[333] This consciously collective effort under the postcolonial sign of "third world people" defied the notion of "disintegrating" or "broken" Black families, offering an alternative of communal practice modeled after the lateral relations of diasporic dispersion, itself a result of colonial and postcolonial realities.

Many period critics, however, detected a very different kind of effort within the narrative of the film itself, citing the solo nature of Sweetback's rebellion. "Instead of carrying us forward to the new frontier of collective action," Bennett wrote, "it drags us to the pre-Watts days of isolated individual acts of resistance, conceived in confusion and executed in panic," providing "John Wayne individualism hero crap" rather than an inspired image of collective radicalism.[334] It is in and through his "extended family" in Watts, however, that Sweetback overturns "John Wayne

[331] Full text of "Moynihan Report" as cited in Spencer Crump, *Black Riots in Los Angeles: The Story of the Watts Tragedy* (Los Angeles: Trans-Anglo Books, 1966), 128, 138.
[332] James, *Allegories of Cinema,* 193–94; Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 68.
[333] Ibid., 133.
[334] Bennett, "The Emancipation Orgasm," 112.

individualism crap," and the related "rugged individualism" of motorcyclists in the "biker-Western" exploitation cycle. *Sweetback* visualizes this common strategy of resistance early on in the film right after two police officers have recovered Sweetback near the brothel and have beaten him bloody. Intercut with shots of cops pulling Sweetback across a hillside are ones of community members pouring gasoline onto the police car—consciously, publicly, brazenly committing acts of arson. When the police rev the engine, the car alights, and a man opens the back door for Sweetback to escape. In addition, an elaborate montage of LAPD officers questioning Sweetback's neighbors, who all feign ignorance as to the outlaw's whereabouts, also demonstrates communal strategies of insurgence. "It is not technology that saves him," Huey Newton reminds us in his review, pointing out the theme of collective survival in the film. "It is his ability to use the familiar features of the Black community." What's more, Newton directly linked the BPP's efforts to construct a "Black community" with the film.[335] "*Sweet Sweetback* helps to put forth the ideas of what we must do to build that community," exhorts Newton. "We need to see it often and learn from it. ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE," a sentiment echoed 34 years later by Billy "X" Jenkins, former Black Panther, who asserted that *Sweetback* "was the embodiment of what the Party was about. Finally somebody caught onto our ideas, our gestures."[336] Newton and Jenkins extend the effects of the film into the world of Black radical politics and, in return, ask viewers to immerse themselves into the story to assemble a Black community.

Intercut between interviews with over a dozen of Sweetback's neighbors are shots of the neighborhood and Sweetback on the run that emphasize the horizontal connections between the single protagonist and the larger population of Watts interwoven throughout his fugitive journey. For instance, just after one man claims "I ain't seen Sweetback, never heard of him, what else do he go by," viewers see a cop walking along train tracks, caught in a perspectival shot, followed immediately by several horizontal views: a panning shot of a bridge; a brief glimpse of Sweetback running *across* a bridge; a close-up of a red car whirring horizontally past. This sequence ends

[335] Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema*, 40; Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 178–79.
[336] Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me," n.p.; Billy "X" Jenkins as quoted in *How to Eat Your Watermelon*.

with another interview in which a man proclaims, "I'm positive I've never seen him." These lateral associations between the Watts community members and their native runaway reveal a diasporic mode of relationality held together by what Moten and Stefano Harney call an "unsettled feeling." Moten and Harney trace this "outlawed" affect to the hold on the slave ship, a container of enforced confinement and displacement, as well as a shared "fugitivity" that escapes this very oppression—despite being born of and out of it:

> Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others. It's a feeling, if you ride with it, that produces a certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history. To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one. Outlawed, interdicted, intimate things of the hold...[337]

In Moten and Harney's language we can hear Glissant's, whose notion of "fugitive memories" reverberates as an eternal bond shared among peoples of the African diaspora. These "fugitive memories" likewise tethered Sweetback's own fugitivity to what Moten and Harney would theorize as the larger affective and political space of the "undercommons," first assembled through the "unsettled feelings" aboard the slave ship.[338] "The hold's terrible gift," they add, "was to gather disposed feelings in common, to create a new feeling in the undercommons."[339] The concept of

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[337] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 97.

[338] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 7.

[339] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 97. Harney and Moten's notion of the "undercommons" relates to a larger body of political theory around the "commons," often seen as an "economic and legal solution to global and regional problems," such as global warming. The commons, shared, pooled, or "collectively managed" resources (the Internet, the high seas, for example) "offers a new (and ancient) way of managing the things we share" and often in contradistinction to the concept of private property as derived from capitalism, writes Kathryn Milun, author of *The Political Uncommons: The Cross-cultural Logic of the Global Commons*. Moten and Harney, as well as Milun, also cite and stand upon a framework of the "commons'" as articulated by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In *The Coming Community* (1993), Agamben rethinks the concept of community, in opposition to the State, that does not rely upon the notion of shared identity. He develops the idea of "whatever singularity" as "inessential commonality" or "co-belonging" of singularities. For more information, please see Kathryn Milun, *The Political Uncommons: The Cross-cultural Logic of the Global Commons* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 1; Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

the undercommons carries the influence of political theorist Cedric Robinson, who theorized and historicized the Black radical tradition as a specifically communal—and diasporic—resistance brought from Africa to the New World during the Middle Passage.[340]

In a 1994 article entitled "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," however, Robinson critiqued Blaxploitation films for distorting the collective nature of Black radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s with vigilante justice and lone outlaw figures. He primarily focuses on how the "Bad Black Woman Narrative," in particular *Foxy Brown* (1974) starring Pam Grier, appropriated and then warped the image of Angela Davis, evacuating her "historical consciousness" as well as intellectual sophistication, political and organization context, doctrinal commitments, and most tellingly, her critique of capitalist society and its employment of gender, race, and class."[341] Most Blaxploitation films, Robinson asserts, represent Black urban space as total anarchy, devoid of community-based forms of social life, such as churches and political organizations. Although his critique centers on Foxy Brown and other characters of the "Bad Black Woman Narrative," he cites several male "counter-revolutionary" Blaxploitation figures, including Sweetback, as examples of how filmmakers "trivialized the troubled activists of the moment," which eventually "ruptured the transmission of Black radical thought" and took audiences "further away from the reality of the liberation movement."[342] A "male prostitute" masquerading as a revolutionary, Sweetback, according to Robinson's logic, "perverts" the struggles of Black radicals with fantasies of solo revenge and vigilante justice.

Throughout the film, however, Van Peebles takes time to show not only the reality of police abuse in Los Angeles but also how an undercommons in Watts helps advance Sweetback

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[340] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xxi, 5, 73, 169–71.

[341] Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 5–6, 11. While I agree with Robinson that Foxy Brown and other films starring Grier eroticize the image of Angela Davis, I do believe that there are some complex undercurrents in Grier's films that go unrecognized in Robinson's essay. The gender politics, in particular, of Grier's characters are more complicated than a simple "eroticization," and the politics of that "eroticization" is not necessarily also oppressive and negative, but these questions are beyond the scope of this chapter and are addressed in part in the next chapter.

[342] Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 5, 11–12.

in his escape from the police. As indicated in the opening credits, the film stars a "Black Community," a specifically South Central one that is "at ease with the fugitive" and "at peace with the pursued."[343] As Newton's review implied, the "black community," or what I call the "undercommons," spills off the screen and into the theater, reaching toward the audience to whom Van Peebles dedicated *Sweetback*: "This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man." Van Peebles uses immersion to usher in the undercommons in actual space: he imagines a creolized space out of a deeply hierarchical one, overstepping the borders that segregated not only Los Angeles but also the movie theater, a site divided between spectatorial subject and displayed object.[344] Period critics, too, observed the film's seductive effect on audiences. A review in the *Los Angeles Times* points out how "Van Peebles plunges the viewer into Sweetback's danger-filled world of back alleys and shabby hideouts, and to pull him along with the fugitive as he races all over Southern California," a style described as "emphatic."[345] The protagonist's horizontal flight enacted, in David Joselit's words, "a picture in motion and a picture capable of moving its audience." "Strangers in the theater cohere as a public," he adds, qualifying the congealing force of the film's movement and echoing Moten and Harney's description of undercommon (e)motion and fugitive feeling—"To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others."[346]

The link between cinematic movement and audience emotion has been recently examined by film historian and theorist Tom Gunning, who draws upon Christian Metz's overlooked essay, "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," translated into English just three years after *Sweetback*'s release and disregarded as "juvenilia" scholarship in contrast to Metz's later contributions to the anti-immersive foundation of apparatus theory. Following Metz, Gunning argues that the "cadence" and "visual rhythms" of film elicit both an embodied and emotional response. "We do not just *see* motion and we are not simply affected emotionally by its role within

[343] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons,* 97.
[344] Aby-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots,* 198–215; Horne, *Fire This Time,* 37–46.
[345] Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?,"
[346] Joselit, *Feedback,* 129.

a plot," writes Gunning, "we *feel* it in our guts and throughout our bodies." Cinematic movement increases audience "participation," for to "perceive motion…one must participate in the motion itself" as something "truly moving." The psychic and physiological registers of cinematic movement foreclose the privileged position of spectatorial detachment and thereby increase the audience's immersion into the film, or what Gunning calls "immediate involvement" and "sensations of intense diegetic absorption."[347]

In *Sweetback,* the visual "rhythms" of cinematic movement manifest in sudden cuts, jerky camera movement, lateral tracking shots and frequent depictions of automobile motion. For example, toward the end of Sweetback's journey, Van Peebles strings together shots of vehicular movement, abruptly jumping from one view of a speeding car (and even airplane) to the next, often filmed from within an actual car. Wedged between these highway sequences are takes of Sweetback on the run as well as whip-pan shots of the desert terrain. Van Peebles builds an intense visual "cadence" to equal and even enact the narrative's immense pressure to move Sweetback—and his audience—toward freedom. And *Sweetback* did appear to move members of its audience. Both the director and critics relayed the affective currency of joy and excitement when the fugitive Sweetback successfully escaped the police for freedom over the Mexican border. The audience experienced an "emotional release," according to Coleman in his period interview with Van Peebles.[348] In *BaadAsssss Cinema,* Van Peebles recounted a similar reaction, a response he may have intended from the film's inception when "Starring the Black Community" flashed on screen during the opening credits: "When Sweetback got away, there was a stunned silence. Then the place exploded." Implicating the audience into the film's larger stakes from the start, Van Peebles strengthens this urban undercommons through the connective tissue of moving image (e)motion and fugitive feeling, "mak[ing] visual revolutionaries," Riley wrote, "out of all of us.[349] The film's aesthetic and political layers of motion also accommodate several

[347] Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 38–42.
[348] Coleman, "In-Depth: Interviews with Artists," 373–74.
[349] Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?"

interlocking histories of Black social and spectatorial movement. Sweetback's flight away from home and the law reminds us of how many of Watts's residents, too, sought freedom in motion upon leaving their homes in the rural South to Northern cities in search of a better life during the latter half of the Great Migration (c. 1910–1970).[350] These migrants soon discovered, however, that violence, segregation, and unemployment also extended north of the Mason-Dixon line, eventually leading to the "urban unrest" that swept American cities in the 1960s as well as the rise of Black Power politics in the wake of what many perceived to be a failure to secure basic freedoms in the preceding Civil Rights era.[351] Deserted by White citizens during the postwar phenomenon of "white flight," the urban movie theater of the Blaxploitation era perhaps served as a site in which unbounded motion could be experienced affectively and socially. By cheering on Sweetback throughout his fugitive flight, audience members could be moved together as a social body.

The black box as a space of Black sociality during the 1970s invites comparison with a moment decades prior during the Great Migration's earlier phase, when newly minted Black urbanites, many of whom were recent arrivals from the South, forged a social space within the theater of moving images. As Jacqueline Stewart argues in her monumental study, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*, Black spectatorship in the first decades of the twentieth century reveled in ambiguity. They were neither purely "oppositional" nor merely "passive" to the flagrant stereotypes flickering on the early cinematic screen. Rather, many Black urban moviegoers occupied a playful middle ground between these binaries. The critical commitment to spectatorial distance proves to be inadequate when it comes to the slippery spectatorship of early Black audiences, who encountered moving images within the social and political context of their own migratory movement. As an alternative, Stewart steers us toward a nuanced model of "reconstructive spectatorship" to show how Black spectators willingly and

[350] Stewart E. Tolnay, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003), 210–12;
[351] Crump, *Black Riots in Los Angeles,* 15–16; Stanfield, "Walking the Streets," 284; Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 158–59; Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 81, 152.

joyously created a communal site in theaters to mitigate the disorienting experiences of migration. Calling cinema a "stage for modernist Black performance," Stewart shows how, contrary to established belief, "patronizing movie theaters became an extremely popular method of participating in urban community life." The "reconstructive spectatorship" of preclassical cinema finds futurity in the immersive environment of *Sweetback*, which encloses an urban undercommon audience into a common feeling of and "participation" in, to use Stewart and Metz's shared vocabulary, fugitive (e)motion.[352]

Van Peebles's suturing soundscape amplifies shared forms of movement reverberating between screen and theater. Notably, Van Peebles, who scored the soundtrack and hired Earth, Wind & Fire for instrumentals and vocals, based much of the soundtrack on the gospel pattern of call-and-response, whereby "performers and participants are joined in a community."[353] This vocal structure is heard when the formerly "bourgeois colored angels," who initially chide Sweetback, turn decidedly undercommon as they begin to encourage Sweetback's radical endeavor.[354] They exhort him to keep moving as he lies near death in the desert. In response, Sweetback yells: "I wanna get off these knees!" "You talking revolution, Sweetback," replies the chorus. "Somebody help me!" the protagonist counters. "They bled your brother, don't let them get you! Run Sweetback, run motherfucker!" command the angels. This call-and-response sequence implicates the audience, similar to the way in which a preacher addresses his or her congregation in a church. By scoring his soundtrack in this way, Van Peebles encouraged his viewers to take a stake in Sweetback's victorious flight and be moved by his motion. He stitched them into the "scene of objection" through lateral imagery as well as a three-dimensional soundscape.

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[352] Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 15, 94, 113, 154. Stewart is influenced (as am I) by the concept of an "alternative public sphere" in the movie theater articulated by Miriam Hansen in her foundational book on early cinema and its reception, *Babel and Babylon*. For more information, see Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 101; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
[353] Howell, "Spectacle, Masculinity, and Music," 10–11. See also, Dyer, *In the Space of Song*, 163 and Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 178–79.
[354] Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* 127–28.

Coupling immersive imagery and sound, Van Peebles fosters what Moten might consider an "ensemble of the senses," wherein the polarized dynamics between seeing and hearing unravel through "the augmentation of vision with the sound that it has excluded."[355] For example, this "ensemble" plays on during the aforementioned scene in Los Angeles's postindustrial detritus when Van Peebles's experimentation with triple screens debuts. As the camera quickly jumps from one form of lateral movement to another—train, human, creek—we hear a member of Earth, Wind & Fire desperately urge Sweetback to move and be moved, accompanied by the rapid rhythms of the band's various instrumentals: "Come on, legs! Come on, run! Come on, knees! Don't be mean! Come on, baby! Do your thing! Come on, baby! Don't cop out on me! Come on, baby! Don't give in on me! Come on, baby! Cruise with me!" The scene offers a sensory tangle of image and sound, both of which equally convey the charged energy of Sweetback's flight. The film's "ensemble of the senses" therefore leads us to another model of lateral relations, dismantling the vertical logic of "ocularcentrism" that places the optical over the sonic. By orchestrating an "ensemble of the senses," *Sweetback* reciprocally builds a foundation for the larger "ensemble of the social" or what Moten calls in another breath "the promise of communism" in relation to the undercommons: analogous weaves of senses, spaces, spectators, citizens, and the city that begin in the black box and spread out into the urban fabric of Los Angeles.[356] The film reassembles the senses to once again reassemble the social, embedding viewers in this holistic sensory experience as a vehicle to insert them into a city haunted by distance between neighborhoods and neighbors. Through his own effort of immersion, Van Peebles therefore asks us to move all at once *across* the partition that cleaves sound from image, audience from screen, Watts from the rest of Los Angeles.

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The rise of "neo-Blaxploitation" films in the 1990s brought renewed attention to the legacy of *Sweetback* and the larger genre it helped spawn in 1971. These films took place in inner-city

[355] Moten, *In the Break,* 175, 221.
[356] Ibid., 251, 229–300.

ghettoes, usually in Los Angeles or New York, the same urban locales of the parent films, and often focused on similar issues such as drugs and gun violence. The connection between *Sweetback* and these subsequent films is further underscored by the fact that Mario Van Peebles directed *New Jack City* (1991), one of the genre's founding films. Beyond the obvious patrimony oscillating between *Sweetback* and *New Jack City*, their affinities quickly begin to fade. *New Jack City* is set in the vertical terrain of New York, unlike the lateral landscapes of Los Angeles in *Sweetback*, a difference reflected in each film's relation to the law. *New Jack City* adopts a much more forgiving view of the police, with two cop protagonists who try to help save the community from gang and drug warfare, a telling contrast to Sweetback's outlaw status and resistance to police law.

Boyz n the Hood (1991), another example of neo-Blaxploitation films of that decade, is sited in Watts and makes an overt reference to the 1965 riots in the opening intertitle. *Boyz n the Hood,* like much of the genre, pictures an "exclusively masculine world" where women and mothers are marginalized, and the narrative centers on the relationship between a father and his son.[357] While Melvin Van Peebles in many ways has adopted his role as the (or one of) "godfather of soul cinema," the way in which *Sweetback* moves laterally with "the trace of the mother," instead of vertically with the father, sheds light upon another lineage. Van Peebles stands in proximity not only to his son Mario and other American neo-Blaxploitation filmmakers but to artists and experimental British filmmakers Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen (discussed in subsequent chapters), whose work rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s around the same time as the 'hood genre emerged.

In his essay "Black Is, Black Ain't: Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities," Julien specifically criticizes neo-Blaxploitation films for presenting an essentialist view of Blackness that forecloses desire's transgressions across race, gender, and sexuality, thereby excluding

[357] Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 1, 145–52; Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 154–56; Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2425; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness,* 158–59, 182–87.

Blackness from "a diasporic perspective." Julien also cites Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) as another early 1990s example of conservative gender and race politics, particularly around interracial relationships that "usually results in punishment." "Spike Lee's opposition to miscegenation," Julien retorts, "probably has a lot in common with David Duke's notion of racial purity." Lee's depiction of "miscegenation" as "a threat to the middle-class family" strays from Van Peebles's own exploration of interracial sex inside the undercommons and outside the confines of marriage during the fucking duel, a scene notably featured in Julien's documentary *BaadAsssss Cinema.*[358] My project traces an alternative entanglement of immersion shared between Van Peebles and a subsequent generation of filmmakers and artists who came of age when Blaxploitation rose to prominence—but this time creolized across the ocean in London. And so now I turn to Julien, whose installation *Baltimore* (2003) creolizes another American city and explores the possibilities of lateral immersion within a multiscreen, time-based environment, in large part through the legacy and lens of the elder Van Peebles.

[358] Isaac Julien, "Black Is, Black Ain't: Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent and Michele Wallace (Seattle: Bap Press, 1993), 260, 262–63.

THE CITY IN CREOLE

Within Maryland's largest city lurk Melvin Van Peebles and an Afrofuturist cyborg, whose ocular tracking device, gun, and Afro wig form a peculiar collection of attributes borrowed from robots, Foxy Brown, and radical activist Angela Davis. Afro-Cyborg lands in Baltimore on a spaceship, completing the long journey from some undiscovered planet where Black Power feminists, Blaxploitation heroines, and machines mingle in an outer-space alternate 1970s.[359] The pair moves through three of Baltimore's cultural institutions: the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, the Walters Art Museum, and the George Peabody Library. Their tour culminates when Van Peebles finds wax figures admiring Renaissance and Baroque paintings lining the galleries of the Walters. Although the likes of Billie Holiday and Malcolm X remain in the museum with the canvases from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, the two protagonists part ways in east Baltimore to dialogue from Blaxploitation hit *The Mack* (1973): "The party's over, Baby," a man with a deep voice tell us. "It's dawn. It's reality."

And so, just shy of twelve minutes later, the futuristic fantasy of *Baltimore* (2003) comes to an end and reality, so to speak, begins (Fig. 2). Translating the work of Édouard Glissant into visual terms, Julien has described his practice as "a creolizing vision," a capacious concept that he introduced at the *Documenta XI* Platform 3 event in St. Lucia and Martinique in November 2001.[360] And in the *Documenta XI* exhibition in Kassel, alongside Steve McQueen's *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap,* Julien showed *Paradise Omeros* (2002), a three-channel installation that oscillates between the creolized waters separating two important islands in the artist's life: St. Lucia, the birthplace of his parents, and London, his hometown. Creolization might also inform

[359] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 175. See also Calvin Reid, "Funk Renaissance," *Art in America*, 92, no. 3 (March 2004): 92.
[360] Isaac Julien, "Creolizing Vision," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta11, Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003).149–55.

Baltimore's blend of earth and outer space, the recent past of the 1970s and the future, three cultural institutions, and the Afro-diasporic histories nestled within the streets of Baltimore itself.[361] A port city connecting Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and both sides of the Mason-Dixon line during the height of the slave trade, the city of Baltimore is one of many such creolized places captured by Julien's lens.[362] *Baltimore*'s exhibition history also reflects these transatlantic itineraries. In addition to London, New York, and Baltimore (among other cities), the installation was shown in Liverpool, one of the major hubs of the triangle trade and the African diaspora it wrought.[363]

Creolized might also refer to the growing presence of moving images in the museum. Just as Julien inhabits a space between countries and cultures, he also works within the interstice of the black box and white cube via the projected image installation.[364] Julien takes advantage of the more flexible format of the gallery or museum, unfettered by cinema's single screen, to stage increasingly immersive installations. Often comprising several large screens with surround sound, the all-encompassing nature of Julien's installations at the same time recalls Hollywood's awe-inspiring IMAX spectacles, a form of technological showmanship that time-based artists like Julien have embraced.[365] Complex, multiscreen installations such as *Baltimore* have also become the face of a growing trend toward immersive spectacle in contemporary art. On one hand, the multiple screens allow artists and filmmakers to creolize their commitments to the space of art and film, encouraging a "polyvision," in Julien's words, typically unavailable in either the cinema

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[361] Guiliana Bruno, "Musings on a House Museum: Isaac Julien's Intimate *Vagabondia,*" in *Isaac Julien,* ed. Enrique Juncosa, Jose E. Muñoz, and Giuliana Bruno (Dublin: Irish Museum of Art, 2005), 4; Kobena Mercer, "Avid Iconographies," in *Isaac Julien*, ed. Darke et al. (London: Ellipsis, 2001), 16; Cristina Albu, "The Indexicality of the Triptych Video Constructions in Isaac Julien's *True North* and *Fantôme Afrique,*" in *Isaac Julien: True North, Fantôme Afrique*, ed. Anthony Appiah et al. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 79.

[362] Mary Ellen Hayward, "Introduction: Baltimore 1795–1825," in *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter*, ed. Carolyn J. Weekley and Stiles Tuttle Colwill (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1987), 21–24.

[363] Louise Yelin, "Callin' Out Around the World: Isaac Julien's New Ethnicities," *Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 2 (August 2009), 240.

[364] Bruno, "Musings on a House Museum," 4; Mercer, "Avid Iconographies," 16; Albu, "The Indexicality of the Triptych Video Constructions," 79.

[365] Mark Nash, "Electric Shadows," in *Ten Thousand Waves* (London: Victoria Miro Gallery, 2010), 39.

or museum alone.[366] On the other hand, the hybridization of the black box and white cube has become a source of anxiety for many current critics and art historians, who bemoan an increase of "spectacle-value" in art.[367] In these accounts, Hollywood's sensory plentitude has quite conspicuously encroached upon the formerly quiet space of the museum, as have advances in digital technology such as Avid, which allows Julien to edit across multiple screens and create the increasingly immersive installations that now bear the brunt of the critique of immersive spectacle. While lauded in many critical circles, Julien's work has also come under similar suspicion for aestheticizing real, pressing events of the world today.[368]

Baltimore makes clever metaphors of this collision of movies and museums, bringing together stars from a Black film renaissance with paintings from the Italian Renaissance. Reviews took special note of the installation's cultural complexities, casting Julien as an art-historical DJ who "sampled" visual and sonic material from both popular and high cultures, film and art.[369] Julien's "sampling" of *Sweetback* is also precisely what makes *Baltimore* so immersive. The formal grammar of Van Peebles's own film serves as a touchstone for Julien's installation. Through the three screens, Julien pays homage to how the horizons of Southern California shape Van Peebles's sweeping cinematography and multiscreen experiments. In the first section of this chapter I argue that *Baltimore* assumes the horizontal shape of the African diaspora to imagine a creolized space for the city of Baltimore, hierarchized along lines of race and class. While *Baltimore* is indebted to *Sweetback*, it also turns to Baroque artworks displayed in the Walters, directing us toward what Glissant would call the creolized "spread" of the Baroque aesthetic of ecstasy and immersion. Through unexpected comparisons among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious paintings, *Sweetback,* and Afrofuturist films, *Baltimore*'s range of references

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[366] Ibid., 38.
[367] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Control, by Design," *Artforum* (September 2001): 163.
[368] Jennifer A. González, "Sea Dreams: Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*," in *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown, MA: Clark Institute, 2001), 127.
[369] Reid, "Funk Renaissance," 92; Alfred Hickling, "Isaac Julien: Fact, Liverpool," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2003; John Russell Taylor, "Is it a film? Is it a video installation?" *The Times*, September 17, 2003.

encourages an ecstatic moment, asking viewers to displace themselves from the detached position of *Renaissance* geometric perspective and become immersed in the imaginative world of an entangled *Baroque* Baltimore.

The second section considers how the immersive nature of *Baltimore*—its lateral configuration of three monumental screens sitting side-by-side—unearths what Spillers calls "the law of the Mother" and disrupts the vertical one of the Father, which has in part informed Julien's relationship with Van Peebles's work.[370] The horizontal form of immersion in *Baltimore* also puts pressure on the visual manifestation of the Law of the Father: the distanced, discrete, omniscient vision of geometric perspectival space.[371] I then turn to how Julien further condenses this detachment through extreme close-ups of the wax objects. The shared waxy materiality of the reproductive medium of celluloid and the sculptural reproductions of famous Black figures, many of whom are male, disclose what Spillers considers the special generative force of Black female flesh, that object or "female within" the Black male that disturbs his claims to patriarchy.

The final section of this chapter builds upon the prior one to examine how the peculiar figure of Afro-Cyborg activates Julien's own interest in objecthood. She brings together a variety of significations upon feminine iconicity and objecthood, from black radical activists like Davis to Blaxploitation actresses like Pam Grier, from aliens to machines. She does so without privileging the politics of Davis, for instance, over the pop cultures and pleasures of Grier, or the fleshy body of the human subject over the hard mechanics of the cyborg. In so doing, her figure flattens various hierarchies that have structured conceptions of humanity and femininity. While Van Peebles certainly serves as one point of influence and inspiration for Julien's immersive installation, Afro-Cyborg also helps us understand the kind of future that Julien dreams for Baltimore: as a creolized figure of the feminine, she metaphorizes the creolized space of the city, spread across the installation's three screens.

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[370] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 75, 80.
[371] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 204.

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Baltimore Baroque

Just one year before *Baltimore* debuted, Julien articulated how the space of time-based art in the museum or gallery generates unexpected forms of spectatorship and equally adventurous formal play, experiments that have expired, in his view, in the cinema:

> I do think there is something quite conservative about the ways in which we view moving images that continue to be encouraged in contemporary filmmaking. It really conditions the ways in which we expect narratives to play out and sorts of stories that we expect to see. In a gallery context, we don't necessary anticipate the same things. I've always been interested in the notion of innovation. I think it died in the cinematic context and I would argue that it has been reborn in the gallery.[372]

This convergence, a meld of black box and white cube, figures as part of Julien's commitment to "interdisciplinary practice, which cuts across different disciplines and transverses and transgresses definitions," gestures that he likens to "ideas around the development of creole practices."[373] The "avant-garde ambitions" that Julien has attributed to Van Peebles are "reborn," in some sense, in the museum or gallery; the triple-screen effects so prevalent in *Sweetback,* would now find a happier home, according to Julien's logic, in this alternative space of display.[374] *Baltimore* extends what Glissant might call Van Peebles's "spread" of Los Angeles's horizontal landscape and its flat desert environs—the director's creolized version of immersion—through the freedom afforded in the more flexible space of the time-based installation, itself a creolization of the white cube and black box.[375]

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[372] B. Ruby Rich and Isaac Julien, "The Long Road: Isaac Julien in Conversation with B. Ruby Rich," in *Art Journal*, 61, 2 (Summer 2002): 61–63.
[373] Kass Benning and Isaac Julien, "In Limbo: Creolisation and Untranslatability," in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, ed. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 374.
[374] Isaac Julien, "Oedipus Directs: Isaac Julien on *Baadasssss,*" *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 55.
[375] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.

The city of Baltimore lacks the distinct horizontal terrain of Southern California, inherent to the spatial orientation of *Sweetback*. What's more, creolizing Baltimore along lateral lines is no easy task. The racial and economic makeup of the city drastically shifted in the late 1960s and 1970s when manufacturing jobs went overseas and White citizens fled to gated communities outside the city. Within Baltimore itself, racial and class segregation has performed a cruel dissection of the city into zones of Black and White as well as rich and poor.[376] The two neighborhoods featured in *Baltimore*—Mount Vernon and east Baltimore—exemplify the city's polarized divisions. The Peabody and the Walters are located across the street from each other in the Mount Vernon Cultural District, one of the city's tourist centers. Both are products of late nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century civic spirit.[377] The Wax Museum claims a more recent cultural history, beginning in the early 1980s as a mobile museum in Joanne and Elmer Martin's hatchback car. By the mid 1980s, the Museum had moved to its current location in east Baltimore, a predominantly Black neighborhood neglected by the local government and overlooked by the influx of capital that has clustered within the Inner Harbor, much closer to Mount Vernon.[378] It's no coincidence that Baltimore's urban fabric transformed during the same decade that Blaxploitation's heroes dramatically revealed, reveled in, and resisted city life, from escaping the drug trade in New York to fighting corrupt cops in Los Angeles. The genre of Blaxploitation and the urban divisions of Baltimore came off the heels of a series of events in the 1960s that radically changed racial and economic relations within cities across the country, such as the rise of Black Power, White flight, and urban unrest, including the Watts Rebellion that had influenced Van Peebles when filming *Sweetback.*

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[376] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 121–24, 133–44.

[377] William R. Johnson, *William and Henry Walters: The Reticent Collectors* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); The George Peabody Library, http://peabodyevents.library.jhu.edu/history/, accessed February 17, 2016.

[378] Marcus Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums: The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum as a Test Case," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2008): 152.

A paradigmatic image of postwar urbanism inaugurates Julien's loop: a highway encircles Baltimore like a shark trapping its prey, suffocating the city until it is drained of color and turned into an island of grey. In contrast to Van Peebles's habit of immersing his camera, and by proxy, his viewers inside the passenger seat of a car with a view of the lateral lines of highways slipping by, Julien's viewers occupy a position of distance shared by commuters making their way out of the city and back to the suburbs. Julien discovers a painted precedent for this image of Baltimore in the Walters Art Museum's collection: Fra Carnevale's *The Ideal City* (ca. 1480–84) hangs proudly as the pinnacle of Renaissance geometric perspective and rational ordering of space (Fig. 3). The compositions of both Carnevale's painting and Julien's shot bear an uncanny resemblance, organized around strong lines and deep perspective as well as a palette of ghostly grey.[379] Once again, viewers are detached from the scene, gripping onto the illusion of optical omniscience and mastery.

One man's dystopia, however, is another's utopia. Social geographer David Harvey features Carnevale's painting on the cover of *Spaces of Hope* as an example of the utopian thinking that Baltimore so desperately needs.[380] Yet the great artistic invention of the Renaissance—geometric perspective—coded the viewer as White, male, and masterful, preserving the divisions of space and subjects that Harvey seeks to undo in the city he called home. Julien finds his space of hope in the sixteenth century, during the Counter-Reformation and on the cusp of the Baroque, eras of visual excess far removed from the reason and restraint of the Renaissance's linear logic. The camera lingers on El Greco's painting *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (ca. 1585–90) (Fig. 4). Iridescence pries open the oppressive, grey sky, clearing a path for the crucifix to cross the contentious border between the virtual and the real. The painting collapses the distance separating the spaces to create an immersed and identifying spectator out of Saint Francis, entirely unlike the one constructed by *The Ideal City.* Julien compares the two paintings on the left and right screens to reveal an alternative model of sight,

[379] I am not the first one to notice the shared grey color scheme. For more information, see English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 176, 182.
[380] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 156.

site, and space: one that forecloses the privileged position of mastery and detachment initiated by Renaissance perspective and continued by the highways choking Baltimore itself.

Religious references in contemporary art, such as the ones made by Julien, however, prove to be particularly troubling to current critics of immersive spectacle. "Paradoxically, the more noisily this electronic apparatus voices its totalizing claims," Buchloh exhorts, "the more it expectorates its *retardataire* humanist, if not outright mythical or religious themes and messages, a fusion of which the American Bill Viola remains the undisputed master…"[381] Often laden with "mythical" content, Viola's time-based work serves as the perennial target in contemporary discourse around immersion, and for good reason, since much of his work appeals to universal—not to mention palliative—themes of spiritual and transcendence, giving viewers a pass to forget the world in favor of some higher, better truth. Hal Foster posits Viola as an inheritor of certain strains of Minimalism, influenced by religious fetishes. Confusing virtual effects of light with the real presence of sculpture, these objects, Minimalist and miraculous, kidnap the viewer on a "quasi-religious transport" outside of the self and undo "emplacement" in real space and time. He calls this experience "ecstatic."[382] Foster's and Buchloh's language is reminiscent of Debord's which connected ideological interpellation and alienation at the hands of spectacle to commodity fetishism and, even further back, to "the ecstasies of convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism."[383] The mystifications of religious art are therefore equated with immersive effects of contemporary time-based art.

Despite these critiques, *Baltimore* spends a great deal of time with the Walters's collection of paintings from the Counter-Reformation, an overwhelmingly visual response to the Reformation's priority of the Word over the material image or flesh. El Greco, of course, is one of the Counter-Reformation's most celebrated artists. The camera also hovers over *Saint Paul the Hermit* (ca. 1638) by Jusepe de Ribera (Fig. 5). As a Counter-Reformation Baroque artist, Ribera

[381] Buchloh, "Control, by Design," 162.
[382] Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), xi, 198–202, 212.
[383] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* n.p.

continued the Catholic tradition of devotional imagery in the face of militant antagonism toward the visual during the Protestant Reformation.[384] Ribera relies on dramatic contrasts of dark and light, as well as thick paint application, to visibly accentuate the pious suffering of a man whose sunken cheeks, protruding ribs, and turgid veins assume the appearance of decaying flesh. These two paintings hinge on visual excess to induce ecstasy, or the state of being "beside oneself," a displacement away from the self encouraged by El Greco, for instance, in his depiction of Saint Francis, whose wounded flesh quite literally surrenders to that of Christ's; the color of his skin and garb rhyme with that of the crucifix and layers of light that surround it.[385]

Julien is not the first filmmaker to express interest in El Greco. Sergei Eisenstein devoted an essay to the ecstatic effects of El Greco's canvases from the Counter-Reformation. Eisenstein explains that *Christ Cleansing the Temple* (Eisenstein refers to it as *The Expulsion of the Moneylenders from the Temple* in the essay) (ca. 1570) remains his least favorite painting in El

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[384] The Walters Art Museum, "Saint Paul the Hermit," http://art.thewalters.org/viewwoa.aspx?id=37037, accessed March 15, 2011.

[385] Ibid., 17; *Oxford-English Dictionary,* s.v. "ecstasy"; The Walters Art Museum, "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata," http://art.thewalters.org/viewwoa.aspx?id=6457, accessed March 1, 2011. "Reaching out" and "replication" are terms used by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit use to describe Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986)*,* a film and filmmaker for whom Julien holds great admiration—so much so that he directed a documentary entitled *Derek* (2008) about Jarman's life and work. While El Greco remains Julien's Counter-Reformation model for ecstatic transport away from subjecthood and toward objecthood, for Jarman, the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio, also associated with the Counter-Reformation, anticipates the dramatic contrasts of illumination and shadow reminiscent of studio film lighting. Caravaggio also enables ecstatic "shatters" of identity," termed earlier by Bersani "self-shattering," not unlike Moten's discussion of ecstasy in terms of destabilizing the subject. Jarman's deep identification with Caravaggio and immersion into his world enables rhymes or "inaccurate replication of the self" that enable this "shattering" of the notion of a discrete self, unhinged from others. Rhymes and replications, but also shattering's and "slippages of identity" are seen on screen when the head of one character, Michele, serves as a surrogate for what was Christ's in Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* (1602-1603). It's also a rhyming seen in the relay between El Greco's Saint Francis and Christ, as well as perhaps the wax objects, whose effect as doppelganger with a difference seems to inhabit what Bersani later identifies with "discovering the self outside of the self," made most forcefully in *Baltimore* when the encounter between Van Peebles and his wax twin is repeated across all three screens. "These moments of confusion of self, dissolution of self, also mean a "journey toward the lover, the human and nonhuman objects of tenderness," which "facilitates contacts with the world", a reaching out, moving closer to someone or something else without possessing or mastering, seen in many of Caravaggio's paintings as well as El Greco's*,* touch Julien. For more information, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 47, 72, 79; Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 217.

Greco's vast oeuvre because it departs from the artist's signature "ecstatic" style, where the painter experiences an "ecstatic subjective dissolution," just as the film actor is "simultaneously the subject and object of creation" (Fig. 6).[386] Eisenstein proceeds to "fantasize" about how he might "ecstaticize" the painting: contorted limbs, contrasting downward and upward rhythms, "the swirling cloudy expanse" of celestial skies, to name just a few of El Greco's characteristic formal devices designed to induce "explosions" of ecstasy. Eisenstein deliberately contrasts the visual regime of the Renaissance to the "excited spirit" and "ecstatically bursting temperament" of the Baroque, a comparison Julien quite explicitly makes in *Baltimore* when *The Ideal City* and *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* occupy opposite ends of the triptych about halfway through the loop.[387]

In other essays on film, Eisenstein uses similar language to describe the ecstatic process of acting: a transition from subject to object, or the ""I" of the actor and the "he" of the image."[388] He eloquently characterizes the critical moment when the actor begins to put on makeup and costume as "a complete "magic" operation of "transformation" with whisperings such as "I am already not me," "I am already so-and so," "See, I am beginning to be him," and so on."[389] He calls this "transformation" a "trans-substantiation," evoking the ritual of the Eucharist when bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ.[390] According to Eisenstein, spectators also experience an ecstatic moment of transubstantiation from "I" to "not me," constantly hovering between a critical distance from and immersion or "leap into opposition" the representation before them.[391] By analogizing cinematic and painted transubstantiation, both Eisenstein and Julien

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[386] Sergei Eisenstein, "El Greco," in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Dalle Vacche (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 202.
[387] Ibid, 195–201.
[388] Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949), 136. Kaja Silverman's notion of "political ecstasy," drawn in part from Eisenstein and connected to Julien's *Looking for Langston*, has been helpful in my thinking. For more information, see Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World,* 90–91.
[389] Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, 137.
[390] Ibid.
[391] Ibid., 172–73. These triumphs and transformations of ecstasy resemble the mutations that Eisenstein so admired in Walt Disney's early animations. The filmmaker called this phenomenon "plasmaticness," defining it as "a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form" and "protest against

discover how ecstasy emerges as a form of immersion, resulting in displacement from and destabilization of the subject, reified by the Renaissance perspective's optics of detachment and omniscience.

The scramble of "I" to "not me," spectatorial subject to displayed object, in Eisenstein's conception of ecstasy in painting and film dovetail with Glissant's description of creolization's connections between countries and cultures as a Baroque movement. Glissant's comparison helps us inflect the ecstatic experience of immersion in cinematic space to that of larger creolized histories and geographies, many of which form the content of Julien's work. While Renaissance perspective produced "hierarchical order," in Glissant's words, the Baroque encouraged "spread," a lateral form of immersion in the world or a "being-in-the-world" that stems from the lateral relations of diasporic "dispersion."[392] He goes on to elaborate upon the metaphor of the penetrating, omniscient gaze and "rationalist pretense" afforded by Renaissance perspective and the "flamboyant realms," "rerouting," and "expansion" of the Baroque.[393] Julien's attraction toward Counter-Reformation and Baroque paintings is therefore coterminous with his professed interest in creolization, and both unsettle perspective's detached viewer with one immersed within and connected to the multiscreen installation, the creolized "re-rerouting" away from the self and into the scene.

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the standardly immutable." According to Eisenstein, this animated metamorphosis provides a respite from Fordist capitalism, "the conveyer belts of Chicago slaughterhouses and the Ford's conveyor belts," which cause "partitioning and legislating" of labor and life (p. XX). But as Yuriko Furuhata points out, the filmmaker failed to recognize that the material production of the image was governed by Disney's Fordist model of production—its "strictly regimented workplace," and industrial methods. Plasmaticness, Furuhata argues, also occurs in the conception of the worker as a "malleable substance" and "passively plastic substance," precisely at odds with an image freely transforming from one shape to another seemingly of its own accord. A mass industrial mode of production—and a Marxist critique of it—has little relevance, however, in the case of El Greco's painted canvases and, especially, Julien's take on them. In the context of *Baltimore,* the ecstasy of displacement from spectatorial subject removed from a scene to displayed object within the scene and spatial metamorphosis from distance to immersion take on a different inflection, creolizing the very "partitioning," divisions, and segregations of space and relations in Baltimore. For more information, see Yuriko Furuhata, "Rethinking Plasticity: The Politics and Production of the Animated Image," *Animation* 6, no. 1 (2011): 28–29; Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda (Seagull Books, 1988), 6, 21, 43, 53–54.

[392] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 77–79.
[393] Ibid., 77.

Immersion within *Baltimore*—what Eisenstein might call ecstatic transubstantiation, Glissant might term creolized connections *across* countries and cultures, and both would suggest as a Baroque transgression of ontological and spatial boundaries—serves as a model for Julien to bring closer and ultimately creolize the formerly segregated and distanced spaces of Baltimore *across* his three screens, the very architecture of his immersive space. For instance, Van Peebles's horizontal movement in *Baltimore* helps propel Glissant's "spreading," rather than Renaissance "depth" and distance as it did in *Sweetback*. After lingering in the streets of east Baltimore, Julien then takes viewers inside the long corridors of the Walters, a space perfectly suited for the camera to construct perspectival space. Viewers expect Julien to follow Afro-Cyborg and Van Peebles from behind or in front, accentuating the long lines of sight embedded within the architecture of the Walters. For the majority of the time, however, Julien's camera remains in a parallel relation with the actors, moving laterally as they make their way through the atrium and across the screens.[394] Furthermore, east Baltimore and Mount Vernon merge across the three screens: Julien shows Afro-Cyborg pass through the doors of the Wax Museum, only to cut to a shot of Van Peebles striding down the colonnade at the Walters; at the halfway point, the left screen displays Afro-Cyborg in the Peabody summoning the director with her supernatural powers. Answering her call, Van Peebles teleports into the Walters rather than the Peabody, a sudden apparition shown on the middle and right screens. *Baltimore* can stage this spatial seepage because of its location in the gallery or museum, detached from the single-screen format of the cinema.[395] Julien's lateral, multiscreen spectacle is an ecstatic fantasy previewed in El Greco's *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* but wholly unavailable in Fra Carnevale's mathematical perspective, which offers a form of optical identification with a subject position predicated on distance, mastery, and autonomy.

For Fred Moten, ecstatic experience plays an important part in the tradition of Black radical aesthetics and its challenge to the barricades surrounding the subject. Ecstasy is

[394] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.
[395] On the use of Avid, see Isaac Julien, "In Two Worlds: An Interview," in *The Film Art of Isaac Julien* (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2000), 26.

shorthand for what Moten describes as the "infusion" and "surprise" bursting forth from the passionate object onto the subject in the "scene of objection," forcing this subject to become "estranged" or "lost to himself" through a "transportative force," incompatible, for instance, with Foster's notion of "emplacement."[396] "Black aurality," he writes, "is the augmentation of reason with the ecstasy it has dismissed."[397] Moten here describes what he calls "crossing over" from the distanced, discrete subject to the immersed, displayed object. This "estrangement" dovetails with the expressions of transport, displacement, and self-alienation inherent to the weird and wacky tradition of Afrofuturism, embodied in the Afro-Cyborg character. Although it gained a footing in the 1960s and 1970s just when Van Peebles began to make films, cultural critic Mark Dery belatedly coined Afrofuturism in 1994 as an "African-American signification that appropriates the images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" that manifested in a variety of mediums, including music, film, and novels.[398] Afrofuturism made its mark on film in 1974 with *Space is the Place,* directed by John Coney and starring musician Sun Ra, whose experimental jazz Julien had been listening to when researching *Baltimore.*[399] Described by Ra's biographer as "part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic," through an aesthetic of visual and vocal vividness, *Space is the Place* follows Ra during his attempt to take Black citizens of Oakland to outer space, rescuing them from a pimp who reaps the benefits of their oppression.[400] Calling Saturn his home, Ra decided to leave humanity behind, claiming citizenship in the stars rather than planet Earth.[401] Ra retold his creation story many times: aliens took him to Saturn through a process of "transmolecurization" in which light shined down upon his body, transfiguring it in a process echoing Eisenstein's ecstatic "trans-substantiation" from "I to

[396] Moten, *In the Break,* 1, 179, 224–25, 300.
[397] Ibid., 175.
[398] Mark Dery, "Back to the Future," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
[399] Isaac Julien in conversation with the author, February 2013.
[400] John F. Szwed*, Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 330.
[401] J. Griffith Rollefson, "'The Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith" 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 104.

not me."[402] Sun Ra's displacement from humanity on earth to aliens in space refuses the notion of the subject's stable "emplacement."

Set in California, *Space is the Place* shares a lateral formal orientation with both *Sweetback* and *Baltimore.* Shortly after his arrival, Ra leads a procession of musicians, all dressed as space-age Egyptian gods and goddesses. They walk along the horizon line of an arid landscape, stretching the screen from one end of the camera's frame to the other. Just as the Mojave served as Van Peebles's muse, another dry, flat landscape occasioned Ra's fantasies of an alien-nation future in the expanse of outer space.[403] Afro-Cyborg's arrival in Baltimore likewise takes a horizontal "rerouting." The familiar cityscape that had inaugurated the loop now trembles with strangeness: what appears to be her spaceship cuts across the sky and thus the three screens. Its lateral trajectory stitches the screens together, but it also acts as a thread to connect earth and sky and their respective residents, humans and aliens. The spaceship's flight acts as a larger metaphorical vehicle to creolize and connect the city's neighborhoods, no matter how seemingly incompatible or alien they may seem to each other.

In his article that launched a thousand Afrofuturist spaceships, Dery asked why there are so few Black science fiction writers, given the fact that Black men and women had particular insight into what it means to be "a stranger in a strange land," an object in a land of subjects.[404] Here, Dery also refers to the importance of the past—in particular the experience of alienation and displacement in the slave trade and on the plantation—for the aesthetics of Afrofuturism. If space is one horizontal site in which Afrofuturist fantasies take flight, then so is the sea, in particular the horizons of the Atlantic, the watery space, which holds the histories of the Middle Passage. The sea harbors a site of projection for the Afrofuturist imagination around enslavement and alienation.[405] The space of the sea below and the stars above come together in *Baltimore*

[402] Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 329.
[403] Van Peebles, *Guerrilla Filmmaking Manifesto,* 65–66.
[404] Dery, "Back to the Future," 180.
[405] Ruth Mayer, "'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," *American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 556–57;), 218–20.

when Van Peebles walks through the recreation of the hull of a slave ship at the Wax Museum. On the exterior wings, Julien scans across the torso and arms of sculptural figures held together by chains. Immediately after this sequence, Julien cuts to an image of earth and surrounding planets, explicitly connecting the sea and space in this sequence. Flanking this telescopic image is Afro-Cyborg on the right and the museum's "Space Frontier" display on the left. The shot of earth suspended in space recalls the final sequence in *Space is the Place* when planet Earth implodes in flames as Ra's orange spaceship flies triumphantly away toward outer space, the source of creative energies. "The vibrations here are different," Ra announces in the opening scene of *Space is the Place*, set on an alien planet. "Not like planet Earth."

The recreated hull of the slave ship is one of the first displays that visitors encounter and must walk into at the Wax Museum: an immersive evocation of the unimaginable beginning of enforced, brutal separation of people across oceans, continents, and countries, and the origin point of the history that unfolds throughout the museum. The hull, however, also first generated the special "horizontal relatedness," the creolized connections within the African diaspora.[406] The hull or *hold*—an all-encompassing space where captive men, women, and children were "thrown together, touching each other," in Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's words—enabled common bonds, an immersed "undercommons" out of the most abject and oppressive of circumstances; its enclosure frayed and flattened spatial and ontological hierarchies despite their preservation above deck.[407] The Wax Museum encourages immersion into the recreated hull through a variety of multimedia devices: visitors can pour a libation to the "ancestors" upon exiting the bowels of the slave ship; a recorded voiceover beckons us to "remember"; a sign asks us to "identify." Museum Director Joanne Elmer invites identification between viewers and life-size wax objects she calls "ancestors," part of the unique "black extended family" and horizontal kinship structures of the African diaspora that her late husband researched in the 1980s. Founded by Elmer and her late husband, John Elmer, the Museum is attuned to an older strain of immersive spectacle—the

[406] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.
[407] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 98.

magic lantern shows, melodramas, waxworks, musicians, and even films all clustered together in dime museums and other nineteenth-century venues of popular culture. These sites of leisure showed little attachment to the precise contours of reality. Instead, history became an immersive theater of magic and fantasy.[408]

Nineteenth-century popular culture spectacles inform how *Baltimore* draws upon immersive technologies to conjure a creolized future for the city of Baltimore. A spotlight beams down upon the wax sculpture of Henry "Box" Brown, a former slave who mailed himself in a box over the Mason-Dixon line to freedom in Philadelphia. Brown toured the transatlantic abolitionist circuit with *The Mirror of Slavery,* a moving panorama.[409] Originally known as "moving pictures," moving panoramas, along with what Alison Griffiths calls "immersive encounters" of waxwork tableaux, contributed to popular culture of the antebellum era.[410] In this period, panoramas often simulated boat rides down the Ohio or Mississippi Rivers, turning unfamiliar regions on the geographic fringe of society into digestible and safe spaces via virtual reality. The panorama performed armchair colonialism, mimicking the actual geographic appropriation and imperial aspirations steadily progressing westward. This ideological interpellation was particularly pernicious, because the panorama excelled at ecstasy, so to speak, to such a degree that viewers would quickly forget they sat immersed within a virtual, rather than real, world.[411]

Much of the contemporary conversation around immersive spectacle in art has coded the tangle of the virtual and the actual as the contamination of the ideological into the real. Hal Foster sums up this position succinctly: artists now provide "environments that confuse the actual with the virtual or feelings that are hardly our own yet interpellate us nonetheless." "Some work tends to subdue us," he continues, "for the more it opts for special effects, the less it engages us as

[408] Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums," 152–54, 159, 161.
[409] Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 83.
[410] Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2–5, 9–11, 74.
[411] Angela Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18, no. 2 (1996): 37–39, 41, 58.

active viewers."[412] In her work on nineteenth-century panoramas, art historian Angela Miller anticipates many of Foster's concerns. She notes how panoramas worked upon viewers, transforming them into passive receptors of its frontier ideology. Miller quotes *The Society of the Spectacle* at length, dwelling on Debord's notion of the alienating effects of spectacle. Prefiguring the immersive experience of the cinema, the panorama, according to Miller by way of Debord, carries out what spectacle does best, asking viewers to leave themselves and their realities for the "image-objects" moving before them. In a sense, therefore, panoramas enacted the ecstasy of displacement and immersion.[413]

For Brown, however, the act of immersion—of both himself and his audience—doubled as resistance to the system that enslaved him for so many years. Miller herself notes how certain panoramas subverted the dominant narrative of spatial and temporal conquest. She provides the example of James Ball, a Black daguerreotypist who created an anti-slavery panorama.[414] But Brown's *The Mirror of Slavery* also upended the anaesthetized conventions of panoramic landscapes with one of slavery and escape, showing the vicious underbelly lying beneath the tranquil surface of the Mississippi River—a site of enslavement, terror, and utter brutality. While Brown departed from certain conventions of panoramic narrative, he also took advantage of the immersive effects that the popular panorama could offer to the project of radical politics. Criticized by one 1850 review as "geography without boundary," Brown's resistance to geography with boundaries—South and North, slavery and freedom, property and person—grew from the inside, first within the cargo box in which he hid to escape the South, and then immersed within his panoramic spectacle.[415] Of all the figures crowded in the Wax Museum, Julien chose to spend time with this transatlantic abolitionist-cum-performance artist, alerting us to how the immersion of *Baltimore* mirrors the immersion of *The Mirror of Slavery*.[416]

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[412] Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, xi.
[413] Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," 53.
[414] Ibid., 59.
[415] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent,* 95.
[416] Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," 37, 49, 58.

Through advanced digital technology, Julien paradoxically uncovers interlocking layers of immersive ancestral media. No straightforward lineage from one form of historical immersion to another, Julien's is a creolized archeology, colliding across his three monumental screens. Leveling hierarchies of high art and pop culture, European and Caribbean, art and film, Black and White aesthetics, *Baltimore* creolizes these different traditions of immersion—European Baroque ecstasies; Glissantian Baroque "rerouting" and "spreading"; the Black radical tradition's "scene of objection" and estrangement of the subject via the object; Afrofuturism's displacement into space—to model the future possibilities of creolized space in the city of Baltimore. In so doing, he also strings together related topographic connections among outer space, the sea, the city of Baltimore and its cultural institutions, and his immersive installation to show how the lateral shape of creolization constitutes not simply the content of his work but also the very form of its immersive embrace.

Maternal Materials and Memories

While *Baltimore* aims to level hierarchies of space, race, and class within the city of Baltimore through its three-screen immersion, the rhetoric around the installation would appear to partly affirm gendered hierarchies of paternity and patrimony, just as with *Sweetback*. To a certain extent Julien looks to Van Peebles as his cinematic father and places himself as one recipient of the maverick filmmaker's inheritance—along with filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, who has made a career out of borrowing from the genre of Blaxploitation, among others. "In a way like Van Peebles," writes Julien, "in a way like myself, Tarantino excavates the repressed from Black popular culture in a non-politically correct way."[417] Julien gathers this genealogy together in his documentary about Blaxploitation, *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002), which features extensive interviews with both Van Peebles and Tarantino. The same year *BaadAsssss Cinema* was released, Mario Van Peebles directed *Baadasssss!*, the son's take on his father's famous film. In Julien's mostly favorable review of Mario Van Peebles's *Baadasssss!* in *Artforum*, the artist

[417] Isaac Julien, "My Pop: Isaac Julien," *Artforum* 43, no. 2 (October 2004): 110.

discussed the dynamic between father and son filmmakers, and in particular how *Baadasssss!* is "attuned to the psychic unrest of a father's quest for self-representation." Julien's interest in the elder Van Peebles's film legacy reverberates with the patrimonial rhetoric shared between Mario and Melvin that we saw in the prior chapter. *Baltimore* might extend the vertical line of patrimony that has influenced the trajectory of *Sweetback* and its afterlife.

The visual language of *Baltimore,* however, might also affirm a horizontal impulse that weakens the vertical ones of patrimony that may have propelled the production of the installation. Both Hortense Spillers and Angela Davis (whom Julien references through the figure of the Afro-Cyborg) have shown how slavery destabilized the patriarchal family unit with horizontal kinships. "From this angle, fathers, daughters, mothers, sons, sisters, brothers spread across the social terrain in horizontal display," writes Spillers, "which exactly occurred in the dispersal of the historic African-American domestic unit."[418] These kinships find form in the lateral geographies generated within the three-screen architecture of *Baltimore*, as well as Julien's other multiscreen installations, most notably his two-channel time-based installation *Vagabondia* (2000) (Fig. 7). *Vagabondia* features the artist's own mother, whose spoken Creole, her mother tongue, makes up much of the work's vivid soundtrack. Her enigmatic voice leads us through London's Sir John Soane's Museum, which houses the equally enigmatic collection of an architect who turned his home into a museum, unchanged for posterity.[419] Julien takes his formal cues from Soane, who mimicked the latest special-effect technology of the time at theaters, dioramas, panoramas, and other popular spectacles to create what architect and architecture historian Helene Furjan tellingly dubs a "kaleidoscope" environment out of his collection.[420] The camera gravitates toward the convex mirrors littered throughout the museum. Architectural and decorative devices of Soane's own design, the mirrors shrink and reproduce space to create an environment reminiscent of a

[418] Hortense Spillers, "The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight": In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers," in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 249.
[419] Helen Furjan, *Glorious Visions: John Soane's Spectacular Theater* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 3, 171.
[420] Ibid., 41–46, 55–57.

kaleidoscope. Julien himself uses advanced digital technology to generate kaleidoscopic images that continuously mirror or collapse into each other, moving within and transgressing across the border separating the two screens. At about the halfway point, the sounds of Creole and the knotted web of the kaleidoscope converge in a mesmerizing sequence. Dramatically lit, fragments of Soane's collection move in and out of shadow, doubling and folding in on each other to the tune of Julien's mother and an unknown male voice, conversing back and forth, mimicking the mirrored imagery on screen. Accompanied by a pulsating beat, their words turn into noise as rhythmic and textured as the spectral objects collapsing in the space between the screens. This horizontal movement of imagery *across* the seams of Julien's screens is therefore propelled by the Creole voice of his mother, the linguistic result of diasporic dispersion *across* countries and cultures.

Rippling alongside the kaleidoscopic stage of Soane's home are the ebbs and flows of a long red dress, worn by a Black woman who wanders through the house like a ghost from its eighteenth-century past. As she walks, the dress sashays across the plush carpet, generating the "pleats and folds" of the installation's imagery.[421] The action taken upon this supple material—the pleat—is what Black studies scholar Rizvana Bradley might call "the feminine fold" that conditions Black masculinity, a material metaphor she uses to visualize Spillers's dynamic of the "female within" the Black male. Although Bradley focuses on the fold of fabric as an index of the "female within" an Afro-diasporic practice of collage and assemblage, I want to extend her analysis to the "pleats" of Rosemary Julien's Creole, which folds together different languages, spaces, and temporalities just as it propels the folds of red fabric brushing the carpeted floor. The pleat is also found in the close-up of the crease in the woman's back, resting between her shoulders; the folds of her dress; and kaleidoscopic imagery that collapses and cleaves within the stitch separating the screens.[422] Julien presents the kaleidoscopic fold, as well as the folds of cloth and flesh, as visual analogues to his mother's Creole, a language that Glissant has described through tactile

[421] Bruno, "Musings on a House Museum," n.p.
[422] Rizvana Bradley, "Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave, and Thornton Dial," unpublished manuscript.

metaphors as "the inextricable knots within the web of filiations."[423] *Vagabondia* reveals how Julien's imagination of the African diaspora adheres to the haunting presence of maternity, given lateral, tactile, and sonic form.[424]

The presence of a visual kaleidoscope and its sonic equivalent alerts us to a maternal figure enfolded within the installation, despite the fact that it follows the "godfather of soul cinema." While masculine voices of Blaxploitation heroes or Black Panthers compose most of *Baltimore*'s soundscape, Julien includes a jumbled countdown about halfway through the loop. The wayward countdown corrupts the linear one heard just minutes before, a sonic send-up of the Father's linear line. "5, 4, 7, 6, 3, 5, 8, 6, 7, 5, 4, 7," repeats an unfamiliar voice during Afro-Cyborg's ride in an elevator through the vertical expanse of the Peabody's grand atrium. This corrupted countdown finds its visual doppelganger shortly thereafter during a kaleidoscopic sequence of the Egyptian collection at the Walters. The jumbled layers of 5s and 7s mirror the strata of sphinxes and sun gods collapsing into each other, recalling *Vagabondia*'s precedent of "pleats" as figures for the "feminine fold." Moving across the three screens, the folds, meshes, and stitches of Julien's kaleidoscope and countdown entangle the linear logic of visual perspective and the sequential countdown. While this installation lacks the overt maternal force seen and heard in *Vagabondia,* similar sonic and visual iconographies infiltrate *Baltimore* three years later. Through horizontal immersion, *Baltimore* level Julien's own vertical paternal proclivities across the seams of the three screens, animating the "feminine fold" and "female within" his own creolized aesthetic.

The materiality of the maternal figure has also animated the shared medium of Van Peebles and Julien. The common root *mater* of the reproductive *mater*iality of film and the reproductive labor of *mater*nity discloses "the trace of the *mater*nal," despite and even because of Van Peebles's moving image patrimony.[425]"A *being maternal,*" Moten asserts, is

[423] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 89.
[424] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[425] Moten, *In the Break,* 16.

"indistinguishable from a being *material*," revealing how seemingly neutral material decisions can contain "residues of maternity."[426] For Moten, herein lies the hidden maternity within the "scene of objection," the *materi*al objecthood that lies at the heart of Black radical resistance, extending Spillers's notion of the "female within" the Black male to aesthetic and political traditions. For Spillers, this *materi*ality has manifested as the textured substance of Black female flesh, sold in the market and then subsequently lashed on the plantation. If slavery committed "high crimes against the flesh," then the "peculiar institution" cut the Black body down to flesh, the raw materiality that bears the marks of "total objectification."[427] However debased by the institution of slavery, Black female flesh at the same time acts as a generative vector of memory and resistance, attuned to the present and the past, a reproducing resource of objection and dignity.[428]

Julien's and Van Peebles's common *materi*al, celluloid, is also partly made of wax, a substance found in abundance at the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, which narrates history primarily through its male "greats." "It is at the heart of black politics about black leaders," Julien noted in reference to the figures at the Wax Museum, "which is always gendered unfortunately."[429] The artist emphasizes the "gendered" representations (and realities) of Black leadership during one of the last shots in *Baltimore* when the wax figures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. flank that of Van Peebles, which Julien commissioned, adding his filmic father to two of the most prominent "fathers" of Black politics. Yet the very fleshy *materi*ality of these wax *reproductions* might contain "residues of maternity" resting on their shiny surfaces, just as another textured image, the kaleidoscopic pleats rendered through the *reproductive* medium of film, may reveal a "feminine fold" that disrupts the vertical patrimony passed down from Van Peebles to his cinematic son Julien.

[426] Ibid.
[427] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67–68.
[428] Ibid., 67–68, 79–80; Bradley, "Corporeal Resurfacings."
[429] Benning and Julien, "In Limbo," 367.

The generative nature of this fleshy matter emerges most forcefully at the Wax Museum in the recreated slave ship. The sculpture of a tortured female slave stands out from the displays of enslaved men and women, boys and girls, crowded in the belly of the ship. The sculptress, Maira Carroll, moves with and along Spillers's notion of Black female flesh. In an interview, Carroll vividly described how she identified with tortured female flesh, a past made palpably present through her working process:

> It was ancestral, and it was visceral, I was going through prayer asking the ancestors to guide me, actually we didn't have a lot of photographs or visual material to go by, I was crying all the way to work, crying all the time I was sculpting, crying all the way home for three months before I realized that these were the answers to my prayers for the ancestors to guide me, because strangely my eyes were never swollen, and then I realized that this was the ancestor's tears, as I am working through these different scenes.[430]

With each "slash" from the sculptor's hand came a "pop" of the flesh, a mode of ecstatic identification between the artist subject and Black female flesh as object.[431] These waxy objects invade the present as a *mater*ialized, persistent presence of the past, as well as a vivid memorial to "honor," in Carroll's words, the members of her maternal lineage, "my grandmother and my great-grandmother," in her "scene of objection" to the horrors of slavery.[432] Carroll's descriptions evoke Baby Suggs's sermon to an unofficial congregation of her neighbors and friends in the Clearing, an open space in the woods near Cincinnati. Baby Suggs, a former slave and grandmother and mother-in-law to the other protagonists of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* proclaims not just the reproductive vivacity of the flesh but the love for its materiality and affectivity, its fleshy objecthood in face of the institutions of slavery, racism, and White Power that have subjected it to the most unimaginable physical and psychic horrors. "Flesh that weeps,

[430] Maira Carroll as quoted in Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums," 161.
[431] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68.
[432] Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums," 163.

laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . This is flesh I'm talking here. Flesh that needs to be loved."[433]

In contrast to Carroll's "visceral" description of the maternal memories embedded and enlivened in her sculpture, art historian Darby English characterizes the figures at the Wax Museum as rigid icons of Black history, reduced and essentialized to a handful of famous male leaders.[434] According to English, if still and silent icons populate the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, then Julien deliberately contrasts the petrified wax objects with the action of Van Peebles, who moves through the museums in a "subject-, not object-determinate way."[435] English adds that Van Peebles is "incongruous" with his wax object, as if the director's grip on his subjectivity is so secure that it will forever prevent his assimilation and calcification into the world of objects—mere reproductions of history.[436] He's also incongruous with his own status as a "screen icon-cum-paradigmatic black object," writes English, analogizing the objecthood of Van Peebles's filmic celebrity with the thingness of the wax sculptures. Julien therefore shows Van Peebles with "the worn look of a reluctant cultural icon," moving slowly with fatigue throughout the three museums, in sharp contrast to "Sweetback's purposiveness." Seventy-one at the time of filming, Van Peebles bears the marks of his age, which supply him with the subjectivity once stolen by Sweetback's stardom.[437]

Throughout the entirety of *Baltimore,* Van Peebles, however, sports some of the iconic accouterments that form essential parts of his self-made image, most notably his cigar, a feature of his wax figure as well. In *BaadAsssss Cinema,* Van Peebles puffs a cigar in between sentences, as he does in his introduction to *Baadasssss!*. And a basic Google image search of "Melvin Van Peebles" yields vintage and recent photographs that show the director more often than not with a cigar. His iconicity is congealed, so to speak, in the wax figure commissioned by

[433] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 102.
[434] English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness,* 192.
[435] Ibid., 175–76.
[436] Ibid., 175–76, 187, 194–95.
[437] Ibid., 184.

Julien, which mimics exactly how Van Peebles's dresses in *Baltimore*. The reproductive logic of the ecstatic encounter between Van Peebles and his wax twin, the subject meeting an object repeated across all three screens, underscores the reproduction of the star as commodity object on film, central to Van Peebles's public persona and character in *Sweetback*. In this meeting, the line dividing wax and flesh, maternal reproduction and paternal original, soon dissolves, as does, in Moten's words, "the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity."[438] Van Peebles's wax sculpture fails to flesh out the differences between the man and the object; rather, it shows us the *mater*ial objecthood within the man ever since he adopted the position of object *within Sweetback*, his celluloid "scene of objection." And Julien takes care to remind us of Van Peebles's fame at the beginning of *Baltimore* when the unforgettable opening line of *Sweetback* is heard: "You've got a sweet, sweet back!" As Van Peebles, now in his seventies, walks toward the camera, Julien takes us back to Van Peebles in the 1970s when the director became an erotic object, represented by his "sweet back."

Instead of distancing his viewers from the wax sculptures as dead and dangerous icons of an essentialized past, Julien brings them near to their textured surfaces in order to reveal the unexpected vivacity of objecthood, allowing his close-ups to double as a mode of immersion. For example, during the penultimate scene where the wax figures spectate together at the Walters, a close-up dramatizes the theatrical lighting dancing upon the tactile surface of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's wax twin. At one point the right screen shows the wax statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose face transforms into a textured landscape of illumination and shadow under the bright lights of Julien's set. Behind him is Ribera's *Saint Paul the Hermit,* a Baroque painting that materializes the intricacies of flesh as vividly as do its wax counterparts. Moments later an extreme close-up of another sculpture flashes on the right screen: its eyes, nose, and the top half of the moustache occupy the entire frame to such a degree that we can see the individual hairs in the moustache and the small crevices in the wax surface around the nose. The intimate shots of the sculptures' lush surfaces augment the textured effect of the kaleidoscopic imagery and

[438] Moten, *In the Break,* 255.

transport viewers into utmost proximity with the very objecthood of these objects—their reproductive maternal matter or "female within" many of these male leaders. The artist enhances the reproductive reverberations of the wax objects by positioning them as spectators at the Walters, a position that mirrors our own as spectators of *Baltimore.* They are the viewers' doppelgangers, and the viewers are, perhaps, theirs as well, an echo oscillating between and ultimately confusing the difference between spectatorial subject and displayed object. The wax sculptures of Billie Holiday, Kweisi Mfume, and Frederick Douglass all look as if in mid conversation around the paintings, reminding viewers of the messy entanglement of subjecthood and objecthood, the impossibility at times of distinguishing the two, and their participation in this "scene of objection" to the very notion of an autonomous, stable subject outside, rather than immersed within, the scene.

Via the close-up, viewers feel they can almost reach out and touch the waxy surfaces, an effect amplified by the large-scale of the three screens. Yet, at the same time, the figures exert what Moten calls the object's "dispossessive force" upon the subject's efforts to come too close, subject, and completely possess with hands as well as eyes.[439] "The shift from look to touch," write film scholars Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, "therefore does not mean the shift from surveilling, controlling, punishing eye to a caressing hand."[440] Mastery can come in visual (seen in *The Ideal City*) but also textured forms. Julien had visualized the various registers of touch and texture in his earlier film *Looking for Langston* (1989), where he made the Black male body, as he said himself, "the site of pleasure" (Fig. 8).[441] This "pleasure" came from the looks exchanged between Alex, a surrogate for Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, and a Black man named Beauty. The film queers Hughes in order to imagine a larger gay subculture hidden in the Harlem Renaissance. When Alex and Beauty share a bed, they kiss, caress, and drape their bodies on top of one another. In another scene, when Alex first meets Beauty face-to-face, sound

[439] Moten, *In the Break,* 1.
[440] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010), 115.
[441] bell hooks and Isaac Julien, "States of Desire," *Transition,* no. 53 (1991): 172.

and image relay haptic qualities. The camera moves up Beauty's chiseled nude body, eventually settling on his face in close-up. These intimate shots are wrapped in the equally tactile metaphors of Richard Bruce Nugent's story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926): "his eyes wandered on…past the muscular hocks to the firm thighs…the rounded buttocks…then the lithe, narrow waist…strong torso and broad deep chest...heavy shoulders…the graceful muscled neck." During this sequence, Alex gently touches Beauty's face and chest.

In a subsequent scene in *Looking for Langston*, photographs from *The Black Book,* Robert Mapplethorpe's black-and-white series of gay Black men, often photographed nude, are blown up and printed on hanging, billowing pieces of fabric, arranged in a dark room. Julien and his frequent collaborator, British cultural theorist Kobena Mercer, have maintained a complex relationship with this particular photographic series, one in which body parts appear in fetishistic fragments under Mapplethorpe's soft lighting. In many of the photographs, the men seem to inhabit what Donald Bogle would call the "black stud" stereotype. For instance, *Man in Polyester Suit* (1981)*,* a particularly infamous image from *The Black Book,* shows a man in a suit, pictured from the waist down, with his pant zipper open and his penis completely exposed (Fig. 9). Mercer initially condemned *The Black Book,* and in particular *Man in Polyester Suit,* for reinforcing racist paradigms around the Black fetishized object.[442] Karl, one of the few White characters in the film, appears to enact these paradigms as he wends his way through the display, possessively touching each picture as a voiceover reads an excerpt from Essex Hemphill's poem "If His Name Were Mandingo," which expresses racist stereotypes and assumptions that are also embedded in these images. We are meant to infer that Karl projects these thoughts onto the men pictured in the photographs:[443] "You don't notice many things about him / He doesn't always wear a red ski cap / Eat fried chicken, fuck like a jungle / He doesn't always live with his mother or off the streets / Or off some bitch as you assume." However, despite the susceptibility of these photographs to Karl's proprietary touch and racist projections, not only does Julien still include these

[442] Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 175.
[443] Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World,* 113.

photographs, refusing to hide them from our look, but he also enlarges them to human scale to underscore their presence: some men stare back at us, and others become animated when the fabric billows in the wind—the texture and movement of the cloth unsettles Karl's aggressive and possessive gestures. Mercer and Julien, too, have subsequently acknowledged the "feeling of ambivalence" they hold toward these photographs, especially in terms of how *The Black Book* activated their own desires as queer Black men, implicated in Mapplethorpe's unruly fantasy.[444] The differing modes of touch and texture in this scene animate that very "feeling of ambivalence."

As with Mapplethorpe's photographs in *Looking for Langston*, wax figures in *Baltimore* decline to be diminished in presence. Depicted at human scale, they also look out or back at the viewer. Furthermore, the shiny façade of wax acts as both visual lure as well as reflective and deflective surface; it both illuminates and obscures the details in the face of the figures, refusing to disclose itself fully in the visual field. The wax is textured but also tough and firm. Although *Baltimore* radically diminishes the distances that have come to structure both the hierarchies within spectatorial space and space of the city, it preserves the integrity of the "dispossesive force" of the object within "the scene of objection."

Stereotypes, Cyborgs, and Creolized Collisions

Julien extends and refines his exploration into the life of objects through the figure of Afro-Cyborg, who contains several variations upon objecthood from the decade of the 1970s, ranging from Blaxploitation stereotypes to Afrofuturist aliens to the symbol of the Afro. One of Afro-Cyborg's prototypes is actress Pam Grier. *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), Grier's biggest Blaxploitation hits, contained all the spectacular accouterments of 1970s action films: flashy costumes, big Afros, even bigger guns, nudity, and the standard plotline of good heroine versus bad drug ring. Similar to Sweetback, Coffy and Foxy used their sexuality or "pussy power," in Stephane Dunn's unforgiving language, to bring down their enemies. In both films, the camera spends much time with Grier's breasts. The opening sequence of *Foxy Brown,* for example,

[444] Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, "True Confessions," in *The Film Art of Isaac Julien*, 59, 61.

features an extended close-up of Grier's chest, barely covered by a bathing suit. According to Dunn, Grier epitomizes Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness"; she is an actress who gathers together all damaging gendered ideologies into the bodies of two characters. "*Coffy* and *Foxy* are spectacles with disturbing political implications," Dunn concludes.[445] Fellow Blaxploitation star Tamara Dobson publicly condemned Grier's representation of overt sexuality. Dobson contrasted her title character, Cleopatra Jones, with Foxy and Coffy: "The difference is that Cleo is a lady…and ladies don't have to take anything off to excite anyone."[446] Even today, Dobson's critique still persists. Dunn praises Dobson's "sexual power" over Grier's "pornographic" portrayals.[447]

Angela Davis has also critiqued the way in which her own image—particularly the Afro hairstyle—has been objectified as "a commodified backdrop for advertising."[448] In the 1960s and 1970s, the Afro often represented rejection of whitened standards of beauty and allegiance to the Black is Beautiful movement. Over time, however, as Davis herself has lamented, this collective symbol of resistance morphed into the epitome of "revolutionary glamour," pictured in fashion and lifestyle magazines and "emptied" of political content.[449] Yet even before the 1990s when Davis penned her essay, the Afro had become fashionable and, according to some, apolitical, during the decade of Blaxploitation, thanks in large part to heroines like Foxy Brown and Coffy.[450] In *Foxy Brown,* the Afro served as both a weapon of revenge and an icon of Grier's stardom. Foxy pulls out a gun from hers during one of the final scenes of the film, when she kills the bodyguards of "Miss Katherine," head of the drug and prostitution ring responsible for the death of Foxy's boyfriend. After taking out the bodyguards, Foxy shoots the ringleader in the arm, having just

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[445] Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 108.
[446] Tamara Dobson as quoted in Christopher Sieving, "'She's a stimulatin', fascinatin', assassinatin' chick!' Pam Grier as Star Text," *Screening Noir* 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2005): 24.
[447] Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas,* 85–106.
[448] Angela Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New Press, 1994), 177
[449] Davis, "Afro Images," 173–75.
[450] Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African-American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 201.

presented her with the castrated penis of Katherine's boyfriend in a pickle jar. In the opening credits of the film, Grier's Afro also makes a prominent appearance. At one point, she is dancing in her underwear, bra, and Afro as the credits roll, a sequence that ends with her pointing a gun into the camera and shooting (Figs. 41, 42). Cedric Robinson argues that these characters not only confuse radical politics with vigilante heroism but also sexually objectify Black women involved in radical politics through the figure of the "Bad Black Woman," "devoid of historical consciousness."[451]

In *Baltimore,* Julien seems to do exactly what Robinson condemned: recombine radical politics with the commodified stereotype of Grier in the person of Afro-Cyborg, equipped with their shared symbol, the Afro. Afro-Cyborg pulls a gun out of her Afro just as Grier did when punishing her nemesis in the last scene of *Foxy Brown;* Julien's extreme close-up of Afro-Cyborg's eye mimics the one of Foxy's wink in the opening credits of the film (Figs. 43, 44). In fact, Julien has specifically described Afro-Cyborg as an accumulation of "stereotypes" of "black power, blaxploitation, and black science fiction," and the filmmaker has admitted to his own attraction to "hyperbolic references."[452] "What I realized when making *Baltimore,*" Julien told Andrew Maerkle in a recent interview, "is that we cannot live without hyperbolic references to representations. We are beholden to signs, even if we want to repudiate them."[453] Julien uses the Afro hairstyle, in particular, to unhinge the binary opposition separating the spheres of radical politics and popular culture.

Although Grier has acknowledged the stereotypes surrounding her characters, the actress also imagines Foxy and Coffy as more than mere receptors of male desires and pleasures; they also signified forms of feminine sexuality unavailable in previous racist caricatures of Black femininity, such as the film character Mammy. "Coffy was my mom. Foxy

[451] Cedric J. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," *Race & Class* 40, no. 1 (1998): 5.
[452] Isaac Julien, "My Pop," 110.
[453] Andrew Maerkle and Isaac Julien, "Not Global, Trans-Local: Interview with Isaac Julien," in *Ten Thousand Waves* (London: Victoria Miro Gallery, 2010), 99.

Brown was my aunt," Grier tells Julien in *BaadAsssss Cinema*. "They were women who were very demonstrative but yet very feminine and knew how to use sexuality…"[454] After Grier finishes her sentence, Julien then cuts to a scene in *Coffy* where Grier, shown topless, has seduced a drug dealer in order to kill him, avenging her sister's addiction to heroin. In this scene, the actress simultaneously embodies and brushes up against woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" of filmic spectacle, a source of visual pleasure and a passive position of erotic contemplation incompatible with narrative force.[455] With gun propped and breasts nearly bare, Grier invites us to look as she takes action, releasing the passive object / active subject binary in Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which Dunn applies in her critique of Grier's characters, into the murkier waters of Blaxploitation. As Julien himself wrote about *BaadAsssss Cinema,* "interviewing the original stars allowed for a complication of stereotypes," a complication continued one year later in *Baltimore* with the "sampling" of stereotypes embedded within the figures of Afro-Cyborg and Van Peebles, who himself once explored the ambiguities of the black stud stereotype.[456]

To this complex mix of icons, stars, and stereotypes of the 1970s embedded in the Afro-Cyborg character Julien adds another variation upon objecthood: the mechanics of the cyborg. In feminist scholar Donna Haraway's germinal 1985 essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," the figure of the cyborg promises the dawn of a feminist utopia where the old hierarchies of male and female, human and animal, man and machine are undone and transform into "illegitimate fusions" by repurposing and redirecting masculinized and militarized forms of technology.[457] Haraway links this feminist cyborg to Afrofuturist versions, citing her interest in Black science fiction writers like Octavia Butler for showing how "women of color," in particular, "could be understood as cyborg identity" or as "fusions of outsider identities."[458] Subsequent feminist readings of the cyborg have helped clarify

[454] Grier as quoted in *BaadAsssss Cinema.*
[455] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 19.
[456] Isaac Julien, "My Pop," 110.
[457] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *BBM Socialist Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 95.
[458] Ibid., 92–93.

and departed from Haraway's notion of fusion. Philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti explains such encounters in the nonlinear spatial terms of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, an "inter-connectedness" that prompts us to welcome "the end of a certain conception of the human" as autonomous, individual, distant, and impenetrable—in other words, Western man, for whom a painting like *The Ideal City* was made.[459] Braidotti shares an interest in the rhizome with Glissant, who inflected it with spatial and cultural "inter-connectedness" of creolization, "spread" along nonhierarchical lines.

These creolized connections and collisions are metaphorized in the figure of the Afro-Cyborg, who merges a variety of histories and ontologies of objecthood in the Afrofuturist alien body of the beautiful "Bad Black Woman." The most overt example appears during Afro-Cyborg's vertiginous ascent to the ceiling of the Peabody. Thanks to Julien's experiments with CGI technology, she gracefully disobeys the laws of gravity, at first spiraling upward but then quickly moving laterally around the atrium in a variety of poses not unlike some of the kung fu-esque ones struck by Pam Grier in the opening credits of *Foxy Brown* (Fig 45). As she descends, her high heels pound the marble floor, adding a touch of feminine fierceness to her alien flight. Afro-Cyborg not only embodies these collisions inside her character, but she also enacts them outside in space. She benefits from the three-screen immersive installation format that creolizes space along lateral lines: through the digital technology embedded in her hand, she teleports Van Peebles, for instance, into the Walters on the right and center screens while she remains in the Peabody on the left; her spaceship shoots across the installation, tearing through the distanced view of Baltimore's skyline; when she wanders through the Wax Museum, the camera adopts her roving point of view, laterally scanning the various displays and interweaving various historical vignettes across the three screens. These are her lateral visions of a borderless Baltimore, staged across the immersive architecture of Julien's multiscreen installation.

[459] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 213, 266.

Lizzie Borden's film *Born in Flames* (1983) helps explicate the capacious form of the feminine and feminism embodied in the figure of Afro-Cyborg, who accommodates and connects, rather than erases and distances, different identifications and significations upon gender, race, class, and sexuality. As film scholar Teresa de Lauretis notes, *Born in Flames,* set in a "hypothetical near-future time and place" very similar to Manhattan, has "the feel of contemporary science fiction writing."[460] *Born in Flames* refuses a post-race, "post-gender," to borrow Haraway's words, homogenized vision of the future. Instead, it highlights "woman as a site of differences" and "specific gender oppressions, in its various forms" that are faced by various groups of women, from Black women to single mothers to lesbians.[461] In the wake of increasing gender inequality under a purportedly socialist democratic government, women unify across their differences to advance a feminist revolutionary political agenda.[462] For instance, two feminist pirate radio stations—Radio Ragazza, run by a White woman named Isabel, and Phoenix Radio, operated by a Black woman named Honey—eventually merge as Phoenix Ragazza Radio and join the Women's Liberation Army, spurred on by the suspicious death of a feminist activist named Adelaide Norris, who has just returned from a trip to northern Africa to observe local feminist movements. Far from erasing the specificities of gender, race, sexuality, class, and geography in a "post-gender world," *Born in Flames* demonstrates that differences between and *within* women enrich revolutionary politics and praxis.

The film's fragmented narrative, which continually jumps between voices and locations, formally establishes "the heterogeneity and difference within women," as well as the impossibility of representing "Feminism as a coherent and available image."[463] For example, toward the beginning of the film, viewers are introduced to Norris through a voiceover of an FBI agent narrating a slideshow of various images of their target. As their voices fade, we see a gathering of women, at the center of which is Norris, who is discussing issues important to the Women's

[460] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 136–37.
[461] Ibid., 137, 139.
[462] Ibid., 136–37.
[463] Ibid., 139.

Liberation Army. Suddenly, we hear "I'll Take You There" by the Staple Singers play as the scene abruptly switches from the feminist kitchen table gathering to a man sitting in an urban alley with a child. Then we hear Honey's voiceover layered on top of the song, and finally see the radio host in her studio. After this sequence comes a more mainstream broadcast, a newscast with a female anchor about the celebration of the tenth anniversary of social labor's victory. This fragmentation, however, does not preclude audience identification with the film's range of feminists but instead enables it. According to Borden, "Everyone had a place on some level, every woman…would have some level of identification with a position within the film."[464] Borden's quotation suggests that *Born in Flames* encourages immersion into or closeness with the film and its cast of characters, a heterogeneous version of immersion to help forge radical revolutionary politics for the future. Afro-Cyborg similarly embodies the heterogeneity of women. Afro-Cyborg offers a creolized matrix of identification for viewers as well as diverse pathways into the installation, which could have easily been singularly dominated by the figure of Van Peebles and his strong filmic legacy. Rather, Afro-Cyborg and the various "female(s) within" her haunt the "godfather of soul cinema."

Afro-Cyborg's final act of creolization comes in the collision of digital and analog, generating what film critic J. Hoberman has called "cyborg cinema."[465] No Luddite, Julien stands apart from many of his time-based peers who work exclusively with celluloid as a formal protest to capital's unrelenting march toward the new.[466] To be sure, Julien shot *Baltimore* on 16 mm, but he also transferred the film to digital, employed digital surround sound for the first time, used CGI, and relied upon Avid. "Digital technology," Julien told *Sight and Sound* magazine in 1999, "adds a visually transgressive intertextuality that can be seen in the dazzling choreography of such

[464] Lizzie Borden as quoted in de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 140.
[465] J. Hoberman, *Film after Film: (Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?)* (New York: Verso, 2012); 4–5, 12. J. Hoberman, "Rounding the Digital Turn—CGI, Cyborg Cinema, and the New Realness" (lecture, School of the Visual Arts, New York, NY, January 22, 2013).
[466] The most obvious example is Tacita Dean. For more information, see Mark Godfrey, "Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's Floh," *October* 114 (Fall 2005), 90, 92, 113–119.

technologically hybrid Hollywood movies, where the special effects are visually thrilling if not the content."[467] Julien specifically refers to the action sequences in *The Matrix* (1999), blends of acrobatics, kung fu, and the pure digital fantasy of bullet time where bodies suddenly turn to jello and movements decelerate. Hoberman departs from the elegiac tone of many film theorists and historians who proclaim "the death of cinema" in the wake of the digital divide, a fear of technological advances perhaps mirrored in the anti-immersion discourse within art history and criticism. Like Julien, Hoberman detects a new frontier for cinema that is realized in *The Matrix*, cyborg cinema par excellence. He hails the film a "landmark hybrid" of live action and digital manipulation.[468] Showcasing digitized aerial acrobatics modeled after those in *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Afro-Cyborg is the vector through which Julien considers "cyborg cinema."[469]

There are a slew of science-fiction precedents for *The Matrix*, including *Blade Runner* (1982). Set in a dystopian version of Los Angeles, the film follows the fate of replicants, enslaved machines that resemble humans. These pseudo-cyborgs have illegally come to Earth while on leave from their colonizing mission in outer space. Refusing to "retire," a euphemism for being murdered, the replicants constantly try to evade capture from Blade Runners, trained killers. The film questions why machines, cyborgs, or aliens stand at such a distance from human subjects, especially if the replicants exhibit more humanlike emotion than some people.[470] Julien appropriates several formal and thematic elements from the film. Ridley Scott, the director of *Blade Runner*, saturated his mise-en-scène with a steel blue palette; Julien bathes the Walters's marble colonnade in almost the same color, which tint Afro-Cyborg's blue eyeshadow, eye, and tracking device. The close-ups of her eye also mirror the details of a replicant's iris during an interrogation with the dreaded Voight-Kampff machine, which determined whether the object of

[467] Julien, "In Two Worlds," 26.
[468] Hoberman, *Film after Film,* 4–5, 12; J. Hoberman, "Rounding the Digital Turn."
[469] Julien, "In Two Worlds," 26.
[470] Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory,* 82.

observation was human or replicant. Both of these optical close-ups traverse and trouble the boundary separating human subject from technological object.

The history of objectification and alienation during slavery, however, determines how *Blade Runner* and *Baltimore* differently narrate the relationship between human subjects and technological objects. In the former, all the enslaved replicants are represented with white skin. While Julien looks back to the formal and to a certain extent conceptual parameters of *Blade Runner*, he simultaneously overturns the film's whitewashed version of slavery by introducing Afrofuturism. Afro-Cyborg and Afrofuturism reproduce the ties between human and technology found in Scott's replicants, but both show how that very same bond directly connects to the aesthetics, histories, and ontologies of Blackness and objecthood, an irreducible connection papered over in *Blade Runner*. As Dery points out in his essay on Afrofuturism, technology has been associated with the domain of White masculinity, but the hybrid aliens, machines, and technologies that populate the music, writing, and arts of Afrofuturism point to the bond between Blackness and inanimate objects. Afro-Cyborg inhabits the realm of the alien object beyond the human subject, born out of the Afro-diasporic experience of alienation in which men and women were abducted from their homes and treated as enslaved objects with only a three-fifths claim to humanity.[471] The particular histories and ontologies of objecthood animating Afrofuturism therefore inflect the cyborg-ness of *Afro*-Cyborg but also of "cyborg cinema," attuning many of its whitewashed visions of technological and mechanical futures to a past when humans were treated like machinelike objects. Afro-Cyborg reveals the thorough imbrication of objecthood and

[471] Mayer, "'Africa as Alien Future,'" 56. J. Griffith Rollefson, "'The Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008). It's interesting to compare Julien's reference to the alien object beyond the human subject to José Esteban Muñoz and Michael Wang's analysis of Julien's 2004 installation *True North.* Muñoz discusses the barren polar landscape in terms of "the Open," a radical relation to alterity, to animality, and to the limits of human perception and human life. For more information, see Muñoz and Wang, "Reaching the Open: Isaac Julien's True North," in *Isaac Julien: True North* (Miami: Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; Los Angeles: MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 2005), 14–16.

personhood that lies at the heart of Black radical aesthetics, such as Afrofuturism and Julien's own practice.[472]

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Ten years before Julien filmed *Baltimore,* artist Fred Wilson also made this city the subject of his groundbreaking curatorial intervention *Mining the Museum* (1992–1993) at Baltimore's Maryland Historical Society (MdHS). Wilson sought to reveal how the selection of objects on display at the MdHS still registered not the city's notable early history of racial and class diversity but the partial history of the MdHS's White male founders. In order to bring visibility to the parts of the collection gathering dust in storerooms, Wilson put formerly hidden objects on view with unlikely counterparts, such as nineteenth-century slave shackles with silver vessels that had long enjoyed a prominent place in a vitrine (Fig. 10).[473] *Mining the Museum* is considered a paradigmatic example of Institutional Critique. It is one of the first of such works to expose how museums ignored questions of race and Black history, and it also helped advance a whole genre of artist-led curatorial projects in institutions.[474]

Wilson, however, has been the subject of critique for his own critique. Darby English argues that the artist's displays concretized "essentialist" conceptions of race relations as "a simple, single relational dynamic: white/nonwhite or dominant/oppressed." To elaborate his point, English pits Wilson's *Mining the Museum* against Julien's *Baltimore.* Where Wilson's critique failed, Julien's valiantly succeeded; where Wilson reifies binaries, Julien breaks down boundaries, expanding Wilson's dyads to triads.[475] English, however, overlooks how Wilson visualizes the bridges between and within Baltimore's nineteenth-century neighborhoods. As historian Ira Berlin

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[472] Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This the Future?: Black Music and Technology Discourse," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (July 2007), 283.
[473] "Metalwork 1793–1880," in *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, ed. Lisa G. Corrin (Baltimore and New York: The Contemporary, Baltimore in cooperation with the New Press, 1994).
[474] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*: *Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 14.
[475] English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 166.

notes in the catalogue for *Mining the Museum*, the artist's pairings, such as the slave shackles and silver, turn to Baltimore's early history of racial interdependence and hybrid neighborhoods, literalized by the objects' proximity in the glass showcase.[476] Wilson renders these histories of hybridity not only visible but also aural, drawing upon a variety of media in the museum and staging the intermixing of the senses alongside the intermixing of objects. Wilson's displays in some sense anticipate how Julien would activate the city's museums to explore the potential creolized connections among the neighborhoods of Baltimore.

The decade sitting in between *Mining the Museum* and *Baltimore*, however, significantly shaped the way in which each installation approaches the museum space. In those intervening years, the dominance of certain forms of critical theory waned, and with it so did the insistence on deconstruction over construction, dematerialization over materiality, pessimism over promise. Furthermore, *Baltimore* also moves in many ways with the present and future tenses, influenced by Afrofuturist fantasies. Wilson, however, *mined* Baltimore, assuming the position of an archeologist who sifts through layers of the past. "Baltimore was, for me," muses Wilson, "really the nineteenth century."[477] In some sense, Wilson does not, and perhaps in this moment cannot, inhabit a future tense. His imperative to deconstruct, to show what went wrong or forgotten, remains a reparative act that weds him to the past. In contrast, the futurity of Julien's installation imagines not only a future for Baltimore but also one for the institution of the museum itself, a future forged in the very galleries and museums that exhibit the artist's multiscreen installations. Julien pictures the possibilities of a creolized city though the more flexible format of the time-based installation in the gallery or museum. Perhaps Julien's future hope for the museum space explains why he appropriates a line from a rather forgettable scene in *The Mack* and purposefully inserts it into the opening sequence of *Baltimore*, just before Afro-Cyborg turns into the Wax Museum. "Bitch, just what do you think you are doing?", a woman exclaims. "Why are you looking behind you when you should be looking in front of you?"

[476] Ira Berlin, "Mining the Museum and the Rethinking of Maryland's History," in *Mining the Museum*, 45.
[477] Fred Wilson as quoted in *Mining the Museum,* 33.

While the possibilities of the future animate *Baltimore*, I do not mean to suggest that the installation neglects the past. Julien takes a roundabout route through history, examining the past through the future or vice versa. The artist fills an ocean of interrelated past, present, and future radical modes of immersion. Julien's work also points us toward that of his former student Steve McQueen, another transatlantic artist and filmmaker. With and through lateral lines, a textured aesthetic, Baroque imagery, close-ups onto objecthood, McQueen's installations and films, similar to Julien's, take us around and into the world, from an antebellum plantation in Louisiana to a jungle in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the streets of East London. What connects the diverse practices of Melvin Van Peebles, Isaac Julien, and Steve McQueen, I contend, is a creolized version of immersion, an aesthetic resource of resistance to the violent and vertical hierarchies that continue to structure this world, from the streets of Los Angeles to the highways of Baltimore to, as we shall see in the next chapter, a mine in South Africa and a prison near Belfast. The films and installations of these artists and filmmakers ask us to relinquish the detachment and distance of the subject, reply yes to the invitation of immersion, and join the objecting objects within the mise-en-scène.

MCQUEEN'S MATTER(ING)

In 1993, during his last year in graduate school at Goldsmith College in London, Steve McQueen abandoned the paintbrush for the camera. Isaac Julien, who was by then established as a filmmaker in Britain, served briefly as his tutor.[478] *Bear* (1993)*,* McQueen's first moving-image installation, set the standard for what would become his signature style early on in his practice: black-and-white 16 mm silent shorts, shot with extreme sensitivity to form and the material properties of the medium, particularly the effects of light and shadow (Fig. 11). Set in an unspecified, unadorned location, *Bear* details a simultaneously coy and combative *pas de deux* between two naked Black men, the artist and Vernon Douglas, a professional actor and acquaintance of McQueen's.[479] Throughout *Bear*, the men wrestle and then dance, grit their teeth and then smile, making the affective register of their meeting altogether ambiguous. The shifts between light and shadow serve as formal analogs to the oscillation between aggression and desire layered throughout the film's duration. The drama of this uncertainty crescendos when McQueen positions his camera on the floor, facing up toward the two men engaged in a headlock, their strained and sweaty faces pressed against each other. The specifics of the installation environment of *Bear* heighten the sense of the men's presence in three-dimensional space. Projected to cover a large wall, the images were also reflected on the floors of the gallery, polished per McQueen's precise instructions. This made the film coterminous with the viewer's own space and the installation an immersive one, creating what the artist has termed "a blanket effect."[480]

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[478] Farah Nayeri, "Facing the Camera," *The New York Times,* February 17, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/18/arts/international/facing-the-camera.html, accessed September 20, 2015.
[479] Gerald Matt and Steve McQueen, "Steve McQueen," in *Interviews* (Cologne: Walther Konig, 2008), 2:235.
[480] Steve McQueen and Patricia Bickers, "Let's Get Physical: Steve McQueen Interviewed by Patricia Bickers," *Art Monthly* 202 (December 1996), 2.

McQueen's practice has been aligned with the repetitive task-based performances, videos, and projected-image installations of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the works of Post-Minimalist artists like Bruce Nauman, whom McQueen himself has cited as an important inspiration for the physicality and economy of his early time-based installations, such as *Bear*.[481] In his studio videos from 1967 to 1969, Nauman uses his body as an object, engaged in modest, monotonous, and often nonsensical gestures. In *Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube* (1969) Nauman does just that, quietly moving through different poses, some frankly erotic or ironic, with the light source (Fig. 12). The artist also manipulated his own flesh: *Thighing (Blue)* (1967) features Nauman's thigh in detail, pinched, stretched, and contorted, an action not unlike the one McQueen performed on his own skin in *Cold Breath* (1999), wherein the artist squeezes his nipple for ten minutes (Figs. 13, 14). Espousing what art historian Janet Kraynak calls "skepticism regarding the autonomy and power of the subject," Nauman not only turns his body into an object, but he also literally absents himself from the frame. *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) shows the artist traversing and occasionally leaving his studio altogether, an emptiness recorded with an upside-down video camera affixed to the ceiling (Fig. 15).[482] McQueen, too, has pictured his own withdrawal at an oblique angle. In *Just Above My Head* (1996), the artist walks with a camera pointed toward the top of his head, which struggles to stay in the frame as the body moves, failing to secure the self in this roving self-portrait (Fig. 16).

Although Nauman's influence is readily detected in *Just Above My Head,* so, too, is James Baldwin's, whose novel of the same name was published in 1979.[483] Tracing the nomadic lives of several friends over the course of thirty years and across many continents, Baldwin's *Just*

[481] Chrissie Iles, "Steve McQueen," in *Seeing Time: Selections from the Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection of Media Art* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 134; T .J. Demos, "The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen," *October* 114 (Autumn 2005): 66; Adrian Searle and Steve McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," in *Steve McQueen: Works* (Basel: Schaulager, 2013), 193. In addition to Nauman, Michael Newman also points to Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol. For more information, see "McQueen's Materialism," in *Steve McQueen* (London: ICA Exhibitions, 1999), 28–29.
[482] Janet Kraynak, *Nauman Reiterated* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 14.
[483] Robert Storr also briefly mentions Baldwin in his discussion of *Just Above My Head.* See Robert Storr, "Going Places," in *Steve McQueen* (London: ICA Exhibitions, 1999), 10–12.

Above My Head places "flight," conceived as a series of "agitated movements" and "abrupt arrivals and departures," at the "center of the psychological drama," as one period critic from the *New York Review of Books* put it.[484] The "arrivals and departures" of McQueen's face in *Just Above My Head* simultaneously reference Nauman's own entrances and exits in his early studio films *and* Baldwin's notion of diasporic flight, an exile that the author lived as an expatriate in France, where he wrote the book, and fictionalized through his characters, themselves continually displaced from their homes in Harlem. McQueen's intervention in the dynamic between subject and object, place and displacement both particularizes and expands when his sources are not solely limited to White artists operating within the tradition of Post-Minimalism.

Despite the prose of Baldwin tucked into McQueen's film, many scholars, critics, and sometimes the artist himself have been at pains to distinguish his early installations, in particular, from Blackness as well as work by other Black British artists. Art historian and curator Horace Brockington concludes that the "artists' blackness seems irrelevant," a reflection of McQueen's overall view that "he doesn't see himself operating within the black British artist category."[485] Instead, McQueen's installations of the 1990s are discussed in terms of how the artist foregrounds his medium, materialized in *Bear* as the play with light and shadow as well as repeated use of flare further throughout the film's short duration.[486] In his book *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s*, art historian and fellow artist Eddie Chambers, associated with the Black Arts Movement in Britain of the 1980s, asserts that McQueen "found the holy grail

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[484] Darryl Pinckney, "Blues for Mr. Baldwin," *New York Review of Books,* December 6, 1979, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1979/dec/06/blues-for-mr-baldwin/, accessed May 14, 2015.
[485] Horace Brockington, "Local Anonymity: Lorna Simpson, Steve McQueen, Stan Douglas," *The International Review of African-American Art,* 15, no. 3 (1998): 28.
[486] For example, see Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 192–93; Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 79–80; Brockington, "Local Anonymity," 27–28; Catherine David, "Passing Through," in *Steve McQueen* (Caracas: Sala Mendoza; Cape Town: The Institute for Contemporary Art; Sao Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 2000), 68; Dominic Molon, "Steve McQueen's Uneasy Silence," pamphlet accompanying exhibition (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1996), n.p.

for which many Black artists had searched . . . a non-racial reading of the Black image."[487] Chambers locates McQueen in a category apart from the British Black Arts Movement, which emerged in the decade before McQueen's career took off in the 1990s. Isaac Julien, in contrast, who began making films in the 1980s, has been associated with the British Black Arts Movement in Britain as cofounder of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, considered a radical node in the movement.[488] Many of the artists in the Black Arts Movement, influenced by the one in the United States of the 1960s and 1970s, espoused what Stuart Hall calls a "new racial consciousness" through representations of contemporary anticolonial and antiracist politics abroad in Africa and at home, particularly the riots that swept England in 1981 and after.[489] As Gen Doy asserts, there appeared to be a noticeable shift in Black British Art of the early 1990s from the essentialist or homogenous orientation around race, the Black experience in Britain, and what constituted 'Black Art' of the 1980s toward more "subtle and ambiguous developments in black visual culture" that proposed unstable identities and the idea that Black artists might not address questions about race at all.[490] The beginnings of McQueen's career arrived at this critical juncture; his career has been persistently positioned apart from artists of the Black Arts Movement in Britain ever since.

While McQueen's early work may not explicitly espouse "racial consciousness" or reference Black radical politics of the 1980s, it would be a mistake to conclude that it disregards Black aesthetics and politics, just as it would be a grave error to reduce the Blacks Arts

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[487] Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art,* 192.
[488] Okwui Enwezor, "From Screen to Space: Projection and Renanimation in the Early Work of Steve McQueen," in *Steve McQueen: Works* (Basel: Schaulager, 2013), 25–28; Kobena Mercer, "Iconography After Identity," in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2005), 49.
[489] Stuart Hall, "Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge--and After," in *Shades of Black*, 12–13. There were four main riots that took place in major British cities in 1981 between Black residents and the police force. The first Brixton riot in south London in April of 1981 began after a Black man from the neighborhood was stabbed by a member of the police force and allegedly did not receive sufficient medical attention. For more information, see Kieran Connell, "Riots don't happen without a reason," *The Guardian,* August 10, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/riots-police-black-community, accessed September 22, 2015.
[490] Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 2, 5.

Movement in Britain, which included artists from the Asian subcontinent and artists with varying and evolving practices, such as Julien, to a monolithic approach to representing race and identity (a topic of great interest but beyond the scope of this chapter).[491] As one of the few critics to relate McQueen's work to other Black artistic practices, Okwui Enwezor notes how *Bear* reverberates with "the crisis of black male identity" explored by several filmmakers and artists in the 1980s, including Julien, who posed intertwined questions around homosexuality, Black masculinity, interracial desire, and activism. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Looking for Langston* enlarges the geographic scope of Julien's inquiry to the United States, queering the premiere poet of the Harlem Renaissance.[492] A black-and-white film resplendent with dramatic lighting, nude Black male bodies, ambiguous glances and equally ambiguous affects, *Looking for Langston* shares many of the aesthetic imperatives that animate *Bear* as well.[493] Take, for instance, how both McQueen and Julien slowly profile the body. Viewers can admire Douglas's neck and shoulders in *Bear* as it gradually moves in and out of the light, just as they can trace the length of the bare body of Beauty lying in bed. Similar to the way Van Peebles and Julien confront, rather than exile, cinematic stereotypes of Black masculinity, McQueen inhabits and unravels the monolithic, hypermasculine, and excessively violent Black stud figure through possible sexual transgressions and the queer male identity nestled in the term *bear,* itself a complex interplay among stereotypically masculine trappings, animality, and queer culture.[494] In *Bear,* flesh meets flesh in an encounter charged with eroticism and violence, pleasure and pain,

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[491] While Stuart Hall cites the Black Arts Movement in the United States as "influential" for British artists such as Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, he also stresses differences between the British and American Black Arts Movements. The later British version includes artists connected to the Asian subcontinent; it was "motivated" mostly by anticolonialism and national freedom movements, rather than the legacy of slavery, as in the case of the American Black Arts Movement; and finally, the physical and historical relationship to slavery differs in Britain, which "managed colonization and slavery from a safe distance." As Hall repeatedly reminds us, "black in England" is "a composite political identity, which deliberately eschewed any distinctions between Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, and Africans." For more information, see Hall, "Assembling the 1980s," 3, 10.

[492] Louise Yelin, "Callin' Out around the World: Isaac Julien's New Ethnicities," *Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 244.

[493] Storr, "Going Places," 8.

[494] York, Richard. "Injury Time." In *The British Art Show* (London: South Bank Centre, 1995), 30.

teetering between the homosocial and the homosexual: the headlock could easily turn into a kiss and the lunge into a flight of desire. These reverberations among Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen complicate the trajectories of influence consistently mapped onto McQueen's early installations.[495]

Furthermore, both McQueen's and Julien's work betray an inclination toward what Robert Storr called, in reference to *Bear,* a "Baroque style," shared aesthetics of excess materialized through the varied textures of flesh.[496] The tactile presence in *Bear*, which issues forth from the intersection of flesh, light, and shadow, resonates with Julien's focus on the fleshy substance of Baroque paintings and the surface texture of wax figures, all brightly lit in *Baltimore.* Enwezor has called this tactile effect in McQueen's early work "haptic visions." Shot mostly on 16 mm, *Bear* lends even the most ephemeral or weightless of phenomena like light a grainy texture, which is the result of silver halide crystal, a property in film stock that when developed appears on the surface of the image and causes that grainy look in photochemical film.[497] Pockets of visible illumination congeal into volumetric cones bathing the bodies of the two men. McQueen and Douglas often chase light; at one point, the artist leans back with eyes closed, and a stream of illumination covers his face like a warm blanket. Storr characterized this virtuosic contest of light

[495] Michael Newman, "McQueen's Materialism," in *Steve McQueen* (London: ICA Exhibitions, 1999), 21; Martha Gever, "Steve McQueen," in *Spellbound: Art and Film* (London: British Film Institute / Hayward Gallery, 1996), 94–98; Storr, "Going Places," 12. A *bear* is a queer identity, mostly adopted by "hirsute, usually heavy-set gay men … who identify with a masculine style...." For more information, see Richard A. Kaye, "Not your average bear," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2007 http://articles.latimes.com/2007/feb/04/opinion/op-kaye4, accessed September 23, 2015.
[496] Storr, "Going Places," 8.
[497] Kodak, "Silver Halide Emulsions," https://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/researchDevelopment/whatWeDo/technology/chemistry/silver.shtml, accessed February 19, 2016; Rochester University, "Photographic Film: An Electron Microscope Study," http://www.optics.rochester.edu/workgroups/cml/opt307/spr04/jidong/, accessed February 19, 2016; Jacqueline Belloni et al., "Enhanced yield of photoinduced electrons in doped silver halide crystals," *Nature* 401 (December 1999): 865–67.

and shadow as “luxurious chiaroscuro,” referencing the dramatic lighting and textured (“luxurious”) qualities of Baroque painting.[498]

Storr’s evocative descriptions of “luxurious chiaroscuro” and Enwezor’s “haptic visions” intersect with what film scholar Laura Marks has identified as “the haptic visuality” of intercultural film and video practices, including Julien’s, which she cites.[499] An alternative mode of representing diasporic experiences, “haptic visuality” appeals to an embodied form of perception and animates multisensory memories that remain deactivated in optical visuality. For Marks, optical visuality “depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object” and “mastery of internal and external worlds.”[500] “Haptic visuality,” however, hinges on *immersion*: “tactility is not a distance sense,” alerting viewers to their own material, embodied objecthood, shared with the objects on screen.[501] And McQueen himself has noted the haptic nature of his work: “I like to make a film in which people can almost pick up gravel in their hands and rub it.”[502] In the case of *Bear,* the varied textures of flesh, shadow, and light spill into the spectator’s space, doubled on the polished floors and monumentalized in the floor-to-ceiling screen. *Bear* pivots on the audiences’ nearness to the flesh as textured objecthood, immersing them into a “scene of objection” to both monolithic renderings of Black masculinity and the masterful, distant subject who has so often done that rendering. Viewers are carried closer to the queered Black male ones that have long been excluded in the history of art, history itself, and McQueen’s own critical history.

This implied proximity to texture and touching in *Bear* also reminds us of the complexities around haptic modes of viewing, which can grant viewers a sense of mastery and possession

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[498] Storr, "Going Places," 8.
[499] Okwui Enwezor, “Haptic Visions: The Films of Steve McQueen,” in *Steve McQueen* (London: ICA Exhibitions, 1999); Laura Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 11.
[500] Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 162.
[501] Ibid, 133, 183.
[502] Steve McQueen and Patricia Bickers, “Let’s Get Physical," 5.

while excusing them from actual accountability or responsibility for what unfolds on screen.[503] *Bear* moves between different forms of touch, from caresses to headlocks, just as quickly as it shifts between shadow and light. The figures are simultaneously vulnerable to the camera's close-up—at one point McQueen's limp penis is dangling above the camera—and inaccessible to its inquisitive gaze—toward the end of the film, viewers only see the men's feet lightly touching the ground, dancing around each other. Another work, McQueen's *Charlotte* (2004), a 16 mm projection, physicalizes haptic visuality and its range of affective registers (Fig. 16). The artist's finger, caught in close-up, in some instances caresses and at other moments crushes actress Charlotte Rampling's eyelid and actual eyeball; the graininess of the medium adds a tactile valence to this act of touching vision; the analog projector in the middle of the installation space alerts viewers to the construction behind the image, carving out a space between spectator and surface image—the space implied in McQueen's use of the preposition "almost" in "almost pick up gravel in their hands and rub it." These works flesh out the immense variety of affects, such as intimacy, tenderness, and aggression, involved in "haptic visuality" and the ways in which viewers might be implicated (or not) in these modes of touch.

I begin with *Bear* not only because it is where McQueen began to work with moving images—and with Julien as his tutor. I begin with *Bear* because its rigorous formalism, precise installation environment, and material experiments with light and texture are married to larger dynamics that lie at the heart of the Black radical tradition's "scene of objection": distance and immersion, subjecthood and objecthood filtered through the artist's interest in the act of touching and the tactile materiality of objects, from flesh to film. "McQueen's materialism," as Michael Newman describes his early works, also resonates with what is the primary focus of this chapter: the artist's later films and installations, which, unlike *Bear,* overtly address issues and histories of slavery, colonialism, and global capitalism in specific locations and have been in part

[503] For more information on the stakes of the haptic and larger phenomenological approach to film spectatorship, see Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 37–41; Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010), 115–20.

distinguished from his earlier practice that seemingly focused solely on medium-specific questions.[504]

In his multipart time-based installation *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* (2002), which premiered at *Documenta XI*, viewers are thrust deep down inside TauTona, also known colloquially as Western Deep, one of the world's deepest gold mines, with a high number of fatalities due to extreme temperatures underground (Fig. 18). Located just west of Johannesburg, TauTona is owned by AngloGold Ashanti, a transnational corporation based in Johannesburg with mining operations in 19 different countries across the globe.[505] With few reliable sources of light in the mine, the camera can only record darkness. For much of the film, viewers are quite literally left in the dark, simultaneously surrounded by darkness and alienated by the lack of legible imagery. When there is some illumination from the miners' headlamps, the air appears thick, especially when bits of bedrock spray out as drills puncture the rock. This density is enhanced by the grainy quality of McQueen's Super 8 camera, reminiscent of the coarse appearance of light in *Bear,* both due to photochemical development processes. In *Hunger* (2008), McQueen's first foray into feature-length filmmaking, texture emerges in the form of flesh. The film tells the story of Bobby Sands, an Irish Republican Army (IRA) inmate (played by actor Michael Fassbender), who initiated a hunger strike in 1981, dying after 66 days of protesting the British government's removal of political status to the prisoners in the Maze, the notorious prison nine miles southwest of Belfast. Sands's objecthood is his flesh, and his flesh is his force of resistance, his source of objection.[506] As in *Bear, Hunger* also carries viewers extremely near to both violent and tender ways of touching flesh that has been beaten, bruised, bloody, withering but also caressed, kissed, resisting.

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[504] Michael Newman, "Moving Image in the Gallery Since the 1990s," in *Film and Video Art*, ed. Stuart Comer (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2009), 110.
[505] AngloGold Ashanti, "Regions and Operations," http://www.anglogoldashanti.com/en/About-Us/Regionsandoperations/Pages/default.aspx," accessed February 3, 2016.
[506] Thomas Hennessey, *Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher's Battle with the IRA, 1980-1981* (County Kildare, Ireland: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 194.

Both *Western Deep* and *Hunger* detail how these textures convey and carry vertical and perspectival orientations of colonial or postcolonial power: global capital's reliance upon raced labor in post-Apartheid South Africa in the case of *Western Deep* or domestic forms of occupation and colonization in the context of Northern Ireland in *Hunger. Hunger* emphasizes perspectival shots of the Maze's long hallways, lined by tiny prison cells, as well as the vertical relations of power between prison guards and prisoners, which manifest in beatings, oral and anal inspections, and other forms of violent touch. In *Western Deep,* miners descend in an elevator, moving downward into the dark depths of the craggy mine, and during brief moments of illumination, the corridors of TauTona often assume a fully perspectival orientation. Moreover, the first part of *Caribs' Leap,* paired with *Western Deep,* shows slow motion dissolves of tiny human figures falling down the screen, shadowy allusions to a 1652 mass suicide when hundreds of native Grenadian Caribs threw themselves off a cliff and into the ocean to avoid capture by invading French settlers (Fig. 19).[507] This historical context boomerangs with the third and final part of the installation, a film of the present-day Grenadian coast shot during McQueen's visit for his grandmother's funeral.[508]

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss how the critical reception of *Hunger* and *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* have drawn upon the intertwined concepts of "biopolitics" and "bare life" to approach the colonial, postcolonial, and capitalist hierarchies and histories embedded in these works. As I will explore in more detail, Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, in brief, concerns how the state assumes control over and intervenes in biological facts of existence in an effort to manage the health of entire populations, reducing certain members to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls bare life, mere biological objecthood, outside the boundaries

[507] Sarah Whitfield, "Exhibition Reviews: London: Douglas Gordon/Steve McQueen," *The Burlington Magazine* 145, no. 1198 (January 2003): 46.
[508] Adrian Searle, "Into the Unknown," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2002, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/oct/08/artsfeatures.art.

not only of citizenry but also humanity.[509] I consider the historical blind spots in biopower and bare life as well as the totalizing nature of these frameworks, which often exclude the possibilities of resistance in and through the bare life of objecthood. While it is certainly true that *Hunger* and *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* immerse viewers into the oppressive purview of colonial empire and global capitalism, ending the analysis there would significantly limit the scope and ambition of these projects. In this chapter I aim to show how *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* and *Hunger* materialize a "scene of objection" to these colonial and capitalist hierarchies and distances. The second section considers how the intertwined materiality of McQueen's medium and the geological matter of the mine in *Western Deep* generate an immersive environment, a textured surround that condenses and ultimately creolizes the hierarchies and distances that have shaped TauTona. I explore the long moments of darkness in the film as immersive Blackness. The third section examines how *Hunger* hones in on various ways of touching fleshy objects, in particularly the flesh of Sands, to implicate viewers in both vertical and lateral articulations of haptic relations. By focusing on embodied resistance to the dominant conception of a disembodied, distant political subject, *Hunger* concomitantly questions the disembodied, distant position of the so-called political spectator, privileged in the current art historical critique of immersion.[510]

Hunger and *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* disclose choreographies of creolization through textured modes of immersion that transgress and compress spatial and ontological hierarchies. These lateral movements, condensed detachments, and structural connections within and between these works are distinguished from the ones so often attributed to globalization and the ever-increasing expansion of capitalism as what social geographer Doreen Massey has called "depthless horizontality" and "unbounded space."[511] Drawing upon Massey's notion of the

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[509] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 135–45; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9–10.
[510] Patricia Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 155, 160, 181.
[511] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd., 2005), 76, 80; Doreen Massey as quoted in Pamela Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 42–43.

"cartography of power" in the flat, interconnected spatial regime of globalization, art historian Pamela Lee argues that much of today's art world—dominated by a dizzying proliferation of fairs and biennales across the world as well as skyrocketing sales for contemporary art—is both a consequence and "agent" of global capital.[512] The art world helps accelerate new "horizontal modes of production and distribution," institutionalizing the "smooth flows, unimpeded international travel, and ever-expanding networks of limitless communication" of capital *across* the globe, where everywhere and everything are easily accessed physically or virtually. What results is a "virtual eclipse of distance," "groundlessness," and historical amnesia that belies the extant forms of hierarchical relations and modes of oppressive labor conditions at work behind global capital's seemingly seamless flow.[513] McQueen participates in and has benefitted from the global art scene. *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* was commissioned for *Documenta XI,* an enormous exhibition showcasing contemporary art with corporate sponsors such as Volkswagen, the German car company that employed Jewish slave labor during World War II, a haunting context when viewing current oppressive labor practices on screen in an exhibition in Kassel, Germany. The artist represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2009 with his time-based installation *Giardini,* and most recently he contributed another time-based installation, *Ashes* (2014), to Okwui Enwezor's exhibition, *All The World's Futures,* at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, to name but a few of the international fairs and biennales that have included McQueen's work.[514] His work in many ways caters to this "nomadic" art-world audience that possesses the means to travel to far-flung venues. McQueen's work is thoroughly imbricated in contemporary art's global expansion, but, as I hope to show, its meanings are not completely determined by it.

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[512] Massey, *For Space,* 85; Lee, *Forgetting the Art World,* 3, 10–13.
[513] Ibid., 14, 44, 90. Silvia Federici argues against a focus on horizontality and deathlessness in this characterization of the current stage of capital—globalization—as misleading. "Far from flattening the world into a network of interdependent circuits, it has reconstructed it as a pyramidal structure, increasing inequalities and social/economic polarization, and deepening the hierarchies that have historically characterized the sexual and international divisions of labor." For more information, see Silvia Federici *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and the Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 102.
[514] "World News Briefs; Volkswagen Faces Suit over Jewish Slave Labor," *New York Times,* June 13, 1998, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/13/world/world-news-briefs-volkswagen-faces-suit-over-jewish-slave-labor.html, accessed February 18, 2016.

Lying alongside the lateral spatial registers of globalization are McQueen's enveloping installations and films, which offer an alternative model of horizontal space, relations, and cultural collisions in the form of creolization. The artist's version of immersion is unhinged from an optical field hierarchized around distanced perspective, the great achievement of Western Art, and unassimilated from a world that is still hierarchized by capital, the 'great' achievement of Western civilization. McQueen's geographies adopt focused and expansive views of the world to generate creolized comparisons among global and local sites of oppression and resistance. The artist puts unfamiliar places like TauTona in dialogue with those that personally resonate with the artist, from Grenada, his parents' birthplace, to England, the artist's birthplace. These localized gravities help weigh down what could be considered McQueen's globalized practice of "groundlessness," moving from one film location, and one biennale site, to another.[515] McQueen ultimately imagines what historian Robin D. G. Kelley calls "a map to a new world," starting in the movie theater or museum, the mine, and the Maze. This is an imaginative leap, a Caribs' leap, part and parcel of the "freedom dreams" of the Black radical tradition.[516] The creolized terrains of McQueen's imagination resemble those conjured by Isaac Julien for the segregated spaces of Baltimore and Van Peebles for the balkanized landscape of post-Watts Los Angeles through their own immersive, moving-image installations.[517] Although *Hunger* and *Western Deep* relay or record the world as it was or is, its tactile invitations and lateral lines ultimately picture, in Kelley's words, "a world not yet born."[518]

"Naked Vulnerability"

[515] Lee, *Forgetting the Art World,* 25–27. *Documenta XI*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, its first non-European curator, both staged the globalized nature of the world today by organizing four anticipatory "Platforms," symposia in different cities ranging from New Delhi to Lagos, and also integrated the alternative concept of cultural collision as creolization into Platform3 in St. Lucia, including many non-Western artists in the main exhibition. For more information, see Lee, *Forgetting the Art World,* 10.
[516] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 2–3.
[517] Ibid., 10.
[518] Ibid.

In his review of *Hunger,* critic and artist Brian O'Doherty cast the division between Protestant Loyalists and IRA prisoners in terms of "absolute power over naked vulnerability."[519] O'Doherty's words hew to the language of biopolitics, formulated by Foucault and subsequently elaborated upon by Agamben in his notion of bare life. For Agamben, biopolitics forms the foundation of modern states, both totalitarian *and* democratic. Biopolitics hinges on the sovereign's absolute power to determine who is worthy of participation in the political sphere as citizen-subjects and who must be reduced to the "unpolitical" status of bare life, "a life devoid of value," mere killable objects deprived of agency and stripped of all rights accorded to citizens, to persons recognized as human.[520] Agamben excavates the *homo sacer,* a minor figure from archaic Roman law, as the first glimpse into bare life. The *homo sacer*, as one who "*may be killed and not sacrificed*,*"* surpasses the law, both judicial and divine: while unworthy of religious sacrifice, the *homo sacer* nevertheless can also be killed without impunity. In a "state of exception" when the law is "suspended," the sovereign alone holds the power to distinguish between life and bare life, political and "unpolitical," value and valueless, human and thing, man and *homo sacer*. This state of exception became the rule in Nazi Germany, Agamben's primary example: those forced in the camps lived out bare life to an excruciating degree in a "space of exception."[521]

Hunger details bare life in the Maze—what Cameron Bailer, film critic and Toronto International Film Festival artistic director, described as "the body-in-crisis on screen."[522] Before Sands began the hunger strike, IRA prisoners had engaged in other forms of resistance with their bodies. In 1976 began the blanket protest, in which they refused to wear standard uniforms reserved for criminals as part of their demand to be considered political, rather than criminal, prisoners. This mode of protest is seen in the beginning of *Hunger* when Davey Gillen, who has just been admitted to prison, announces to the prison warden that he "will not wear the uniform of

[519] Brian O'Doherty, "Terrible Beauty," *Artforum*, 47, no. 5 (January 2009): 61.
[520] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 9–10, 139, 170, 173.
[521] Ibid., 114, 142, 159.
[522] Cameron Bailey, "Survival, Hunger and Shame," in *Steve McQueen: Works*, 185.

a criminal." Gillen then strips off all his clothes and is handed a blanket. Two years later came the dirty protest. Because of frequent attacks by guards during bathing, prisoners refused to clean themselves or their cells, vividly pictured in McQueen's close-up shots of feces smeared on the cell walls.[523] Take another scene, for instance, when the guards force the prisoners to bathe against their own wishes. In one especially gruesome moment, after being tossed against the walls of a long hallway, Sands is punched in the face. Guards then squeeze his bloody face against the seat of a stool and cut his hair with scissors, visualized in hideously close proximity. He is subsequently thrown into a bathtub and scrubbed with an industrial-size broom, fit for washing a floor, not flesh. Several guards then drag Sands out of the bloody bath, his body limp and nearly lifeless, broken by the absolute and unregulated power of the state.

Biopower and bare life provide structural frameworks to consider the condition of Bobby Sands's Irish White male body in *Hunger* in relation to that of the miners' Black male bodies in *Western Deep,* which too has been discussed in terms of these theories.[524] Fully operational during Apartheid, the vast majority of TauTona's laborers are Black, shown on camera riding in an elevator, using heavy machinery on the bedrock, and, in one of the most disquieting scenes, undergoing medical surveillance.[525] From outside a small window, McQueen films doctors taking the temperature of the miners, who are all shirtless and dripping with sweat. They are then forced to perform regimented exercises, stepping up and down onto a long bench to the beat of buzzer that is synchronized with a flashing red light. The camera shows the men, all Black save one, in a deep perspectival shot, visually ordered around the bench. With little agency over their bodily movements, the miners must calibrate their motion to the authoritative and equally monotonous

[523] Maria Fusco, "Steve McQueen," *Art Monthly*, no. 320 (October 2008): 37; Gary Crowdus and Steve McQueen, "The Human Body As Political Weapon: An Interview with Steve McQueen," *Cineaste* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 22.
[524] See, for example, T. J. Demos, "Moving Images of Globalization," Grey Room, no. 37 (Fall 2009): 7-8.
[525] James Macharia, "AngloGold workers protest S. African mine deaths," *Reuters,* October 2, 2002, http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/10/02/harmonygold-idUSL251875320081002, accessed July 9, 2015; Mark Schoofs, "African Gold Giant Finds History Undermines a Fight against AIDS," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2001, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB993503630507120612, accessed July 9, 2015; Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 61.

pulse of the buzzer. The unsettling mechanics of this sequence underscore how Apartheid's regime of segregation and inequality still courses through global capital's regime of raced labor.

Black and Irish White male bodies have long been intertwined, particularly in American political and popular discourse on race, citizenship, and immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Race marked Irish immigrants and Black men, both of whom were considered unfit for the mutually reinforcing duties of citizenship and manhood in a nation eager to shore up its own geographic boundaries against a wave of immigration.[526] Further back, in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, English philosophical discourse equated "savagery" of Africans, "associated with nature," with that of Irish peasantry and Scottish highlanders.[527] There also exists a large body of literature both on the racialization of the Irish in Europe and the United States as well as cultural and political points of intersection between the Irish and people of the African diaspora: Michael G. Malouf traces literary exchanges between Ireland and Anglophone Caribbean in terms of the shared structural relation to the English empire; Lauren Onkey calls such alliances "Celtic Soul Brothers," citing, in particular, the overlaps between the struggle for civil rights in Northern Ireland and America in the 1960s.[528]

As political historian and theorist Alexander Weheliye has shown, Agamben rarely makes such connections, despite the totalizing nature of his argument: "…we are all virtually *homines sacri.*"[529] Weheliye has challenged the concepts of biopower and bare life as Euro- and Western-

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[526] Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 107–11.
[527] David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 31.
[528] Michael G. Malouf, *Transatlantic Solidarities: Irish Nationalism and Caribbean Poetics* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 4, 6, 16, 20; Lauren Onkey, *Blackness and Transatlantic Irish Identity: Celtic Soul Brothers* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 19–21. For more information, see also Kathleen M. Gough, *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories* (London; New York: Routledge, 2104); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America* (London; Chicago: Pluto Press, 1998); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
[529] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 115.

centric constructs that fail to fully come to terms with just how centrally race and racism have determined what constitutes the human.[530] Weheliye pursues similarities among different manifestations of biopower that mark the "concentration camp, colonial outpost, and slave plantation" as "three of many relay points in the weave of modern politics."[531] He also recognizes affinities among sources of resistance to reveal "the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed."[532] Agamben overlooks "the existence of alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human."[533] If biopower weaves together different vertical instances of oppression and abjection across time and space, then might the "scene of objection" trace structural associations among what might initially appear to be unrelated histories of the "resistance of the object"?[534] I now turn to how *Western Deep* builds an immersive "scene of objection" through both the materiality of the mine and McQueen's medium.

The Matter of Nothing

In an essay for the catalog accompanying Okwui Enwezor's 2006 Seville Bienal, which included McQueen's *Charlotte*, political philosopher Achille Mbembe identifies an iteration of biopower—what he calls "necropolitics"—within the context of slavery in the Americas. As "the first instance of the biopolitical," slavery constitutes a "becoming-object of the human being," a mere thing stripped of humanity. The "triple loss" of the enslaved: "loss of home, loss of rights

[530]Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3, 33, 43.
[531] Ibid., 2, 37.
[532] Ibid., 2.
[533] Ibid., 1–2. Agamben has pointed to the figure of the refugee, who emerged as a "mass phenomenon" at the conclusion of World War I, as a positive vector of "aterritoriality" or "being-in-exodus" that defies the boundaries of the modern nation-state, and with it, the concept of birthright, origins, and nationality itself (*Homo Sacer*, p. XX). But this formulation once again neglects the historical moment many centuries prior when Africans, who were forced to be "in-exodus" on the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, developed ways to survive, dissent, and live, formed from their diasporic exile and dispersion. For more information, see Giorgio Agamben, "We Refugees," The European Graduate School: Graduate and Postgraduate Studies, http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/we-refugees/, accessed June 2, 2015.
[534] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

over his or her body, and loss of political status," he concludes, results in *social death*, a term he borrows from Orlando Patterson's influential study *Slavery and Social Death.*[535] Mbembe connects the division of human subject and non-human object within the plantation system to the "vertical sovereignty" and "setting of boundaries and interior frontiers" in the colonization process, his case study being Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa.[536] These hierarchical gradations of being and non-being were often realized in spatial terms as well. McQueen images this vertical configuration of space in *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap.* In the former, miners move deep down into the mine. In the latter, tiny human figures fall down the screen to allude to the mass suicide of native Grenadian Caribs.[537] Vertical ascent and descent therefore become and have remained means by which vestigial and yet altogether vivid forms of raced and colonized labor and oppression are enforced and endlessly reproduced.[538]

Aside from the scene of medical surveillance, much of the rest of *Western Deep* is cloaked in darkness. This visual absence might confirm the spectrality of social death that has come to frame the installation's political ground: the workers are quite literally missing from the visual field; the contours of their figures are impossible to discern. McQueen inaugurates the film with total darkness, which remains nearly unrelieved for six minutes, until a lamplight flashes on and miners exit what we now understand to be an elevator that transported them deep down into the mine. At this point, the legibility of images is precarious at best, and the camera relies on a chance flicker of miners' headlamps. In an essay devoted to the installation, art historian T. J. Demos, perhaps the most prolific scholar of McQueen's work, emphasizes the association between the darkness of the film and "absence" of life in the mine: "this darkness is not simply metaphorical; rather, it says something important about the film's conditions of representation …a

[535] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Seville: Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla, 2006), 39, 41–42; see also Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*: *A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[536] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 42.
[537] Whitfield, "Exhibition Reviews," 46.
[538] "About the Artwork," The Art Institute of Chicago, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/181091, accessed February 7, 2016.

form of representation somehow based on the flickering presence of absence, or conversely on the recognition of a lack of anything like a presence to capture."[539] The material circumstances in the mine not only condemn these "damned men," in the words of critic Kate Kellaway, to social death, but they also determine the darkness in the work: lacking reliable sources of light, the Super 8 camera often fails to record the scene before it, creating what critic Adrian Searle called "nothingness in the cage."[540] What viewers see, in other words, is the film's breaking point, its material limits.[541] Following this logic, the materiality of film is incompatible with the material presence of the men. To work in the mine is therefore to experience utter absence, to live a bare life of social death; and to film in the mine is to only capture the material substance of the medium.

Demos calls "the art of darkness" the means by which *Western Deep* performs the complex dance between presence and absence, indexed as the viewers' simultaneous immersion within and distance from the scene. While darkness envelopes viewers within its blank expanse, it also pushes them away by revealing the material makeup of film, blocking spectatorial desire for immediacy and transparence. "On the one hand, audience and film are drawn together in *Western Deep*"; yet, he qualifies, "this does not mean that *Western Deep* completely engulfs the viewer within its virtual expanse; far from it."[542] Although Demos maps the ebbs and flows of the installation into the spectator's space, he lands on the other side of immersion with the admission that "McQueen's work affords some distance from the image."[543] It is undeniable that the darkness in *Western Deep* functions to frustrate the spectator's ability to see and thereby know, grasp, and fully feel the miners' experience inside the mine—and how could or should they feel it, for an installation in a gallery, museum, or international exhibition venue like *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany, sits incredibly far from the conditions in TauTona near Johannesburg. But what

[539] Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 61–62.
[540] Kate Kellaway, "From Grenada to Jo'burg, everyone's in deep trouble," *The Guardian,* October 5, 2002, http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2002/oct/06/features.review87, accessed April 15, 2015; Searle, "Into the Unknown."
[541] Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 65.
[542] Ibid., 86.
[543] Ibid., 78.

are the consequences of damning these men to the realm of shadows? How does this aesthetic and ontological spectrality diminish not only these miners' labor but also their lives as matter(ing)? And where does this position leave film and art: do time-based installations like *Western Deep* merely reproduce the fact of social death over and over again at each exhibition juncture?

As I shall argue in the following pages, the darkness in *Western Deep* is much more capacious than a visual index of social death—"absence," "damned men," "nothingness in the cage." *Darkness* in this installation incarnates the radical aesthetics and politics of *Blackness*. This Blackness figures as a force of immersion into the "scene of objection," resistance to vertical spatial and ontological hierarchies and distances that have haunted TauTona and the larger country of South Africa. It figures as a dense, muddied force of immersion into the underground social life of objects, held together in the dark by the shared, searching sense of touch rather than the unyielding perspective of the subject's distanced, omniscient vision; it figures as a force of immersion into what world might materialize at and beyond the limit, discontent with simply pointing out that limit. In short, enveloped by what Fred Moten might call "blackness and nothingness," McQueen reminds us of the matter of objects through the matter of his medium and gestures toward how a different world—a creolized one—might be envisioned out from under this one.[544]

Moten's incisive essay "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" not only echoes Weheliye's commitment to nuance prevailing theories of and related to biopower, particularly Patterson's social death, but it also locates the promise of social life *underneath* the world above, a spatial configuration especially relevant to the subterranean space of *Western Deep* and the submarine one of *Caribs' Leap*. In Moten's account, the alliance of "nothingness," "blackness," and "thingness" does not automatically tether Blackness to social death.[545] In fact,

[544] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2012).
[545] Ibid., 742.

the opposite is the case: a "mass" of materialized, rather than spectral, objects assembles as an "undercommons," a social collective that began in the hold of the slave ship, the very place that others have identified as the birth of social death.[546] The materiality of objecthood itself acts as the connective tissue within the undercommons. As Moten and Stefano Harney tell us, "hapticality," the "touch of the undercommons," holds the social life of Blackness together in the absence of normative structures of belonging:[547]

> Thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nationality, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history, and home, we feel (for) each other.[548]

Instead of instantiating social death in objecthood, the matter of "nothingness" here serves as the foundation for social life in the undercommons. In the most oppressive of circumstances, deep *under* the sea, in the claustrophobic container of the hold, arose "the social life of black things." In contrast, the discrete, disembodied and distanced citizen-subject, otherwise known as Western man, proves to be the one that Moten considers socially dead, an individual removed from a life lived in common with others.[549] While the subject—"who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and self-possession"—requires "perspective" or "standpoint," Blackness as nothingness needs "no standpoint" and exists in the "no place" of "undercommon, underground, submarine sociality."[550] Related to the "scene of objection," Moten elaborates a dynamic of distance and immersion filtered through individual subjecthood above ground and collective objecthood crowded *within* the undercommons.[551]

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[546] Ibid.
[547] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Port Watson, 2013), 97, 98.
[548] Ibid., 98.
[549] In a long footnote for an earlier essay, "The Case of Blackness," Moten casts a critical eye upon "a certain American reception of Agamben," which bears a "critical obsession with bare life" that "fetishizes the bareness of it all." Instead, he asks us to consider alternative paradigms of Blackness apart from "bareness." For more information, see Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 216.
[550] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 738.
[551] Ibid., 751, 742, 740.

In *Western Deep,* dense, disorienting darkness finds Blackness, abolishing the distanced and disembodied perspective or standpoint through which Western civilization sees itself and others. McQueen's characteristically precise installation environment extends the force of darkness on screen into the spectator's space offscreen. In October 2002, just several months after debuting at *Documenta XI*, *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* was exhibited in London's Lumiere Cinema, an abandoned art-house theater near Trafalgar Square, which had been left to rot until a developer scooped up the property and turned it into a hotel and then later a gym. Before these corporate transformations took place, McQueen transformed the Lumiere into an immersive installation: upon entering, viewers encountered the dual loops of *Caribs' Leap* projected on a wall and screen that faced each other; at the half hour, this part of the installation closed, and viewers were led downstairs to watch the entire twenty-four minutes of *Western Deep.* As visitors descended into the subterranean depths of the cinema, the miners likewise descended into the mine on an elevator.[552] McQueen's underground installation purposefully echoed the buried claustrophobia of TauTona, leaving viewers in the dark with a grave sense of gravity.

Bathed in Blackness, the viewers at the Lumiere floated in the darkened subterranean space as an indistinguishable "mass," dispossessed of fixed spectatorial positions, particularly without any seating inside the installation. The cloak of darkness also deprived viewers of those visual markers of the body that help secure a sense of identity and help distinguish, and *distance,* self from others.[553] Certain subject positions, however, have not carried the visual markers of identity, because Whiteness (not to mention masculinity and heterosexuality) has been reified as the universal norm from which all other identities deviate. Therefore, to leave behind the structures of identity is much easier when one never bore the marks of identity to begin with. But darkness as Blackness in this installation functions not necessarily as a mark of race or mode of racial appropriation but rather as immersion into undercommon resistance to the very privilege of

[552] Searle, "Into the Unknown."
[553] T. J. Demos, "Life Full of Holes," *Grey Room* 24 (Summer 2006): 84.

the universal, unmarked subject position.[554] *Western Deep* denies visual omniscience, which is so central to the construction of the subject's transcendent perspective over the world and its objects, and it even threatens to erase the optical realm altogether, despite the fact that the installation is most often shown in gallery or museum settings, spaces devoted to the act of looking. Viewers must rely on senses other than sight, such as touch and hearing, to grope through the space and experience the installation. McQueen tethers these two sensations together, translating tactile sensations into sonic ones. Accompanying moments of complete darkness are the industrial sounds of an unseen machine, a noisy presence so abrasive that it makes the entire installation space—and the viewers in it—tremble.[555] Aggressive as it is expansive, the sonic presence of *Western Deep* also acts as an agent of immersion, perforating into the spectator's space. The immersive embrace of Blackness requires spectators to *feel* lost in the dark together.

On screen, the shift from vertical orientation to surrounded disorientation, distanced perspective to textured immersion is best demonstrated during those brief moments of illumination when the perspectival structure of the mine surfaces. The extent to which deep shots and linear lines visually regulate the grim conditions of TauTona becomes readily apparent. The scene of medical surveillance exemplifies the depth of the mine's linearity. The doctor walks between the rows of men, often placing thermometers directly into the miners' mouths. Directly preceding this scene is a shot of a long corridor, barely visible by the dull light of headlamps. Arranged one by one, perpendicular to the camera, the men trudge slowly toward the viewers. The dark abyss of the corridor swallows those men at the end of the line. McQueen tellingly sandwiches these two perspectival moments with their opposites: poorly lit close-ups of an

[554] The installation environment of *Western Deep* might echo what philosopher Catherine Clément refers to as "choosing night," which "banishes distances" and "identities" for the promise of radical and more lateral relations, unavailable during the legibility of daytime's visual order. "At night," she contends, "one can confuse oneself with the other," a "crossing over into nothingness" that reverberates with the "blackness and nothingness" of Moten's undercommon sociality. For more information, see Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, trans. Sally O'Driscoll and Deirdre M. Mahoney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 23–24, 27.

[555] Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 61.

unidentifiable liquid and yet another scene of near darkness in the crowded elevator. Although a dark green tone tints the elevator shaft, there is little sense, as before in the earlier scene, of when one body begins and another ends, a sense of disorientation and dispossession that spills out into the spectator's similarly darkened space. If, as Moten argues, the Western subject fortifies "cartographic coherence" through unyielding positions or perspectives, then *Western Deep* offers *cartographic incoherence*, a creolized cartography based on the blurred boundaries within immersive Blackness.[556]

While *Western Deep* goes deep down into TauTona to record the extraction of gold from earth's matter, McQueen's three-channel installation *Drumroll* (1998) metaphorically transports another valued natural resource up from under the earth to its surface through the symbolism of the oil drum (Fig. 20). The artist rolls the clunky container down the busy streets of midtown Manhattan where commodity traders report to work to abstract the material reality of oil into exchange value on the global market.[557] Within the oil drum sit three cameras: two are placed on either end, one is situated in the middle, and all are pointed outward. These tripled points of view are splayed across each screen. The looming vertical skyscrapers briefly captured on camera, aloof from the city below, echo the oil industry's vertical penetration of the earth's surface. As with the helicopter's aerial vision in *Sweetback* and the omniscient optics of Renaissance perspective in *Baltimore,* the skyscraper in *Drumroll* instantiates what Michael Newman describes as the "God-like viewpoint" of the subject.[558] The lateral orientation of the three screens; the horizontal tumbles of the drum across the streets of New York, pictured parallel to the viewers; the circular motion of the images on the far screens; the circular shape of the barrel and camera lens; and the circles that abound in the visual field of Manhattan traffic, from car to bike tires, all counteract the vertical and distanced nature of this "viewpoint." Although he rolls the oil drum down the street, McQueen also surrenders his *singular* authorial control to the *three* cameras inside, generating

[556] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 752.
[557] Schaulager, "Drumroll," http://www.schaulager.org/smq/en/exhibition/drumroll-1998.html, accessed February 7, 2016.
[558] Newman, "McQueen's Materialism," 32.

dizziness and disorientation. Divorced from his gaze, the camera even frames the artist as an object of vision, periodically glimpsed when the middle camera briefly faces upward with each turn. *Drumroll* yields the visual field to the object itself, bringing viewers closer to the oil drum and symbolically transporting this natural resource closer to the material ground from whence it came.[559]

In *Western Deep,* the thick darkness inside the mine not only muddies the linear organization of space in TauTona but also makes a mess of linear time, tethered to capitalism's forward march and its vertical relationship to earth's resources, just as the penetrating act of oil drilling is subjected to horizontal and circular motions in *Drumroll*. For much of *Western Deep,* spectators face a blank screen with little sense of whether the film is moving forward. The darkness thickens space *and* time, propelling viewers into what media theorist Jussi Parikka calls "deep time" or "the immense duration" of earth's materials—interlocking strata of rocks, soil, and other matter. These "entangled" material layers follow "nonhuman earth times of decay and renewal" over billions of years in contrast to capitalism's "myths of progress," associated with speedy technological advance.[560] Parikka's interest lies in how different forms of media remain in congress with the deep time of geology's various objects and textures, much of which lies underneath our feet. Metals, minerals, chemicals, and other natural resources make up and materialize media, pointing toward the social, economic, and political contexts in which these resources are surveyed, extracted, processed, and transformed.[561] The geology of media—its earthy objecthood—reminds us of labor: the "hardwork" that produces "hardware."[562] This homology slows down, levels, and thickens both the rapid evolution of media toward further abstraction via exchange value and increasing dematerialization with each technological advance—slimmer and slicker phones, smaller cameras, lighter computers.

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[559] Enwezor, "Haptic Visions," 30.
[560] Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 6–8, 38, 41, 51.
[561] Ibid., 3–6, 19–26.
[562] Ibid., 54.

McQueen underscores the geology of media and its materials by using an analog, rather than digital, camera in *Western Deep*. "I wanted to shoot on something that had grain," explains the artist. "I wanted something that the viewer could hold onto, that had texture, the texture of the rock, the drilling and mining. I wanted the audience to actually feel the molecules of dust."[563] The grainy consistency of the Super 8 film stock is aligned with the materiality of the mine itself. The solicitation of the spectator's sense of touch in the darkened space of the installation is redoubled when miners turn on their headlamps to drill into the bedrock. After showing a miner in profile operating a large machine, the camera hones in on a drill puncturing the craggy, textured surface. Liquid sweats off the rock and the drill as the earth crumbles, succumbing to the pressure of the invasive machine. As tiny particles of rock propel outward, the air seems to teem with "molecules of dust," thanks in large part to the Super 8. Harmful to the miners' lungs, dust troubles the line between immateriality and materiality: the seemingly weightless essence of air—"nothingness"—becomes thick, crowded with tiny particles of rock that threaten the material realities of the body.[564] McQueen discloses the intersections among technology, geology and labor: the camera is dependent on the light of the miners' headlamps to produce an image; the graininess of the film stock attempts to approximate the dust in TauTona. McQueen's medium and the mine are bound together as material presence rather than spectral absence. If, as Marx and Engels tell us: "all that is solid melts into air" with greater dematerialization and abstraction as capitalism expands, then *Western Deep* seems to reverse or at the very least destabilize this process by going back underground to the disruptive matter of labor.[565]

McQueen's time-based installation *Gravesend* (2007), commissioned for the 52nd Venice Biennale, further meditates on the intersections of media, geology, and global capital (Fig. 21).[566] *Gravesend* begins in a laboratory in Nottingham, England, where tantalum, an extremely conductive metal, is extracted from the mineral ore columbite-tantalite and processed through

[563] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 201–2.
[564] Parikka, *Geology of Media,* 83–92.
[565] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), 18; see also Lee, *Forgetting the Art World,* 88–89.
[566] Demos, "Moving Images of Globalization," 12–13.

robotic machines.[567] Tantalum is often used in digital devices, such as cell phones, laptops, cameras, projectors, and processors.[568] After several minutes in the lab, the scene abruptly shifts to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where miners dig for columbite-tantalite, known as coltan in the DRC. Several armed groups, including the Rwandan army and its proxy militias in the DRC, control many of the mines in the eastern part of the country. The profits from the sale of coltan to multinational companies helped fund various factions in the DRC's extremely bloody civil war, which ended in 2003. To this day, however, artisanal miners continue to be subject to ethnic-based violence without hope of protection from the state, whose stronghold still remains in the western part of the country. At the height of the market, it is estimated that the Rwandan army profited $62,600,000 from coltan mining in 1999. Although there are major coltan mining operations all over the world, the ease at which it can be extracted from the earth also lends itself to small-scale labor practices. In the DRC, miners use picks, crowbars, shovels, and their hands to dig holes in the earth that run around 6 meters deep. This form of artisanal, rather than industrial, production is easily controlled by armed groups, a fact conveniently forgotten when coltan is illegally funneled out of the country to Rwanda, then to multinational processing plants, on to technology companies, and finally into the hands of consumers.[569] The sleek surfaces of laptops and iPhones obscure the reality of "hardwork," geology, and "*geo*politics" (Parikka's emphasis) that surrounds this "hardware."[570]

It is important to note that while *Gravesend* was shot on 35 mm film, the artist then transferred it to a digital format for projection. Digital processors, which convert analog to digital, can contain the metal in question. Furthermore, the specific projector used in *Gravesend*, Projectiondesign Cineo 3+ 1080, "may contain tantalum," according to an employee of Barco,

[567] Lee, *Forgetting the Art World*, 26.
[568] U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, "Conflict Minerals Report," http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1308547/000144530514002423/exhibit101.htm, accessed February 5, 2016.
[569] Michael Nest, *Coltan* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 1-4, 12–13, 19, 32, 37, 50–51, 75–78, 84–88, 91.
[570] Parikka, *Geology of Media*, 46.

Inc., which acquired Projectiondesign in 2012.[571] By filming the "hardwork" behind this "hardware," McQueen attempts to rethink digital projection through the geological makeup of its mineral materiality. In contrast to the sterile, sleek space of the laboratory where robotic machines, operated by unseen human technicians, process coltan, the scenes in the DRC are messy and muddy. Several shots are deeply reminiscent of ones in *Western Deep*: an extreme close-up of rocks being split by a hammer; another close-up of a miner grating the surface of the earth with a pick, his back to the viewers as the camera inches ever so close to his head; another close-up of brackish water skimming the surface of rocks. All of these shots are accompanied by sounds of banging, chiseling, and running water. McQueen described the purposeful intimacy of the images in terms of closeness and immersion: he aimed to generate a "sense of focus" that

[571] For information on digital processors, see U.S. SEC, "Conflict Minerals Report." According to colleagues of Sal Amato, who had also worked for Projectiondesign, a Norwegian company, before it was bought by Barco, although their products "may contain tantalum," they "follow the regulation for Conflict Minerals." A previous email stated: "Tantalum is generally used in alloys in all things electronic these days, so it's a safe bet there are traces of it there. And tantalum oxides are used in hardened optical components, so there's a good chance of that too. But these projectors were built in Norway, and Norway is pretty conscious about "conflict" materials. Whereas they did a lot with magnesium early on, and now aluminum, I don't imagine them directly employing a lot of tantalum for major components." Norway, however, appears to follow the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines for conflict minerals, which were adopted in 2010, three years *after Gravesend* was released. And according to an OECD due diligence report on "mineral supply chains and conflict links in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," 2011 marked the year when countries began to implement the regulation on conflict minerals. In fact, Norway's Parliament debated this topic in April 5, 2001. Therefore, there is some evidence to conclude that Norway's tougher regulations on conflict minerals were also implemented and enforced well after 2007. For more information on McQueen's exact projector for *Gravesend*, see Yunsung Hong, Marian Goodman Gallery, email message to author, February 9, 2016; for more information on the material makeup of Projectiondesign products, see Sal Amato, email messages to author, February 10 and February 11, 2016; for more information on Norway's conflict mineral regulations and OECD's guidelines and report, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, "Combating sexual violence in the DR Congo and Great Lakes Region," https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/development-cooperation/innsiktsmappe/women-and-gender-equality/combating_sexual_violence/id651405/#conflictminerals, accessed February 12, 2016; OECD, "Responsible Business Conduct: Mineral Supply Chains and Conflict Links in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," http://mneguidelines.oecd.org/Mineral-Supply-Chains-DRC-Due-Diligence-Report.pdf, accessed February 12, 2016.

would "seduce" the viewers and "pull people in a way" toward the "events that are taking place."[572]

While not as dark as *Western Deep*, *Gravesend* often casts miners in the shadows when they are deep in the hole, described as "weightless beings," "ghostly absences of light," and "deplet[ed] of substance."[573] McQueen's visuals and sounds, however, also emphasize the materiality, rather than spectrality, of their labor and lives, surrounded by earth's matter. *Gravesend* transports viewers as close to these textures as possible, refusing to erase the material source of the seemingly immaterial objects of the digital world: the viewers' first glimpse of the artisanal mining operations comes from *within* one of the holes dug into the earth; adopting the same position as the miners, the camera is surrounded on either side by tall walls of dirt, rocks, and large roots. McQueen might also surround his viewers with the materiality of "hardwork" in the exhibition space through the "hardware" of the digital processor and projector as well as the cellphones sitting in visitors' bags, pockets, or hands. The viewers at the Venice Biennale are immersed within and connected to this material, especially if they use smartphones or laptops. So, too, are time-based artists such as McQueen, who employ digital means for the production of their installations, which are then viewed in the global art context of the Biennale and will soon circulate around the world as digital files just as coltan moves around the world according to the exigencies of the mineral market. The installation visualizes this movement, and brings it close to McQueen, visualizing connections between the artist's own country, England, colonialism, and capitalism. The work travels between the DRC, Nottingham, and the industrial port of Gravesend, England, where the narrator of Joseph Conrad's nineteenth-century novella *The Heart of Darkness* retells his encounter with imperialism sailing down the Congo River.[574] *Gravesend* does not attempt to presume its own innocence, paper over these interfaces, or

[572] Renaissance Society, "Steve McQueen: Artist Talk," September 16, 2007, Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, accessed February 25, 2016, https://vimeo.com/16536169,
[573] Demos, "Moving Images of Globalization," 12.
[574] Ibid., 8.

distance labor from its afterlife. Rather, it makes this chain of connections, so often rendered invisible, material.

In Demos's account, McQueen highlights the material substrate of film in *Western Deep* to destroy the illusion or "virtual image" and break the immersive embrace of the installation. "McQueen underlines the materiality of the film's installation, which resists the audience's passive immersion into new forms of technology," he writes, elaborating a binary of "the virtual image against the physical conditions of the space of its projection"[575] As is the case with much of McQueen's critical reception, Demos compares the artist's commitment to materializing his medium to 1970s artistic experiments with projected images in galleries and museums. One of the most illustrious examples is Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), which foregrounds the physical elements of film, its apparatus, and the space of its exhibition (Fig. 22). In a darkened white cube space, visitors watch a beam of light from a 16 mm film projector change shape.[576] McCall called *Line Describing a Cone* a "solid light film," solid in many ways due to vapor emitted from smoke machines, which lends substance to the illumination.[577] Without characters, narrative, representational imagery, or any other aspect of more conventional cinema, McCall reduces film and its mode of display to its raw elements—light, projector, three-dimensional space—to reveal the sculptural solidity of the medium, the density of light, and the constructed nature of the cinematic experience.

There are several moments when *Western Deep* briefly transforms into a "solid light film": the miners' headlamps resemble the beam of light from a projector, and the camera often encounters these lights head on, sometimes taking as its subject light itself (or, for much of the piece, the lack thereof).[578] While McQueen's work engages with the language of projected image experiments of the 1970s, the content of *Western Deep* shifts the stakes of the artist's investigation into the materiality of his media. Artists Space in New York, the nonprofit art gallery

[575] Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 77, 66.
[576] Anthony McCall, "'Line Describing a Cone' and Related Films," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 42.
[577] Ibid.
[578] Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 87.

that exhibited *Line Describing a Cone* in 1974, differs entirely from TauTona and even the intentional underground space that McQueen orchestrates at the abandoned Lumiere. The artist acknowledges and moves against the grain of the politics of material revelation: *Western Deep* demonstrates how the physical nature of film remains inextricable from the mineral materiality of the mine, caught on camera and projected digitally as a "virtual image." By materializing his means, McQueen makes material the labor and lives hidden behind the unfathomable, seemingly immaterial network of the commodities market. Continually insisting upon the battle between virtual and material, illusion and construction not only maintains a false binary, but it also threatens to deny the reality depicted in the image, condemning the miners to social death. McQueen discloses the material properties of his medium—its grain, its dependence on light—not solely as exercises into deconstruction and distanciation or formal purity. Rather, the matter of his media remains entangled with the matter before the lens.

An immersive installation results from these doubles and echoes. Through the grain of the film that thickens the grain of dust, viewers are confronted with the earthy substance that is being pummeled in pursuit of profit; the beam of light emitted from the digital projector behind the viewers' heads parallels the cone of illumination issued from the miners' headlamps, enhanced by the grainy Super 8 film that McQueen subsequently transfers to digital, further blurring lines between virtual and material, digital and analog; the rumbling sound of the elevator resonates in the installation space itself; and the underground darkness of the Lumiere melds with the subterranean darkness of the mine. Visitors are surrounded by the presence of the miners' "hardwork" through the presence of McQueen's "hardware": the Super 8, projector, and the installation space. These two subterranean, contained, and immersive spaces—the mine and the installation—as well as their occupants—miners and spectators—can encounter each other on the basis of shared materiality, common objecthood, "thrown together touching each other" to form an undercommons.[579] The dense, dark immersion in *Western Deep* muddies, thickens, and

[579] Demos also invokes the term "touching" to describe the encounter with virtual and real space, screen and spectator, but he still seems to maintain the binary between immersion/virtual image

rattles the vertical distances and hierarchies, linear temporalities and perspectives that have structured the mine and in part the politics of space in South Africa. It asks us to *feel* beyond the limit set by vision and dream of a "world not yet born" underneath this one.

A "world not yet born" is also imagined in the watery space of the ocean in *Caribs' Leap,* which echoes the underground space of the mine in *Western Deep.* In the first part of the installation, shadowy figures fall and dissolve against an indistinct light blue background, evoking the Caribs' plunge into the ocean. The doubled effect of the undercommons hold on the sea—a space of terror and imagination, fixity and fugitivity—redoubles in *Caribs' Leap:* an exit from one world and an arrival at another darker one, underneath and free from the regime of colonial boundaries and subjugations. "They have gone elsewhere where the French cannot follow," as Jean Fisher writes on the complex dynamic of life and death in the work. "Death here is a liberation."[580] In their vertical fall, the Caribs land immersed inside the "submarine sociality" of the ocean. The unseen sea in the first part of *Caribs' Leap* acts as centrifugal force in the second (Fig. 23). McQueen documents Grenandian fisherman going out to sea and coming back to land with the day's catch; dogs and children playing in the soft waves; and a man fashioning tiny boats, which he sets sail in a small inlet. The camera rarely leaves the beach, orienting itself along the lateral lines of the shore and the watery horizon. The artist shows how Grenadian life, the former life of his parents, is still organized around the sea, which carries the memories of the Caribs' final act of underworld insurgence. "Surveying the ocean instead of hurling ourselves into dizzying altitudes," as Glissant exhorts us to do, the horizontal structure of this second section of *Caribs' Leap* works against the vertical one in the first, just as the vertical descent into the

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and the "materiality of the film." In contrast, I see the two as coextensive: the materiality of the medium produces and enhances the immersive surround of the installation; and the virtual image echoes the materiality of McQueen's medium. For more information see, Demos, "The Art of Darkness," 87–88.

[580] Jean Fisher, "Imitations of the Real: On Western Deep and Caribs' Leap," in *Caribs' Leap / Western Deep* (London: Artangel, 2002).

perspectival organization of TauTona encounters the dark surround and disorientating installation environment of *Western Deep.*[581]

To be sure, the vertical ascents and descents of both *Caribs' Leap* and *Western Deep* reveal the structural similarities between the oppressive effects of global capital in present-day South Africa and that of early colonial settlements in Grenada. At the same time, however, McQueen's pairing of *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap* analogizes the immersive underworlds in each, creolizing the spaces and histories of South Africa, the past and present Caribbean, and London's Lumiere, and lends a creolized connotation to the blurred boundaries in the darkness throughout *Western Deep*. As in *Gravesend,* by tethering the material origin of gold with a place of his own personal origins, Grenada, McQueen refuses the soothing illusion of distance that lies between labor and its product, the West and the rest, present and past. Globalization here encounters creolization. *Western Deep/Caribs' Leap* calls upon what Glissant considers to be "the subterranean convergence" in the Caribbean, where "the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History" unravels in the face of "multiple converging paths" of lateral cultural connections in the "abyss," underground or underwater, perhaps the creolized version of "deep time."[582] It's as if McQueen's dual installations attempt to fulfill Glissant's bold promise made on a transatlantic ocean liner just before his death in 2011: "The whole world is creolizing itself."[583]

Beside Bare Life

While the immersive texture of McQueen's medium in *Western Deep* destabilizes hierarchies of biopower, colonialism, and capitalism embedded within TauTona, in *Hunger,* McQueen's intensely sensory treatment of another texture—bare flesh and bodily excess—thrusts audiences into the intersection of domestic colonial power and biopower. Through an overwhelming solicitation of the senses, McQueen details the IRA prisoners' reduction and

[581] Édouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation: Edouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28 (Spring 2011), 5.
[582] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 66.
[583] Glissant and Diawara, "One World in Relation," 7.

resistance to bare life as material, precarious objects. The film rarely leaves the H-block, the section of the Maze where IRA prisoners were kept, forcing us, in McQueen's words, "to see, hear, smell, and touch in the H-block."[584] The sight of Sands's vision loss filtered through an unfocused lens; the sounds of his labored breathing at the very end of his life; the smell of prisoners' feces smeared on the walls of their cells; the rough touch of a guard prying open a prisoner's jaw—all these stabs of bodily sensation propel the audience into a scene that McQueen felt had been cleansed from public consciousness and hidden behind prison walls.[585]

By focusing on a hunger strike wherein the materiality of the body itself serves as a locus of agency, *Hunger* widens its lens to show how the very target of biopolitics is also its greatest threat. The film refuses to distill the hunger strike down to a straightforward history lesson about the vertical power of the state exerted over the vulnerable body of the prisoner, the subject subjugating the object. The larger corporeal premise of the hunger strike as a mode of protest rattles the dominant definition of the ideal political subject: White, male, freed from the constraints of the body and accountable to the rational mind alone.[586] In *Hunger*, the materiality of the body, in particular the flesh, occasions oppression and objection, possession and dispossession, violence and tenderness, death and agency. *Hunger* constantly negotiates between these modalities, prompting questions around the intersection of "haptic visions," objecthood, and immersion: How does touching in *Hunger* implicate viewers in complex and often contradictory haptic gestures, generating vertical and lateral relations toward the object of touch? How might the act of reaching out reinforce and weaken ontological and spatial hierarchies, borders, and distances within the social and political context of Northern Ireland? By immersing viewers through their own bodily senses, *Hunger* ultimately stages a "scene of objection" not only to the notion of the disembodied and detached political subject but also to that of the disembodied and detached spectatorial subject. Although there are no Black characters in the film, *Hunger* draws

[584] Crowdus and McQueen, "The Human Body As Political Weapon," 23.
[585] Ibid.
[586] Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl*, 155, 160, 181.

upon the aesthetics and politics of Blackness—the lateral force of immersion into the "scene of objection"—to creolize boundaries, from the movie theater to the Maze.

In her essay devoted to the film, art historian Toni Ross traces the haptic registers at the heart of *Hunger*. Jettisoning the "optically distanced relationship between image and spectator," McQueen instead favors the immersive intimacy of tactility. Through close-ups of "carnal palpability," the film replaces "emotional distance" and "cognitive mastery" with "embodied feeling" and "the material presence" of "objects," such as Sands's own flesh.[587] While *Hunger* may evacuate cognitive mastery, in many ways it brings viewers in proximity to how touch can accommodate haptic mastery.[588] The film is filled with tactile imagery, conveyed most conspicuously in repeated close-ups of hands, seen in multiple shots of Officer Raymond Lohan, a guard at the Maze, washing his bloody knuckles (Fig 67). During Lohan's smoking break, viewers get an even more immediate view of his raw knuckles, wounded from regular and repeated beatings of prisoners. The scene begins with a long shot of the guard, his mien haggard and upset; the camera slowly inches closer as snow lightly blankets the ground; suddenly, we see his hand, speckled with blood, a position so proximate that snowflakes dissolving on his skin are easily visible. "If you see a drop of rain on someone's knuckle, you feel it because you know that physical sensation. That sensory experience brings you closer to an emotional one," McQueen notes in reference to this particular scene.[589] Here, the director articulates how the film activated spectators' range of sensory registers to thrust them into the scene, giving them little space to block out the history played out so palpably on screen.

Like the grating noises in *Western Deep*, the sound of violence in *Hunger* acquires a bluntly tactile dimension, embedding viewers into the sonic textures of brutality erupting

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[587] Toni Ross, "Resonances of Nineteenth-Century Realism in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*," in *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Allen and Laura Hubner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 179, 180, 181.
[588] Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, 120.
[589] Steve McQueen as quoted in Dennis Lim, "History through Unblinking Lens," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2009. Ross herself cites Laura Marks as well. For more information, see Ross, "Resonances of Nineteenth-Century Realism in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*," 171.

throughout the film. McQueen has pointed out his own interest in sound for its immersive ability "to transport you anywhere."[590] When riot police are summoned to help control an inspection of the prisoners' anuses and mouths for contraband, they beat their batons against plastic shields and then onto the naked flesh of the prisoners. These steady thuds add a haptic intensity, as well as rhythm, to a visually chaotic scene filmed with a jerky camera that attempts to follow the frantic paths of the prisoners, who are thrown up against walls and between shields as they try in vain to resist this intrusion into their bodies. The sounds continue as a shot of Sands's battered face lingers on screen, revealing the physical aftermath of the baton. These tactile acts—from beatings on the surface of the body to actual incursions inside it—force guards and prisoners into close proximity. However, this possessive, proximate type of touch at the same time instantiates vertical distance: the guards tower *over* the bodies of the prisoners as they fling their batons downward, visualizing the hierarchy of power separating armed guards from prisoners, who crawl in fetal positions down the long hallway. These unequal relations culminate after one prisoner head-butts a guard, meeting him face-to-face instead of looking up from the ground. The prisoner is immediately hurled to the floor. Suddenly, one of the riot police, who had previously seemed nervous and hesitant on his way to the prison, begins to beat the prisoner's flesh over and over again, thrashing his weapon downward in rapid succession upon the object of his rage, the prisoner who lies prostrate on the ground.

While *Hunger* details the extremity of violent and vertical modes of touch, it also shows how tenderness persists even in these harshest of circumstances. Take the scene, for instance, when IRA prisoners gather together for a religious service, which they promptly ignore and instead use as an opportunity to collectively discuss what they will do in the future. Sands, commanding officer of Republican prisoners in the Maze, is shown speaking with two men, his arm around one.[591] He affectionately and encouragingly grasps the face of another fellow prisoner, eventually patting him on his back. The camera then hones in on a prisoner passing

[590] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 204.
[591] Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, 38.

Sands a tiny note, their fingers briefly touch before Sands puts his finger—and the note with it—into the inner recesses of his mouth for safe keeping. Earlier, McQueen spends over a minute with a close-up shot of Davey Gillen, who desperately—but gently—tries to make contact with a fly resting atop the busted metal grill covering the small window in his cell (Figure 71). The fly briefly crawls onto his finger and then flies away. These tender forms of touch provide a contrast to the brutal ones seen throughout much of the film.

During the last third of the film, when McQueen focuses solely on Sands's slow death, viewers witness perhaps some of the most tender of touches from visitors at his bedside. These tactile relations at Sands's *bedside* turn upon the preposition *beside*, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick implies is illustrative of the spatial orientation of touch. "*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking," she writes, including "subject versus object."[592] Sedgwick points out that beside does not proclaim "a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or pacific relations," and her example comes from the "wide range of relations" that unfold when siblings share a bed, from "rivaling" to "warping" to "desiring."[593] In *Hunger,* however, many instances of beside at the bedside foster tender touch. While the possessive force of touch in much of the film hinges upon vertical dualities of subject and object in the Maze—guard and prisoner, Protestant and Catholic, Loyalist and Republican—the beside at the bedside frays these binaries and instead occasions more lateral orientations, quite literally positioning viewers next to, rather than above, Sands. After arriving at the prison hospital, for instance, Sands's mother, Rosaleen Sands, sits by his bedside as he sleeps. She slowly leans in to gently kiss her son; the meeting of his forehead and her lips are shown in an extreme close-up. As Sands struggles to open his eyes and slowly turns his head to look over to his mother, the camera comes in and out of focus as if to mimic his failing vision. We eventually return to a profile shot of Sands in bed as Rosaleen Sands reaches out to caress his forehead; a single tear then rolls down his cheek, his response to his mother's tender touch. Viewers are placed next to

[592] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8, 22.
[593] Ibid., 7.

Sands's profile, *beside* him just as his mother quietly sits by his bedside. Another notable visitor touches Sands at his bedside—the "young Bobby"—during one of several flashbacks and dream sequences of Sands's childhood peppered throughout the last third of the film. Bathed in the golden hues of late afternoon light, the elder Sands receives "young Bobby," who rests his hand on top of the hand of his future self. Along with other flashback sequences, this gentle gesture confuses any pretense to the "linear logic," in Sedgwick's words, of historical time, translating the spatial orientation of beside into a temporal one.[594] This scene refuses to tell history through a cold set of straightforward, transparent facts drawn from written records; rather, the intimacy of tender touch condenses both space and time along the lateral axis of beside.

The touch of Sands's doctor in the prison hospital provides perhaps the most telling example of beside at the bedside in *Hunger*. McQueen details how this doctor treats his patient's flesh with respect and care, despite the fact that the doctor is in the employ of the prison and therefore the state. Sands's physician, on the other hand, pays special attention to his patient's flesh, in particular: he puts soft sheepskin rugs underneath Sands's sheets to alleviate pain from bedsores; he helps Sands into his shirt and into bed; he catches Sands when he falls after throwing up blood; he finds a metal cage to put around his patient when the weight of sheets is too much to bear for Sands's sensitive skin. In another telling scene at the bedside, the physician gently applies cream to Sands's gaping bedsores, and the patient quivers in turn. As the doctor tends to the wounds, McQueen cuts to an extreme close-up of a sore on the spine, asking viewers to linger in bodily abjection as Sands's mode of objection. The red craters in Sands's flesh are reminiscent of the raw gash that punctures Sweetback's abdomen in the scenes of surveillance and escape in the desert, as well as the lesions on Christ's body in El Greco's *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* or the corporeal decay of Saint Paul in Jusepe di Ribera's *Saint Paul the Hermit,* both Baroque paintings prominently featured in *Baltimore.* McQueen summons the audience into these intimate scenes of texture, touch, and tenderness through what Brian O'Doherty described, in reference to the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio, as the film's

[594] Ibid.

"Caraveggesque sensuality," just as *Bear* employed "luxurious chiaroscuro" and "Baroque style," in Storr's words, to animate the flesh of the figures.[595] In *Hunger,* the camera is near enough to show the cuticles on the doctor's finger and individual crevices of withering skin around Sands's wound, an aesthetic of excess details used, in the director's words, for immersive purposes: to "stir an audience and bring them close to the character," akin to how Julien focuses on fleshy surfaces of Baroque religious ecstasies and wax figures to displace viewers and pull them near the scene and its objects.[596]

The camera's closeness may verge on an inquisitive, even possessive, gaze over Sands's body, permitting the audience to take perverse pleasure in flesh in death. At the same time, the tender touch that Sands's flesh prompts—both from the doctor and visitors beside his bedside—scrambles the hierarchies of state and prisoner, possessive subject and dispossessed object that the hunger strike itself also seeks to destabilize through the material of flesh. As Sedgwick reminds us, "touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity," upsetting the powerful position of the state and the precarious and seemingly passive ones of the prisoners, who protest and resist precisely by not doing—not eating—and letting the flesh wither without significant medical intervention or "agency."[597] Touching also comes with understanding that you can be touched and what you touch has been touched before, generating "reversible properties of textural objects and subjects." In *Hunger,* to touch and be touched both preserve *and* threaten the distance between subject and object upon which the state depends on for its power. The audience is implicated in this dynamic as well. While viewers are not physically touched, they may be emotionally touched and perhaps even feel some sort of haptic impression while watching these scenes of tenderness: the "physical sensation" pictured on film transmuted

[595] O'Doherty, "Terrible Beauty," 61.
[596] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 200–1.
[597] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 14. Also consider Melzer's discussion of how one of the prison doctors during the 1981 hunger strike refused to force-feed the hunger strikers, thereby mounting resistance to the state, his employer, precisely by not doing something, not acting, not intervening or invading the prisoners' bodies: "His refusal to force-feed the women against the orders of his nonmedical superiors thus made him complicit in their politicization of their bodies." For more information, see Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl,* 153–54.

into the "emotional one" registering with the audience, to use McQueen's description of the phenomenon.[598] McQueen's camera concentrates on the intricacies of touch on the flesh through spatial proximity at the bedside, immersing viewers in a similar position of beside and inviting them to trace lateral, rather than only vertical, connections between the state as represented by the doctor and the IRA represented by Sands.

While touching flesh *beside* at the *bedside* aims to level vertical relations of violent touch between subject and object seen throughout much of the film, other forms of corporeality dismantle these seemingly intractable hierarchies, particularly as they manifest in the "harsh geometries" that structure the Maze.[599] McQueen insists upon demonstrating the perspectival nature of the prison's rigid architecture on more than one occasion, only to subvert it later. Deep shots of the hallway are repeated throughout the first third of the film. The corridors are often vacant and lifeless; the grim monotony of the drab beige walls and identical lines of tiny cells accumulates in serial fashion. The architecture of the long hallway serves both symbolic and physical value: as prisoners are hurled against the walls of the narrow hallway, McQueen pictures the corridor in a deep perspectival shot, instantiating the position of mastery that the guards and police readily adopt as they stand over the prisoners to beat them.[600] In a subsequent scene, however, the prisoners disturb the linear logic of the hallways by pouring their own urine from their cells into the long corridor, which results in uneven and unruly pools of liquid that stands in contrast to the linear geometries of the Maze. This liquid materiality of the body seeps under the metal doors that separate the prisoners from each other as well as from the guards. Soon afterward, as a custodian walks down the hallway sweeping pools of urine ever closer to the camera, a recording of Thatcher's voice announces the beginning of the hunger strike: "Faced with a failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have decided to play what very well may be their very last card. They have turned the violence against themselves … and seek to

[598] McQueen as quoted in Lim, "History through Unblinking Lens," AR11.
[599] Kieron Corless, "The Human Factor," *Sight & Sound* 18, no. 11 (November 2008): 24.
[600] Gary Crowdus has also noted the "all-encompassing" effect of the wide-screen format. For more information, see Crowdus and McQueen, "The Human Body As Political Weapon," 23.

work on the most basic of human emotions: pity." Her disembodied, "emotionally distant voice," in Toni Ross's words, provides a sonic analog to the subject position of remove and mastery afforded by the perspectival organization of the hallway.[601] Moreover, seeping in like a dematerialized "vapor," to use McQueen's own description, Thatcher's iconic voice is also distinguished from the materialized seepage of urine.[602] While the Prime Minister's distant authority, figured as a voice without a body, reifies the linear structure of and borders within the prison's oppressive tectonics, the prisoners' bodily insurgence, their transgressive waste, serves to disrupt them.

McQueen focuses on how flesh and bodily excess cut laterally across spatial and ontological borders within the specific political setting of the Maze. In *Hunger,* this transgression extends to the categories of race and gender that have shaped the larger notion of what constitutes a political subject. As Patricia Melzer points out in her account of the Red Army Faction's (RAF) hunger strikes in German prisons in 1981, the same year as the IRA's, since forms of self-starvation, such as anorexia, are often aligned with women in Western contexts, male hunger strikers are often feminized. Violence, on the other hand, is usually associated with masculine qualities such as aggression and strength, therefore female hunger strikers, in the case of the RAF at the very least, were considered to be "masculine and dominant" precisely for appropriating violence and directing it toward themselves.[603] Hunger striking offered both male and female prisoners "liberation from confining gender expectations."[604] By politicizing self-starvation, prisoners challenge the "claim of rational, universal, political subjectivity *outside* the body," a position available to White male subjects who are supposedly liberated from the materiality of the body and its "excesses."[605] In *Hunger,* the subversion of normative gender roles emerges in part through the haptic relations between Sands and his male physician: the doctor

[601] Ross, "Resonances of Nineteenth-Century Realism in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*," 181.
[602] Steve McQueen as quoted in Lim, "History through Unblinking Lens," AR11.
[603] Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl,* 17, 25. Female IRA prisoners also participated in dirty protests and hunger strikes in Armagh women's prison in 1980. For more information, see Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, 53.
[604] Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl,* 21.
[605] Ibid., 155.

inhabits the role of caretaker, so often attributed to and assumed by women, and Sands, in turn, is shown as vulnerable, requiring help to put on his shirt, get in bed, and tend to his wounds. Likewise, his flesh and the touch it evokes concomitantly challenge what constitutes an ideal politicized spectator according to the current critique of immersive spectacle. This spectator must combat the sensory seductions of immersion through the critical, rational faculties of his mind, distancing him from the scene and aligning him with the privileged position of the political subject. By touching viewers' sense of touch, *Hunger* refuses to forget the body, using immersive textures and haptic gestures to undercut the notion of a disembodied and detached spectator as the only political position available within the cinema or time-based art.

Corporeality has been associated with raced as well as gendered bodies, serving as a justification for their exclusion from the political sphere. Figuring as the "female within" the Black male, Hortense Spillers's account of Black female flesh—its persistence as an object of resistance or what Weheliye (drawing upon Spillers) calls "the monstrosity of the flesh as a site of freedom beyond the world of Man"—questions the disembodied, White male subject at the core of dominant conceptions of the political sphere.[606] Spillers's "female within" as Black female flesh also provides a structural framework to consider the presence of objecting flesh across race and gender throughout McQueen's oeuvre. Although Black masculinity has long been historically associated with White Irish masculinity, a lateral view of McQueen's work reveals the entanglement of Black female flesh, Black male flesh, and White Irish male flesh to consider how different forms of biopower and resistance are affected by and are enacted through the fleshy material of the body. The images of Sands's wounded flesh reverberate with those of Patsey's lacerated back in *12 Years A Slave* (2013)*,* McQueen's feature-length film adapted from the autobiography of Solomon Northup (1853), a freedman from Saratoga Springs who was kidnapped in Washington, D.C., and sold into slavery in Louisiana. Patsey, an enslaved woman, was frequently raped and whipped by Edwin Epps, the owner of the plantation on which she was held captive. Her back is seen in detail after she has been brutally whipped by Epps, played by

[606] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus,* 125.

Michael Fassbender, reversing his role as the object of violent acts to the subject committing them. The male doctor's tender touch upon Sands's flesh resonates with those of the enslaved women who apply salve to Patsey's torn back. Patsey quivers, as does Sands in *Hunger*, in response to their caring touch, and the women in turn weep in response to her pain.

As seen previously in Maira Carroll's visceral and vivid relation with her sculpture of an enslaved woman, whose back she sculpts into with wounds, flesh finds tenderness even in the most "bare" and mean of circumstances, such as the Maze or the plantation, bringing to mind once again Baby Suggs's pronouncement in Morrison's *Beloved*: "This is flesh that needs to be loved."[607] Baby Suggs showed her love of flesh through care and caress, tending to her daughter-in-law Sethe, who had just escaped a plantation. Baby Suggs bathes Sethe, greases her back, and massages her neck, enacting a form of touch that chafes the violent kind: "Love it hard," says Baby Suggs, because "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it … Yonder they flay it."[608] Patsey's and Sands's flesh needs to be loved and is loved in each film in contrast, perhaps, to the flesh of the Black miners in *Western Deep,* who are subject to medical supervision that is emptied of the care shown to Patsey and Sands. And yet the close-ups onto the textures of Patsey and Sands's flesh might encounter or echo the close-ups of the craggy, sweating bedrock and the sweating miners who operate the drill; the thick air filled with dust; or the dense muddy darkness in *Western Deep* as different *material* modes of objection to the ontological distances and vertical spaces and borders that regulated the prison, the plantation, and the mine. The objecting force of Black female flesh, the object "within," occasions structural connections *across* different colonial and postcolonial spaces and histories: from antebellum Louisiana to Northern Ireland in the late 1970s and early 1980s to South Africa in the early 2000s. Lateral connections not only emerge within each work but also *across* McQueen's practice, *beside* each work, to

[607] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 102. Weheliye also cites this passage from *Beloved* in conjunction with Spillers's notion of flesh. For more information, see Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus,* 125.
[608] Morrison, *Beloved,* 102, 115–16.

consider objection to the politics of biopower, the political subject, and the politicized spectator, in and through Black female flesh.

Horizontal spaces unfold within *Hunger* despite the deeply perspectival and hierarchical structure of the Maze prison. While Van Peebles uses the horizons of the desert and Los Angeles's freeways to stretch his scene and while Julien disrupts the perspectival shots of Baltimore's highways with horizontal movement across three screens, McQueen levels deep takes of the H-block's long corridors with his preferred wide-screen format. The struggle between deep and flat, perspectival and horizontal, hierarchy and connection, reaches an apogee in the scenes before and then during the famed seventeen-minute uninterrupted shot of Sands and his priest that arrives about midway through the film. The long sequence with the riot police triggers this transition. Multiple takes of the hallway, eerily empty at the beginning of the scene and later lined by riot police, puncture this outburst of violence. Soon after, the film shifts to Sands and Father Dominic Moran, who are filmed horizontally in profile sitting directly across from each other as they debate the morality of the hunger strike, to which the priest remains opposed even in light of his support for the Republican cause. In contrast to earlier and later sections of the film where Sands is often shown subject to gratuitous violence or in isolation, the horizontal placement of the figures, dilated by the anamorphic aspect ratio, connects these two men, secular and religious Republicans, despite the fact that they fall on different sides of the hunger strike debate. It also endows a lateral shape to the transition between the first and final parts of the film and to the crux of *Hunger*'s narrative: the scene where this history is explained in the most intimate terms by a man prepared to die and his priest. The horizontal composition of the scene carves out a space based on lateral intersections instead of hierarchy, even in the most uncompromising structure of the H-block.

Hunger creolizes space and relations through and in excess of the textures, visions, sounds, and structures of violent verticality that pervade the film. The film expresses a diasporic dream for Ireland without the religious and political divisions that had violently atomized the

topographies of the Maze, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the British Isles, a creolized movement or "spread" likewise conjured in the suspended darkness within the depths of *Western Deep,* the bottom of the sea in *Caribs' Leap,* or the underground immersion at the Lumiere. McQueen imagines an alternative geography in cinema for the world outside its walls, spatial and relational fantasies not unlike that of Van Peebles's for Los Angeles after Watts or Julien's for Baltimore after White flight. Through close-ups onto fleshy objecthood as objection; tender touches beside at the bedside; horizontal stretches and porous architectures, *Hunger* enacts a creolized version of immersion—transgressed borders and entangled spaces—to make the world over along lateral lines.

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Although he travels to shooting locations around the world, it was in his hometown of London that McQueen made what he considers to be his two "cornerstone" works: *Bear,* where this chapter began, and *Exodus* (1992/1997), where it will end (Fig. 24).[609] *Exodus* fortuitously resulted from the artist's habit of carrying his Super 8 around the city. Within this tiny window of time, McQueen follows two Black men who wend their way through the crowded streets of east London, an extremely diverse section of the city and home to many immigrants from all over the world. Of West Indian origin or descent, these dapper men carry two large palm plants, which, due to McQueen's position from behind, appear to grow directly from the tops of their heads.[610] Here is McQueen's account of this chance encounter:

> I was in Brick Lane market, and I suddenly saw these palm trees walking towards me. I got out my camera and started shooting. These were these two odd fellows with their pork-pie hats almost ceremonially walking along, one behind the other, carrying palm trees. I got the impression that they were in a relationship, that they were a couple. Then they crossed the road, got on a bus, and disappeared, and that was it.[611]

[609] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 204.
[610] Enwezor, "Haptic Visions," 45.
[611] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 194.

As a piece that "encompasses it all,"[612] McQueen's description touches on several salient themes that animate so much of his subsequent work, in particular the creolized geography of Brick Lane and displacements of diaspora tucked within the title of the work, a title in which Enwezor hears Bob Marley's "rousing reggae anthem of departure from Babylon and return to the promised land . . . his popular narrative of dislocation and return."[613] The artist has discussed *Exodus* in terms of regard for the world around him, which he considers "a beautiful thing."[614] With his Super 8 by his side, McQueen was immersed in the city streets, not high above them, and the camera shakes as we get one final glimpse of the men who wave from the back window of the bus, acknowledging their interrelationality with their admiring cameraman in the bustling density and creolized connections of east London.

These "odd fellows" remain connected to the Caribbean and each other in and through the sensory and material registers within the palm. They also live, like McQueen, in *exodus* as creolized citizens of the world. Van Peebles and Julien are also such citizens of the world. As discussed in the previous chapter, Amsterdam, McQueen's current home base, served as Van Peebles's port of call before he moved to France, and the "Van" of "Van Peebles" reflects the director's transatlantic identifications. Born and raised by Caribbean immigrants in east London, Julien still lives and works in his hometown. Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen have lived along the crisscrossed currents of diaspora. Turning to immersion, all three have creolized the spaces of spectator and spectacle as more lateral, unbounded modes of occupying (and indeed surviving) this current world and dreaming of new ones yet on the horizon.

[612] Ibid., 205.
[613] Enwezor, "Haptic Visions," 45.
[614] Searle and McQueen, "A Conversation with Steve McQueen," 193.

CONCLUSION

Although the temporality of this dissertation congregates (I hope) around a constellation, rather than straightforward history, of formal and conceptual affinities among the work of Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen, my project leaves out a conspicuous historical and art historical moment between the early 1970s when *Sweetback* was released and the early aughts when *Baltimore* and *Western Deep* premiered. During the moment of the 1980s and early 1990s, the art market soared under the neoliberal, antiregulatory economic policies under the Reagan-Thatcher regimes. Artworks amenable to the market grew in popularity and price, such as figurative painting that employed a mode of realism. In response to this trend, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh penned an incisive essay in 1981, focusing in particular on European, majority male neoexpressionist painters as "figures of authority" and "ciphers of regression," a return to figuration seen through the impassioned painterly gestures of the artist's heroic subjectivity.[615] Littered with "iconographic codes," such as the "painterly sign" of energetic brushwork that is "emptied of historical content and meaning," these canvases as commodities embody postmodern pastiche and "fulfill their function as the luxury products of a fictitious high culture."[616] An "aura," in his words, borrowed from Benjamin, washes over these paintings, promising a universal aesthetic experience of "spiritual salvation" seemingly divorced from the social, political, and historical realities to which they are each inextricably tethered.[617] And years later in his 2012 essay "Farewell to an Identity," with the advantage of hindsight, Buchloh continues to identify the 1980s as a pivotal decade when a "transformation" began to swiftly take place: "the total permeation of the cultural sphere by economic operations of finance capital and its attendant ethos and social structures."[618]

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[615] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes no the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39—68, 40.
[616] Ibid., 55, 59,
[617] Ibid., 59, 62.
[618] Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," 254—255.

By the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the question of beauty and art also resurged amid the market's own resurgence, a position advanced most forcefully by Dave Hickey in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* of 1993. "Beauty is and always will be blue skies and open highway," Hickey writes, referring to his peculiar American conception of beauty as a distinctly democratic discourse.[619] "So we talk, because the experience of American beauty is inextricable from its optimal social consequence: our membership in a happy coalition of citizens who agree on what is beautiful, valuable, and just."[620] As the purest source of pleasure, beauty creates consensus, free of the fault lines of dissent and critique that have propelled so many avant-garde art practices. In contrast to this celebration of aesthetic beauty, Buchloh's aforementioned essay Conceptual Art as an "assault" on the "visuality" and "commodity status" of the object appeared in 1990. And earlier, Hal Foster edited a selection of essays in an influential volume entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, originally published in 1983.[621] Foster's introduction outlines the differences between a "postmodern of resistance," which exhibits a "desire to change the object and it social object," and a "postmodern of reaction," "singular in its repudiation of modernism" and "voiced by shrilly neoconservatives" who "sever the cultural from the social."[622] As the title of this volume suggests, Foster casts a skeptical glance toward the "very notion of an aesthetic" divorced from the vagaries of history and the grit of the world.[623] This critical genealogy of the 1980s and early 1990s fell out of the frame of my dissertation, but one that I could envision pursuing as this project evolves.

In terms of artistic practice, Julien interfaced with these aesthetic and political debates across the Atlantic during the decade of the 1980s, particularly as a founding member of the of Sankofa Film and Video Collective. Funded by cultural arms of the state, such as the Greater

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[619] Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 69.
[620] Ibid., 71.
[621] Buchloh, "Conceptual Art, 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," 107.
[622] Hal Foster, "Introduction," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), xii.
[623] Ibid., xvi.

London Council and Channel 4 Television, Sankofa, along with other independent video and film collectives and workshops, were mostly comprised of artists born and raised in England to parents who had immigrated from former British colonies. These organizations aimed to "gain a collective, creative voice," according to film scholar Hamid Naficy, and destabilize both "mainstream media's stereotyping and misrepresentation of the black and subaltern subjects but also representation itself," such as, perhaps the representational matrix of pleasure, beauty, and spectacle that Blaxploitation promoted—its excess, its eroticism, its stereotypes, its visual and affective currents of desire [624] Despite this flowering of independent film and video workshops and organizations, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, under whose Conservative government "rampant commercialism" thrived, discontinued the Greater London Council by the mid-to-late-1980s, and, as a result, many of the collectives or workshops disbanded by the early 1990s.[625] As such, many ex-members embarked on solo film practices, including Julien.[626] And it was also in 1989 with *Looking for Langston* that Julien made the Black male body into a "site of pleasure" and named one of the main characters "Beauty":

> Because of the historical inscription of male bodies in photography and in art generally, I was always worried about trying not to show the black male body in a particular construction that could be consumed for the white gaze. I was always worried about that gaze, and that meant that to a certain extent I annihilated my own ambivalent desire around the black male body. I think that was a problem, and I think that I resolved those things more successfully in *Looking for Langston*, where I really wanted the black male body to be the site of pleasure.[627]

After teaching a class on Black American filmmaking at Harvard University in the early 2000s, Julien directed a documentary about the genre in 2002 and then cast its "godfather" in *Baltimore* in 2003.[628] Much of Julien's work inhabits the complexities of pleasure, beauty, Blackness, and

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[624] Hamid Naficy, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 88.
[625] Satinder Chohan, "Film and Cinema," in *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, Alison Donnell, ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 116.
[626] Ibid.; see also Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 166—167.
[627] bell hooks and Isaac Julien, "States of Desire," *Transition,* no. 53 (1991): 172.
[628] Julien, conversation with author.

representation. “Our pleasures are political,” wrote the artist and Kobena Mercer in 1993, “and our politics can be pleasurable.”[629]

Across the Atlantic in America, artists negotiated what Huey Copeland calls “the multicultural turn” of the 1980s and early 1990s, which “did dismantle the myths of Eurocentrism” and “acknowledged cultural difference” but also “rehearsed static identities” and “imaging of corporeal difference.”[630] In this multicultural moment, many Black artists were received as “ciphers of blackness” and their work often critically reduced to monolithic, “packaged” renderings of their race.[631] “Market forces swept away communal and symbolic structures,” writes Copeland, citing Debord’s preface to the third edition of *The Society of the Spectacle,* “conscripting black subjects to become complicit in their own commodification and devaluation within a glittering consumer culture,” part and parcel of a “globalized spectacular culture, in which blackness circulates even more widely.”[632] Take the reception of Lorna Simpson’s iconic phototexts. “Victim” and “victimization” were terms often used to describe these photographs of anonymous black women with turned backs, set against a blank backdrop, and paired with often incisive or enigmatic text panels, compressing and condensing is work and these women into sole signs of “oppression.”[633] “If you’re black,” wrote critic Amei Wallach, “you feel the ground sliding out from under you as a conflicted survivor of victimization.”[634] Jan Avgikos called Simpson’s subjects “frozen pantomimes of subjugation” in a 1992 review in *Artforum*.[635] Yet in an interview of the same year, Simpson specifically denies that the figure featured ten times over in her 1988 *Stereo*

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[629] Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “True Confessions,” in *The Film Art of Isaac Julien* (Annandale-on-Hudson: Center for Curatorial Studies, 2000), 141.
[630] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.
[631] Ibid., 6.
[632] Ibid., 6—7.
[633] Roberta Smith, “Review/Art; Linking Words and Images Explosively,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 1990, accessed March 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/20/arts/review-art-linking-words-and-images-explosively.html.
[634] Amei Wallach, “Lorna Simpson; Right Time, Right Place,” *New York Edition Newsday*, September 19, 1990.
[635] Jan Avgikos, “Lorna Simpson, Josh Baer Gallery,” *Artforum* (October 1992): 104.

Styles represented victimhood (Fig. 25). "It is a light, funny piece," Simpson responded. "I would hate to think my work is perceived as a portrayal of victimization," she added.[636]

For other critics and scholars, the turned backs of Simpson's figures represented oppression *and* resistance to spectacular regimes of violence, power, and oppression. Saidiya Hartman's essay in early exhibition catalogue for Simpson's 1992 solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago identifies this dynamic in the phototexts. "One is most visible," she writes, "when most subjected."[637] This essay previews some of the stakes and themes of Hartman's book, *Scenes of Subjection*, published just five years after Simpson's exhibition at the MCA. In her book, Hartman traces a direct connection between the "subjection" of the enslaved body and deceptively "innocent amusements" on the plantation, the auction block, and eventually on the minstrel stage. Enslaved men and women who were forced to sing and dance for their master endured "suffering through spectacle."[638] The turned backs of Simpson's figures are effectively "severing the connection between woman and spectacle."[639]

Copeland extends the anti-spectacular impulse of Simpson's work beyond her phototexts to her lesser-known immersive installations of the early 1990s, including *Five Rooms* (1991), installed in the slave quarters of a historic mansion in Charleston, South Carolina. In one room, the artist loaded large glass containers with rice, one of the state's most prized products (Fig. 26). Copeland positions Simpson's installation as a conspicuous departure from representations of Blackness and Black bodies conditioned by the homogenization, spectaclarization, and commodification of the twin forces of multiculturalism and the market. Instead, inanimate objects like water jugs full of rice act as surrogates for absent bodies, referencing the historical link between Blackness and objecthood in slavery without directly representing "scenes of subjection"

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[636] Deborah Willis, *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1992), 58, 60.
[637] Saidiya Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh," in *For the Sake of the Viewer* (New York: Universe Publishing; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 55.
[638] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17, 22, 7-8.
[639] Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh," 56.

and the bodies of enslaved men and women who were forced to harvest "Carolina gold."[640] In so doing, Simpson turns to the "material coordinates of slavery rather than figuring African American identity as a mere effect of racialized subjection" in these immersive, multi-sensory, multi-media installations.[641] Instead of the spectacular figure of Black female victimhood, Simpson presents rice to explore the complex collisions and connections of Blackness and objecthood as a mode of resistance to "the model of humanity on offer within neoliberal capitalism," the subject who has often has performed "subjection."[642]

Julien and McQueen also explored the contours of Blackness and objecthood in the late 1980s and early 1990s—but with recourse to the human figure, more specifically the Black male body, absent in the installations of their American counterparts in Copeland's survey, which also includes Fred Wilson's aforementioned *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore. Take *Looking for Langston* and *Bear,* for instance, as well as later works that examine the intricacies of flesh in close-up. Their work does not avoid the spectacle of the Black male body—its objectification and even commodification. Instead, their work inhabits this space to flesh out the complexities of what it means to be an object immersed *within*, rather than the subject distanced from, the scene. By 1997 during her artist's residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Simpson, too, began to welcome the figure back into her frame, which notably occurred when she started to work with film and video. In these moving-image works, unlike the photographs, we see the faces of many figures, including men and women of varying ethnicities and races. In addition, some reference actresses like Lena Horne, allusions to mid-century Hollywood, the star system, and its attendant forms of commodification and spectacle.[643]

Simpson's summer 2011 show *Momentum* at Salon 9, her gallery on the Bowery in Manhattan's Lowest East Side, foregrounded many of the same concerns shared by the work of

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[640] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 8, 10, 77—78.
[641] Ibid., 9.
[642] Ibid., 19.
[643] Lorna Simpson, *Lorna Simpson: Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts/The Ohio State University, 1997); Kellie Jones, "(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson," in Kellie Jones, *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 84.

Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen: pleasure, immersive spectacle, objecthood, and urban space. I will conclude my dissertation with a consideration of this installation, but I also look to the future of this project with *Momentum* in mind. In an earlier form, my dissertation had included a chapter on *Momentum.* My thinking, however, shifted focus to how three Black male artists/filmmakers, all of whom train their lens upon the objecthood of Black male body, might consciously or unconsciously reveal a "female within" through the immersive formal languages of lateral lines and the textures of the object. How might Simpson, a Black American women and artist, approach immersion—or perhaps a better description would be an auratic atmospheric surround—into a spectacular "scene of objection" similarly and differently than Van Peebles, Julien, and McQueen?[644] Do other histories of "the female within" appear in the visual idiom of the artist's later work, which includes the figure itself? How does Simpson creolize urban space, particularly her hometown of New York City, rapidly gentrifying in no small part due to art institutions? How does Simpson's more recent work reflect a shift in her practice toward the complexities of immersive spectacle and its ability to generate a "scene of objection" to the very same subject that the turned backs of her figures in the early phototext works resisted as well?

Momentum started on the street, greeting the viewer with a window-size screen featuring professional dancers whose faces, Afros, and limbs were covered in gold paint (Fig. 27). Also available on a small monitor inside, the video fulfilled Simpson's childhood desire to sit in the audience as she danced on a Lincoln Center stage, her eleven-year-old body performing in gold costume.[645] Downstairs, the performance theme continued with five large 1960s-era postcards of Lincoln Center, four in gold ink and one in color, all printed on felt panels. From outside to inside, upstairs to downstairs, the viewer witnessed a personal past transformed into a public geography. Salon 94 surrounds viewers and among her materials of memory, extending Lincoln Center's stage downtown to the Bowery. Simpson's artworks also perform. The felt, itself made of hair, curves off the wall. Its movement echoes the pirouettes of the ballerinas, who animate the

[644] Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
[645] Salon 94, "Momentum," accessed April 21, 2016, http://www.salon94.com/exhibition/momentum.

gallery's exterior face. Taken as a whole, the exhibition generated an entire atmosphere around the performance of personal memory, the gleaming texture of gold, and the landscape of Lincoln Center.

By covering skin, felt, and paper in layers of gold paint and ink, Simpson returned not only to a childhood memory of visual pleasure but also to the question of aura and art. Although its etymology relates to light and halos, aura has entered critical debates about contemporary art via Walter Benjamin's essay, "A Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," discussed in the introduction. In this essay, Benjamin refers to several genealogies of aura, but in one notable passage, he tethers aura, glimmer, and spectacle tightly together, attributing a "putrid glimmer" to the degraded aura emanating from Hollywood stars and starlets.[646] This essay has been mobilized by critics of spectacle in art and architecture as well as in the debate around the fetishization of neoexpressionist painting and the glorification of aesthetic beauty in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Simpson's golden surfaces recall the shiny hair and skin of one such star, Josephine Baker, a Black actress and performer who left the States to find success at Paris's prominent performance venues. In a series of black and white glamour shots taken during the height of her popularity in the 1920s, Baker's semi-nude body is covered in oil, gold jewelry, blindingly bright clothing, and a dramatic encounter of shadow and light. Recent scholarship has recuperated Baker either as an active agent fashioning her own career or the epitome of objectification, running the risk of resembling the golden commodities generously adorning her body.[647] Anne Cheng's *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* provides a provocative model for understanding not simply the danger but rather the promise of shiny surfaces. Cheng nuances the polarized paradigms of existing scholarship on Baker's enigmatic career by showing how her skin hovered between animate and inanimate, person and commodity, subject and object. Always

[646] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art In the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (First Version)," *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 24.
[647] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3—4,

on the verge of disappearance, Baker could hide under the hard, shiny surface of her "second skin."[648] Rather than condemn spectacle as a condition of oppressive hypervisibility and objectification, Cheng insists that Baker's "theatricalization" or, in another instance what she calls "aura," "breaks open rather than secures the borders of racial legibility."[649] We can see this most clearly in a photograph entitled *Baker, Folies Bergere Dancer* (Fig. 28). Here, Baker is surrounded in her own aura—a hazy halo of light that concomitantly obscures and illuminates her sleek black hair, downturned face, glistening hip, metallic bracelet, and the loose drape of reflective fabric coyly covering her thigh. The shimmering surfaces proliferating in *Momentum* also function to frustrate "racial legibility," bathing all the dancers—no matter gender or race—in a layer of gold paint. The dancers acquire the visual marks of aura rather than the visual markers that have so often stabilized and secure the self, separating subject from object.

The serigraphs mount a similar challenge to legibility. Although the felt panels are partly made of hair, Simpson provides no indication of whose head the material derives from. And like the Afros wigs in the video, we have no sense of original hair color. Sitting opposite each other in the exhibition, both versions of *Day Time* feature several people milling about Philip Johnson's famous fountain in front of Lincoln Center, including a Black man and a young black child in the far left foreground, and a group of white men and women on the right. In the color print, the viewer can easily identify skin color (Fig. 29). In the gold print, however, all figures acquire a dark skin tone (Fig. 30). From color to gold serigraph, skin color no longer acts as a reliable indication of racial difference, much in the way the aesthetic of darkness in McQueen's work, most especially *Western Deep,* muddies the visual marks of identity within his installation environment.

As with Van Peebles's *Sweetback* and Julien's *Baltimore*, *Momentum* takes the complexities of urban space as its subject and attempts to remap the rapidly changing nature of New York City through the immersive—and inviting—qualities of the installation. By transporting the elements and experiences of Lincoln Center downtown to the Bowery, *Momentum* converts

[648] Ibid., 13, 60-65, 116–118.
[649] Ibid., 117, 175.

the gallery from a space in which artworks are displayed to a stage in which artworks in many ways perform. Yet Manhattan's Lower East Side is a far cry from the Upper West Side of Lincoln Center. Salon 94 sits just steps away from the New Museum of Contemporary Art and right across the street from Bari, a wholesale shop specializing in appliances for Italian restaurants. This neighborhood, like many in Simpson's hometown of New York City, is an eclectic mix of old and new, subject to a relatively recent wave of art gallery and museum development. But over half a century ago, the area surrounding Lincoln Center was itself also in the throes of gentrification. Coming off victory in World War II, Lincoln Center was built to exhibit American cultural power at the cost of dislocating thousands of New Yorkers.[650] The gleaming white and glass campus we recognize today was previously the site of what Robert Moses termed "the worst slum in New York" and "urban rot." Wesley Janz describes Lincoln Center as an impenetrable "fortress."[651] Janz notes how a team of all-star architects designed the buildings to look inward, facing away from the neighborhood. Although Lincoln Center was cast as a beacon of cultural freedom against the backdrop of Cold War politics, New York's premier performance space was, in fact, quite the opposite—exclusive and destructive.[652]

Simpson might then the risk of re-inscribing the loss of yet another New York neighborhood at the hands of institutionalized culture. Or, by referencing the early history of Lincoln Center, perhaps she conducts a critique of Salon 94 and, by proxy, a self-critique of her presence as an artist on the Bowery. But as an alternative, Simpson also relies on the space of her gallery to re-map and break open the exclusive space of New York's premier performing arts center. Downstairs, the large serigraphs surround the viewer. In contradistinction to the turned backs of Lincoln Center's monumental structures, Simpson's dancers face the street, bringing a performance that took once place inside Lincoln Center outside and onto the Bowery, creolizing uptown and downtown, inside and outside, street and stage. While Simpson's early work may

[650] Wesley Janz, "Theaters of Power: Architectural and Cultural Productions," *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)* 50, no. 4 (May 1, 1997): 231–233, 241.
[651] Robert Moses as qtd. in Janz, "Theaters of Power": 231.
[652] Janz, "Theaters of Power," 231, 233–234.

have been cast as a refusal of the spectacle of the Black female body, *Momentum* stands apart in and through its interest in the radical properties of seduction into a spectacular, and in this case, perhaps an auratic atmospheric "scene of objection," both inside the space of the installation and outside on the street.[653] Simpson might conjure a small, modest creolized space for her city on a quarter of the block, premised on the osmosis between inside and outside, interior and façade. In the beating heart of the art world, Simpson gives us something spectacular and seductive, without sacrificing the political rigor of her practice. The entire span of her oeuvre helps tease out the various stakes and strains of the debate around beauty and spectacle in the 1980s and early 1990s, and moves beyond this discourse, as did her peers across the pond, to consider alternatives *within* the scene.

[653] Moten, *Scene of Objection*, 1.

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