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“MAKING OUR OWN”: CREATIVITY, STRATEGY, AND AUTHORITY AMONG
BLACK WOMEN MEDIA MAKERS IN NEW YORK CITY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Making Our Own”:

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Taking account of media environments historically structured to favor white men’s images and contributions, and amidst contemporary debates over racialized and gendered value in situations such as Black Lives Matter, Oscars So White, and Hollywood’s gendered salary differentials, this dissertation examines how Black women media makers of different ages, class positions and sexual orientations cultivate authority and imagination in making their works, and in fashioning their lives. Drawing on fourteen months of research combining participant observation in several contexts – film shoots, press interviews, film festivals, pre-production and post-production workspaces, and even living rooms with interlocutors and their families – through semi-structured and informal interviews, archival research, and close readings of content, this dissertation’s ethnographic vignettes and analyses foreground the contextual, ideological and interpersonal dynamics that Black women navigate in order to access and work across New York City’s independent media domains.

Overall, this dissertation argues that authority is less a stable status than a process in which, for members of marginalized groups, one is constantly learning, adapting, and challenging dominant institutional norms in order to imagine and make space for one's own stories and visions. Many Black women built senses and thus practices of authority not only on technical merit and mastery but also on resilience and lessons nurtured through lived experiences as well as collective memory. Despite problematic histories of racial representation in mainstream U.S. film cultures, contemporary Black women creators were working to traverse exclusionary media training environments, embrace the various affective experiences behind media making, and test out the liberatory potentials to conceive of alternative authority-building praxes if not new worlds altogether. Ardently, many worked to collaborate with other creators to author and create works that – whether or not their content is overtly political – were radical in their very insistence that Black women's and other marginalized perspectives were important to behind-the-scenes creative development. Via flexible and imaginative approaches to creation, media makers in this study unmasked some of the racialized, gendered, and classed codes that have tacitly upheld hierarchies of authority in mainstream media production.

Overall, building on media, feminist and Black feminist anthropology, this study contributes to anthropology a centering of Black women as a population actively engaged in cultural production. Through close readings both of their interpersonal interactions in media worlds and of their creative works, the dissertation concludes that marginalized social subjects develop non-dominant modes of maneuvering and claiming authority in (mostly) independent media production environments so as to highlight their talent and determination to imagine non-normative but nonetheless legitimate visions and dynamics.

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The experience of writing a dissertation has been exhausting yet refreshingly creative. On this journey, I have done my best to practice a mantra preached by several of my research participants who also centered it in their media production praxes: there is no ‘I’ in team. By this, they meant that people almost never did their most effective work in isolation. Rather, they had to network, bringing trusted colleagues and companions into the fold for feedback as well as other professional, social and/or emotional support. Likewise, my past seven years in graduate school have entailed if not required me to confide in and rely on people who often sensed greatness in me before I fully identified it in myself. To recognize energies and hopes that others have invested in my intellectual growth, I start this dissertation by directly acknowledging my anchoring communities not only of practice but also of mutual reassurance, encouragement, and commiseration.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Photos	x
PREFACE	
Daughters of the Dust: A Landmark Event	1
Inspirations and Limits of Black Exceptionalism	4
INTRODUCTION: Probing Authority as Concept, Ethnographic Tool, and Reflexive Prompt	12
When Silence Befalls: Authority in Politics of Media-Making	12
Author, Authorship and Authority	15
Authority and Experience: Introducing Questions of Race, Gender, and Class	19
“Under My Watch”: Clashing Perceptions of Authority	24
CONTEXTUALIZING FIELDWORK	31
Why New York?	33
Geographic and Internal Diversity of ‘Blackness’	35
Movement as Method	40
Recruitment of Research Participants	41
Changes in Interview Design	44
Positionality and the Value of ‘Alternative’ Epistemologies	50
Similar but Not the Same	53
Ethnographic Self-Reflection: Image, Perception, and Authority	55
The Sequence of Events	58

CHAPTER 1

Stratified Realities: Historicizing Invisibilization and Recognition 63

“I’m Gonna be One”: A Panelist Muses on Media Production’s Structural Violence	63
Whiteness and the Making of Stratified Realities	74
Authority and The Gaze	78
Slavery and Beyond: Mediated Stereotypes as Racial Stratification	83
Entanglements of Race, Media and Authority	84
Perspectives on a Nation: Race Films and Masculinist Privilege	87
But where are the women?: Looking into a Politics of Looking	90
“The Outsider Within”: Encounters of Difference in Tolerant Spaces	92
Paradox within a Civil Rights Commission: A Case Study	94
Conclusion: Double Standards, Embodied Knowledge and The Gaze	97

CHAPTER 2

“Not Built for Us”: Cultivating Authoritative Practices and Public Image 101

Project Greenlight: A Tale of Two Perspectives	101
Power Revisited: Investigating Two Features of Authority	104
Danielle: Entering and Navigating Formal Film Institutions	108
Lacking Attention to Film’s Racialized Legacies and Content	112
Placating Performances	115
Aisha: An Education on the Semiotics of Race and Space	123
Violet’s Rebuke: Authority as Accountability	129
Molly’s Advice: Self-Presentation as Reflective of Work Ethic	136
Gretchen: Jumping Between, or Empathy as Path of Least Resistance	140

Conclusion: Learning Authority to Cultivate Authority	148
CHAPTER 3	
Coming to Terms: Media Making as Psychosocial Coping and and Community Care	154
What is ‘Unthinkable’?: Art, Ambivalence, and Coming to Terms	154
Vulnerability as Legitimacy	158
Helen: Sensing, Responding to and Provoking Discomfort on the Job	159
Jayla: Self-Care, Comfort, and Coping with Anti-Black Violence Via Art-Making	164
“Your reaction is valid”: Jayla’s Artistic Reply to the Charleston Church Shooting	171
Conclusion: Media as Affective Embodiment and Expression	176
CHAPTER 4	
Production Choreography: Situated Navigations of Horizontal Power Relations on Film Shoots	179
Choreography of Production: An Interpretive Lens	181
Meeting Jenelle	186
Choreographing Collaboration and Leadership	188
Authority and The Question of Directorial Style	191
Performative Choreographies: Staged and Un-staged Aspects of Directing a Scene	193
Studying Repetition and Embodied Praxis via Self-Emplacement	198
Repeated collaborations	204
Pauline: Choreographing Vulnerability	206
Arresting Logics: A Dialogue Between Two Directors	211
Conclusion: Situated Choreographies of Authority-Making	219

CHAPTER 5	
Aesthetics, Play, and Temporality in Contemporary Afro-Imaginative Media	221
Talking Futures at the Theater: Panel Discussions and Politics of Distribution	225
Contemplating Afro-Imaginative Aesthetics	230
Anthropology of Play: Interactive Experimentation in Afro-Imaginative Media	234
Afrofuturism?	239
Black Socio-Poetics: Production, Politics, and Praxis in Afro-Imaginative Media	243
Depicting Policing via Exhibition of Afro-Imaginative Video	247
Conclusion: Contemplating Generationality and Black Futures	257
CONCLUSION	261
Tales of Media Production: Storytelling as Authority-Making	261
Denouement	268
EPILOGUE	272
Scene #1	272
Scene #2	273
Scene #3: But Have Things Changed, Really?	275
BIBLIOGRAPHY	280

List of Photos	Page
Photo 1: Ava DuVernay Twitter Post	11
Photo 2: Cast of HBO show Insecure, Issa Rae (director)	275

PREFACE: A Student Ethnographer's Inspiration

“The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”

— *Combahee River Collective Statement*, 1986

Come, I will let you go [to the Cinema]
When black beauties
Are chosen for the screen;
That you may know
Your own sweet beauty
And not the white loveliness
Of others for envy.

— Una Marson, “*Cinema Eyes*” (1937)

Daughters of the Dust: A Landmark Event

The first time I watched University of California-Los Angeles alumna and film director Julie Dash's 1991 narrative feature *Daughters of the Dust* was for an undergraduate class assignment. I sat in front of my laptop, my leg quivering with the general impatience of an overcommitted college student. However, within minutes of the film's start, I felt my shoulders loosen, my mouth drop a bit agape, and my body sink into the chair holding it up. On screen, a boat carrying two sienna-skinned occupants sailed down river. The man wore a dapper black top hat, and the woman daintily perched a lacy umbrella over her head with white-glove-covered hands to shield herself from the blazing sun. Moments later, a third party became visible. Standing on the boat's hull, a darker-skinned Black male laborer – whose tan, sweaty brow, and torn and ill-fitting clothes juxtaposed his working class ruralness to the duo's elite urbanity – stood to row the vessel downstream manually.

Daughters depicted intra- and inter-generational relationships between members (most of its central figures being Black women) of a Gullah family as they gathered on their family's ancestral lands one last time before migrating to the northern continental United States¹. The film's airy color palette sang, whites and saturated greens and blues stressing the island scenery's visual impact. History, heritage, and diverse expressions of Black womanhood converged so robustly throughout its storylines that I felt compelled to research the production background of this film, which resonated with me differently than most 20th century Hollywood portrayals of Blackness. Luckily, I did not have to look for long because Dash had actually released companion literature a year after the film's debut. At one hundred and seventy-three pages, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992) contains a complete screenplay, behind-the-scenes photographs, transcripts of interviews with Dash herself, and essays by bell hooks and other scholars on the film's production saga, distribution hardships, and ongoing legacies and impact².

To create what would be the first U.S. Black woman-directed film to secure nationwide theatrical distribution, Julie Dash had organized the *Daughters* shoot on limited finances and resources. Nonetheless, she managed to assemble and lead a team that ended up producing an impressively substantial artefact whose socio-historical impact still carries on in Africana and film history courses and other screening milieus such as film festivals decades later. I contend that the team's budget-conscious³

¹ The particular historical reference depicted in *Daughters of the Dust* was the first U.S. 'Great Migration' at the turn of the 20th century during which many Black people moved from the South to the North in search for industrial employment and better living conditions.

² The film's production, from conceptualization through theatrical release, spanned sixteen years.

³ According to a New York Times article (Buckley 2016), Dash and her team produced *Daughters of the Dust* on an \$800,000 budget provided by PBS's *American Playhouse*.

manipulation of the filming location's natural beauty and lightscapes (which shifted with time of day) rendered an aesthetic that was not only optically and aurally captivating, but also allusive to African cultural patterns, spiritual beliefs, and griot-inspired oral traditions significant for many contemporary Black families and communities. Dash faced a relative dearth of interest from investors and distributors, as most were unwilling to associate their brands with or risk their money on what several described as an 'experimental' work⁴ that differed drastically from reigning cinematic templates. She also faced problems on the film shoot itself, as when she had to deal with challenging cast members who had trouble reconciling her Black womanhood with their own ideas of what an authority figure 'should' look and act like. As Dash recalled one incident on set,

I was confronted one morning by an actor who refused to put on his costume. We were ready to shoot a scene that included him and for whatever reason, he decided that this was the time to assert the fact that even though I was the director, he was a man and no woman could make him do anything. This man, a Muslim, who had been telling us all about the need for unity among black people, stood there in the middle of the set, in front of the crew, and confronted me, physically. He knew that he could intimidate most people because of his size (about 6'4") and demeanor. I knew that if I backed down from him the entire project would come crashing down. Any authority or control I had on the set would be completely undermined. We were seconds away from actually fighting, but I made my stand...I'd won, but secretly I was shaken for days afterward. (1992:11-12)

⁴ As one of Julie's distributors told me:

Julie didn't have anybody to promote the film. She didn't have a distributor on hand and the film was going directly to PBS...American Experience funded it. And she actually sold off the European rights to get her last production money, so there was really nowhere for it to go...we said, this film cannot go straight to TV. It would be a travesty. We've gotta do something with it. Just like that we formed our company...We sponsored a screening of the film, invited a bunch of distributors and one of the distributors who came was someone affiliated with Kino. And so Julie insisted, when Kino was going to pick up the film, that they hire us to do the marketing and consulting with them and that's what made all the difference because Kino out of all the places? Their expertise was in foreign film! So they sort of saw *Daughters* as a foreign film. They didn't know who the audience was. They didn't know how to market it. They knew that they knew foreign film, so they figured it was close. (Interview, 2013)

In this quote, Dash recounts a paradoxical display of patriarchal intimidation – a pronounced profession of Black unity undercut by an act of insurgent disruption – that internally wounded her. Despite fear for her mental and physical well-being in the moment, Dash hardened her outer presentation to perform a solid and ultimately efficacious demonstration of on-set authority. Her directorial approach incorporated awareness of wider national and international production climates that had yet to generally and unsuspiciously recognize Black women as potentially valid power players. Whether unwittingly or not, Dash internalized an understanding that she could not show weakness, which led her to prioritize gains in group productivity and efficient project progress over her own immediate peace.

Inspirations and Limits of Black Exceptionalism

Academically and personally, I have grown more curious about Dash's story. Most central here was her ostensible willingness to stomach personal sacrifices of time, money, and even corporeal safety for a perceived greater good. It is important to note that this named act of hers, and motivations behind it, were not products of some essential instinct, but rather of her ongoing attentiveness to the social environments in which she participated – or at that point, aspired to participate. Looking at various articles and other pieces about Dash and her accomplishments, I have also become more inquisitive about the tendency of online news outlets and other press sources to isolate Dash as 'exceptional' without mention of her collaborators or broader communities of support.

Upon later review of files saved on my fieldwork recorder, I came across audio notes that I had taken personally to explain (then for my future self and now for you, the reader) the chain of thoughts that led me from that fateful first screening of *Daughters of*

the Dust to dissertation research and analysis about the countless other Black women out there trying to create media for reasons and at costs addressed in the larger document to come. Below, I have reproduced my directly pertinent audio fieldnotes:

Julie Dash [is] a Black woman filmmaker who was part of what is now called the L.A. Rebellion⁵ that came out of UCLA... I remember this film and it seemed not only shocking to me but somehow *brave*. To make sense of why that was to me, I really wanted to go into this: What was it about that particular film, and about this particular woman who [successfully] ‘made it’... [It was] her directorial presence that created this reaction in me, and also within many of the women I’ve worked with since... Her name is one that’s constantly mentioned as being *that* inspiration for [other creators] wanting to join film and what they see can be done with it.

So, Julie Dash, to me...[her] presence brings you in but she’s also open to discuss the politics of her work and does it throughout this book [reference to Dash’s aforementioned 1992 book] ...She has actual conversations with folks in this book, talking about the context and larger forces that went into making a film. A lot of people engage film as a text in and of itself, not [necessarily] thinking of the larger context and relations that go into the actual production of a product... a crew member who she felt didn’t respect her... The hoops she had to jump through to get a distributor, [as lots of them] couldn’t particularly vibe with the image she was putting out because it was so ‘different’ in terms of how she was choosing to present Black womanhood.

I think something that particularly caught me was this discourse that surrounded her in the media, the press. It was elevating Dash as this isolated figure, and she was made to mark the potential of Black women filmmakers as opposed to realizing that there are a lot of women filmmakers out there. There are just structural and ideological forces that exist that make it harder for a lot of them to get through. So, I really wanted to look at, in this project, what I’m calling ‘larger contexts of strategy building.’ That includes political forces, ideological and social forces. Colorblindness [asserts] that we’re all equal but things like the Black Lives Matter⁶ movement are bringing us to a place where we are returning

⁵ The L.A. Film Movement – also called the L.A. Rebellion by some writers and critics – refers to the film students who went through UCLA’s film program from the late 1960s to vaguely the early 1980s who worked to create pieces that represented Black people and families as complex, reasoning, and at the center of it all human. (UCLA Film and Television Archive 2011).

⁶ The *Black Lives Matter* movement is a digital hashtag turned socio-political movement founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometti in 2013. According to the movement’s official website, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” (Black Lives Matter 2018)

to this debate of ‘What does race mean today?’ It’s not the clear-cut line that we imagine of the late 60s but it’s not an imaginary of equality either. So, what does it mean to create images in this space and to be a racialized and gendered body *trying* to create images in this space?

As inferred by this reflection, I quickly discerned tensions between Dash’s stated motives and strategies, and the ways in which most reporters wrote about her. This prompted me to ask ‘What is the point of displaying creators as individual, even isolated figures of success, and at what expense?’ Though Dash’s ambitious milestone certainly merits commendation, her self-proclaimed commitment to community pride as both narrative theme (Gullah cultural formulations in *Daughters*, colorism and passing in her 1983 short film *Illusions*) and work principle (repeatedly collaborating with fellow film students and a rotating core team of actors in her UCLA film school projects) convey her grounding insistence that people need not trap ‘exceptional’ figures in bubbles of applause. Rather, it is vital that they examine the ideological fundaments, surrounding and shifting discourses, and statistic trends that unevenly shape U.S. media climates that make way for the ‘exceptional’ Black woman creator icon to emerge in the first place.

While many contemporary media representatives suggest that racialized exclusions have slackened with increasingly accessible and affordable technologies, it remains critical to study structures that jointly maintain and contain Black women’s success stories as shining, exceptional sparks of hope. Over two decades after Dash and team’s laborious feat, a research group at the University of Southern California-Annenberg reported, “Twenty-eight women have worked as directors across the 700 top films from 2007 to 2014. Only three were African American” (Smith et al. 2014). Russell K. Robinson writes of similar patterns in his call for legal attention to discriminatory hiring practices in media worlds. He lists among items of note 1.) ‘write what you know’

industry directives that reproduce a preponderance of white characters in film and television, and of white men in power positions, and 2.) studio representatives' tendencies to pursue paths of 'least resistance' by investing in characters and storylines they believe to be 'bankable' and already primed for 'universal appeal' (2007:7-12). These two of many such studies on media diversity or lack thereof (also see Yuen 2016, Hunt et. al. 2006a, Hunt et. al. 2006b) shed light on the prejudicial employment and discrepant inclusion rates that uphold U.S. media's conventions of authority despite apparent advances. The amount of media representation received by people from non-dominant demographic groups has oscillated with changing socio-political and economic times, meriting investigation of the complex racial, ethnic and gendered stratifications that seem so hard for U.S. media production systems to shake completely.

Challenging the frequency with which people confuse exemplars of visibility with sustainable mass progress, Aimee Cox forwards, "being able to crack the codes or superficially penetrate the boundaries of exclusionary systems on an individual level [e.g. Dash] does not change how these systems continue to operate in the collective lives of Black women" (2015:111, bracket added). Of especial mention is the fact that journalistic imperatives to valorize Black women as symbols and icons of media inclusivity did not end with Dash. Media makers and proudly self-identified Black women Ava DuVernay (director/writer of feature films *Middle of Nowhere*, *Selma*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*), Issa Rae (director/actress in *Awkward Black Girl*, *Insecure*), and Shonda Rhimes (creator/writer of television shows *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*) are three more recent creators caught in isolationist promotional discourses that have effectively severed them from the communities, collaborators, and role models that

each has openly and verbally embraced as crucial – whether as colleagues, nurturers or inspirations – parts of their respective personal and professional developments.

Such conventional press templates report Black women creators' milestones to public readerships in manners that suggest, perhaps unintentionally, that 1.) people would and/or should be surprised by their demonstrated acuties, and 2.) they earned the attributed accolades alone, displacing their achievements and challenges from historical, social and economic contexts. Such articles – and their predispositions to insulate – were thus fundamentally at odds with their subjects' production ideals. This likely stemmed at least partly from gaps between national proclamations of neoliberal individualism, and driving communal narratives of Black struggle, uplift and insistence on remembering the nation's formative and continued exploitation of African-descended people.

Seemingly not attuned to the culturally hefty significance of such differences, articles that positioned individual Black artists who have 'made it' as arbiters of some inevitably approaching meritocracy largely omitted the collective methods and practices through which many marginalized creators learn, grow, and create. Not only did they downplay demographic inequities still at play in both mainstream and independent media spaces (Hankin 2007), but they also committed the violence of erasing people's connections to their home bases and sites of occupational and social nurturance. Therefore, as of 2019, even as nods to 'Black film' have suffused Hollywood and brought hope to diversity-hungry audiences, it remains important to ask about the stability and sustainability of such presences, and to question uncritical celebrations of discrete Black women – or Black people, more broadly – that also invisibilize the structural obstacles, draining negotiations, and countless labor hours behind their productions. Extending this

inquiry further, if one were to accept these women as exceptional, to what and/or whom would they be an exception, and based on what criteria? As DuVernay exclaimed in a January 18 E! article aptly titled “Ava DuVernay Downplays Being the First Woman of Color to Direct a \$100 Million Movie,”:

When I'm introduced as 'the first this,' 'first that'...It doesn't mean anything to me. It's not anything I earned. I don't allow myself to take it in like it's real. I'm trying to have all of us up in there and more. I don't want to be someplace by myself. I don't want to be on a pedestal as 'the first this and that.' That's so wack; that is the old way of thinking. (quoted in Rothenberg 2018)

Resonant with DuVernay's statement, immense rifts separate the legitimacy I attributed to Dash's and numerous other Black women's works, and the social legitimacy denied their craftsmanship at large. Admittedly, initial seeds for this research were planted long before I saw *Daughters*, as I too have childhood memories of problematic 'firsts.' I can recall my mother's ardent complaints during living room chats with family and friends about the kind of roles for which Black actors – notably, Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*, Denzel Washington in *Training Day*, Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball*, and Monique in *Precious* – typically got Oscars from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She was offended by this, as it appeared that Hollywood most predictably awarded – and in connection, funded – morally questionable Black characters that perpetuated stereotypes of Black promiscuity, violence and/or servility.

With age, my interests in which images actually made it on-screen, and what activities went on behind the scenes gathered intellectual and social momentum. Over and over, I noticed race and gender imbalances in mainstream media (supported by the above conclusions of Smith et. al. and Robinson). Therein lies the groundwork for this ethnographic study of exclusion, innovation, and authority. Besides shining a spotlight on

competencies historically depicted as unachievable by Black women, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to facilitate a paradigm shift that would allow their consistent legibility as capable producers with the right – although not an inherent or essential obligation – to pursue politically-oriented themes, forums and/or reputations.

To close, I refer back to my earlier audio notes to ask, what were the ‘larger contexts of strategy-building’ named by my earlier self? Post-fieldwork, I would argue that they consist of the broad matrix of interactions under investigation throughout this dissertation. They are situated contexts built of, from, towards, against, and in-between the historical scaffolding and socio-political infrastructures that surround Black women media makers: aspiring and established. These ‘larger contexts of strategy-building’ surface and shift as repeated interfaces with markers of socialization teach Black women their presumed place in society, and later in the specialized but by no means removed domains of media consumption, production, and distribution. Contingent on specificities formed amidst hierarchy, such contexts guide the formation of producers’ identities by applying certain institutional and interpersonal pressures onto Black women as subjects who can never achieve dominant authority’s normative ‘ideal’ (read: white affluent heterosexual cis-manhood) in its totality (Mulvey 1999, Gaines 1986, Fanon 1967).

Therefore, less likely to bank on positive cultural capital as their white male counterparts, most Black women media makers realize early on in their production trajectory (Chapter 2) that they must develop imaginative conceptual and practical ways



of knowing, doing, asking, acclimating, challenging and rebelling. Along the way, they strive to learn what authority looks like in its widely accepted mainstream forms, adapt it into personally suitable performances, sit securely in those performances, and have those performances respected by

collaborators, funders and target audiences. At the trying intersection of idolizing the successful and being frustrated by their limited numbers, Ava DuVernay tellingly posted on her Twitter after *A Wrinkle in Time* made her the first Black woman and thirteenth Black person to join the *\$100 Million Club*, “Lovely room to be in. But can’t wait for more sisters to be here too. #Onward” (Quoted in Ifeanyi 2018, picture of tweet included above). Overall, complex and ultimately uncertain psychosocial processes of coming up with terms, and coming to terms with individually viable expressions of authority span lifetimes – even generations – for Black women working to construct the collaborative networks of support necessary to create works– if not sustainable media structures and communities – of their own.’

INTRODUCTION:

Probing Authority as Concept, Heuristic, and Reflexive Prompt

“What should be evident...is that those who are ‘authorized’ to speak on what constitutes innovation ...are those already recognized as authorities...Therefore Blacks and feminists [or woman, as a more general category of identification], ever marginal to the authoritative discourse, cannot sit at the dining room table because they were never invited – having been hidden in the kitchen (to borrow an image from Langston Hughes), waiting to be called upon (as needed) for their ‘anecdotal’ opinions; nor will they be recognized by the hosts, who base their guest lists on their own exclusive criteria.”

– Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*, 2001

“An artist is a sort of emotional and spiritual historian. [Her] role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are.”

– James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 1985

When Silence Befalls: Authority in Politics of Media-Making

“I didn’t feel like I was being taken seriously...I know that I don’t look like Steven Spielberg or Jonathan Demme,” career director/producer and current workshop leader Pauline announced to a university auditorium of about twenty people, most of them other Black women. She was in the process of sharing what appeared to be a familiar annoyance with the U.S. media industry’s pervasive yet largely unspoken – if not outright denied – integration of society’s racialized and gendered logics. As part of a NYC film festival that championed works by emerging women of color and nonbinary directors and producers, Pauline’s workshop attracted creatives and film professionals seemingly eager to revel with her in an organic moment of communion such as this one. Many nodded their heads in enthusiastic agreement. Some even let out affirmative hums (‘mmm-hmms!’) and hollers of ‘yes!’ However, audience members gradually quieted as Pauline’s implications settled into their respective psyches. Soon all were united again, this time in contemplative silence. Before my eyes, attendees transitioned from openly verbal and/or gestural signs of approval to saddened side-to-side head shakes and furious

scribbles of cautionary recognition, implying that perhaps Pauline's reflection had hit close to home.

During this collective moment of silence, I watched Pauline as she firmly (albeit briefly) shut her eyes in a fight to regain enough composure to finish delivering her prepared PowerPoint on how to direct independent film shoots on tight budgets and schedules. She started up again after about ten seconds. With that, the room snapped back to professional engagement, though now with more of a somber feel in the air. Illustrating the precarious and at times affective links that people erect between the production of media and collective identities, the discomfort I sensed in that room only further stoked my interest to study the coinciding structures, ideologies, and embodied repertoires (Auston 2017) that shape practice and personae cultivation amongst New York City-based independent media makers. As evident in the reactions to Pauline's presentation (above) and Juliet's memory (below)—as well as many other events I observed during my fieldwork—Black women filmmakers are hyperaware of the odds against them in a male-dominated white industry where white men retain unquestioned authority.

This chapter attempts to disrupt uncritical attributions of authority by analyzing some of the assumptions and internal mechanics that maintain power relations in spaces of media production, and to a lesser degree distribution⁷. To position authority as a developing and contingent series of on-the-ground negotiations of various material and non-material contributing factors, my guiding research questions included: What does it entail to imagine and create as a Black woman in a society rife with racialized, gendered and classed contentions? In what ways does imagining different possibilities – in terms of

⁷ This dissertation does not go far into questions of audience and distribution. This, however, will certainly be addressed in future book and article projects of mine.

both networking and decisions of content, form and style – influence Black women’s methods of cultivating and exercising authority? How do they advance claims and practices of legitimate/legible authority (and for/to whom)? What confidence- and strategy-building practices do these media makers nurture to advance their claims and deployments of legitimate authority from ‘the margins’?

Embracing Anna Tsing’s suggestion that “margins...are sites from which we see the instability of social categories” (1994:279), this dissertation centers Black women as they work to identify, attune themselves to, and navigate structural biases. On their respective journeys, Black women (a heterogenous group) variably experience and define Black womanhood throughout their pursuits of roles as directors, producers, editors, screenwriters, photographers, social media content creators, and/or distribution strategists among others. Coming from different geographical origins and personal histories of oppressive encounters, the range of Black women I worked with associated media making with different obstacles and outcomes. Creators made choices as variable as who to collaborate with; what learning opportunities (formal schooling, informal apprenticeships, or otherwise) to pursue; what target audience(s) to appeal to most centrally; if and to what degree to highlight overt politics in media works; and whether to foreground artistry, political messages, carefully designed mergers of the two; or other aims entirely. In so doing, each differently planned production details and cast-and-crew assembly in order to give themselves the best chances of achieving their team’s particular aesthetic and audience objectives.

Author, Authorship and Authority

Throughout research, I frequently heard interviewees laud exceptional figures such as Ava DuVernay and Issa Rae, yet at the same time share exasperations with obstacles they faced as both independent media makers and more specifically *as Black women media* makers. Delving into this dis-ease, I found myself asking why the utterance of these distinguished names in particular carried such a common weight, and what it meant that so few women of this demographic affiliation had attained such recognizable heights in media fields. I propose a theoretical intervention into authority, a concept that has been normalized in accordance with mainstream racial and gendered codes. By interrogating otherwise ubiquitous media systems from perspectives of marginalized and disproportionately excluded parties, I seek to highlight how these marginalized agents – and agents, they are! - respond to obstacles and craft alternative expressions of authority able to form, flex and function in the face of dominant contouring (but of course, not absolutely determining) structures.

To examine practices of authority fashioned amidst and in spite of struggle, I question authority as an inherent, singular, permanent, and oft uncritically (until recently⁸) attributed status assumed and therefore reinforced by institutional support and recognition. To do so, I follow it as a process shifting and dependent on people's varying accesses and affinities to, and engagements with, configurations of cultural and economic resources, sociality and community-building. Here, I found it useful to consider how research participants embodied and managed tensions between their professional aspirations and ideologies underlying Western formulations of authority. I decided to put

⁸ Critiques of media authority and celebrity exploded in 2017 through hashtags and political demonstrations as part of the #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite movements among others.

‘authority’ in conversation with sister etymological terms ‘author’ and ‘authorship’ for two main reasons. First, I wanted to track some relevant disciplinary lineages that load authority both conceptually and in practice. Second, I wanted to place this dissertation within discussions concerning what politics, assumptions, and omissions are necessary to spur broader academic interrogations of what authority means, assumes, and entails.

The ‘Author’⁹ concept has shaped literary studies since the 17th century, during which ideals of the Enlightenment period devalued unseen figures of divinity in preference of what was scientific, rational and tangible. As Roland Barthes explains this course of events:

“The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, *it discovered the prestige of the individual*, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person.’ It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author.” (1977 [1967]:143)

This revered status of possessing provable ‘knowledge’ brought with it a need to connect innovations, intellect, prowess, and capability to specific individuals. Foucault agrees, stating in his ‘What is an Author?’ lecture, “the coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the *privileged moment of individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (1977 [1969]:115, emphasis added). In this piece, Foucault explicitly adopts a textualist focus but also makes sure to mention an array of important factors that he would not have time to address at length:

For the purposes of this paper, I will set *aside a sociohistorical analysis of the author as an individual* and the numerous questions that deserve attention in this content; *how the author was individualised in a culture such as ours*; the *status* we have given the author, for instance, when we began our research into *authenticity and attribution*; the systems of *valorization* in which he was included; the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to an author’s

biography; the *conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental critical category of 'the man and his work.'* For the time being, I wish to restrict myself to the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it. (1977 [1969]:115, emphasis added).

Several of the themes listed here will be under consideration in this dissertation, engaging inquiries not only about Author, but authorship and their intersections as well.

Having much to do with who is credited for creativity beyond immediate spaces of production, questions concerning authorship may include, 'Whose names make it onto works distributed to wider publics?' 'What acclaim, expectations, and accountabilities do members of the general public attach to certain authorial names and their film repertoires?' 'What imaginaries and agendas are projected onto people of different demographic backgrounds before words are ever spoken?' These questions position the author as a visibly central element of publicity campaigns designed to spark audience attentiveness and/or investor support throughout a project's development and distribution. However, placing figures on such authorial pedestals enables certain relations of power and privilege as well as exclusion and omission. Moreover, foregrounding an author might do damage in masking behind-the-scenes legwork and collaboration, as it can leave fallacious impressions on the general public that works come out of nowhere like 'magic' (Barthes 1977 [1967]). Such misconceptions neglect if not actively overwrite the immense physical and emotional labors that creators put into crafting works without safety nets of conventional authorial and authoritative legibility (Dyer 1997).

This dissertation centers Black women media makers (authors) working to be acknowledged for their creative and technical prowess on specific projects (authorship), and as figures whose team members – and ideally, the larger public – respect their

managerial styles and follow their procedural directions. To dispel tacit racial and gendered codes embedded in discourses of media leadership, I root interests in who initiates creative and administrative production (Author) and attention to the names that investors presume will bring in the most monetary and audience support as a project's public face (authorship) in a question that precedes both and is devious in its seeming conspicuousness: what constitutes authority? Positioning authority as the foundation upon which the gains of Author and authorship depend, I contend that authority – and the multifarious pathways to achieving it – extend back long before any single text exists in the material world. Rather, authority and its (dis)contents involve the circuitous internal and external negotiations that shape one's self-assurance and strategies for wielding their power (as structure and concept) in fashions that others not only obey but respect as well.

Max Weber's essay "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule" (1958) frames authority as a socially orienting concept that coheres social systems through participants who abide by norms and accept certain individuals as legitimate enforcers of those norms. Interrogating state leadership and governance via three heuristic 'pure' ruling types – legal (written impersonal law), traditional (ancient heritage and lineage) and charismatic (personality and other performative characteristics specific to individuals) – Weber meditates on the different types of authority and to what degree each relies on pre-existing foundations: namely, institutions or traditions.

Alternately entwining aspects of the legal, traditional, and charismatic, this dissertation proceeds with full awareness of how the role that social, political and economic infrastructures often play in delineating expectations of authority and its possessors. However, it does so through the stories of creators with immediate recourse

to institutional support, which perpetuates alternative modes of comprehending and strategizing approaches to obstacles along their journeys of *authority-making*. Therefore, this ethnography examines not only how media makers create works, but also – and perhaps, more primarily – how authority stands as a goal of an ongoing process of acquisition and socialization integral in one’s preparedness to participate in media fields.

Authority and Experience: Introducing Questions of Race, Gender, and Class

Foucault, Barthes, and Weber’s respective theorizations of authority vis-à-vis ‘the productive subject’ discuss power without reference to specific situated individuals. The Author (Foucault), the magician (Barthes), the chief and the leader (Weber) surface as labels devoid of racial, classed, and gendered reference. This may be an outcome of disciplinary conjecture, heuristic assumptions of homogeneity, or presumed to be insignificance and/or impact of these factors on other ‘central’ issues of concern, or as Marx (1983 [1867]) would term this, superstructural. However, scholars have grown increasingly committed to locating their theoretical figures of authority in on-the-ground communities, relations, and struggles. For example, for many media makers I worked with, authority’s situated import began in educations they acquired as students, apprentices, and/or lifelong media consumers about Hollywood’s hegemonic and widely influential imaginaries. Generally aware of the odds against them, many entered media already expecting speedbumps during their journeys to develop, design, and exercise their own technological and occupational authority via non-dominant filming, editing, and distribution options (Halleck and Magnan 2002 [1993]). Merging helpful aspects of mainstream media training¹⁰ with personally valued networking approaches, content

¹⁰ Media masters programs and schooling opportunities often embed mainstream values. (for more, see Chapter 2)

selection, and production techniques, research participants were continually navigating and trying to reimagine ambiguous relationships with traditional media systems.

Akin to the media-as-cultural-mediation turn encouraged by Ginsburg, Terence Turner and others, many anthropologists have critically analyzed mechanics, ideologies and hierarchies that effectively value certain groups as authorities over others. What are epistemological and practical pathways to authority-making, especially by Black women (the doubly marginalized, but historically invisibilized reproducers and backbones of Black society)? Are these pathways unidirectional or multidirectional? Contemporary anthropologists have challenged the centering of the voices, gains and welfare of the socially unmarked and empowered. For instance, John Borneman (2003) uses historical and psychoanalytic reasoning to contemplate the ‘death’ of ‘patricentric’ political authority. While our topics and regions of specialization differ, interests in how claims to subjecthood are made through media forms, as well as in the underlying facets and factors of democratization (as process, not guarantee) link our projects. After stating that “an end is not only always disputed but also must be retroactively claimed– and thereafter *repeatedly proclaimed, in literature, film, historiography, and commemorative events*” (vi, emphasis added), Borneman suggests that “it might be useful to inquire into *the kind of transformations out of which democratizing processes are expected to flourish*” (2003: vii, emphasis added). Both statements prompt further questioning about what is lost, or perhaps intentionally overlooked when complex situations are packaged reductively into democracy discourses meant to inspire hope in periods of socio-political uncertainty.

Embracing authority’s background messiness, John L Jackson Jr.’s notions of ‘racial sincerity’ (2005a & 2005b) and ‘racial paranoia’ (2008) offer insightful means of

analyzing the ubiquitous violence of externally imposed racial categorization in the United States (Omi and Winant 1994). Jackson argues that people have naturalized U.S. Blackness as belonging within pre-determined parameters: certain speech patterns, food preferences, hobbies, and musical affinities. Paradoxically, the very claims to ‘authenticity’ that rooted collective politics in the Black community for decades (i.e. “Black is Beautiful” campaigns of the 1970s) have also ignited internal divisions that register some as ‘Black’ and others as ‘not Black enough’.

However, in a post-Civil Rights United States in which ‘Black’ and ‘White’ are no longer segregated legally, Blackness has the hypothetical (if not always practical) ability to transcend previous boundaries around occupation and behavior (Touré 2011). ‘Racial sincerity’ intervenes in ideologies that structure Blackness through rigid criteria and disable Black people’s ability to take full advantage of newly afforded opportunities. Sincerity grows not from externally posed markers of Blackness, but from earnest and self-servicing performances of self-in-the-world. “Unlike authenticity, sincerity implies that our identities can never be fully known, and there is power in this mutual impenetrability and ambiguity” (Jackson 2005a:38). In this line of thought, what would it require and look like to craft media that do not serve dominant imaginings of ‘authentic’ Blackness, but embrace the wholeness and messiness of an author’s negotiations and visions? As Jackson explains,

When racism was explicit, obvious, and legal, there was little need to be paranoid about it. For the most part, what black saw was what they got. However, after the social changes of the 1960s, African Americans have become more secure in their legal citizenship but concomitantly less sure about other things, such as when they’re being victimized by silent and undeclared racisms. This uncertainty can make people all the more paranoid about the smallest slights, the subtlest glances, the tiniest inconveniences. Any of those can be telltale signs of ‘two-faced

racism,’ of hidden racial animus dressed up to look politically correct, racial conspiracies cloaked in public niceties and social graces. (2008:9)

Taking ‘racial paranoia’ seriously as a phenomenon that exists throughout society and not only at its extremist fringes requires one to ask not only how people and institutions propagate it, and also how individuals internalize and strategically imagine and pursue progress in spite of it. Here, paranoia is not delusion, but a willingness to embody and/or confront realities that seem to consistently suspend Black bodies in contradiction, consternation and suspense. The twoness proposed in W.E.B. DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) reigns still, as Black people now allegedly able to access social and material heights continue to face the additional trials involved in sensing, feeling out, and figuring out how to read the ‘subtler forms of racism’ that permeate their work and broader personal lives.

Thus, in tracking how Black women approach media production communities and institutions in a 21st century concurrently shaped by the Black Lives Matter movement and continuing pronouncements of ‘*Freedom and Justice for All*’ as a constitutional right, I find especial interest in interlocutors’ (un)willingness to let affective realities – whether experienced overtly or covertly in ‘the smallest slights, the subtlest glances, the tiniest inconveniences’ – inform their work relationships and processes. How and for what purposes did many research participants, already double marginalized by larger society, grow mindsets and public personae able to balance technical prowess and the potential vulnerabilities of socio-affective insight (Behar 1996)?

Chiefly, this dissertation argues that aspirants to authority need not flee from personal background, experience, or reasoning while creating cultural artefacts. Most women I worked with did not even consider self-erasure, but actively worked to integrate

their technological skills and their intimate knowledge of and attunements to dominant social dynamics (whether they sought goals of assimilation, challenge, or idealized transcendence). When shaped by social, ideological and economic limits statistically associable with being ‘Black’ and ‘woman’ (Beal 1970, Collins 2000, King 1988), authority must be rethought in terms not only of its criteria but also its variant expressions across times, spaces, and audiences. Here, I echo Black feminist calls to scrutinize structure as means to promote a nuanced paradigm shift that not only unveils but also fathoms the reimagining of current premises and arrangements of societal power, however tacit (Pierre 2002, McClaurin 2001, Christian 1988). As numerous scholars¹¹ have argued, cultural production is not distinct from social realities, but reflective of, active in, and co-constitutive of them. Bringing the conversation full-circle, David MacDougall’s *On the Corporeal Image* (2005) reunites bodies and the image not in the romanticized Author figure (Foucault 1977 [1969]) but through the labors, dreams, and compromises of media makers who – as human beings with their own histories and motives – will inflects frames, camera angles, editing, or other details they supervise.

Methodologically, I investigated modes of authority contrived, morphed, and disputed outside of white male bodies by interviewing and/or shadowing over forty Black women (and a few nonbinary persons in shared social and professional networks) building up professional personae and portfolios to prepare for media production’s many technical, social, and emotional labors over the course of fourteen months. Each woman harbored psychologies, approaches and self-presentations influenced by conservative

¹¹ Among scholars of mention are Irma McClaurin (2001), Kamari Clarke (2014), John Jackson (2008, 2005a& 2005b), Bianca C. Williams (2018), bell hooks (1992), Stuart Hall (1997), Ulla Berg (2015), Louisa Schein (2002), Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa (2015)

notions of who ‘should’ be in charge of public domains: namely, white men. Whether individual creators explicitly saw themselves as being in conversation with normative whiteness and/or masculinist discourses, larger structural realities affected the chances of and environment within which most Black women strove to produce works. Overall, this chapter lays out the hierarchical terrain traversed by nondominant media makers not only to visibilize but also to foreground these creators’ visions of and for change.

“Under My Watch”: Clashing Perceptions of Authority

In *Selections from The Prison Notebooks* (1989 [1971]), Antonio Gramsci introduces the term ‘hegemony’ in vital relation to resistance and rupture. While prevailing social, political, and economic structures typically favor some groups’ prosperity at the expense of others (through discourse, ideology, material distribution, etc.), their apparent ‘stability’ is constantly threatened by the potential and existence of voices that desire something else. Framing the media makers with whom I worked as embodiments of that potential and existence, I refer again to the complex infrastructural and attitudinal footwork that they use to decode conflicting messages of opportunity and inequity. As Jackson says of race’s acutely felt elusiveness in the 21st-century U.S.,

“The point isn’t that race is less important now than it was before. It’s just more schizophrenic, more paradoxical. We continue to commit to its social significance on many levels, but we seem to disavow that commitment at one and the same time. Race is real but it isn’t. It has value, but it doesn’t. It explains social difference, but it couldn’t possibly. This kind of racial doublethink drives us all crazy, make us so suspicious of one another, and fans the flames of racial paranoia. Nothing is innocent, and one bumps into conspirators everywhere.” (2008:11)

Alert to the embedded paranoid sensitivities of U.S. Black womanhood, I argue that numerous epistemologies over time and space have intersected, intensified, and clashed with one another to de-value the notion of Black women as agents, let alone

leaders in image production. For one, U.S. socialization practices and dominant media environments reproduce racial hierarchies that position whiteness as superior. Centuries after slavery's official eradication, the ideological schism between non-whiteness and technology capacity continue to inflect national consciousness. Particularly in U.S. media, discourses have framed racially marked bodies as incapable, inadequate and lacking, if not completely absent from technological operations (Jackson 2008, Hobson 2008, Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 2000, Lutz and Collins 1991).

Of significant note, these creators' personally tailored authoritative practices were not natal or immediately sophisticated, nor were they simply accepted by others without friction or contestation. Realistically, the status quo survives through a web of intertwining systems, their roots deeply implanted in society's social, economic, political and cultural fabrics (Gramsci 1989 [1971]). Hence, many media makers I met recalled instances in which they felt that others were reading them as radical for their mere presence, which not only exposed but also confronted the context's tacit cultural assumptions and dynamics. Therefore, authority turns out to be a process not only of acquiring familiarity with dominant occupational and personal expectations, but also with actually trying out and finessing one's approaches to occupying power positions, and understanding terms of and miscommunications in work relationships.

For example, four months into my research period, I conducted an interview with Juliet for the first time. Juliet was a renowned distribution strategist in independent media circuits principally based in New York at the time. We sat on a bench along Brooklyn's Eastern Parkway to take in the sunshine as Juliet recalled her first foray into media making. This opportunity challenged me to analyze how Juliet-of-today remembered her

younger self, who was much greener to the racial politics of media institutions¹². Juliet spent her earliest years in the Northeastern United States before moving to Anchorage, Alaska with her father to care for an ill family member. In both places, Juliet had attended ‘largely white schools’ (in her words) and came to think of race more subtly than she had since grown accustomed to in her current majority-Black neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. “I grew up in New England in Connecticut. Where I grew up...there were very few people of color, very few black people in my classes and everything. So, when I moved to Alaska, it wasn’t like a shock that I was one of two.” For Juliet, gaps between her trust in her own work ethic and output, and her awareness of imaginaries that others could and would project onto her grew clearer throughout her five-year stint in college radio work. Juliet’s voice grew brasher and more adamant as she recollected the tensions that led to her eventual departure from that job:

It was a largely volunteer run organization...maybe not even eighteen [full-time] staff [members]. A small amount of staff, maybe 10. I can’t remember. But there was basically a mutiny against me because I put them through all these programming changes where you couldn’t just do whatever you wanted. I was trying to build a listenership, a listener base for the station by shifting the programming a bit, professionalizing a bit, and doing a little bit more, just kinda make it into a real station. And there were all sorts of politics going on in the background that I won’t get into but they made me reapply for my job and the last two or three station managers did not have to apply for their jobs if they wanted them...For me, I wouldn’t say it was a racial thing but I would say that [3 second pause] you know, I don’t know what I would say.

I have since interpreted Juliet’s backtrack- her noticeably lengthy pause followed by ‘I don’t know what I would say’ - as her cautious attempt to articulate racism’s stealthy and elusive qualities in the post-Civil Rights United States (Omi and Winant 1994). At

¹² As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps describe this task, “Personal narrative is a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present and as yet unrealized experience” (2001: 2).

first, Juliet swiftly dismissed the idea that her opponent had racial motivations. However, she stopped upon realizing that she could not confirm absolutely that their mistreatment of her was not inflected by race, or gender for that matter. At the juncture of ‘racial paranoia’ (Jackson 2008) and ‘microaggression’ (Sue 2010), such moves made by more socially privileged people towards their less privileged counterparts carry implicit meanings that can injure the latter immediately as well as over time—as seemed to resurface for Juliet during this chat.

As the receiving party in this case, Juliet retrospectively tried to digest and interpret that former life moment. As the first woman to hold that particular station manager position, Juliet’s visual presence and brazen audacity to shake up operations-as-usual flustered those who eventually participated in what she construed as ‘the mutiny’ against her. I read her hesitant inclination to reject the incident’s possibly racist undertones outright as a hint at her simultaneous – and at times conflicting – belief in her own hard work and professional merit, and acceptance of the reality that others could and would subvert her image based on reasons and interpretations that were out of her control. Juliet continued:

What I would say is that I was the one- I’m not gonna take credit for everything that happened at the station...[but] the prior leadership had been trying for years to get a power increase and didn’t and it happened under my watch. The prior leadership had been trying to professionalize the station and start doing news and it didn’t happen but it happened under my watch. And so you know, I was building upon things that were already in the works but I actually executed them and made it happen...I had a sense back then, I think, of what the community-- of understanding your community, understanding how to program, understanding content for your community, bringing them into the process but the small group of people who were part of the volunteer base at my station-- half of them, they were largely young white men, mutinied and were pissed off...They complained to the board and I had to be forced to apply for my job again. And people thought I was just gonna do it, they were like oh she’ll just apply or whatever, and I didn’t!

Privy to a protocol that existed at the radio station before her arrival, Juliet huffed out this recollection with aggravation. She believed that she had accomplished much in the way of ‘understanding’ consumers’ needs, ‘professionalizing’ the station, and ‘executing’ what her predecessors had only managed to plan. ‘Under her watch,’ in Juliet’s words, things got done. However, all the physical and mental energies she had exerted to guide the organization towards a more reputable and stable future had been tossed insultingly by the wayside when her bosses asked her to reapply for the job. She knew that none of her recent predecessors had had to go through this process in order to renew their terms. It appeared that Juliet had built up her confidence and exercised authority on fundamentally shaky ground reliant on people with little loyalty to her. As per her analysis, they regularly tried to undermine her position on the institutional ladder. Furthermore, in making what Juliet perceived to be an unreasonable reapplication request, her bosses thought she would just shrink down from being an authoritative subject to an obedient one. However, she said snarkily, they had another thing coming:

J: I didn’t apply for the job. I was like, ‘Fuck y’all’! You don’t appreciate what I’ve done, and we were also in the middle of doing a license renewal which is a big deal. To do a license renewal, you have to go through all this paperwork and process and you know, applying to the government to maintain your license. A lot of these community radio stations don’t do what you’re supposed to do to apply again but I did, and it was the first license renewal the station had ever had. It was less than seven years old. So, it happened every seven years, so I was the first person to go through the process and actually got it renewed and upped their power.... So, I was like nah, y’all can have this. I’m leaving.

Me: Did they have a goodbye cake cutting? (asked half curious, half in jest)

J: Oh yeah, they did! They were freaking out. They just thought I was gonna stay. I was like No, *nuh uhh* [a sound of negation]. *I’m the wrong Negro*. You don’t know. You know, I wasn’t saying that, but in my mind, I was thinking like, ‘What?’

Juliet’s running description of this debacle seethed with dual tensions. One named fractures and frustrations that had bubbled beneath her authoritative displays throughout

her tenure at that radio station over so many years. The other gave the situation a second life as Juliet recounted anew that sly, recalcitrant insurgence. Although the niceties of a cordial sendoff did take place in the form of a cake-cutting sendoff, Juliet's increasing recognition of her contributions not just as a talented radio station manager, but as an ambitious Black woman *and* radio station manager undervalued in what she experienced as a space of white-centric anxiety, showed through in her eventual, real-time declaration: 'I'm the wrong Negro.' In mentioning the licensing application that she submitted to rectify the station's less than official accreditation status, Juliet was also gesturing towards the great lengths to which Black people often had to go in occupational contexts in order to have even a chance at being seen as professionals on par with their white associates¹³, even if such strategies were ironically received as punishable transgressions by those same counterparts. As conveyed in Juliet's comments on Alaska's whiteness and the group of 'largely young white men' who rallied to thwart her, race likely did come into play for this non-white, non-male person in a position of media power. Juliet had not only dared to re-shape organizational proceedings, but had realized goals unmet by 'prior leadership.'

¹³ Speaking to the racialized limits of fame, comedian and Hollywood actor Chris Rock asserted the following in his 2008 stand-up special *Kill the Messenger*: "I live in a place called Alpine, New Jersey. My house costs *millions* of dollars...In my neighborhood, there are four black people. Hundreds of houses, four black people. Who are these black people? Well, there's me, Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z and Eddie Murphy. Only black people in the *whole* neighborhood. So, let's break it down: me, I'm a decent comedian, I'm a'ight. Mary J. Blige, one of the greatest R&B singers to ever walk the Earth. Jay-Z, one of the greatest rappers to ever live. Eddie Murphy, one of the funniest actors to ever, ever do it. Do you know what the white man who lives next door to me does for a living? He's a fucking *dentist*. He ain't the *best dentist in the world*, he ain't going to the dental hall of fame, he don't get plaques for getting rid of plaque. He's just a yank-your-tooth-out dentist. See, the black man gotta fly to get to somethin' the white man can walk to."

In terms of macro-structural forces, Juliet's disagreement with her rebellious subordinates unveiled cracks in alluring post-millennium democratic media discourses that proclaimed meritocratic reward systems void of racial gender or other categorical forms of bias. Richard Dyer addresses such double standards of authority: "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that- they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interest of a race" (2005:10). Dyer then dives into the upsetting implication of such structures: "The assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture" (2005:10). Positioned at such conflicting interface, Juliet interpreted these successive challenges to her authority as coalescing in a functionally chaotic, two-faced storm of conflicting work philosophies, commitment levels, racial and gendered identifications, and invested egos.

As Juliet's account illustrates, conventional notions of what conventionally qualifies as professional contribution had to morph and expand to accommodate and acknowledge her capacity for legitimate authoritative leadership. Giving me a glimpse into her self-fashioning mode, Juliet performed strength during our interview by prioritizing her competence, rebuffing perceived mistreatment, and then moving on to other matters that immediately re-grounded her story not in impasse or betrayal but in personal determination and triumph. Specifically, she went on to name a plethora of jobs she held after the radio job with other independent media organizations or projects. She remembered some warmly as complementary to her skill sets and outgoing personality, and others less fondly but with lessons learned. Juliet— and many other creators

navigating media's power structures—had to juggle other people's assumptions of 'Blackness' and 'womanhood,' which often collapsed myth¹⁴ and reality (Collins 2000). Studying authority as concept and practice reveals much about how people attribute meaning not only in media environments, but society at large (Hall 1997, Ginsburg 1994, Turner 1992).

CONTEXUTALIZING FIELDWORK

During my main fieldwork period (September 2015 to November 2016), the U.S. was in a major state of flux. Conflicts between hopeful democratic ideologies and discriminatory on-the-ground practices shaped the attitudes not only of marginalized media creators I worked with, but of the larger body politic. In this 'land of opportunity,' civilians were openly condemning manipulative state leaders and neoliberal logics they used to scapegoat that stubborn elite's desperately clinging power via defaults to religious and moral conservatism and highly illusory and irresponsible equality discourses (i.e. colorblindness, gender equity, and so on). Among milestones of this period were the explosion of Black Lives Matter protests (after Michael Brown's 2014 killing), the end of Obama's two-term presidency, and at-times crass face-offs between controversial media personality and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, and first female major-party presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. In a variety of forms including street marches and sit-ins, vibrant news panel discussions, and celebrities' politicizing their televised acceptance speeches during awards shows, people were denouncing societal injustices that ran the gamut: from inequitable housing and employment rates, to barriers to

¹⁴ Popular myths of Black womanhood, spurring from antebellum America, marked them as unjustifiable – if not essentially – angry, hypersexual and irrational beings incapable of self-leadership or self-determination. (see Cooper 2018, Riggs 1986)

political representation, to federal intrusion into women's say about their bodies vis-a-vis reproductive rights, to gendered salary gaps, to disproportionately high homicide rates perpetrated against people of color by law enforcement.

Against the turbulent national context described above, I spent fourteen months in independent media-oriented spaces across New York City, taking especial interest in prospects and values that contemporary self-identified Black women media makers imagined, associated with, and/or built across the various stages of media production and distribution. My mixed-methods research combined participant observation; library and archival research; content, discourse, narrative, and performance analysis (Bernard 2006:415-418); and semi-structured interviews. Under the expansive umbrella of 'participant observation,' I list service as a Production Assistant on student- and professional-grade independent film shoots, volunteer work with film festival organizing committees, meet-and-greet networking sessions, observations of casting sessions and editing rooms, and attendance at film festivals, lectures, and workshops on traditional aspects of production and distribution as well as emergent technologies (i.e. social media, virtual reality). To collect assorted viewpoints, I interviewed more than forty people- most of them Black women, along with Black nonbinary people and other women of color- working across production and distribution fields of photography, film, television and/or social media. To contextualize participants' endeavors in broader histories of media and national politics, I also coded willing participants' screenplays, and conducted two weeks of research reading printed (legal documents, films, flyers, promotional pamphlets and so on) and transcribing audio-visual materials housed in Indiana University-Bloomington's *Black Film Center/Archive*.

Why New York City?

By way of New York City's developed – albeit subject to constant partial shutdowns and re-routing – subway system, bus lines and Uber availability, traveling between boroughs was common to the point of being a ubiquitous part of New York City living. Traveling between screening venues, between film shoots, and between boroughs let me physically run around as the women I worked with did, thereby experiencing jumps between different local infrastructures and regional attitudes as well as the discourses, interpersonal networks, and events that connected them. Although Hollywood has been a beacon for hopeful U.S.-based media anthropologists, and Black women are undoubtedly creating media across the nation as well as the world, I chose to base my research amid New York City's diverse cosmopolitanism for a number of reasons.

Firstly, I initially thought to conduct fieldwork in New York City to disrupt common cultural discourses that frame Hollywood as the only reputable U.S. film production hub. Based in that default city, Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* analogizes traditional anthropological frameworks of magic, taboo, and divination to Hollywood's daily operations (1950:124). Such studies of Hollywood are rare because industry egos compel 'insiders' to maintain established boundaries and abide by 'hire our own' cultures (Ortner 2010). Not only do vertical studio structures impede ethnographer access, but their internal rules have also reduced Black women's likelihoods of 'making it'¹⁵– as argued in the 2003 documentary *Sisters in Cinema* directed by director and media non-profit leader Yvonne Welbon. Alternatively, New

¹⁵ By 'make it,' I mean they acquire steady work that earns one notable monetary earnings as well as celebrity and recognition of talent. Powdermaker's 1950 ethnography *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* similarly analyzes Hollywood as an insular culture where people tend to forge connections and work repeatedly with one another, making it difficult for others to enter.

York City houses prominent but comparatively decentralized mainstream and independent film infrastructures. Its municipal government's "Made in NYC" Film Initiative has further incentivized local production by making producers who film episodic series and independent shorts and/or features within city limits eligible for tax bonuses¹⁶. Participants in this study mostly pursued independent media projects, even if they edged occasionally into commercial work vis-a-vis mainstream careers or short-term job contracts to support the former and life's necessities financially. New York City is even more of a prime research location for my specific interests in independent media.

Second, New York City is an optimal location to study media training and institutional cultures. Home to many film schools and training programs, many New York City graduates have forged careers, founded film festivals, and/or hosted smaller-scale events such as community screenings and events. From more widely acclaimed events such as *Tribeca Film Festival* to more niche programs such as the *African Diaspora International Film Festival* to locally contrived occasions such as the *Harlem Film Festival*, chances to show off and stir up interest in filmmakers' work, methods, and obstacles are practically countless across the city's five boroughs.

Thirdly, New York City has a reputation—real or fantastical—for acceptance and opportunity. Popular representations of the urban magnet flout financial promise and openness to a variety of belief systems and modes of creative expression. In film and television, New York City emblemizes difference. In fact, I should say that I conducted this research across New York City rather than in it, as it is a very culturally and

¹⁶ For more information on NY Production incentive programs, see <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/mome/resources/ny-state-tax-credit.page> and <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/mome/resources/discount-card.page>

economically heterogeneous urban space. Composed of five boroughs, New York City stretches over 302 square miles as a developed cosmopolitan hub and home to various cultural scenes. With successive waves of migration, flight and gentrification, demographic clustering and collective memory fostered in different parts of the city spur particular borough allegiances and vibes. Broadening the lens, New York City can be called a ‘global city’ and also a ‘media city’ (McQuire 2008). As such, there is great potential to meet people of various international origins, and travelers visiting from abroad. Busy and densely populated, these characteristics have encouraged many people who feel stifled or stuck to pack up and move there in order to network, encounter other cultural norms, and develop careers, even when faced with the city’s harsh realities of disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic inequality.

Geographic and Internal Diversity of ‘Blackness’

Discourses of acceptance as above attract a myriad of transplants, immigrants, and African-descended peoples to the city as well. New York City is a place where domestic and international Black locals, tourists, visitors, and newcomers come to visit if not live indefinitely, stirring potential for rich conversations—and conflicts—about and over Blackness. As David Scott posits, “Contention presupposes that there is something held in common- a way of life, a god, a traumatic origin, a distinctive history, a unique language- but this common possession (in Michael Walzer’s phrase) does not presuppose agreement, a uniformity of perspective, an ultimate consensus” (2013:3). Expressions and experiences of Blackness will differ to a degree between residents of Harlem, New York and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and between Black Americans, Caribbeans, Africans, and Dominicans. For instance, when people with different heritages and geographic

places of origin would come together at film lectures or festivals, mentions of ‘the Black struggle’ spurred intense, multifaceted debate. Blackness (Scott 2013, Hall 1996), and thus Black film (Cripps 1993, Lott 1991) are phenomena under persistent discussion. What are their criteria? Who or what qualifies as belonging to these categories and on what grounds? What histories, values, and assumptions underpin different people’s relationships to Blackness? Such assemblages make for fascinating conversations about people’s different transnational affiliations with, or rejections of ‘Black’ as a personal identifier and what such self-positioning might mean for new productive socio-cultural and geo-political possibilities.

In an interview, self-proclaimed Black woman, activist, and first-time documentary director who I call Helen communicated pride and empowerment- not frustration—regarding Blackness’ polysemy:

H: “Blackness is...it’s a social status, it’s a set of cultural norms, it’s a very very insufficient label for a very broad group of people. Um it’s a source of pride, it is- yeah

Me: “And what do you mean by that?”

H: “I think it’s a census term, description of lineage but I think it’s also a copout from using the word that has all the connotations of history and racial relationships.”

Notably, my participant recruitment style took W.E.B. Du Bois’s (1903) ‘double consciousness’ into consideration. Black communities have been contrasted and otherwise separated from the broader ‘America’, prompting Black individuals to cultivate strategies for living in two or more social realms. Despite the fact that the country was built on the labor of Black bodies and labor forces reproduced by Black women, the latter are frequently coerced to straddle discourse and action, word and deed, causing physical

and psychological harm to many. The effect only grows more acute as the number of categories that one claims and/or is associated with climbs, as with persons jointly embodying Blackness and womanhood.

While this research design intentionally centered self-identified New York-based Black women media makers' exchanges, reflections, and professional strategies, it never sought to do so at the expense or exclusion of persons from other backgrounds or social categories. However, by focusing on Black women's stories and strategies, it did work to stress the heterogeneity amongst those who identify as Black women and to center their authoritative prospects, challenges, and decisions as they relate to their colleagues. I have also appended the qualifier, 'self-identified'¹⁷ to indicate my conscious effort to consider participants' personal associations with, hesitations around, or refusals of raced, gendered and other terminologies. I learned people's identifiers via their unsolicited announcement of preferred or disliked labels in public forums such as discussion panels or film festivals, or during dialogic processes of reflection that occurred in one-on-one interview settings. For some, self-identification happened as a strategic and even polemical proclamation made during question-and-answer sessions. For others, it served to engage audiences as observers and possible co-conspirators in social justice efforts. Alternately, many approached it less radically, as means to encourage collective consciousness and support. For others still, self-identification was a gradual and reluctant process honed whilst talking me through childhood taunts and later trials and triumphs

¹⁷ I met some people at Black women's film-specific events and discovered in later interviews that they did not identify as women, but gender non-conforming. When I cite their stories, I explicitly include their qualifiers so as not to reduce, collapse or make assumptions about their media field experiences. I hope to give this additional lens of gendered consideration more attention- which it rightly deserves- in future work.

experienced at volatile intersections of racial and gender ideologies, personal practice, and cultural expectation.

Just as when I use the term ‘Black,’ I do not intend to lump together all ‘Black women’ who so identify as if they were a homogenous and monolithic group. In fact, several creators I met viewed this label to be detrimental. However, I utilize vernacular categories because many more of the people I worked with found community and forged collaborative projects through acts and/or initiatives spurred in racial solidarity. In such cases, cultural categories were not necessarily constraining, but can serve as political platforms through which marginalized groups demand recognition or cultivate communal pride. As Terence Turner states,

I would suggest that approaching the study of cultural categories in this way can be a salutary corrective to the historic bias of the discipline, inherited from both Durkheimian and Anglo American positivism, towards conceiving of categories only in the static form of classification or collective representations, and not in the active form of schemas for producing classes or representations. (1992:16)

Here, Turner presents cultural categories not as inherent indication of decontextualized and timeless stasis, but rather as indication of a group’s recognition and strategically aware navigation of environments in which they are not generally in socio-political power positions. This dissertation speaks, albeit in a different context, to the intimate and self-reflexive processes through which members of marginalized groups *self-objectify* (Turner 1992), or work to position and represent themselves in particular ways both to their own identified communities and to larger publics. Other scholars have discussed this prospect of assuming labels for particular contexts and reasons. Gayatri Spivak acknowledges “a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak 1996 [1985]:214) as one means through which minority groups

assert political presence and worth, and Suzanne Oboler (1992) names ‘the politics of labeling’ to describe a similar phenomenon in Latinx communities concerning *Latinidad*. Whether they are applying to diversity grant funding, inspiring pride and self-love, positioning themselves as part of longer familial histories and/or communities, reckoning with national and/or international politics, associating with familial lineages, or performing other work, people’s modes of (dis)identifying with Blackness can shift. For example, in response to my asking, “What does Blackness mean to you?” Helen continued on from the above quote without significant pause:

I was writing this poem called ‘we are the no name people’ because I think that right now, and in the past century, *‘Black’ has been the name that we’ve clung to*. But over the course of history in this country, we’ve always been something else, always something else, always some people attempting to solve the problem of what’s happening to us by relabeling us and *the truth of the matter is that none of these words encompass who we are, and I think we all know that in our heart of hearts*. I think even those of us who are most proud of being black know that. I mean, black is a color at the end of the day and it doesn’t even describe our skin tone really. So... it’s very limited and so folks identify differently. Some folks prefer African-American--sometimes I switch it up depending on who I’m talking to and, you know, *I look at Blackness in a positive light and it’s something that I wanna share with people I trust and people who I’m comfortable with* but if I need to have a formal conversation with someone I’m not going to engage them on a cultural and spiritual level that I feel like Blackness exists on so I might say African-American or say people of color. So, for me it depends But I think everyone has their own personal definition of it. (2015 Interview)

Helen’s twisting and impassioned description of Blackness demonstrates the term’s complexities on both structural and personal levels. She embraced ‘Blackness’ not because she believes in some essential trait or bond, but because the term Black is historically loaded not only as a weapon of the Euro-American elite, but also as a badge of courage and community-building often taken up by those co-identified as ‘Black.’

Movement as Method

I, along with my advisor, thought long and hard about the implications and types of questions that different methodological formats would best facilitate. While immersion at one institution or LLC¹⁸ could facilitate a headfirst dive into the inner workings and interconnected elements of one establishment or community, I sensed that this approach would also be limiting, as it would be largely shaped by that entity's stated principles and relations, which might not translate to other organizations.

To investigate the flexibility with which Black women media makers deliberated positive and negative expectations of people they encountered, I shift focus between individuals and/or film collectives. While this research design did not give me an institutional home, it enabled me to involve various people: one participant could be an established mentor-like figure while another could be a lost film school graduate just as worthy and deserving of scholarly attention. In addition to the 'follow the person' methodology that Bianca C. Williams used to study Black women's transnational pursuits of happiness and George Marcus's "valorization of methodological bricolage and spectacular performance" vis-à-vis multi-sited research (2012:18), I was inspired by two other methodological approaches. Moving from a multisited to '*siteless*' conception of methods, Louisa Schein's 'itinerant ethnography' (2002) recognizes "the deterritorialized character of the cultural politics that are under examination," such as research objects that are either impermanent or mobile. Similarly, Berg's 'ambulant ethnography' expands ethnography's capacities to analyze migration as an experiences and process that assumes movement. As she explains, "the project's multisitedness did not emerge as an attempt at

¹⁸ The *LLC*, or limited liability company, is a type of business organization under which many independent artists create economic titles and insurance support structures.

methodological virtue per se; rather, it was the empirical realities of the subjects' lives that motivated the choice of various ethnographic sites and made the project 'multisited'" (2015:30).

Recruitment of Research Participants

I recruited participants in numerous ways. For one, I reconnected with associates from a previous internship that I had with the *Point-of-View* (P.O.V.) documentary programming series in New York City. During an internship from May 2012 through August 2012, I had begun to establish contacts within the city's Black independent film community. At meet-and-greets hosted by P.O.V., I had received requests from some people wanting to be included in my then-upcoming graduate research. Upon moving to New York for fieldwork, I strengthened and expanded my network through snowball recruitment (Bernard 2006:187-194). Quite effective, this method involved asking current participants if they had any friends and/or colleagues who might have interest in joining my research as well. Depending on specifics of each encounter, I either jotted down the contact's information to send them an e-mail with a project description and invitation to participate later, or asked the initial contact person to reach out to their friend on my behalf with a brief project summary and my contact information.

I also met potential research participants at media event receptions and other mingling sessions arranged through networking websites such as *meetup.com*. Some events were invitation-only (so my presence was due to someone else's invite, or their kindly bringing me along as their guest). Others were advertised and open to the public, affording me opportunities to practice 'interface ethnography' in organized spaces in which film teams or institutional representatives directly met, or 'interfaced' with, the

public (Ortner 2010:213). I noticed that both of these assembly types seemed to attract relatively low numbers of Black women unless publicity targeted them specifically. Sometimes a cross-room nod at more general gatherings inspired other Black women attendees to walk up to me to introduce themselves and kick off a discussion about our experiences of NYC's media-making climate as Black women. Perhaps they believed we could bond over shared frustrations with media production's climates. As Sara Ahmed wrote, "Whiteness can be a situation we have or are in; when we can name that situation (and even make jokes about it), we recognize each other as strangers to the institution and find in that estrangement a bond" (2012:5).

I attended, schmoozed at, and scheduled future meetings with potential participants during film festivals whose titles and/or application guidelines named 'Blackness,' 'Africa and the African Diaspora', and/or variations on 'Woman' as theme. Along similar lines, I went to grassroots community screenings and other programming hosted by Black women-led film collectives. There, I introduced myself to contributing panelists and organizers, and also to people attending in search of community, commiseration, networking, and economic and/or ideological support.

Cognizant of ongoing disparities in U.S. media fields, several participants described consistent struggles of trying to construct operable project casts, crews, budgets, and reputations. Some blamed ideologies that thought Black women were only capable of producing works specifically concerned with race, gender, 'diversity' or other such qualifiers. In part responding to lasting issues of media inequity and invisibility, and in part celebrating cultural and ethnic values resistant to assimilationist standards, several interviewees refuted the implication that they worked on the 'fringe' of Hollywood

production culture. Instead, they ‘made their own’ in various capacities. To do so, I grounded my study in the epistemological and ontological jumble of collaborations and conflicts that characterized media-making contexts *as* Black women experienced, perceived, and questioned them.

While most key informants were under forty years of age, participants in this study (as interviewees and/or subjects of observation) ranged in age from twenty years old to upwards of sixty to facilitate ‘coming of age’ and intergenerational analysis as well (Chapters 2 & 5). Among those who took part in my study were self-proclaimed film students, non-profit employees, documentarians and narrative filmmakers, editors, writers, animators, photographers, cinematographers, grant writers, on-line ‘content creators,’ and distribution strategists. Also, to get a glimpse into research participants’ relations with co-workers from similar and different backgrounds, I spoke with cast, crew, and other collaborative personnel¹⁹.

Regarding ethnographic authority (Clifford and Marcus 1986), Ginsburg promotes studies that consider anthropologists—particularly ethnographic filmmakers—to be one of several media types, as opposed to innately superior and more accurate media forms that need not be in conversation with them. Agreeing with her logic, I focused—during research as well as analysis—on positioning myself as a knowledge producer within broader media production contexts that not only include but are often led by other producers. Moreover, I understood my interlocutors as co-producers of knowledge, and

¹⁹ In fact, in the earliest, most expansive phases of this research, I also encountered other women of color directors (Indian, Latina, Taiwanese) and Black queer creators. However, for lack of space to do these groups justice in addition to an engaged study of Black women creators, I held my concentration on Black women, though I hope and am determined to engage more with creators of other racialized and/or gendered affiliations in future works.

our journeys as empathetic in their work to access, assess and strategically traverse socially, economically and demographically uneven institutional cultures.

Along similar lines of consideration, I have chosen to refer to all interlocutors via pseudonyms. While a few did mention that they would not mind my using their real names, I decided that the critical openness with which many people approached and/or came to treat interviews had the potential of coming back to deter their growth in mainstream career lines or funding opportunities.²⁰

Changes in Interview Design

As authority became a more prominent research theme, I adjusted my research model to prioritize participants' ways of representing and recollecting their experiences, especially in interview contexts. In fast-paced contexts of researching independent media in real time, I was constantly modifying my project, fitting for the 'ambulant' (Berg 2015) 'get up and go' 'hurry up and wait' media production cultures I studied in which things tended to happen and/or shift quickly.

For instance, growing more aware of the biographical templates that interviewees—who were also public figures—prepared and memorized for press interviews prompted me to alter my approach for engaging them. I switched from a semi-structured interview style with pre-written questions to an informal conversation style guided by researched (but not determining) bullet points of publicly available biographical and career information. I also asked interviewees to choose where interviews would take place, which placed their convenience first. This not only demonstrated my familiarity

²⁰ During consent procedures, I told interviewees that their status as public figures with digital footprints and such disallowed my guarantee of confidentiality. However, I told all I would do my best to conceal their identities.

with their work, but also accommodated people's schedules and organically meandering pathways of career trajectory recollection. This distinguished the shallow and rehearsed talking points and comportment rhythms of press interviews from interlocutors' candid dives into personal backgrounds, fears, and aims (a shift which I felt honored to witness and be part).

Through successive interactions, I detected patterns and themes, focusing my inquiries accordingly. One question that underwent complete overhaul was "What are your favorite kinds of storylines or genres in film?" What I thought was a promising icebreaker turned out to privilege a somewhat outdated take on media categories. Current creators – especially younger ones – looked at me befuddled when I asked the question, as it did not make space for plots and aesthetics that were becoming increasingly experimental and untethered to traditional genre conventions. Pauline (Chapter 4) began her career in documentary work but had transitioned into narrative film inspired by nonfiction material. During a separate post-screening Q&A, a Latina film director described her film as hybrid 'docu-narrative' that combined archival material, footage from interviews with real-life subjects, and fictional plot points into a coherent storyline that she hoped would better capture and hold millennials' attention²¹.

Another question I adapted was "What criteria do you use to deem a product successful?" Although the question appeared obvious to me, it confused several interviewees. The term 'success' - though technically applicable - was not a common way of thinking about what I was trying to address, as guidelines and motivations for

²¹ Older generations of media makers and larger societal narratives often accuse millennials of being a population plagued with short attention spans and detachment issues owing to their digitally immersive upbringings.

independent media production vary much more widely than box office earnings, fame, and industry awards. With studio or other unitary large-scale financial investments come ties, interests, and variant levels of ordered censorship. Hollywood jobs and economic resource pools are also tight-knit, typically requiring agent referrals or other network connections to open up the possibility of ‘outsiders’ entering. Alternately, independent film projects are commonly funded not by exclusive studio contracts (and corporate tethers thereby attached) but through a hodgepodge of sources (grants, fellowships, jobs, institutional support, crowdfunding²², private investors and donors, etc.). Such diverse sourcing styles and work amid decentralized, self-wrought power networks generally permit independent creators to be quicker as well as more transparent and forthcoming about how their embodied knowledges and/or socio-political intentions imprint into their production processes and/or distribution campaigns.

In spaces and communities crafted more to fit their needs, most independent directors I met felt a sense of expressive freedom (though definitely tempered by realities of funding applications and not-always-reliable questions of audience interest) in choosing themes, storylines, and potential points of socio-political inquiry they could address vis-a-vis their works²³. The communities I refer to here include not only one’s educational tutelage and/or associations but also contacts encountered at film festivals,

²² Crowdfunding is the process by which people use social media to advertise a project, build audiences, and ask for production support via monetary donation.

²³ Admittedly, freedom remains a limited concept. For instance, media makers perceived a greater sense of freedom to cast non-white and non-male persons, or focus on explicitly social or political issues should they desire. However, this ‘freedom’ was still corralled by societal expectations that surround them as Black people. For example, longtime producer Gretchen has wanted to direct a documentary on mid-20th century Black yogis for years but been advised against it time and time again by acquaintances and investors alike for not seeming like a universally appealing or legible subject (more in Chapter 2)

community screenings, museum exhibits, and other professionally relevant venues. In terms of physical mobility and potential access to various people and projects, New York City was an optimal site for this ethnographic study on Black women pursuing authoritative positions convinced that success however was possible if one put enough extensive intentional labor into resource-, relationship-, and professional personae-building. As Sherry Ortner contrasts mainstream and independent media:

Where studio films are in the business of “entertainment,” independent films often set out to challenge their viewers with relatively difficult subject matter or techniques or both; where Hollywood films generally eschew taking sides on political issues, independent films are often explicitly political and critical; where Hollywood films are in the business of fantasy and illusion, independent films include virtually all documentary films, and even features are usually highly realist. (2012:2)

A more effective approach involved asking about inspirations and aspirations:

‘What kept them going in the business despite the ideological, financial, and social obstacles that might get in your way?’ ‘what and who are your inspirations: artistic, political, or cultural?’ and ‘How do you define success?,’ These prioritized creators’ goals and definitions of success rather than industry standards.

I also had to consider when to delve into potentially sensitive issues such as race and gender, and to what depth. As doubly (and often more so) marked subjects, interviewees were constantly internalizing, embodying, and (re)configuring their relations to these and other social categories. After all, they were more likely than their white and/or male counterparts to negatively confront categorical boundaries (Smith et. al. 2014), which can be disconcerting and psychologically taxing (Fanon 1967). For this reason, direct questions about what Blackness or womanhood predicate for them as creators and as people did not fare as well towards the beginning of interviews, as they did towards the middle or end when a conversational momentum and trust had been built.

If race and/or gender came up spontaneously, I asked the interviewee to elaborate further. If not, I would tread lightly into such topics, linking them to other parts of our conversation so as not to suggest that these categories were all-consuming, or were my sole interest at the expense of their holistic and complex navigations of media fields.

Accepting these women as experts not only of their experiences, but as media authorities or authorities-in-the-making also let me register any correctives they felt emboldened or comfortable enough to offer me. One such misconception was my assumption that all video creators would respond to the term ‘filmmaker’. In early iterations of this project, I referred to such subjects as ‘self-identified Black women filmmakers.’ However, in several interviews, ‘filmmaker’ turned out to be a contentious label. If I included the word in a question, some more junior participants would pause, stutter, and/or shakily interject, “I wouldn’t call myself a filmmaker” or “I’m not a filmmaker”. Taken aback, I was left to ponder their abrupt acts of renaming. Upon asking them to explain their response, I learned that many of them either associated themselves with more specialized roles (editor, producer, writer etc.), or perceived themselves as not having enough experience and/or training to deserve such a comprehensive credit. Many trained across fields, though typically devoting more time to some roles than others (hence the frequent use of x/y ‘slash’ descriptors throughout this dissertation). At participants’ invitations, I attended some events organized to bring together women of color creatives with different audiovisual proficiencies-including narration, direction, production, casting, lighting, photography, social media content creation or upkeep- to encourage support and collaboration. Such networking venues also challenged my monolithic use of ‘filmmaker’, which can do the potential violence of overlooking

relationship-building between professionals across independent media's various stages and spaces. Everyone did not aspire to the same position.

As another correction, several participants were also particular about how they spoke of themselves as media contributors. For instance, a few interviews also urged me to replace the word 'barriers' with 'obstacles.' They likened 'barriers' to walls, which implied immovable challenges and marked them as 'victims.' Their refusal of the word, therefore, translated as a refusal of well-intended tendencies to study structural disadvantage through what they interpreted as the reductionist and disempowering framework of 'victimhood'. 'Obstacles' acknowledged the presence of difficulty, but the capacities to circumvent, resolve, or conquer them, allowing these creators recourse to narratives of diligence, flexibility, innovation, and problem-solving.

Their hesitance to claim the label also spoke to uncertainties of what 'actually' constitutes a filmmaker in the face of technological and digital advancements. I heard more than one person say, "Not just anyone can pick up a camera and call themselves a filmmaker." But what makes a filmmaker then? A pre-determined amount of training? An ability to direct and organize movements on a shoot? Possession and use of audiovisual technologies? 21st-century cell-phone camera users and other guerrilla recording methods have utilized more affordable cameras and low- to no-cost on-line distribution platforms (i.e. YouTube, Vimeo) to record, edit, and share videos. Some of these creators have gone as far as to call themselves filmmakers. However, more traditional practitioners still promote certain cinematographic and narrative standards, even if one chooses to use these less financially restrictive technologies. Conflicting takes on expertise necessitate conscious recognition of institutional models that presently

dominate Hollywood and influence (though not determining absolutely) independent media's less centralized, more grassroots-oriented models. With all of this in mind, I shifted from 'film making' to 'media making', and from 'film production' to 'media production' unless informants or their anecdotes directly evoked other terms.

Positionality and the Value of 'Alternative' Epistemologies

This ethnography of production (Ganti 2012, Peterson 2003)– and to a lesser degree distribution as well – aims to benefit from and contribute to Black, feminist and Black feminist anthropology, especially concerning their attention to issues of self- and/or collective definition, economic inequality and politics of representation. Postcolonial feminist scholars have worked to disrupt 'sisterhood' discourses that proclaim to speak for 'all women, insisting instead that experiences of womanhood manifest differently at lived junctures of power: individual, family, region, state, nation (Mohanty 2003, Roberts 1997, di Leonardo 1993).

Alongside surging feminist social sciences, mass Post-World War Two realizations of overseas horrors performed in the name of racial superiority spurred attitudinal shifts towards ethnographic transparency and enabled a mushrooming of anthropologists of color who challenged power inequities in the discipline via their presence as well as their words. They denounced anthropology's continued preference of white thought and experience, which implied who constituted a 'worthy' subject of study.

As John Gwaltney frankly prefaced *Drylongso*,

This book...stems from my long-held view that traditional Euro-American anthropology has generally failed to produce ethnographers who are capable of assessing black American culture in terms other than romantic, and from my belief in the theory-building and analytic capacities of my people. In other words, I share the opinion commonly held by natives of my community that we have traditionally been misrepresented by standard social science. (1993 [1980]:xxii)

To further this ethnographic shift, earlier Black anthropologists including Gwaltney (above), Katherine Dunham (1994 [1969]), St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton Jr. (1993 [1945]), and Zora Neale Hurston (1978 [1935], 1928) as well as more contemporary voices such as Faye Harrison (1995), Lee D. Baker (2001, 1998), Leith Mullings (2005), John L. Jackson Jr. (2005a, 2005b), and Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson (2016) have mused on what it means, entails, deters, and enables to research Black communities as a Black anthropologist. Reminiscent of earlier proponents of ‘native anthropology,’ they argue that—while some accuse native anthropologists of being incapable of ‘objective’ distance and analysis—intimacy and attentiveness to certain cultural questions afford Black anthropologists particular pathways to unique insights as ‘insider-outsiders’ or, what Patricia Hill Collins would describe as ‘outsiders within’ (2000:10-11, 72-73, 184-185).

Likewise, I would also argue that Black feminist anthropology is not reductive but extremely generative in its possibilities. Explicitly referencing Black women as vital interlocutors, Black woman and anthropologist Bianca C. Williams posited that studies of Black women could serve as windows into complexities and blind-spots of larger social, economic, political, and affective matrices: “Because Black women’s lives demonstrate the dynamism of race and gender and speak to issues of power and privilege, their experiences are crucially important for understanding the tensions and exchanges that emerge in this transnational, increasingly globalized world” (Williams 2018:19). Such intellectual foci, frequently overlooked, have called out and encouraged the dismantlement of rigid canonical thinking for decades. As one much under-cited

precedent, queer theorist Barbara Smith has long criticized feminist complicities if not outright perpetrations of non-inclusive practices, writing:

It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence. Even more numbing, however, is the realization that so many of the women who will read this have not yet noticed us [black feminist lesbians] missing either from their reading matter, their politics, or their lives. It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness. (1978)

In research, I have never turned away from or tried to minimize my Black womanhood, and openly note that research participants permitted me entry more quickly than I had expected on several occasions (though certainly not to the fullest of depths). These connections, and thus my initial acceptance ‘into the fold,’ took the shape of peer-to-peer or mentor-to-mentee relationships. As Diane Lewis described the ambiguous influence of such ethnographic relations, “the very involvement of the insider, however, which in some instances blinds him, in other instances makes it possible for him to grasp the inner workings of the group to a degree that is impossible for the outsider” (1973:588). Furthermore, as participants inferred and even said aloud several times during fieldwork, “If we do not study Black women, then who will?” It is not coincidence that Tami Navarro, Bianca Williams and Attiya Ahmad (2013), Lynn A. Bolles (2013), Gina Ulysse (2007), Jemima Pierre (2002), Irma McClaurin (2001), Leith Mullings (2000), and many other Black women anthropologists were the ones to deem it necessary to write works on Black womanhood. Most explained in their final manuscripts that they felt compelled to do so because of alienations and dismissals they themselves had experienced in predominantly white academic spaces.

Similar but Not the Same

While emphasizing similarities between these cultural producers and myself, I also add that I am *not exactly* like the people with whom I worked inherently yields a ‘passion project’ void of intellectual merit as is a common critique of ‘native anthropology’ (McClaurin 2001, Behar 1996). It is true that my background made me privy to certain sensibilities, and helped me ask questions that others may not have thought pertinent. However, Blackness and womanhood – though they present people with comparable structural and ideological barriers – are extremely diverse in expression and experience. This is a reality downplayed by the all too common practice of conflating ‘us’ as Black women without critical interrogation.

I am a thirty-year-old from a suburban lower middle-class family with an Ivy League degree. These are a few of countless details about my personal trajectory that distinguish my story from those of participants coming from many different places (New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; even Canada), and an array of class, religious and other backgrounds. Some confessed to living on limited funds. To pay rent and bills and finance ongoing or upcoming creative projects, they constantly sought funds through institutional scholarships, grant-writing cycles, crowdfunding campaigns, and/or mainline careers or side jobs. Also, the bonds that I did foster were not linked to some mythic essential magnetism between Black women, and these identifiers were not the only factors that influenced how participants viewed me. We also bonded over our multifaceted experiences of pursuing academic degrees or other professional recognition in predominantly white and male professional settings despite structurally embedded financial and social constraints. Collective affinities rooted not in identitarian similarities *per se*, but in shared structural

obstacles and frustrations likely moved some participants (and their colleagues) to empathize with my situation as a junior scholar, and nurture trust and excitement in the eventual outcomes of my writing process.

My ‘outsider status’ also showed in my lack of internalized embodied knowledge of the city’s bustle. For instance, people responded to my New Jersey upbringing in numerous ways; from dismissing the relatively short distance between the two locales, to asking why I would move to such an unaffordable and thus unwelcoming place, to guffawing in disbelief that I had not moved into New York City sooner. Life’s suburban sprawl in the commuter state of New Jersey is incomparable to New York’s extensive public transportation systems and fast-paced, pedestrian-crowded sidewalks. It took about two weeks for me to attain adequate walking speed to keep up with locals who charged ahead with wide strides, drifted over curbsides, and darted across streets against lights whenever traffic slackened up enough. I also had to adjust to the immersive feel of urbanity: phasing out of New Jersey’s cordial but emotionally detached neighbor relations, and into New York’s quotidian mix of tight cultural communities and interpersonal suspicion (Simmel 1969). Also of note is the fact that, while I may not be a native New Yorker, neither were about one-third of the women I met over my time in-state. Varied childhood origins and reasons for either staying or moving into the city’s limits also arose as topics of discussion during my research period, especially when participants had plans to leave.

My gregarious personality aided my forging connections but also made it that much more crucial for me to periodically remind participants of my researcher role. I learned that the very act of scheduling and sitting down in face-to-face interviews with a formal back-

and-forth question-and-answer format (which many of them had similarly been conducting for documentary film production) required some work to erect an academic buffer, as did my requesting written consent to use their words in future publications. I also utilized tactics such as angling my notepad to make its front cover more visible to them or- in cases of highly sensitive testimony- directly asking interviewees if they were okay with me taking notes at that specific time (and immediately acting in accordance with their ‘yes’ or ‘no’), mentioning dissertation and future paper prospects, and turning informed consent procedures into actual discussions. Despite our similarities as producers (me of knowledge in higher education, and them of cultural artifacts), I was ultimately the one who would sift through data to write up analyses for wider public engagement. However, believing in the power of reciprocity, I did my best to offer assistance such as volunteering on film sets and attending screenings to boost audience numbers and visual fullness.

Ethnographic Self-Reflection: Image, Perception, and Authority

In addition to positioning myself within anthropology as a field, research amid image-concerned domains of media making also pushed me to see myself differently, and to reflect on the aesthetic and performative image that I projected into the world. I remember a particularly animated exchange that I had with actress/film director Opal and her former business partner Johnathan during an interview at Panera sandwich shop. They informed me of how they first met and their pathway to partnership, which included a bond formed over part-time jobs at a grocery store, and Johnathan’s conviction that Opal was an actress based only on her apparently out-of-place beauty in that space. The duo reminisced about their transition from budding friendship to ambitious business-

minded co-founders of an LLC. Our conversation lasted so long that we decided to walk around the city to keep on chatting.

We stopped briefly at a Barnes and Noble bookstore chain because the two routinely looked at its newest self-help and self-improvement books to recover from hardship and regain the confidence central to exercising authority. Opal even suggested a book to me, bringing me into the circle of trust they had established around readings that acknowledged and helped them to alleviate the psychological and social stressors of marginalized cultural production work. Further including me, they also took me along to their next stop, *Abercrombie & Fitch*, where I had a jarring moment of self-reflection. The store's bright lights, spacious layout and expensive price tags unsettled me, but seemed common to Johnathan, who darted directly to the outerwear section to pick up a jacket for the unusually brisk weather. Meanwhile, Opal and I entertained ourselves by looking at candles and other knickknacks. Suddenly, she tapped my shoulder to signal that I follow her to other side of the store. Abercrombie executives had rented out a portion of that floor to an eyeglass proprietor, whose backlit display had beckoned Opal's attention. "We have to get you some new glasses!" Opal exclaimed. "Maybe we can find you a nice pair of cat-eyes [a shape of frames]! Maybe purple ones!"

Opal had been commenting on my glasses, labeling them lackluster, for a few weeks. "Oh no!" she recoiled when I first pulled them out in front of her. The frames were black and rectangular, functional albeit unremarkable. She asked me, rhetorically, if those were really my glasses. I released a bit of nervous laughter in response, not sure of the problem or how to proceed. I could not place her seemingly superficially derogatory statement, so I just filed it away with other notes she had given me on my "old-looking,"

and “matronly” wardrobe choices (cardigans and printed dresses among them), as well as a half-joking fleeting statement that she would not hang out with people who did not look like they “care about what they look like”.

After three or four frictional encounters over months of hanging out enough to call her a friend, I worked to put aside personal offense and thoroughly attempt to place her scattered comments in larger contexts of media making and consumption. Having described her own clothing choices as ‘tailored’ and ‘masculine’ (dark colors, boldly square sunglasses, and straight legged pants with no pastels or frills), Opal viewed style as indication of a person’s authoritative grasp of and commitment to detail. For Opal, it was important to make sure that one was not only dressed with care, but also in a way that reflected some part of their uniquely individual selves and styles. “It’s just that I don’t think those glasses are very you. You’re so outgoing and wonderful, and they’re...” She trailed off to indicate disappointment. She ended by punctuating her clarification with “Boring!” She chuckled before explaining that she took issue with the disparity between my vibrant personality, and the anti-social implications that such uneventful glasses may stir in people making my acquaintance for the first time.

In that Abercrombie, Opal vigorously perused the small gallery of glasses, selecting different frame shapes and colors for me. I tried on a pair of royal blue cat eye glasses and an oval dark red pair, each conveying her attempt to echo through my eyewear the tenacity and boldness she had detected from my spirit over our months of interaction in formal (i.e. on set, sit-down interviews) and informal (i.e. brunch, bars) settings. Unlike my belief that such bland glasses communicated scholarly prowess and may promote my authority, Opal believed that the manner in which a professional woman

of color chose to present herself to a wider, likely judgmental public said lots of her ambition and investment in image making methods. To foreground empowerment and integrity, she valued colorful and personality-appropriate choices in adornments such as clothing and eyewear. Gradually, I absorbed these logics, especially as creatives I met over time pointed to the conscious strategies and energies that went into the formulation, strategic deployment, and long-term upkeep of a uniquely cultivated professional persona. Opal's comment originally felt like a dig but through analysis indicated my own embodied point of entry into a world of constant attention paid to questions of public image awareness and management.

The Sequence of Events

This dissertation studies how media makers come to understand mainstream norms of authority and cultivate their own, by investigating 1.) conventional attributions of authority to certain bodies and via what processes; 2.) people's ways of learning the social hierarchies embedded in U.S. media fields, and how others make perceive their bodies thusly; 3.) people's ways of developing personae and styles of authority across a variety of climates, including alternative (a.k.a. non-mainstream) spaces. In asking how Black women work to understand and (re)configure authority in media fields, I shift from top-down visions of authority as discussed vis-à-vis the State to re-interpret as a relational exercise and ongoing aspiration, thereby enabling greater consideration of the nonlinear occupational routes by which Black women develop alternative authoritative strategies and sensibilities.

Overall, this dissertation analyzes words spoken, histories recalled, forms of personhood contemplated, and strategies negotiated by Black women media makers

approaching authority as an embodied performative repertoire crafted amidst an array of ideological, psychological, structural and material forces. In doing so, it also problematizes authority as a ready-made status entitled only to white men by showing the various ways in which people from marginalized groups pursue it– albeit through alternative means and sensibilities. To become directors, producers, editors, writers and/or other positions, Black women first had to develop convincing shows of authority. Hence, each person I met diligently toiled to build up enough outer and (for some, even more difficultly) inner resolve to learn U.S. media production’s conventional notions and boundaries, and integrate these cultural and occupational lessons into personally suitable authoritative identities and expressions capable of effectively garnering, allocating, and supervising a host of economic, material, human, and other resources.

Throughout histories of U.S.-based media production, Black women have been included premised on the paradox that they are to be seen, not heard. From the release of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, to race films tailored to intervene as racial re-centering if not redemption (William Foster and Oscar Micheaux). Using ‘the gaze’ as both a theoretical and complicating framework, Chapter 1, “Stratified Realities: Historicizing Invisibilization and Recognition,” chronicles historical antagonisms between Black womanhood and dominant media systems to contend that U.S. media culture has largely obscured Black women’s voices and contributions, even in purportedly progressive movements.

Chapter 2, “‘Not Built for Us’: Cultivating Authority and Strategizing Public Image,” examines different women’s pathways of learning and cultivating authoritative personae. Unable to claim social capitals of white masculinity, marginalized creators

cultivate authoritative personae and practices by learning dominant ideologies and structures of media fields (in order to amend them suitably) and embracing authority-making as a constant endeavor built through social networks, technical training, and financial as well as emotional investment. This chapter follows five women of different ages and levels of career exposure to comprehend the multifaceted considerations and pragmatic responses that creators endure to craft the authoritative performances that best work for them. Of concurrent interest to how institutional and ideological structures co-manifest, then, is how training contexts shape participants' future experiences, approaches, interpretations, and displays of resistance in media production fields as authorities over projects.

Chapter 3, "Coming to Terms: Media Making as Psychosocial Coping and Community Care," stresses that- at the heart of many people's journeys towards cultivating one's authoritative confidence, voice and style- media production is an embodied process by and through which participants try to grasp, test out, and articulate personal responses to events and conditions of socio-political strife. Examined at the intersection of identity, knowledge and cultural production, it delves into the story of one Black woman media maker, Jayla, to investigate how she utilizes the artistic process to actively digest and comprehend pains of racialized violence, and to connect with communities not only of practice, but also of shared social struggle.

Chapter 4, "Production Choreography: Situated Navigations of Horizontal Power Relations on Film Shoots," shifts focus to the hectic environments and performed power relations of two working film sets in order to chart how Black women reckon with marginalized social positions and exercise power in closely orchestrated contexts of

production. Inspired by Cox's 'choreography of citizenship' (2015), I develop 'choreographies of production' to acknowledge the semiotics and significance of movement (of ideas, bodies, equipment, and so on) in establishing flexible arrangements of authority between a director and other specialized team members. Based on participant observation on two film shoots, I argue that expressions of authority are rooted in intimate engagements and adaptations to other specialists on projects, requiring balance between the director's centering and ultimate guidance with each team members' particularly honed skill sets and perspectives.

Primed with aforementioned analyses of Black women media makers' internal and external modes of learning, reckoning, and practicing, Chapter 5, "Aesthetics, Play, and Temporality in Contemporary Afro-Imaginative Media," extends creativity into forward-thinking realms (particularly of Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism) to ask and imagine 'What Next?' On this front, the chapter examines how members of younger generations have carved out space- via aesthetic creativity and technological innovation- to productively reconfigure media in a collective- and in many ways continuing- fight for recognition of Black people, women especially, as socio-political thinkers and actors. Some millennial creators have adopted less realist, and more abstract frameworks to contest conventions of production style and social ideologies and speak truth to the race relations of their day.

The Conclusion re-presents power hierarchies of visual economies that exceptionalize a few Black woman Hollywood creatives at the expense of acknowledging the underlying structures that sustain mainstream production's exclusionary hiring and representational trends. It integrates themes addressed throughout the dissertation to

argue that Black women- aware of their social group's ascription to the 'bottom rung' of the U.S. social ladder- have recognized and reworked 'the gaze' to embrace media production as a dually technical and socio-affective project. They believe that it can be rerouted, or even reimagined to amplify their viewpoints and concerns. Knowing their ancestors were prohibited from gazing back and denied traits of consciousness, intelligence, and humanity, the women featured in this dissertation expended physical and emotional labor to create media forms and stories not tethered to, but often experientially motivated by topics including but not limited to belonging, marginalization, mortality, and futurity.

Finally, the Epilogue revisits core dissertation questions about one and a half years later in the age of such Hollywood films as Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and Ava DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time* to ask: 'Have Things Really Changed?', soliciting a few research participants' viewpoints on the prospect's gains and oversights. What does 'exceptionalism' look like and what dangers does it pose to media and wider protest climates in 2018?

CHAPTER 1:

Stratified Realities: Historicizing Invisibilization and Recognition

“Racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world. At what costs regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidized and sold, in what terms they are validated- these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery.”

— Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness,” 2005

“The past- or, more accurately, *pastness*- is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*”

— Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1995

“And black women specifically? They have never been a primary subject of the American Left, always falling somewhere in the cracks between the Negro Question and the Woman Question.”

— Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2003

“I’m Gonna be One”: A Panelist Muses on Media Production’s Structural Violence

In November 2015, I attended an evening event in DUMBO’s *Made in New York Media Center* comprised of a screening of five short films followed by a question-and-answer session with the films’ directors, all of whom were members of a film collective composed of Black women. Along with approximately forty other attendees, I watched the night’s short films in succession, which lasted about an hour altogether. Film topics spanned greatly, from racialized police encounters and ensuing violence; to an aesthetically experimental mix of funk tunes, animation, and voiceovers from Black Pride activists; to a Black male high schooler’s problematic relationship with his white female teacher; to a young black girl’s experiences of hypersexualization, bullying, and friendships at school. The films not only demonstrated the heterogeneity and the communal pride that the collective wanted their audiences to grasp as co-existing realities for many Black women, but they do so by engaging various facets of what some might

ascribe to or describe as part of the larger ‘Black American experience.’²⁴ As the last film’s credits finished scrolling up the projection screen, I rapidly blinked my eyes to readjust to the auditorium’s abruptly risen house lights. Facility employees were already hurrying to space out six black stools evenly across the front of the room in preparation for the night’s Q&A (Question-and-Answer session).

Having heard about the event from one collective member and previously interacted with the other four, I waved to alert them to my presence as they and their invited moderator (a middle-aged Black man with dreadlocks) settled onto their stools. Meanwhile, audience members rustled about, either fighting to revive feeling in backsides that had gone numb during the screening (I had seen many people perched on the edges of their seats, too entranced or curious to shift about); or turning to judge the few people who rushed to collect their belongings and depart before the Q&A officially began. Reflecting on Q&As more generally, I remember an Indian-American woman director telling me (during a 2013 interview I conducted as part of preliminary research), that she usually felt more excited for Q&As than the screening before them. Contrary to films that she had directed, supervised edits for, and viewed countless times, Q&As were relatively unpredictable, contingent as they were on present crowd and community. Every Q&A helped her to differently assess her work’s effectiveness²⁵ on publics who

²⁴ The phrase ‘the Black American Experience’ is not meant to insist on Black people as a homogenous mass. Rather, it is a phrase that many people use to describe the shared structures and histories that collectively shape the pathways and obstacles that contemporary Black people face, though not one person’s experience will be the exact same as any other person.

²⁵ Such ‘effectiveness’ could involve many traits including but not limited to usefulness, practical relevance, emotional provocation, and points of conflict or confusion in character development or plotline.

presumably did not have the same levels of closeness and bias as those who been directly involved in project development.

Unlike conventional theatre screenings, which typically ask for spectators' silence, Q&As encourage viewers to partake in interactive group discussions about a film's themes: in this case, especially timely and volatile subjects such as race, gender, class, sexuality, power disparities, and anti-Black homicide. While the event had been publicized on social media and was open to the public, the subject matter and named authorities have drawn in mostly people of color. Several of them nodded along as the panelists passed a microphone between them so each could share her ideas on mainstream and independent media's climates of participation, access, recognition, and possibility.

While no panelist named personal investments in whiteness as a standard for her measure of self-worth (a few even rejected such a premise on political grounds), they were also mindful of the fact that many audience members who had come out to this event had done so because they were aspiring and/or newer media makers themselves who wanted advice on how to find their own voices amidst media spaces that could often feel exclusionary, even hostile. Aware of their audience's likely diversity of experience and background, the panelists made sure to name the white male-centric ideologies that had shaped and continued to shape their own media educations and work trajectories. Their collective transparency let spectators in on the fact that their ostensible confidence was the result of an unending growing process that took effort and had never been easy. Perhaps because their names headlined the programs distributed at the auditorium entrance, or because they sat on the panel itself (indexing field expertise and authority),

or because they presented ‘germane’ bodily identities to the night’s central themes, audience members watched intently as the panelists spoke. Before the relatively captivated audience, the women recalled stories riddled with ‘you knows’ (suggesting mutual understanding), casual references to one another, and trusting confessions to present company that they frequently felt undermined if not outright unsafe elsewhere.

After the panelists answered three queries from the moderator, he invited attendees to ask questions of their own, thus expanding the situation from a linear discussion between panelists into a larger engagement of different people’s concerns about what went into conceptualizing and forging productive work spaces. Collectively, their questions probed not only film content and production details, but also broader concerns about what types of concessions should and/or needed to be made by people—especially women—of color in order to potentially access mainstream media’s resources (e.g. institutional lessons and funds, advertisements, networking circles, population non-specific film festivals, work inspirations and collaborators).

In communal gatherings such as this, interpersonal differences did not breed abrasive conflict but rather spurred productive brainstorming about what it might entail to ‘make our own.’ While some creators made asks and applied for offerings here and there from mainstream institutions and/or funders to forward personal projects and goals, others completely dismissed interest in mainstream approval and/or reform, seeing projects and conversations in principle and practice as stepping stones for building holistic and sustainable community-funded production infrastructures by and for minoritized groups. Despite differing ideas about and willingness to compromise with hegemonic media representatives, most people who remained at that Q&A did so because

they wanted to engage in generative conversation amongst fictive kin about the continued measurement of women of color against metrics structured to benefit white men's visions and ambitions (whether in their immediate presence or absence).

Wherever attendees fell on the spectrum of assimilation to abandonment of mainstream resources, the Q&A's first ten minutes proceeded cordially. Illustrative of the room's apparent camaraderie and a collective desire to define what constitutes 'good art' and 'creativity' without constant eyes toward whiteness, a woman of Indian descent in her forties raised her hand and- once she possessed the circulating microphone- stood up and enunciated:

I don't want my reason for making to be always about pushing up against. I'm making this [work] because *you need to see me*. I'm making this because *you don't include me*. Hey, I'm making this thing. I've got this gift. I've got these resources. If I don't have it, my sister has it and we can do stuff together. And I really, really think it's the moment to stop fighting for the attention of people who in their mind- it never occurred to them to include us. We've got a huge audience here, look at us!

This woman refused to submit to, or identify with societal discourses that implied her inferiority, positioned her on someone else's margins, or defined her as whiteness' negative. "Look at us!" she boomed into a room full of motivated, competent and resourceful women who had each found the strength to brave the odds of media systems, and the resolve to come together that night in search of empathy, advice and support of 'sisters'. She sat down to a round of applause and even a few 'whoop whoops' in agreement, leading me to believe that her rejection of the notion that one must align oneself with ideals of European masculinity in order to be seen as legitimate (Fanon 1967) – or the 'Man's overrepresentation' as coined by Sylvia Wynter (2003:262) – seemed to resonate with almost everyone present. However, this image of consensus was about to be tested.

Two questions later, an event volunteer ran the microphone over to a middle-aged white woman with glasses and dirty blonde hair with her hand raised. She offered a preamble of running thoughts before asking; “I get that it’s hard for Black women, but isn’t it hard for white men and women too? ... I mean, isn’t it difficult for all independent filmmakers out there?” Though not likely her intent, the woman effectively lumped all filmmakers into the same proverbial basket as if the field were pragmatically meritorious and could be deemed ‘equal’. The room fell silent. Two panelists squirmed a bit, probably trying to regain the comfort just snatched from them. Most fought to recover discreetly. However, outspoken director/writer and film collective member/panelist Tanya leaned forward, her eyes widening in disbelief. She began to reply with discernibly slower speech than the many other statements she had made throughout the evening (whether for purposes of self-censorship, emphasis, or a bit of both).

“They’re not struggling to the same degree that we are,” Tanya said in the most metered and diplomatic tone she could muster. For this inquirer to watch an entire block of films directed by this diverse but socially and strategically unified panel of Black women, and then ask a question that re-centered whiteness and equated Black women with white men countered the event’s core objectives to visibilize and recognize marginalized creators for products and value systems they create from their own social locations and cultural, technical, and aesthetic criteria. Tanya continued, “I do not know anything about their struggles. I do know about my struggles, you know, as a human that inhabits a body that’s *Black* and inhabits a body that is *woman*.” Some audience members snapped their fingers and whispered ‘Yes!’ in solidarity. Gradually, Tanya’s words grew in both speed and volume. “So yeah, I’m sure those people are struggling. [But] I know

my struggle very intimately.” She paused, readying herself to plunge into the bulk of her argument:

Um...I do understand that when I enter these spaces, *I’m gonna be one*. I’m gonna be one person there who looks like me. I’m gonna be fighting for these resources. I’m going to be one having to constantly resist being undermined on my own set. There’s just...a lot that goes into being this [looks and gestures downward with chin to reference herself] and trying to do what I want to do. So yeah, I can’t really attest to the struggles of white men. I do know that the history of documentary filmmaking is white men. The history of fiction filmmaking is white men. You got white women pissed the fuck off because white men won’t give them any money, so can you imagine being a Black woman?! Like, the white men don’t even see you. They’re like ‘who?’

Stressing that discussions about the politics of (in)visibility were not new to the collective members, Tanya added “We talk about this shit all the time” while gesturing her right hand—flat with palm raised— from side-to-side in reference to her on-stage colleagues. With that, the audience got a brief glimpse into some dynamics of the group’s regular chats (as it served as a healthy and safe place for them to vent) about mainstream media’s stratified conditions of production. Tanya looked back at the inquiring audience member, who was sitting by that time. “Like this is not...like I hear what you’re saying,” Tanya said, trying to revive her opening style of address. “Like it’s hard for everyone, just like being a human is hard for everyone.” A few chuckles escaped from audience members who read Tanya’s comment as obvious. Tanya’s voice got breathier, “And then there’s structural oppression, and *there’s violence*. There’s psychological violence, there’s physical violence. And that happens every day, right?”

Disproportionately silenced in general media domains, Black women develop alternative practices as marginalized subjects determined to cultivate, express, and contest authority in spaces that have never fully accepted their capacity to lead. They exert immense amounts of energy to attain access without guarantee of success. Linda

Alcoff's articles "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1992) and "The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment" (2006) attends to opposite sides of the question of how politics shape who general society perceives as credibly able to speak of themselves and Others, and which groups are thought incapable not only of general analysis but of self-reflection: two sides of authority's figurative coin. To explore this, Alcoff examines double standards of knowledge production (which I transpose to cultural production) to consider the fragile authority of persons of color working in power positions traditionally held by white men. In her example, An Asian American man walks into a philosophy classroom and introduces himself as the professor. Some students are taken aback by him, but warm up as he lectures on Deleuzian theory. However, upon his first mention of race, several students tense up, ready to dismiss his lesson as partial and prejudiced:

For a nonwhite called back from a normative postural image to a racialized 'epidermal schema,' as Fanon put it, the habit body one falls into at such moments, I would suggest, is protective, defensive. A hyperactive self-awareness must interrogate the likely meanings that will be attributed to every utterance, gesture, or action one takes. The available options of interactions across the visible difference, seem closed down to two: *combative resistance without hope of persuasion, or an attempt to return to the category of nonthreatening other*, perhaps through attaining the place of the not-really-other. Neither can yield a true relationship or dialogue; both are options already given within the white dominant racial structure. No original move can be recognized. (Alcoff 2006:193, emphasis added)

Here, Alcoff purports that such subjects' modes of presentation- both of content and more intimately, of self and body- are circumscribed by structures of whiteness. Hence, marked bodies must not only account for their bodily ticks, movements, and sways more consciously than their unmarked counterparts, but must also assess and act in response (agreeably, begrudgingly, or otherwise) to other people's interpretations of their words and movements. This dynamic only becomes more threatening in light of Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others":

Not only is [social] location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for. (1992:7)

Together, Alcoff's analyses of authority, perception, and racial hierarchy support Tanya's assertion of silencing and invisibilization as violence (in concert with compounding violence rocking Black communities in forms of police brutality and infrastructural neglect).

Next, Tanya transported us all back to her time in film school to demonstrate why she believed some faculty had overlooked, if not outright denied the role that prejudice could and often did play in issues of student discomfort, estrangement, and non-retention. She stated, "I would get up and go to school, and be like oh shit, you know I'm gonna have to go listen to these sixty-year-old white men tell me that my work about a young, Black queer man doesn't matter..." Tanya picked at memories she had repressed but never quite fully resolved. She threw her voice to imitate past professors. "Like, 'why are you doing this?' 'Who wants to see this?' 'Nobody wants to see this,' 'It doesn't matter.'" Tanya proudly reassumed her own voice to proclaim, "That's violence! So yes, it's a struggle for white men to get their films made. It is...But then there's violence."

Concurring hums from the audience brought Tanya's monologue to a close. The blonde woman tacked on, "I really appreciated your answer. It's a lot more tangible for me now." With a twinge of sarcasm only discernible to the intimately closest of listeners, Tanya replied, "I'm glad you appreciate it." Afterward, I went to hang out with the collective members at a bar at their invitation. The five of them exchanged only a couple snarky remarks about that particular question before moving on to discuss future collaborations and rejuvenate themselves through laughter and sociality. This stark and

un-sarcastic shift suggested that, while every such jarring encounter certainly rocked their sensibilities in spaces constructed purposely to promote not only professional but personal comfort, they were in fact veterans to face-offs resembling that one.

Blunt yet composed, Tanya replied to a curious woman who had not experienced the same intimate, prolonged exposure to the social vulnerabilities active amidst independent media's already financially precarious structures. Raised and nurtured to be proud of a body and lineage that larger U.S. publics were taught to disdain and fear (Ahmed 2004), Tanya described what many of her counterparts encounter and largely handled unspoken.

To this day, I have not forgotten Tanya's interpretation of Black women's experiences of media production fields as 'violent', particularly in juxtaposition with themes of neoliberal²⁶ colorblindness and increasing media democratization (Williams 2003 [1974]) that have shaped much post-2008²⁷ U.S. media production discourse about merit-based self-determination. Proponents of this moment positioned advancing media tools (i.e. more affordable digital camera options, built-in cell phone cameras, online distribution platforms) and formats (i.e. photography, film and television, social media) as embellishments and signals of democratic opportunities to be limited only by one's willingness to train and work hard enough. However, Tanya's interjection stresses the violent aspects of such performative twoness (DuBois 1903) further compounded by others' denial of that pain. This argument echoes in Helan Enoch Page's "No Black

²⁶ By neoliberalism, I refer to discourses that promote hard work by individuals at the expense of studying the role of structure in drastically uneven socio-economic disparities.

²⁷ 2008 is an important year- especially for questions of race relations- because it was the year of that the United States elected its first Black president.

Public Sphere in White Public Space: Racialized Information and Hi-Tech Diffusion in the Global African Diaspora”:

European American’s sustained racial control over communications technology compels us to regard uses of the commodified black image as acts of symbolic violence. No human rights act will defend us from this subtle form of violence whose perpetrators strive to contain black creativity, opinion, and subjectivity in an American public sphere where our presumed advocates and champions contentedly decline to establish a ‘black’ public sphere. The prescribed African American stance encourages us to act within the system; we sense a prohibition against questioning for an autonomous black public sphere in which interracial teams of cultural authority would work under the management of black-owned technology in the global service of an anti-racist information agenda most affirmative of nonwhite Americans. Such an agenda need not be disaffirmative of European Americans, but neither should it any longer cater to phobic reactions to blackness. (1999:111)

Speaking to racially stratified realities of mediated public sphere-making, Page describes a climate and conditions similar to the complex occupational landscape upon which Tanya and her companions negotiated their public personae and project developments. By stratified realities, I refer to the divergent lifestyles, perspectives, and temporalities that enable more privileged (and potentially out-of-touch) persons to see inequitable infrastructures only in times of acute crisis whilst marginalized individuals on receiving ends of injustice regularly confront and thus learn to expect infrastructural bias on a more continuous, even cyclical basis. In many ways, whiteness here enjoys the ‘privilege of unknowing’ (Sedgwick 1988). Positing a tug-of-war between desires for an ‘autonomous black public sphere’ and lived experiences of dominant social and economic structures that—more often than not—require them to compromise in order to get certain things done, Page spotlights the consequences of such systems as symbolic violence. First-time director and interviewee Helen (revisited in Chapter 2) supported the existence and constant weight of negotiating such twoness in her confession that, “in my

ideal world I would want to be uncompromising, and I would want to go to my own [Black] community for funds, and I would want to make something that was really truly truly ours but unfortunately it's just not the reality of how resources are allocated" (Interview, 2015).

Interrogating apparatuses and relations undergirding these kinds of symbolic violence, what is to be made of Tanya's distinction between those who endure struggle and those who endure struggle whilst also weighed down by larger contexts of violence (structural, psychological, social, political and even sometimes physical)? In retrospect, and with tens more Q&A observations under my belt, I have realized just how pervasive that one audience member's perspective is throughout media-related systems of investment, press, and film criticism.

Whiteness and the Making of Stratified Realities

Before delving into ethnographic examples of the numerous ways that marginalized media makers traverse uneven media structures from my original research, I believe it would be most helpful to provide the reader with a brief history of the developments and trajectories that founded such deeply embedded matrices of expectations around Black women's bodies and behaviors, in general U.S. consciousness broadly as well as media worlds specifically.

Humanity and authority have long been fundamentally linked concepts, as one's ability to speak their truth and have their words acknowledged rely on others' recognition of their capacity to do both. Additionally, since the 17th century, histories of European and Euro-American conquest constructed humanness, authority, and whiteness as 'natural' companions (Smedley 2007, Smedley 1998) by representing whiteness as the

teleological endpoint and moral superior of dark-skinned ‘Others’ from other world regions. Robert Stam and Louise Spence (1983) emphasize the role of representation in this equation, explaining how power moves made by the West through colonialism, racism and the creation of a victimized ‘Third World’ were entrenched into common social understandings through popular culture’s distribution channels to naturalize imaginaries of the good, heroic Westerner and the savage, mindless ‘Other,’ thereby justifying the former’s continued exploitation of the latter.

In this way, audio and/or visual media apparatuses’ technological capability to reach beyond proximate corporeal geographies enabled the tacit spread of white patricentric discourses through seemingly benign artifacts including but not limited to cartoons, film and television, decorative paraphernalia, travelers’ diaries, and newsletters (Harris 2003, Riggs 1986). “Images of colonial conquest were stamped on soap boxes ... biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars ... No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace (McClintock 1995, p. 209)” (Cited on Hall 1997:204). Operating as extensions of socio-political imaginaries and agendas, Western colonialist imaginaries wove themselves into the socio-cultural fabric of the U.S. body politic—namely, the expectation of white men as ‘proper’ holders of authoritative positions on local as well as global scales.

Before content is produced or messages—implicit or explicit—assume meaning through post-production edits, whiteness-as-value (along with hints of its colonialist orientations of power) is engrained in the very media technologies and techniques that people acquire in their earliest days of training. For example, standardized film and

lighting techniques- and affiliated pedagogies- demonstrate the incorporation of racialized values into widely adopted technological praxes. In schooling institutions or apprenticeships, one of the first techniques that photography, film, and television students learn is color balance, or *white balance*: the calibration of a camera's color temperature to render what is white in the world, white on screen. The idea seems rational enough: just as one has to focus a camera, one should adjust color schema before capturing real-world scenes. However, white balance is premised on the insidiously unquestioned prioritization of whiteness, as it requires other colors to morph, distort, blur, and fall in line around a crisply calculated white standard. I remember once watching a queer woman of color student and aspiring documentarian search for a blank sheet of white paper to hold in front of her camera's lens in order to calibrate white balance manually. Performed as just part of what you are supposed to do to shoot a scene, this act literally blocked out and configured the resulting scene around whiteness with aims of getting a scene to look 'natural' or realistic.

However, being cautious of the social and power-laden acrobatics that go into crafting what is later taken as 'natural' is critical to an investigation of the many forces shaping Black women's participation in media fields, mainstream and/or independent. As Teju Cole stated in *New York Times Magazine*'s "A True Picture of Black Skin,"

All technology arises out of specific social circumstances. In our time, as in previous generations, cameras and the mechanical tools of photography have rarely made it easy to photograph black skin. The dynamic range of film emulsions, for example, were generally calibrated for white skin and had limited sensitivity to brown, red or yellow skin tones. Light meters had similar limitations, with a tendency to underexpose dark skin. And for many years, beginning in the mid-1940s, the smaller film-developing units manufactured by Kodak came with Shirley cards, so-named after the white model who was featured on them and whose whiteness was marked on the cards as 'normal.'

Some of these instruments improved with time. In the age of digital photography, for instance, Shirley cards are hardly used anymore. But even now, there are reminders that photographic technology is neither value-free nor ethnically neutral. In 2009, the face-recognition technology on HP webcams had difficulty recognizing black faces, suggesting, again, that the process of calibration had favored lighter skin. An artist tries to elicit from unfriendly tools the best they can manage. A black photographer of black skin can adjust his or her light meters; or make the necessary exposure compensations while shooting; or correct the image at the printing stage. (2015)

As Cole explains above, technologies are regularly discussed and interpreted as neutral objects detached from human bodies and intervention. However, they are ultimately human-made materials and systems that are manipulated again by humans in order to yield particular products, immersing them multi-directionally and inescapably in ubiquitous racialized hierarchies that do such impactful work that they can effectively ‘unsee’ Black faces²⁸.

As a first-timer amidst New York City’s creative industries within and across its boroughs, there is much to learn about how standing social and economic orders translate into media production and distribution spaces and relationships that form, disintegrate and change within them. Entangling cognitive and bodily knowledges, one’s start in media making involves getting acquainted not only with technical vernaculars and financial and socio-cultural norms, but also with how one’s own body may be perceived and treated in established media environments. For new creators entering media from non-dominant backgrounds, this is a difficult but most necessary education, as they must

²⁸ In 2009, a viral YouTube video featured a Black man and his white co-worker trying out an HP computer’s face recognition software. The woman moved about, and the detection feature efficiently tracked her face. When he moved in frame and she shifted out, the software did not sense him at all. See video here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4DT3tQqgRM>>. The trend took off for a time, as other Black people tested the software, also to no avail.

learn to predict and strategize around ‘outsider’ publics who undervalue or have trouble comprehending them as simultaneous subjects of authority and struggle.

Overall, this chapter historicizes²⁹ Black marginalization as a story of fluctuating accesses to and deployments of media technologies up to the present day. Time and time again, race, gender, class, and other divides have achieved material effects live through and atop acts of looking, especially between groups with drastically different claims to power (Berger 2002). Therefore, it is powerful practice to trace media as an assemblage of communicative processes and technologies with which people amplify, extend, and/or re-signify assumptive and imaginative possibilities of intra- and inter-human gazing. Though sprinkled with exceptional Black women figures, written histories of these and 21st century moments to a large degree as well remain averse to interrogating systems of structural violence that continue to disproportionately deter Black *women*’s recognized success in media fields. This chapter tracks the historical relationship between media production and racialized hierarchy in the United States, embracing the polysemic possibilities of gazes and images both of which have facilitated histories of international conquest, occupation and exploitation as well as contestation and liberatory potential (as in Tanya’s case above).

Authority and The Gaze

Multiple scholars have used the concept of “the gaze” to think through not only spatial discernment via the senses, but also looking as a symbolic act of power and/or assumed mastery. Orienting the reader in historical dynamics of both physical and figurative seeing, particularly of who has been depicted as visible, this chapter

²⁹ Here, I use historicization as per Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s description of narrative’s inclusive and exclusive politics in his 1995 book *Silencing the Past*.

historicizes authority as it has been imposed, sought, and claimed through enacted and/or projected gazes over time. Hence, while laypeople may understand gazing as the mere act of visually ascertaining the presence of other human beings or things in the world, I deploy it as a performative meaning- and power-saturated act.

Generally, in a two-party exchange, a looker presumes the ability to render another into an object to be looked upon. Said looker also has the capacity and – in considerably uneven power structures – freedom to project meanings, faculties, and aspirations onto the receiving body without retort. In order to maintain this power, however, the looker must constantly reassure themselves and others of their power by looking. Attending to authority's constant investment in renewing control over visual discourse, Mirzoeff suggests, "This ability to assemble a visualization *manifests the authority of the visualizer*. In turn, the *authorizing of authority requires permanent renewal* in order to win *consent as the 'normal,'* or every day, because it is always already contested" (2011a:2, emphasis added).

Pertinently, bell hooks opens her analysis of Black spectatorship with the following statement, "The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze" (2003:94). Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977 [1952]:115-117), Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* and other theorizations of looking and power have tried to make sense of how catching sight of and interpreting another person not only engages immediately present stimuli, but also incorporates outside evidence, assumptions, and agendas. As Mirzoeff expands his argument, "The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or

voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity: ‘the right to look. The invention of the other’” (2011b:473).

Abused by some as shortcuts to asserting knowledge of Others, gazes also do not transpire simply on proverbial blank canvases but channel stereotypes that people hold of one another, influencing whether they want to engage with others and on what terms. Thus, in order to comprehend how privilege, disadvantage and authority-making shape interpersonal interactions and expectations, it is vital to take gazes seriously not as static and unidirectional givens, but as mobile and conditional sets of relations. In an article aptly titled “The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone,” Corrine Columpar writes,

In surveying American and European film history, it becomes quite clear that film is not a window onto the world, nor has its use historically been ideologically neutral; rather it is a signifying system with its own representational legacies, established ropes, industrial constraints, and political baggage. In particular, as that which has, more often than not, consolidated, initiated or perpetuated various stereotypes as well as a visual economy that privileges a white, male perspective, dominant Western cinema is profoundly implicated in both sexist and racist practices. (2002:27)

As Columpar explicates (conversant with Lutz and Collins’ 1991 article mentioned earlier), the gaze is not static, but active, relational, and wide-reaching. Gazes, which I summarize as looking with context and consequence, mobilize and impact various spheres regularly encountered by media makers with whom I worked. Gazes might wield impact via the judgmental glances that investors, potential collaborators and other resource holders cast towards those requesting their support; or through camera setup, editing software and other technologies that facilitate and record film team members’ literally gazing upon and altering images of surrounding socio-physical worlds (pending requisite resources, of course). While the latter should also be of concern to us as inquirers into human beliefs and environments (and as such, may be an interest of my

own future work), this dissertation focuses on the former mission to recognize the politics, human labor, and personalities at work behind media production and distribution efforts.

While stereotypes and other assumptive modes have worked to extend hierarchies of racialized gazing across oceans, macro-level structures often wield their most significant force at levels of personal and interpersonal experience. In fact, sometimes the impact of gazes is felt most harshly at the closest of proximities. Frantz Fanon famously reflected on the harm internally done to him by a white child's gaze and its after-effects:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects...And all these movements [of protection, avoidance, compliance, cooperation] are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of myself as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world- such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world- definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (1967:82)

In this scenario, Fanon scares a white blonde child who he encounters in public space. Without falter, the child cried out to his mother, "Look mama, a Negro! I'm frightened," instantly naming that which society had educated him to feel toward Black bodies: instinctive, absolute fear. Fanon explained how others' fear can leave psycho-social and visceral imprints on the perceived subject, who is subsequently thrown into lasting self-doubt. As Fanon illustrates, gazes and their meanings bend to time, space and present company, revealing much about common assumptions regarding legitimate presence and power.

Applying the gaze's affective potential to media realms, Ginsburg highlights connections between media and social worlds in her assertion that "the quality of work is judged by its capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create *certain social*

relations...[and] to draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations” (1994:368, emphasis added). Akin to Ginsburg, I underscore that media and social production are co-constitutive, charging the bridging arena of gazing with transformative potential.

During the Q&A session described above, the panelists and moderators redirected gazes several times throughout the night, symbolically challenging the naturalized, unidirectional gaze described above. Hence, they enacted an argument that ‘gazes’ and ‘gazing’ are not the inherent real estate of a socially unmarked elite, but could emerge and evolve as relations highly contingent on surrounding environments, politics, and audiences. Irreducible to a single gaze, several directions, capacities and semiotics of gazing took place during the aforementioned Q&A. First, audience members gazed, and were directed to gaze (via a lit screen and forward-facing seats, see Barthes [1986]) to absorb and interpret the five films screened- a mentally active but not necessarily interactive series of events. Next, for the first half of the Q&A, panelists and moderator sat before a room, facing the audience head-on as they conversed amongst themselves. This set-up acknowledged the audience more so than an inanimate screen could, but did not yet involve their direct input and intervention. The panelists and moderator looked to and spoke amongst themselves, serving another possible purpose of demonstrating for the audience the kinds of empowering solace that could be found in like-minded people with shared work communities and values.

Finally, for the latter half of the Q&A, the moderator welcomed these spectators as active participants. As such, they could openly pose questions to the entire panel or certain panelists about their works and words, again shifting and broadening the dynamic

but now to promote encounters that could involve all in the space or could be directed to a panelist(s) of one's choosing. Across these formulations, gazes swelled, retracted, redirected and morphed between event attendees in a relatively amicable environment that included mostly people whose interest, availability, and actual want to be present and contribute to this collaborative session had prompted them to stay.

Slavery and Beyond: Mediated Stereotypes as Racial Stratification

Aspiring creatives of color have problematic relations with 'the gaze,' which have recycled and circulated oftentimes hostile media representations and broader social environments that subjected them to the at-times predatory, voyeuristic gazes of people above them on the ladders of colonial-imperialism. From missionaries' initial sightings of non-Western 'Others', Europeans prepared other Westerners for the 'necessary' violence of Empire through various looking acts such as daguerreotypes, Natural History museums that exhibited pygmies and orangutans in the same cages, tribal displays at World fairs, and 'freak shows' such as that which toured Afrikaan woman Sarah Baartman (Magubane 2001). Reinforcing ideologies that shaped Euro-American ways of gazing upon others for centuries to come, many archival documents have recalled white sailors, missionaries and other travelers 'valiantly' venturing to and saving Third World nations from themselves—deemed subhuman, exploitable, and in need of rescue— via installation of Western norms, beliefs, perspectives and- sneakily- financial interests. Colonizers weaponized "the gaze" in pursuits of world domination. Supported by gender norms that attributed innovation and rationality to men, and racial norms that framed whiteness as intellectually and socially superior, gazes undergirded actions as dire as the Berlin Conference and the Transnational Slave Trade.

Fundamentally, U.S. slavery depended on power imbalances signified and enabled through gazes that infantilized dark-skinned ‘Others’. Alongside corporeal and material abuses used to beat Black bodies into submission, many whites invested in the institution of slavery also resented slaves looking them in the eyes (Mirzoeff 2011a & 2011b, Gaines 1986), as looking relations were understood to both establish and reflect power relations. Even in the contemporary U.S. context, certain looks from certain people are still deemed disrespectful and worthy of punishment: a trend sadly resonant with Stop-and-Frisk policies that criminalize Black bodies for no wrongdoing other than making eye contact with the wrong person, or being perceived by another as threatening³⁰. Slavery’s racialized and ideological dogmas—imprinted in gazes— left an indelible mark not to be quickly sloughed off.

Entanglements of Race, Media and Authority

Even after Black people no longer lived in formal bondage, many whites were not ready to give up the privileges and visions of superiority they had been raised to know as their birthright. Convictions of white superiority did not just survive into the Reconstruction Era. As explained in Marlon Riggs’ 1986 documentary *Ethnic Notions*, whites of the antebellum South maintained discriminate gazes on Blackness as lazy, inept, hypersexual, bossy, greedy, and sinful through dominant visual discourse. Late 19th-century U.S. popular culture (i.e. cartoons, movies, and songs among other types) encouraged the mass mediated commercialization of Black stock caricatures to hyperbolize those traits that many perceived as evidence of Black pathology and deficit.

³⁰ On April 12, 2015, Black 25 year old Freddie Gray died after being arrested for an allegedly illegal knife and falling into a coma while in police custody. Protests sparked soon thereafter, as local residents believed his death to be the result of police brutality after he supposedly ‘looked at an officer wrong’.

The lascivious and seductive Jezebel, rotund and jollily servile Mammy, mindless dancing child Topsy and overbearing Sapphire of the New Deal era emerged as four such stereotypes to bite deep into U.S. consciousness and maintain their hold for generations.

By no means coincidental, such images emerged at pivotal historical moments in resistance to Black progress, as they worked to bypass structural critique and to dismiss, excuse and/or moralize the routine abuse of Black people. As Leith Mullings describes, “While the Jezebel image functioned to excuse miscegenation and sexual assault, the Mammy image functioned to endorse, rationalize, and justify slavery” (1994:269). Such myths took on material form and phenomenological life via media’s mass reach. To validate continued discrimination, these stereotypes surged in print and moving images, subliminally buttressing white people’s apprehensions towards freed Black people in public space. Creators used press, cartoons and later sound, camera framing, and lighting equipment and other methods to erect a technical leg of the gaze that could subconsciously introduce viewers to archetypes of deviant Black bodies and helpless women (Riggs 1986). With this ammunition, people could cast biased gazes on social Others without the latter’s presence or insight. So potentiated, ‘the gaze’ constructed not only an uneven material encounter, but a technological, social, embodied, and symbolic show of one’s capacity to exercise representational authority.

Since movie-going gained momentum as a middle-class pastime in the early 20th century media, authoritative regimes, media systems, and racial hierarchies have co-evolved as mutually reinforcing. Film’s nascence as general U.S. public pastime paralleled the rise of Boasian anthropology as well as white supremacists’ retaliatory acts against Reconstruction via lynching and other injurious acts (Giddings 2008). A notable

product of this era, the 1915 premiere of the U.S.' first theatrical feature-length film, David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, merged technological advancements with racial-gendered hierarchies to variant reactions of shock, praise, and disgust. In the three-hour-long silent film, a white young man witnesses his family and community members (all white as well) be disrespected, mistreated, and violated by rambunctious and uninhibited freedmen³¹. One subplot shows a trusted Black politician (played by a white actor in 'blackface'³²) stealing constituents' money. Another watches a sexually ravenous black man (also a white actor in 'blackface') pursue a white, blonde, innocent, and inexperienced young woman. Eventually, she leaps from a cliff, risking her life to escape his clutches which would presumably be a fate worse than death. The film concludes with the male protagonist donning a white hood and mounting a horse as a heroic Ku Klux Klan member. Along with his 'compatriots', the man rides intrepidly through town to save its citizens from thoughtless, wild freedmen unwilling to stay in their 'proper' place.

A landmark release, *Birth* still holds a special, albeit contentious place in U.S. film history. It was lauded for its groundbreaking storytelling and cinematic techniques (e.g. the close up, toggling between scenes to imply simultaneity of events, and so on). Its market success led it to become the first film screened at the White House, then for president Woodrow Wilson. However, its problematic depictions of U.S. race relations also inspired NAACP protests that called for screening bans, and for the production of counter-portrayals challenging the works' slanderous representations and potential social

³¹ 'Freedmen' is the term used throughout Reconstruction to refer to formerly enslaved- or 'freed'- persons, mostly of African descent, post-Emancipation.

³² Blackface is the practice, derivative of and still associated with minstrelsy, of a non-Black person putting black paint all over their face to evoke and perform an exaggerated, often denigrating version of Blackness.

effects. As historian Thomas Cripps writes of this moment, “Griffith’s picture had produced hasty decisions, nationwide protests, and more direct action than anyone in the black leadership had ever contemplated. Blacks never debated whether to stand and fight it, but rather how” (1993:70). Similarly, J. Ronald Green asserted, “*Birth of a Nation*...[its] cinematic spectacle and provocatively expressionistic editing were being experienced as an attack on the black community” (2000:6).

Perspectives on a Nation: Race Films and Masculinist Privilege

Whether referring to its oscillating frames edited to indicate dialogue between on-screen characters, or to audiences’ varied attitudes about it upon consumption, gazes eternalized by Griffith’s infamous film both channeled and challenged ideologies of its time. Moreover, it inspired his Black contemporaries to address matters of racial (in)authenticity and complexity by making their own films. Amidst a burgeoning media environment invested ideologically and monetarily in social hierarchies, Black media makers aimed to show Black families, relationships, and hopes not as innately doomed or devilish, but as nuanced in their humanity. While I hesitate to suggest that these films ‘humanized’ Black people (for Black people were always human, no matter their changing legal or political classifications over time), these film makers adapted existing production knowledges to accommodate smaller budgets, remix mainstream techniques with experimental ones, and display variable expressions and capacities of Blackness through the very audiovisual media formats used to denigrate them: a form of ‘looking back’ (Rony 1996).

To recognize Black creators' media achievements, several scholars have chronicled race films³³ and Black film more generally as a credible and necessary historical repertoire. Among these are Henry T. Sampson's *Black in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (1995 [1977]), Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993), Mark A. Reid's *Redefining Black Film* (1993), Manthia Diawara's edited volume *Black American Cinema* (1993), and Michele Wallace's *Black Popular Culture* (2003).

"Race films" also merged around this historical moment, including *Ebony Film Company* (1915), the black-owned *Lincoln Motion Picture Company* (1916), and *Micheaux Book & Film Company* (1919)³⁴. In terms of individuals, many historically revisionist accounts name William D. Foster and Oscar Micheaux as two formative figures of U.S. Black film's 'first wave' in the early 20th century³⁵. Both of these men wrote, casted, directed, and distributed films for Black audiences specifically. Foster was the first Black man to establish a U.S. film production company (during Reconstruction and its backlash, but interestingly before *Birth*'s release though molded by similar conversations and social climates). Foster's silent comedy *The Railroad Porter* (1913) integrated archival footage of a black YMCA parade to exhibit actual recorded examples of Black unity and collective uplift. However, perhaps more well-known in Black film history, Micheaux directed more than forty films, all of which featured all-Black casts

³³ Race films is a term used to refer to those films produced between approximately 1915 and 1950 (discussed by some as Black film's 'first wave'). Result of segregationist rules that kept Blacks out of 'white' theatres, these films are characterized by all-Black casts, culturally relevant themes, and Black target audiences.

³⁴ See "Period Responses to Birth of a Nation," https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v14n1/gallery/micheaux_o/intro_page.shtml

³⁵ See Jae Jones' "William D. Foster: Influential Movie Producer of the Black Film Industry," (2017) <https://blackthen.com/william-d-foster-influential-movie-producer-black-film-industry/>

and social themes particular to U.S. Black communities and histories. Complicating essentialist convictions of Black deviance, violence, and incompetence, Micheaux's first film *The Homesteader* (1918)³⁶ tells of a black pioneer's move out West (e.g. propriety, ownership, romance), and his second *Within Our Gates* (1920) follows the daily struggles of a mixed-race (half black, half white) schoolteacher (e.g. colorism, urbanity, cultural and social capital). To a large degree, Black audiences of the time celebrated the different, more culturally sophisticated perspectives that these films offered, especially amidst the contentious racial politics at that time.

While their accomplishments shifted the nation's media landscape and should not be neglected, I find it irresponsible to overlook the predominantly masculinist tone of most scholarship about this nascent period of Black media development. I came across Micheaux's name several times during research but did not see the name of his instrumental colleague Alice B. Russell until much later. Before conducting research explicitly on Black women producers, I had also never heard of Eloyce King Patrick Gist, who has been named by some as the first Black American woman film director. She and husband James Gist co-wrote, co-produced, and co-directed Christian shorts *Hell Bound Train* (1929-30) which condemns gambling, adultery and other sinful behaviors happening on a train to Hell; and *Verdict Not Guilty* (1930-33) which centers an unmarried woman who dies giving birth and is put on trial for entry to Heaven. Screened as part of the interactive education model of Gists' travelling ministry, these films have largely fallen through the cracks of public memory. Maybe the film was more pedagogical and less widely entertaining than its mainstream counterparts. However, I

³⁶ This film was an adaptation of Micheaux's own fiction novel, *The Conquest*.

also attribute part of Eloyce Gist's general invisibility to media environments unable to make sense of her authoritative role in the creative and technical sectors of film production.

But where are the women?: Looking into a Politics of Looking

In thinking on gazing as a powerful and power-full act, I also note the power of absence. Black women were background actors in Griffith's portrayal. Its two sole Black female characters were cinematic reproductions of Mammy and Topsy and were scarcely seen in scenes together. Neither had a crucial role in the film's plot, if only to compliment and complement white grace and authority.

Despite progressive intentions, most Black film history texts primarily lift up men's accolades, leaving Black women out of consideration. On the one hand, projects from men such as Micheaux's and Foster's vied to depict diverse intentions and possibilities for Black people, and their redemptive plotlines did much to confound dominant racial imageries. However, Black women still appeared in conventional mother and daughter roles, or faced punishment for subverting the Black heterosexual nuclear domestic unit that many saw as a notable gain after slavery's disregard for families of the enslaved (White 1990). Risking 'race baiter' labels, critics (many of them, women of color) rose to contend that racial interventions were being made at the expense of progress on fronts of gender and sexuality (White 1990). The masculinist slant to archival documentation has remained relatively steadfast, as it also pervaded the 1990s resurgence of Black film via celebrations of one of the most famous Black directors in contemporary public consciousness: Spike Lee, director of *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Crooklyn* (1994), and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). bell hooks (1992). Jacquie Jones (included in Diawara's

1993 edited volume), and other scholars have expressed irritation with Lee's representation of Black women's sexuality, revealing gender to be an unresolved issue. Although she does not pay adequate attention to race or other social axes, Mary Ann Doane pinpoints the masculinist assumptions of 'the gaze,' and media's implicit presumption of male control and oxymoronic expectations of 'woman':

...The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyphic, the picture, the image- the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theatre of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not for her. For she is the problem...On the one hand, the hieroglyphic is summoned, particularly when it merges with a discourse on the woman, to connote an indecipherable language, a signifying system which denies its own function by failing to signify anything to the uninitiated, to those who do not hold the key. In this sense, the hieroglyphic, like the woman, harbours a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness. On the other hand, the hieroglyphic is the most readable of languages. Its immediacy, its accessibility are functions of its status as a pictorial language, a writing in images. For the image is theorized in terms of a certain closeness, the lack of a distance or gap between sign and referent. (1982:96)

Defined by her contradictions, this hypothetical woman posited by Doane is both indecipherable and openly accessible. People do not know this 'woman' on her own accord, but as interpreted through their prejudgments. Her hypothetical woman's mystery and subsequent over-definition by external parties speaks to and would likely only grow more complicated with the introduction of race, class and other factors into the equation. Along similar lines, Black women media makers often labor amidst paradoxical conditions of being seen as excessive and hypervisible in others' works (i.e. loud or sex-hungry or bossy characters), yet invisible in terms of outsiders' abilities to accept them as individuals and media makers in their own rights. Film student and director in her 20s Danielle (revisited in Chapter 2) opined on this painful Catch-22 during an interview as she waited for film footage to upload from her external hard-drive onto a desktop computer:

Being a black woman in a male dominated profession, and white dominated...It makes me feel, it makes me feel empowered but also it feels like I'm in a land of destruction because you know I don't feel like I'm supported, or that my work is valued to a lot of people because it's not what they would say or they don't want to put race or politics or things that are real into their work. They'd rather talk about dogs, you know... or some random place whereas for me, I want to make my audience feel what I'm feeling too and talk about some real shit that is real. (Interview, 2015)

For Danielle, visibilizing social backgrounds, experiences and consciousness should not demand that one relinquish their argumentative integrity. Rather, melding personal and professional details can bequeath unto products intricacies of depth and scope that are enriched all the more by creators' familiarity with the lived effects of social divides.

“The Outsider Within”: Encounters of Difference in Tolerant Spaces

In climates where their talents impressed but their physical bodies stirred doubt and evoked tolerance – implying that others ‘put up with’ their presence– rather than acceptance (Hage 2000 [1998]), many Black women media makers learned and embodied self-protective practices as strategically aware ‘outsiders within’ (Collins 2000:10-11, 72-73, 184-185). Analyzing routines of expression, interaction, and protection that Black women have adopted to withstand socio-political struggle, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality- their ‘outsider within’ status- to produce...a special standpoint on self, family, and society” (1986:S14). Here, Collins emphasizes the inextricability of intimacy and labor in such encounters no matter how fervently they may be denied. She brings up Black maids’ maternal yet commodified employ in white households as one historical iteration of Black women’s invisibilized centrality in U.S. systems of socio-economic power.

Most of my interlocutors knew that visibility did not inherently and immediately bring progress. In fact, mere visibility could get in the way of reception. Several

interviewees stressed the common problem of viewers assuming media products as direct reflections of their creators' politics, whether or not their media content directly addressed race or gender. Black women came to understand that interfaces between them and potential investors, publicists, press representatives and/or 'allies' meant subjecting their doubly marked bodies to stereotypes potentially embedded in others' assessments, misrecognitions and microaggressions³⁷.

Research participants garnered inspiration as well as aggravation from experiences with the underside of social categorization. From discrimination, many were able to hone innovative ways of seeing and- via sufficient training and experience- representing society (Mullings 1994). Not only did these women work in production, but they also watched and were thus familiar with the images and imaginaries swaying public opinion. As bell hooks describes this dual capacity of Black women as both hypothetical objects of gazes and spectators looking back (also see, Rony 1996),

...All attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. (2003:94)

Living at such intersections heralded insight, as many strove to challenge entrenched hierarchies (or structural needs for hierarchization altogether), expose discursive farces, and (if among their intentions, for not all were overtly political) offer

³⁷ Originally coined in the 1970s by Chester Pierce, microaggressions is a term used to point out and address "the everyday subtle and automatic 'put-downs' and insults directed toward Black Americans...while his [Pierce's] theorizing focused solely on racial microaggressions, it is clear that microaggressions can be expressed toward any marginalized group in our society; they can be gender-based, sexual orientation-based, class-based, or disability-based" (Sue 2010).

alternatives that pushed others to think differently or reflect critically on their lives and positions in society (Rony 1996).

Paradox within a Civil Rights Commission: A Case Study

To demonstrate how stratified realities and frustrations wrought from blindness to intersectionality can fuel creative projects (and foundations for one's authority), I turn my attention to Kai, a middle-aged Black woman and corporate America employee turned private nonprofit consultant and aspiring director. From the start of the interview I conducted with Kai in 2013, she denounced hypocrisies between what people said and how they acted. Perhaps Powdermaker was right in saying, "The level of frustration was high, and frustrated people love to talk." (1950:6). At one point during our chat in a Whole Foods dining area, Kai brought up in discussion and began to situate *Fruitvale Station*³⁸, a film she had reluctantly seen with a friend the evening before:

There are a very few number of filmmakers who really have reached a pinnacle of success and fame and autonomy. Do what they want to do financially and have the money to do it. So, um which actually, you know, I was very happy to see there's a director of *Fruitvale Station* [Ryan Coogler]. I saw that yesterday. Um I had to wait a little bit because I'm still very angry with Zimmerman so um I...A friend of mine and I were talking, we were gonna go see *Fruitvale* or not. And I said I knew I was going to get angry. [laughs] So we wound up seeing it and of course I cried at the end. It's just a never-ending cycle.

You know, for me that's another story I wanna tell! History is repeating itself and I want to be able to at least educate our young to know that this is not new. This is the history of this country. If you're aware of that, then there's certain things that you need to do in order to recognize that this is um, this will continue if you don't do something and I'm not sure yet what 'do something' means but there needs to be more respect for ourselves as well.

³⁸ *Fruitvale Station* is a 2013 biopic directed by Ryan Coogler and starring Michael B. Jordan as Oliver Grant. The film portrays the last day of real-life homicide victim Grant's life before he was shot and killed by a police officer in Oakland, California's Fruitvale metro station. The cop claimed that he mistook his gun for a taser and ultimately spent only a combined 365 days in prison, spurring protests by Black Americans and their allies.

Incorporating marginality, creativity, and embodied knowledge into her next steps as a film professional, Kai made moves evocative of Collins' 'outsider within'. She held concurrent awareness of the promise that Coogler presented to media making domains, and the dishearteningly repetitive trend of events not very different from the murder narrativized in Coogler's film. Eighteen minutes into her meandering reply to my same first question "What got you into film?", Kai transitioned to talk about yet another annoying confrontation with socially paradoxical ignorance:

I'm on this Civil Rights Commission [in Montclair] ... we had a meeting a couple weeks ago...there was, I was the only African American. Um, and the rest were two white women and about four white [men]. And the whole conversation was about how do we address this Zimmerman verdict, how do we respond. And before I came on the commission, they had sent out a letter that they were against what had happened and so on. I'm saying all of this to say what my passions are and to say why they're justified. This white male commissioner says to me, you know things have changed. We've come a long way- [insert from real-time Kai] I'm getting tired of hearing that one too- and I said no, things have not changed. And he says 'Yes they have!' You know, the arrogance of telling me things have changed in my community or things have changed in regards to me as an African American woman. I think that's very arrogant. He's just sitting there as a white man...very different lenses. So-- he said, "well you know, I'll give you an example. Decades ago there was a young man who had gotten a flower for a white girl and as a result the town of white men took the child and drowned him in front of his father, killed him in front of his father because of it." So, I stop him [and reply] "So what you're telling me is because the method of killing our children has changed, the outcome isn't still the same? A child is [still] dead.

Kai's practically breathless stream-of-consciousness monologue recalled a memorable conversation with the commissioner of a public interests committee on which she also sat. Its irony baffled her. Though likely well-meaning, this liberal white male associate entrusted by city residents to hash out and offer public statements on political affairs performed 'colorblind racism' (Bonilla-Silva 2018) insofar as he discounted and dismissed Kai's articulation of her lived experiences, and those of her fellow community members. Kai's comment leaned into the interaction's stratified realities and was laced

with Paul Gilroy's 'changing same' (1993:122). Kai's clarification that 'a child is [still] dead' aimed to highlight the various ways that a single racialized event can imprint public memory, and with what sense of ephemerality or permanence. For Kai, the murder defied taught linear teleology of racial education and progress amidst U.S. society's extensive range of meritocratic opportunities. Instead, she described structures and pathways through which comparable incidents- homicides by police, incarceration rates, high unemployment, housing precarity and inequality, schooling crises- happened over and over again.

Applying different modes of rationalization, Kai and the man in question processed Black death through their personal ideas on and investments in race's current societal impact and stakes. Despite present work that involved addressing yet another unpunished slaying of a young Black person (Trayvon Martin), the man nurtured a palpable internal disconnect between incident and structure, exception and norm, discourse and action. Kai reported that he decried Zimmerman's³⁹ crime only to turn around and earnestly suggest that things have changed. To be clear, the conflict between them did not concern whether things had changed or not, because they certainly had. Slavery was no longer an upfront and legalized U.S. institution. Rather, their core dissension stemmed from differing visions of what change ought to look like, and what degree of change was acceptable. Once again, stratified realities surfaced, allowing the man to isolate moments such as Emancipation or the referenced homicide as symbols of a worse racism long gone.

³⁹ On February 26, 2012, neighborhood-watch volunteer George Zimmerman confronted unarmed Trayvon Martin as he walked back to his family's residence and ended up fatally shooting him. More than six weeks later, Zimmerman was arrested, claiming self-defense via Florida's 'Stand Your Ground' law. After a nationally trying trial, he was acquitted of all charges, provoking national protests that would echo for years vis-à-vis #BlackLivesMatter especially after Michael Brown's murder at the hands of police two years later.

By contrast, Kai could not neglect the shapeshifting yet ultimately contiguous experiences of alienation and abuse suffered by Black bodies at the hands of powerful white men (or persons authorized by and through whiteness) over the course of centuries (Alexander 2012). Cultural discourses around, and ways of experiencing and reading time differed between the commissioner, who trusted that America's founding tenets would and more often than not did mirror its lived realities (sequestering violent incidents as exceptional and not reflective of U.S. values), and Kai, whose lived encounters of discrimination made her highly aware and critical of socio-political difference.

Like Kai, several interviewees described misunderstandings with non-Black and/or non-women colleagues, which they heard as excuses or denials of deep-rooted structural violence and alternative temporalities that produced and keep producing America. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says in *Racism without Racists*, "I contend that whites have developed powerful explanations- which have ultimately become justifications- for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color" (2018:2). In the face of contemporary U.S. racial dynamics, such stratified ways of learning and acting only amplified the social, political and felt invisibilities that participants not discerned as psychological and behavioral challenges.

Conclusion: Double Standards, Embodied Knowledge and The Gaze

Though often taken for granted and/or arranged behind closed doors, authority is not an innately possessed skill. It is one generally associated with certain cultural capital, and one that must be learned through firsthand encounters with formal institutions, interpersonal relations, and normative discourse. In that and all chapters to follow, this

dissertation engages media making is an embodied process that has to do as much with considerations of social perception, fragile claims to authority, and forging spaces of acceptance and comfort as it does with more technical elements of media education and production. National hierarchies, characteristics of race, gender, and class among other markers of U.S. cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) have come to index authoritative capacity and legitimacy of vision without a word needing to be spoken outright.

First, this chapter proposed ‘the gaze’ as a useful ethnographic analytic for studying the many tensions, personalities and demographics at play in contemporary Black women’s media making journeys to establish authority. The chapter utilized historical study of the gaze, framing it as a multifaceted practice composed of a wider constellation of persons, presumptions, perceptions, and production strategies that comprise media making. Countering reports on Black success, and oppositely on Black death, that claim exceptionalism to evoke surprise, I argue— in agreement with numerous black scholars, political correspondents and Black Lives Matter protestors across numerous cities—that perceptions and treatments of Black people should be read within continuous (albeit shifting) histories that have regularly- though without empirical basis- denounced Blackness as inferior and incapable (Alexander 2012, West 2000).

Therefore, rather than allowing visions and notions of Black womanhood to float about amorphously, I take steps to situate them in events and trends that recognize, connect, and ground them in communities of association, embodied knowledge, and support (i.e. friendships, collaborations, investors, publicists/distributors etc.). It is crucial to acknowledge Black women’s general social location as a population upon whom marginalizing factors of Blackness, womanhood, and greater chances of unemployment

or lesser pay have shaped many of their ideas of what success could look like for them, what obstacles to expect, and how best to navigate production landscapes.

This chapter argued that media production is a process in which the visual, structural, and socio-political stakes of racialized gender hierarchies coalesce and morph most conspicuously; presenting a domain in which formerly represented have become representors. For instance, scholars point out *Birth's* veneration of the Ku Klux Klan as a project constructed to retaliate against growing social mobility and possibility for the formerly enslaved. Once again, great weight lay in how, when, and to what degree parties can look at, perceive, and presume items of others; and to what extent their sights can and do yield action.

Many photographers, film and video artists, distribution strategists and social media content creators I worked with acquired knowledge of these histories either in school or through experiences in their own lives, which made occasional injustices less surprising and more unfortunately expected. As both media makers and U.S. residents, these women had become accustomed to a range of conditions and expectations that distinguished their work and life possibilities from, and positioned them as lesser than other social groups. Hence, they constantly faced situations that implicitly nudged them to straddle categories, bringing about paradoxically concurrent statuses of belonging and non-belonging that made others' expectations of them specific in some ways yet unperceivably vague in others (Doane 1982). Attempting to undercut this process, Black women drew on their multiple identities to craft personal, constantly shifting modes of self-identification and alignment to raise funds and foster networks across communities of engagement.

The following chapter will emphasize an always-existent human agency (i.e. principles, compromise, compassion, energy) in a present-day context dominated by intellectual discourses of ‘post-humanism’ and technological determinism. To do so, it will frame media-making not as a background to its final product, but as a series of processes, encounters, and internal conversations of reckoning through which six different Black women artists worked to comprehend social disparities for themselves and/or for audiences. Examining first institutional steps into authority and its constitution as a raced and gendered U.S. phenomenon, it will ask ‘what does authority mean, look like and entail for aspiring and established Black women media makers?’

CHAPTER 2:

“Not Built for Us”: Cultivating Authoritative Practices and Public Image

“Become what you don’t see...” – Yasmin, Participant, Interview, 2016

“She has this fear/that she’s an image/that comes and goes/ clearing and darkening/ the fear that she’s the dreamwork inside someone else’s skull/ she has this fear.”

– Gloria Anzaldua, 1987, Page 43

“But I feel like it’s a harder path being a woman of color, a path that was never meant for anyone outside of being white. Sometimes I feel like it’s superficial because it’s very based upon how you look and not necessarily what you know. I could have skills being the best D.P.⁴⁰ in the world, but because – just because of this, just because of my skin color people want to view me: ‘Oh you couldn’t possibly know how to edit or you don’t know how to use the camera.’ And it’s just, it’s hard and I feel that in a larger sense, people of color have learned how to censor themselves in white space... all for the sake of getting along.”

– Danielle, Participant, Interview, 2016

Project Greenlight: A Tale of Two Perspectives

The television series *Project Greenlight* premiered its fourth season in September 2015 after a hiatus. The show followed co-executives Matt Damon and fellow white male celebrity actor Ben Affleck as they invested in a chosen independent film project not only with money but also with a team composed of notable industry producers and crew members. According to *Indiewire* (Thompson 2015), Adaptive Studios partners Perrin Childs and Marc Joubert, the latter of whom knew Damon and Affleck from *Greenlight*’s past life at Miramax, wanted to revive the show. Eventually, they managed to do so with a screenplay entitled “Not Such a Pretty Woman.”

The script, and thus the film to be derived from it, included black prostitutes: the main detail that would set this entire confrontation in motion. One of the professionals recruited to work on this team was Effie Brown, a Hollywood producer whose host of accomplishments technically validated her insights during a team brainstorming session

⁴⁰ D.P. is shorthand for Director of Photography in film and video fields.

about which directors to hire from the applicant pool. However, when Brown dared to comment on issues of race and gender, her legitimacy seemed to plummet in Damon's eyes. Brown advocated for a white woman/Vietnamese-American man directorial duo in part because she believed that the subject matter might be more complexly served by directors able to draw on their own personal non-white and/or non-male experiences of the world. However, as Damon memorably objected, "When we're talking about diversity, you do it in the casting of the film, not in the casting of the show." At the time, Brown could do little more than muster an exasperated 'Wow'.

Anything but silent, critics leapt to Brown's defense on social media after the episode aired to denounce what many have since interpreted as Damon's insulting ignorance. The episode let viewers in on an instance of racialized 'mansplaining' in which Damon (secure in his fame) found it appropriate to lecture Brown (who happened to be a Black woman) about his distinguishing between what went on in front of the camera and what happened behind it. Diversity, as Damon preached (for which he later issued a public 'apology' and clarification attempt), was a performance arranged and put on primarily for audiences' sake. Therefore, the demographics of people working behind the scenes did not matter. In contrast with industry insiders who have publicly said that diversity should be an indispensable consideration in Hollywood's representational and hiring practices (actresses Geena Davis, Lucy Liu, and Viola Davis among them⁴¹),

⁴¹ For more information on Davis, Liu and Davis' comments on gender and/or racial inequality in Hollywood, see:

- <https://seejane.org> (Geena Davis on media's gender inequality),
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/movies/asian-american-actors-are-fighting-for-visibility-they-will-not-be-ignored.html> (Liu and various other Asian American actors), and

Damon's retort appeared both aggressive and regressive in its implication that the presence of people of different ethnic, religious, gender and other backgrounds had no relevance and stood to wield no discernible impact in behind-the-scenes production processes and decision-making.

The event was troubling, as were elements of public response. Matter-of-fact assertions of 'colorblind' media professionalism such as Damon's are so common that most proceed under the radar, skewing likelihoods of success to favor certain (read: racialized, gendered, classed and so on) people's projects and careers. Furthermore, even in the rare case that such wrongs were outed (as in the case of this blowup), most online pop culture essayists and commenting laypeople raged in ways that framed such incidents as exceptional. As has been contended in all chapters preceding this one, exceptionalism deters general comprehension that such acts of dismissal are symptomatic of structural histories and divides.

The resounding silence of Brown's astonishment reminded people, if only for a moment, that Hollywood is not only an aspirational project celebrated and envied the world over. It is also a huge business, a corporate machine that materially shapes relations and imaginaries and abets presumptions of who can and/or should be thought capable of filmmaking prowess (i.e. conceptualization, production, distribution). Brown and Damon's face-off revealed some of the ills still harbored in mainstream media professional cultures, specifically as they concern systems of power and privilege that encourage holders of cultural capital to feel safe and entitled in labelling and discounting

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- <http://www.etonline.com/viola-davis-says-if-hollywood-wants-to-call-her-the-black-meryl-streep-they-better-pay-me-what-im> (Viola Davis commentary on unequal pay of white actress counterparts)

others. Brown's suggestion that people's personal experiences of social rifts may influence- and even benefit- their media work seemed to offend Damon, as he was a man likely unacquainted with such social locations.

Mentioned by a research participant in irritation and collective identification of 'us' (she and I) with Brown, the *Greenlight* exchange, or lack thereof, was but one example of the climate and concerns fueling this chapter's critical investigation of how producers with socially marked and composite identities learn to ascertain, bend, and/or reimagine the dominant ideologies, norms and assumptions guiding imaginaries of authority in U.S. independent media production. This chapter examines this dissertation's central claim in practice by tracing authority-making as a process that requires creators to first learn how to sense and then adapt to and/or adjust field politics and discourses into personally cultivated presentations. In order to position authority as a shifting and relational assertion built up and torn down through series of interactions with others, I analyze how five women at different periods of life and with different levels of exposure to media production spaces ascertain and then integrate and/or amend dominant media norms. To move forward in media production, this transgenerational sampling of media makers must assess and develop strategies for navigating already ideologically entangled media infrastructures of technology, economy, and expectation.

Power Revisited: Investigating Two Features of Authority

For media makers I worked with, to be viewed as a valid authority figure meant being seen by others (i.e. investors, colleagues, audiences) as a creative, business-minded, and reliable person whose project concepts, visions, initiatives, and orders could be taken seriously. Such marginalized approaches to authority-making flexibly combine

two ‘features’ whose proportions varied depending on immediate spaces, situations and audience(s) at hand. Though inseparable in practice, these two heuristic features center decision-making power over others and lived experience respectively.

On one hand, authority generally refers to a person’s or group’s ability to lead an organized group of people and have their orders both heard and followed. Frequently associated with abstract parties (i.e. ‘the state,’ ‘the elite,’ ‘the Man’), authority derives from and depends on one entity’s ability to wield administrative and/or creative power over others. In media, this authoritative feature involves one’s leadership⁴² skills, training, degrees and other credentials, years of experience, and project position(s) (i.e. director, producer, cinematographer, and so on). Building on this Weberian contemplation of obedience (Introduction), this chapter complicates authority by tracing its manufacture as a communicative event shaped by one’s socio-political standings and audience at a given point in time. Sometimes, for instance, authority could bend, jump, transfer and even be dialogically co-produced by colleagues with different strengths (i.e. knowledge, skills, previous experience, *and other circumstances*) in order to best handle whatever immediate situation was at hand (further illuminated in Chapter 4).

In referring to the ‘other circumstances’ parenthetical catch-all in the above paragraph, I shift to consider *lived experience* as a second heuristic feature of the authority forged by these creators. Authority encompasses much more than technical elements of knowing, training, and leading. Throughout my research period, several

⁴² Leadership and authority are related but different terms. Leadership refers to skill sets of someone in a head role: content and casting decisions, selection of which investors to approach, and so on. Authority more so centers powers of delegation, emplaced trust, and control, especially as they concern having one’s orders respected and carried by recipients. Authority also transcends the active production situations, needing also to convince and legitimately treated by audiences, press interviewers, etc.

participants recalled times in which they felt that grant gatekeepers and audiences underestimated if not undermined their authority based on their own pre-existing racialized, gendered and classed assumptions. Beyond conspicuous displays of racialized disgust and/or discrimination, many also attested to having faced occupational prejudice vis-a-vis tacitly enduring but for them unattainable standards of affluent white heterosexual masculinity.

Made aware of such dynamics through personal experience, friend circles, and/or mentors' warnings, media makers worked constantly to refine personal methods for judging and cultivating alternative pathways toward authority-making that considered not only how to demonstrate competence, but also how to take account of the possible effects of socio-cultural backgrounds and politics (actual or projected) on their professional interactions. In fact, many participants consciously refused to curb or mask the influence of social realities on their works. In deliberating over their project themes, aesthetic decisions, team composition, and target markers, these media creators believed that their intimate knowledge of marginalized social locations brought not only struggle, but also useful lessons that could help them prepare for opinions and obstacles they were likely to encounter throughout their media careers. They carried stressful experiences as badges that strengthened and equipped them with wisdom to which others may not have been disposed or even aware. This chapter investigates how harmonies and dissonances between these two authoritative 'features' sharpened for practitioners over time and with practice, enabling them to more efficiently anticipate, strategize, and deploy their own authoritative performances.

Furthermore, these five women show that diversity exists amongst not only Black women, but also – specific to this dissertation – Black women media makers. Diversity also radiated from their varied approaches concerning what behavioral and physical expressions might best serve them in managing the expectations of various people, organizations, and community members, and how to adjust some and unyieldingly hold onto other personal goals along the way. While some were more adept than others in knowing how to cope and respond, all five women experienced authority-making as a practice that was never guaranteed and never mistaken as a solely democratic project. Rather, it was a constantly (re)negotiated matrix of networks, claims, evasions, headspaces, personalities, conducts, and appearances through which they primed themselves to confront the many facets of media’s uneven power structures.

In defense of Black women creators, DuVernay has ‘clapped back at’ – or openly denounced – demands that they must elevate one authoritative feature (either decision-making power or lived experience) at the other’s expense. She also contested notions that Black women are incapable of authority’s technical elements, or wrong to claim the potency of authority’s ontological side. Not only did she practice what she preached by founding a distribution company (ARRAY⁴³), but she has also made this point at numerous engagements, including an interview with the online independent film news platform *Indiewire*:

Any film that you see that has any progressive spirits, that is made by any people of color or a woman, is a triumph, in and of itself. Whether you agree with it or not. Something that comes with some point of view and some personal perspective from a woman or a person of color, is a unicorn... When you just

⁴³ “ARRAY, founded in 2010 by *Ava DuVernay* as the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement (*AFFRM*), is a community-based distribution collective dedicated to the amplification of films by people of color and women filmmakers” (<http://www.avaduvernay.com/array/>)

imagine that there's one type of voice that's really being pushed to the forefront is the white male voice. In terms of cinema, it's really clear that the rest of us are locked out. So, it becomes imperative that people – audiences that want to see that – fight for it, push for it. Support it when it comes, but also artists just become really vocal. (Quoted in Kang 2015)

As an insider, DuVernay could draw on expansive knowledge of the field in her analysis of mentioned being 'locked out' and a 'unicorn' in the face of the many obstructions, dismissals, underestimations and/or oversights that commonly impede Black women and other non-white and/or non-male media makers.

Scholar/Writer/filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha (1989) also endorsed women of color as cultural producers capable of meaningfully weaving personal ideas and concerns into legitimate intellectualism, as she was particularly privy to the media's powerful influence on human imagination. Both DuVernay and Trinh's arguments concur with a 2013 interview I conducted with a Black woman director who proclaimed that there is "privilege in presentation [as a cis-white man]" and "privilege in being loud, and heard on [their own] terms" (2013 Q&A). This director's statement emphasized the importance of acknowledging who can speak about whom and how, and for what reasons.

On this note, I will now discuss five media makers' ways of traversing complex media environments in order to follow how different Black women– variously situated in socio-political and economic hierarchies– gathered consciousness of and nurtured flexibly strategic performances of authority. First, they learned dominant media production narratives and structures. Then, as a lifelong project, they worked to appease, reformulate, and/or challenge them (Ginsburg 2002, Rony 1996).

Danielle: Entering and Navigating Formal Film Institutions

Generally, media hopefuls have two options for getting acquainted with the inner workings of media worlds: film school or apprenticeships. Each of these pathways into

the world of media production presents distinct benefits and trials. Apprenticing takes a ‘from the bottom up’ advancement trajectory, in which one begins as a Production Assistant or other low-tier, less specialized role and ascends through the ranks as their experience and networks grow. Alternatively, film school offers a more structured albeit much more expensive avenue with built-in access to high-end recording and editing equipment and regular contact with technical experts and cohort communities that have their own at times beneficial and at times problematic cultures of support, validation and recognition.

First, I feature a woman who I call Danielle, a twenty-two-year-old masters’ level film student with a Bachelors’ degree in journalism. When I first met Danielle, she was two years into a film Master’s program in New York City. Originally from Maryland, Danielle’s jolly and outgoing demeanor enamored and drew laughter out of those around her. She was also ardently committed to advocacy work regarding the dignity of Black life. Habitually, she posted Black Lives Matter content and reports of police brutality on her Facebook page. Danielle had switched from journalism to film after college because she saw great value in filmmaking’s longer production periods, as she believed more time would allow her to further explore creative writing and storytelling, which would in turn afford more narrative possibilities than journalism’s headline-oriented time crunches. While Danielle’s affinity for New York City itself was questionable, her determination to become a screenwriter/film director after she graduated never seemed to falter.

Danielle, and several other research participants I met throughout fieldwork, had decided to enroll in film school for a number of reasons. For one, registration as a film student let one take advantage of the institution’s resources. Danielle could utilize in-

house film equipment, editing software, and database access that may have otherwise been out of her financial means. She could also benefit from the expert advice of professors and visiting professionals who came to lecture or exhibit their work at her home or adjacent institutions. Additionally, she could have her work ethic and quality vouched for vis-à-vis recommendation letters from professors, and would eventually have her achievements documented in the form of a Master's degree certificate complete with official school logo as further proof of technical qualification. Furthermore, as a student, she gained communicative access to wider alumnae and other college/university prestige networks. Finally, she hoped to gain industry skills and techniques to apply to future media making opportunities. Among these included camera operation, editing styles and semantics, lighting configurations and their on-screen implications, sound recording during production and sound manipulation in post-production.

While film school can provide certain benefits to enrollees, it was also a predominantly white male space in which people of color could feel marginalized. Film students I worked with recalled their experiences of film school's marginalizing, even disciplining forces in several ways. First, conspicuous whiteness surrounds many Black students numerically. Out of fifty or so students who entered film school as part of Danielle's cohort, only eight were Black (most of these, women). Despite her conscious efforts to collaborate with and befriend colleagues of color (though not exclusively), the disproportionately small number of spots they held—and consequent environment upheld by the school's racial and gendered cultures—sometimes overwhelmed Danielle in ways she had not anticipated.

“Do you ever feel like the only one?” Danielle whispered as a drop of sweat plunged down her temple. Her khaki Capri pants and t-shirt appeared to offer little reprieve from the August heat. I struggled to hear Danielle as we rushed down busy midday Manhattan sidewalks. At first, I was confused by Danielle’s comment. Her query into solitude seemed out of place given the crowded setting. However, her tonal shift intrigued me. After asking me, she stared into my eyes intently, breaking her gaze only when she sensed head-on collision threats. As soon as her path cleared of danger, she would look right back over in wait of my reply. Not at all and then all at once, I realized her implication. Earlier that day, I chatted with her a bit about my own graduate school career: a topic that, in her eyes, bonded us in parallel trials we faced as ‘insiders’ (registered attendees) at institutions that have historically undervalued and underserved the creative and intellectual capabilities of women and people of color.

In this regard, Danielle and I travelled on comparable trajectories: she in cultural production and I in academic knowledge production. Danielle’s lament on the huge amount of physical and emotional labor she poured into spaces ‘not built for us’ sounded all too familiar. Her words provoked me to reflect on my own memories of higher education’s exclusionary institutional cultures and taboo topics such as race, gender, and class disparities. Half in contemplation and half in commiseration, I nodded along as she expressed her frustration with the affective labors that she believed to be a tacit obligation of Black women creators in particular. Next, she uttered what I had only said aloud to trusted and similarly positioned confidants: our very presence in contexts of knowledge and/or cultural production often seemed to come off to some as ideological and spatial intrusion and to others as a downright threat.

Even though website text, mission statements, and appointed figureheads of our institutions posited productivity and quality output as primary concerns, we could each recall a slew of interactions that suggested otherwise. Many people we had encountered in these spaces could (or would) not detach materials we produced (in her case, films and in mine, papers) from their own pre-existing imaginaries of what types of bodies, visions, and perspectives ‘should’ be producing them. Equality discourses, no matter how loudly or insistently hollered, could not outpace undercutting mishaps and dismissals that we witnessed and/or experienced.

Lacking Attention to Film’s Racialized Legacies and Content

Beyond enrollment demographics, Danielle also criticized the absence of course content about race or directed by nonwhite filmmakers on syllabi. This omission implied to Danielle that her teachers as did not believe that people of color had created works worthy of classroom acknowledgement: an irritation compounded by teachers’ and peers’ lack of engagement with the racial content that Danielle and some of her peers of color created themselves and screened in class. Danielle explained that in-class feedback sessions went differently for Black people than for their less socially marked counterparts. She described seminar reviews and critiques in which supervising professors and fellow students dodged included social themes or polemics, pushing them aside as ‘problematic’ (a comment Danielle had actually heard a fellow student receive in class). Instead, they darted straight to allegedly more neutral and/or non-offensive technical matters: color, or ‘white’ balance, lighting, editing, and pacing decisions. Likewise, other Black-identified students I interviewed attested that even their advisers seemed hesitant to discuss the specificities of their films’ themes, twists, and impact as

openly as they did with white students. Interviewees of this opinion suggested that it might be for fear of revealing their ignorance of social disparities, or convictions that such matters were not seen as ‘appropriate’ in the classroom. Why did instructors or other students tend to workshop or comment on their materials with less depth? However, many of these students come to film school to use it as a tool for redressing societal wrongs, and are thus more uncomfortable with the program’s focus on “the technical” as opposed to film’s high social and political stakes. Not alone in her assertion, Danielle noted such reluctance from other people as a repeated occurrence and explained that she consciously resisted filtering her intimate experiences, inspirations, viewpoints, and/or social knowledges out of her creations.

With each passing day, Danielle—along with other women and men of color in her program—comprehended more fully that things would not always be equal between them and their non-Black-identified counterparts. On top of uneven racial dynamics in classrooms, class inequalities also fostered imbalance between film students. Many interviewees challenged the notion that their access to film school meant resource possession which automatically yielded equality. In group venting sessions beyond the classroom, Danielle and her colleagues of color called out microaggressions and assumptions that subjected even the most networked Black individuals to psycho-social distress. J.R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes’ study—although focused on middle-class Black Americans—also examines how illusions of certain Black people’s comfortable and unchanging economic access silence their emotional and psychological experiences. In their words, “we hope to show the image of untrammelled black middle-class prosperity

and integration to be a white illusion, quite out of touch with the daily reality” (1994: viii).

Hence, even when institutions tried to orchestrate ‘even’ playing fields via class syllabi and assignments with budget maximums, they could only do so much to equalize conditions of production and encounter. Despite imposed guidelines, students still had varying access to economic, cultural, and social capital. I draw here from an interview with Danielle’s classmate Aisha in which she addressed access as both concept and practice. For Aisha, a continuing student and Black woman who had decided to change careers in her early forties, access concerned not only how one was treated but also how others were treated in contrast:

Film school was crazy. Film school was an utter and complete culture shock... my age was the first culture shock; the second culture shock was socio-economic differences of the people that were put into this little microcosm of thirty-two students in the class. Literally, the son of a Forbes billionaire and me were in the same class. It’s like, it was crazy. And how that translates in film, and in the art world, was that you have to tell your stories and it becomes inherently apparent how valuable those resources can be in actualizing your visions.

With this, Aisha noted class as yet another stratifying measure in the multifaceted process of being disciplined as a media maker. Despite having students take the same classes and complete the same assignments, success depended on what resources they had available to them beyond the university. Interestingly, class mobility arose as a topic of interest for Danielle, Aisha and others I interviewed, but not for grandiose visions of personal wealth and social ascendance. Just because they could borrow high-end film and editing equipment, their class status did not permanently rise. Rather, many of them had to flexibly access higher-class markers and other types of monetary and in-kind support to make projects fathomable. In this way, exorbitant profit was not an end goal for most, and earned funds did not create participants’ visions of amassing riches or celebrity

living. Instead, money surfaced as a ‘necessary evil’ – a material resource that anointed one with the financial and reputational pull to employ expensive and higher quality equipment to create their projects.

Placating Performances

Film school’s demographic, financial and social-cultural dynamics fabricated a climate in which Danielle had to either fight back or perform in ways that placated and comforted people around her. Amidst the unmarkedness and impunity that U.S. society generally accords whiteness, several such aspirant media makers conveyed a self-protective need to stomach or otherwise bear chronic feelings of being stifled or overlooked. To varying degrees, they appeared to internalize a tactic evocative of Hochschild’s assertion that one must “Learn to manage your feelings, and learn to attune yourself to feeling rules because doing this will get you places (emotional-labor occupations)” (1979:159). Energy and strategic reservations thereof were conscious considerations for Danielle, as ceaseless confrontation would risk burnout.

For example, while shadowing Danielle during one of her workdays (at her invitation), I observed she and her three white male team members plan – for a class assignment– and implement a ‘guerrilla’ filming method in which they asked random passersby to do a funny dance with them on camera for about ten seconds. In a preliminary planning session, they had agreed that the footage would later be edited in rapid-fire succession to symbolically communicate unity. Ironically, to fashion a project on togetherness, Danielle’s teammates volunteered her to be the personable, goofy character who would persuade members of the general public to participate.

After an hour and a half spent roaming the streets and acting silly for the camera, we split from her associates for the day. Relieved, Danielle shed the ‘happy’ façade she had worn throughout the day. Soon, she admitted that the regularity with which she found herself tapped to perform jollity was exhausting. The calculated smiles she thought were necessary to charm teammates and strangers alike tired her out, both literally and figuratively. Sometimes, she confessed, they even made her jaw sore. Claude M. Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi* (2010) presents similar performative strategies that marginalized people grow to pre-emptively lessen the chance that others would associate them with negative stereotypes. The book’s title refers to an example detailed in the book in which a Black man has trained himself to whistle classical music in public to quell white people’s fears and assure them that he is one of ‘the good ones.’

Similar to the social knowledges and habitus embedded in the above man’s pre-emptive protectionism, Danielle saw feigned smiles as routinized behaviors meant to assuage white people’s predictable anxieties and carve out space for the professional futures she imagined for herself. In fact, several interlocutors developed performative repertoires in order to mitigate prejudice, advance career paths, and encourage wider publics to recognize that historically disenfranchised people can aptly represent struggles and victories of groups with whom they identify. People also attribute certain meanings to marginalized people’s actions, demanding that the latter be strategically attentive to the polysemic nature of their own behaviors, words, and demeanors in others’ eyes: “Greetings, handshakes proximity, tone of voice, all reveal the effects of racial awareness, the presumption of superiority vis-à-vis the other, or the protective defenses against the possibility of racism and misrecognition” (Alcoff 2006:184).

Together, these social, economic, and environmental factors fashioned film school into largely ‘white space.’ As Erin White, a writer for *Afropunk*, describes some marginalized persons’ experiences of white space:

These immersions into white vacuums, places where I shrunk as to not take up too much *white space*, doing so with an unrealized desperation to re-affirm my normality. As if sharing a meal, sleeping in White folks’ sheets meant that I wasn’t inherently unsavory, despite the re-enforcements from the outside world” (2017).

In line with this realization that some people regarded her very presence as an impingement on film school’s expected populace, Danielle performed the consistent ‘emotional labor’ (Hochschild 1979) of learning and appeasing institutional representatives as patiently as she could manage, all the while growing more aware of and attuned to norms of U.S. media education and production landscapes. Hence, she toggled between tiptoeing around and trying to confront her insecurities. Having entered film school as an extension of her journalist-activist praxis and narrative acumen, Danielle encountered schooling as a project that upheld a ‘white racial frame’ (Feagin 2010) by largely sidelining discussions of social, cultural and/or political disparities. Therefore, it took great effort to construct an authoritative directorial persona and to materialize project aspirations at least partially legible to her schooling counterparts all while striving to honor the investigative praxis and social justice interests that had brought her to film school in the first place.

For Danielle, film school was an environment structured to discipline student abilities to exhibit adequate knowledges in film training⁴⁴ and networking⁴⁵ to make them competitive candidates for future work prospects. However, beyond such formal lessons, social hierarchies of race, gender, and class among others also come into play. To cope with the at-times bewildering psycho-social effects of classrooms' recurrent omissions of and refusals to recognize her, Danielle held an ambivalent relationship with film school, which she described as follows:

Oh wow, well, being a Black woman in a male dominated profession, and white dominated... It makes me feel-- it makes me feel empowered but also it feels like I'm in a land of destruction because you know I don't feel like I'm supported, or that my work is valued to a lot of people, because it's not what they would say or they don't want to put race or politics or things that are real into their work... And it's just, it's hard and I feel that in a larger sense, people of color have learned how to censor themselves in white spaces because -- all in the sake of getting along. But if it be on the other hand, white people can say whatever they want even if it's offensive. But yeah, I'm always being, I feel like I'm always being watched. I'm always under the eye. So, like, the struggle that I go through, my classmates wouldn't nearly understand what that feels like. To be in my skin, to be in my psyche and, you know, it's a tricky place to navigate when you're not being cultivated personally, emotionally and in other ways too. (Interview, 2015)

Film school positions students both as novices in the field as well as authorities of their own projects. In a confusing turn of events, Danielle- who had felt infantilized, unheard and or ignored in countless classroom encounters- was also expected to direct and produce several projects in order to graduate. The program required her to attend classes and meetings that for the most part neglected race- and oftentimes gender- as pertinent issues (obliquely, and sometimes overtly, dismissing facets of these students'

⁴⁴ By *technical* film capital, I refer to technique- and equipment-related know-hows; exposure to film terminologies, histories and genres; and expected dress, personal equipment, comportment and behavior.

⁴⁵ By *social* film capital, I refer to community partners, film festival attendance and distribution, networks for borrowing and/or trading equipment.

self-worth). However, they also stipulated that she direct entire casts and crews whose actions hinged on her authoritative stability and guidance.

Here, schooling's duality struck again, demanding Danielle to lead a set with confidence despite training that had better predisposed her for submission. In light of such duality, I describe Danielle's work as emotional labor. For one, she believed that certain enactments of happiness, sadness, and patience were expected of her as a less privileged and presumably deferential party in numerous spaces and encounters. Also, in response to psychological and behavioral pressures applied under the auspices of a film school education, Danielle had executed a self-preservationist and in ways escapist split (Collins 1986), strategically at first and over time incorporated into her 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1992 [1934]). She handled these seemingly opposite demands of her by compartmentalizing her professional duties and constant alertness to others' expectations of her as apart from communities (Lave and Wenger 1991) she built at Black and/or woman-oriented community media events and film festivals such as the one at which we first met.

Incongruous messaging treated Danielle as a canvas for institutional disciplining, challenging her to reconcile two seemingly dissonant realities. As a result, she had embodied clashes between coursework novice and project authority throughout her introductory years vis-a-vis feelings of ambiguous non-belonging in the program. Consequently, she had also adopted a self-protective stance. Rather than relying on film school and its authoritative structures for growth, Danielle had adjusted her mindset to reframe school as an institution whose technological lessons and prestige may benefit her but at the costs of discipline. In other words, it alone could not empower her or fulfill her

needs completely. This place of compromise was addressed directly by Violet, a woman who had already graduated and adapted aspects of schooling to a career of her own making (visited in more detail later in this chapter):

I made the most of that school by going into the film program. I'm learning hardcore skills regardless of-- because when you're in school you deal with like the um the biases of, which you still do in film school, but like when are you're being taught certain concepts and theories like all this with the more book learning stuff you deal with all of the institutional stuff and the racism on a deeper level because that's what you're getting your degree... I know I can get the other stuff like so I'm learning like an actual skill. That's what I appreciated about it.

The other stuff was not cool. The screenwriting class, the film theory class like my you know because it, they were all, they didn't show enough diverse, a diverse array of filmmakers.

In the face of such struggle, Danielle, Violet and numerous other women not only cultivated intentions to make a difference with their films. For instance, writer/director Janelle (more in Chapter 4) described her own coming-to-terms with and communal ways of navigating media production's imposition of a 'white racial frame':

I hadn't really worked with black people until I left [her former commercial contract] and that's because I was on staff so I just worked together. I was the only person of color on staff there. They had people of color in different positions, but not as regular producers. So that's been really interesting for me. I feel like I've been gravitating more towards working with Black people in a way and I guess that it's in response to feeling like sort of like I was a token for a long time. That was the situation, people knowing you're of color so help us get this grant. So, you know, now I love that, 'cause it was weird you know. (Interview, 2015)

To cope with school-related stress, Danielle looked for support in extra-curricular spaces. She scheduled countless treks into the city to reach out to groups she found more personally, socially, and holistically energizing.¹ In addition to already existing friendships, Danielle traveled to and made such contacts at film festivals, community and regional screening events, media lectures, meet-ups and other events where people gathered to discuss occupational gripes, learn of new skills and opportunities, and potentially find like-minded people with whom to build professional and/or personal

relationships. Driven by passion and desires for connection, she did this in spare time that she technically didn't have given all the projects and asks made by professors and fellow students. These 'outside' spaces of communion functioned as voluntary communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), providing Danielle with validation, reminders that she was not alone, and confidants to listen to her as she aired frustrations and honored emotions deemed inappropriate for school's hierarchical environment.

Bouncing between school and community spaces, Danielle did her best to cultivate proactive replies to social difference, and to develop methods of coping with and negotiating school encounters that marginalized or misrecognized her acknowledging their role in doing so. Hence, she juggled two engagement and pedagogical communities, each tied to very different expectations of 'optimal' participation. Danielle divided her energies between two communities of practice, one structured within institutional walls and the other more amorphous and interpersonal across spaces, areas and potentially even boroughs through regular transport and contact.

Interweaving lessons and communities, Danielle approached authority as a strategic and emotional negotiation that never stopped valuing –and in many ways culled power from–her broader community of support. I got to participate in the shoot for one of Danielle's final short films as an 'extra' (background actor), which gave me the chance to witness the authoritative style that Danielle had crafted over years spent at the intersection of these communities of practice. On that set, surrounded by school peers and volunteers (many of whom she had recruited through personal friend groups and social media calls), Danielle had exuded jollity (her resentment concealed), determination, and confidence. Guiding her camera-balancing cinematographer through the crowd of extras,

her hand on his shoulder, Danielle projected her voice over a basement filled wall-to-wall with people who had cleared their schedules to support and help her bring her vision to the screen. During one of our extended interviews off set, Danielle explained her approach to managing projects and also to authority-making as communally-oriented efforts:

For me, I sometimes put up Instagram posts saying like I'm looking for musicians or I'll reach out to friends who are musicians and that will be my way to kinda get them involved in this too. Because it's such a big collaborative artform, it makes no sense to work with people you don't like because it's gonna be so long. If I'm looking for artwork, I will contact people who I know have really dope artwork and I'll ask them if I can use some of their work or whatever. On Facebook, I'll eventually create a page or whatever to get support that way for my film—whatever the film will be.

But I think I've been very protective of my babies. A lot of people are like 'I wanna see your work, I wanna see your work' and I'm like in the area or if I'm near them maybe they'll see it...because I know that the world- It's just like having a baby. The world doesn't want anything good for that baby, but you want your baby to succeed and all that good stuff. So, until it's ready, I'm like I will go about doing it [protecting it from the wider judgmental world]. That's why I'm trying to finish all this, my documentary, my spring narrative and my silent film so I can send them out to film festivals.

But I've also asked some of my friends to come to screenings here and it's been great to get their support. And sometimes—I don't know— you just need that because people here are so overly critical and then you have one of your friends who sees it... I mean one friend came to see my documentary, two came to see my narrative, and my other friend came to see my silent film. It's nice to have people—who understood your story and what you were trying to tell— say this is not bad. Sometimes you just need that support- you know- because I don't feel like this is a very support-... It's not very supportive. If you have a certain type of taste or if you make a certain type of film then, yeah, you love this place but if you don't (fades out to silence) ...

Seeing Danielle as a project screenwriter/director gave me a fuller picture of the processes and contradictions through which new media makers acclimate themselves to media production's standards and boundaries. To make the most efficient use of their labor, each person had to assess what they desired in their optimal communities of

practice and acquire what they needed in order to be viable candidates. Interviewees who acknowledge their lack of confidence and experience as media makers expressed shock at the force and frequency with which these ostensibly oppositional identities seemed to collide for them.

With her from quite early on in her career, I was able to watch Danielle struggle to find her footing, grow more familiar with prevailing media system models and preferences, and cultivate means of discerning which production details to fight for and which to compromise on. To perform happiness in the face of tokenization, Danielle processed inner battles that juxtaposed her personal strengths and aspirations with others' suppositions about her and her work. Furthermore, for Danielle and other students of color, 'two-ness' meant juggling two filmmaking worlds: one in which they resigned themselves to institutional practices that prioritized White, male norms and attitudes, and another in which they bonded with like-minded filmmakers of color.

Aisha: An Education on the Semiotics of Race and Space

But what does it look like to assume one's hypothetical authority without conscious thought of how underlying stereotypes may undercut it, or position you as a transgressor of norms? In 2013, I first met Danielle's classmate Aisha (also proudly Black, though lighter in complexion than Danielle), then a continuing film student in her mid-forties. After I had volunteered on two film sets on which Aisha worked (one as producer and one as director), she felt comfortable enough to sit down and talk with me. During this interview, she called out double standards she had discerned since beginning film school two years prior. She interpreted imbalanced film reviews (as discussed by Danielle above) as underhanded attempts to undermine assertions of authority from

marginalized social subjects under guises of ‘neutrality’ or ‘common sense’. Colleagues questioned Aisha’s ways of conceiving and wanting to make use of space. Specifically, these people voiced concern with how her choice of shooting location would inhibit future audience engagement. Broadly, space is tricky in that it is an object independent of, but never fully apart from meaning that humans ascribe to it. Therefore, space is socially enmeshed and ripe with polysemic potential. Setha Low describes ‘spatialization’ in *On the Plaza: The Politics of Space and Culture* pertinently here, as she encourages academics “to locate— physically, historically, and conceptually— social relations and social practice in space” (2000:38). Thinking of space as a socially mediated phenomenon, I ask ‘What might a contemplation of two differently racialized and gendered- and thus socially positioned- parties’ views and visions of space reveal about the trial-and-error realizations behind authority-making?’

Aisha’s personal engagements with space were layered: the hopeful discourses signifying New York as an opportunity-laden geographic space, the productive and technologically promising space of film school, and spaces of the shoot over which she would presumably have directorial control. Following a discussion of why she had wanted so badly to move to New York, Aisha went on to describe her adjustment period to and annoyance with some of film school’s raced, gendered, and classed realities. While instructors may construct group student projects or try to delineate them with particular rules in an attempt to ‘even the playing field’ (as Aisha phrased it), the kinds of financial and cultural capital to which each student had access in the wider socio-economic environment mattered in practice. Ultimately, they influenced one’s methods of—and

urgencies put behind— developing networks of collaboration and support, as well as the amount of personal funds one could invest into less restricted assignments.

After explaining the imaginaries and hopes that initially brought her to New York, Aisha switched gears to recount her clash with a couple other film students while location scouting for a project she was leading. Briefly summarized, location scouting is the multi-day process by and through which a director and select team members (potentially including its Director of Photography, Assistant Director, and/or Art Director) travel to and check out- or ‘scout’- possible sites for an impending film shoot. During these visits, team members look over each site’s particulars in person— including measurements, spatial allowances and configurations, physical setups, lighting, sound atmosphere, movability and immovability of appliances and other large objects— to assess if and how the site could adequately accommodate cast and crew size, and fulfill the needs of certain scenes if not the entirety of a film’s *mise-en-scene* requirements. While they venture to these sites with explicit intentions to imagine new- albeit fleeting- possibilities for already existing infrastructures. However, in Aisha’s encounter, the possibilities of space were quickly pushed aside to center limitations fueled by her colleagues’ anxieties about the project. Whether to calm herself, emphasize her words, or both at once, Aisha explained between periodic sighs:

I have a film... [in which] the woman [played by a Black actress] lives in a very nice apartment. The original apartment we had for it was this lovely place in the Trump tower on 69th and 2nd avenue. Beautiful! I mean gorgeous floor to ceiling windows, and when I brought the production designers images, the first question is ‘What does she do for a living?’ And I said, ‘It doesn’t matter whatever you decide’. They said ‘No, we have to know what she does for a living’ and I said ‘why? It’s not gonna be like [there’s] beekeeping in the movie. It doesn’t really matter. It’s not relevant to what we are talking about right now.’ They’re like ‘We can’t define her if we don’t know what she does for a living.’ (Interview, 2016)

First in thought, then out loud, Aisha disputed the production designers' claim, which she believed to be founded in disparate racialized presumptions of whose success needs elucidation. To them, that extravagant, chandelier-equipped home needed exposition if it were to be owned by who they all knew to be a Black woman protagonist. This Black woman character could not simply walk into the scene holding title without giving spectators necessary background to make sense of and accept her financial and social belonging in such a grand space. Hence, classed imaginaries of white male affluence (laced with gendered and raced assumption) saturated their judgment of story- a take quite divergent from Aisha's. In fact, she expressed anger at their assertion that such details were vital to general narrative legibility, and also at their persistence on that single point of contention for days. I return to Aisha's unending reflection:

And I said, you know it's very interesting, I see Tom Cruise in a movie, I see him homeless in a gutter. I see him on top of a mountain in Dubai. Wherever he drops into a film, I accept the fact that he's there and I just move on with it. But because I put a black woman in a nice apartment, you have to know what she does for a living, you immediately have to know how she got here. That's not fair. That's why we have all these didactic films in the African American community where people are constantly explaining. If you see five black men in a movie, there's gonna be a scene where the five of them sit together and they go 'so nice that we finally got to this point. Remember when you were in law school and I was just cleaning cars'... There's gonna be this whole silly conversation about how they got there...it's an explanation of not just what's happening in film but what's happening in society. (Interview, 2016)

Here, Aisha contrasted narrative omissions that whiteness can make without critique, with the insulting nitpicky inquiries that she and other Black students had received time and time again for not providing what others thought to be 'enough' justification to turn upper-class Black women into credible protagonists. Differential hyper-surveilling criteria for Black on-screen presence shaped happenings, comfort levels and creative expressions on the ground. Contesting these two white men, Aisha repelled

demands to acknowledge the unspoken politics and histories of structural oppression that informed their perception, unwitting as they may have been. As one party got benefit after benefit of the doubt, its socialized inverse was required to offer cross-checkable layers of evidentiary support even if the result produced clunky, disjunctive narrative progression and seemingly superfluous flashback scenes. As a practiced storyteller, Aisha resisted 'it's only entertainment' discourses that tried to sever 'personal' and 'political'. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that lines between public and private, individual and collective, inclusion and exclusion, media and 'real life' are naturalized to extents that phase out everyday complexity. Now back to Aisha's comment, which had still not yet broken in real time:

When you watch their films, when you watch films that are Caucasian you almost never get into career unless it has something to do with the story. And it doesn't matter because wherever you put them, people just accept that they have the right to be there and uh one of the things I'm saying with my films is that we have the right to be here too...the argument that they gave me was, 'How are people going to accept that this woman exists?', and my argument was that the woman who owns this apartment is a black female! ...Like it got so bad that I put a moratorium on it. I said we can never discuss this in class again. It got to yelling in the classroom over this. Professors...I mean we were all yelling back and forth about it. There were six films were being made in the classroom and none of them except for one mentioned the occupation of any of the characters. Why are we discussing it about my film? Do you not understand how racially motivated this is? And they refused, as soon as you say racially motivated *that's not what I'm trying to say, respect what the audience...[blah blah]* If you could just come down off that ledge and listen to what I'm saying to you, you'll realize that I am right. I know you're defensive about this but if you go home and think about it, you'll know I was right. (Interview, 2016)

Did career have to be addressed on-screen with dialogue to verify a Black woman's belonging in a lush apartment? While Aisha's belief that they'd know she was right may have incorporated some ego, it had more to do with her opponents' defensive unwillingness if not fundamental incapacity to recognize their argument's hypocrisy.

At a lived intersection of race, space, and economy, Aisha's experience regarding one prospective filming location with spacious layout and decorative adornments exposed hypocrisies that spurred her to commit what others might have perceived as an insurgent act: openly confronting the racialized wealth imaginaries that continually inform actual relations in front of and behind camera and social operations. Aisha vented to me- as both researcher, and as another Black woman who she saw as what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) terms 'fictive kin' - about double standards she believed to distinguish the kinds of requests people made of her, from those made by socially unmarked (read: white and male) classmates.

While filmmaking may appear a trivial argument when superficially associated with what space a film team chooses to rent for their shoot, the consequences of not engaging socialized relations and micro-aggressions at meetings of race, space, and belonging— especially when the first is construed and treated as somehow apart from the latter two—can literally be a life-or-death decision. Structurally if not physically abusive incidents have emerged from volatily mixed imaginaries that assume Black bodies should not occupy certain places despite realities that regularly contest those expectations. In a project conducted in the climate of Black Lives Matter, and a contemporary context where sensed transgression of space based on uneven claims to entitlement can and regularly does yield homicide with impunity, I can think of no better question to pose here than Aisha's own: "Do you not understand how racially motivated this is?"

Violet's Rebuke: Authority as Accountability

Authority is not singular in its manifestations, as can be better seen in the cases of creators further along in their production careers. At this point, media makers have identified signature styles and most have also rooted themselves in certain principles and goals, as media systems can be befuddlingly vast without such grounding. Hence, after an indeterminate period of initial discovery- particularly of field norms and hierarchies- Black women creators worked to discern which of their visions and values were actually worth a fight. Here, I recall Violet, who rooted her decisions and demonstrations of authority (which included elements of confidence, power, motives, and public presentation) in consciously-embraced political and ethical commitments to promoting the welfare and just treatment of Black people, especially Black women. Thus, she put intentional work into demonstrating her pride, integrity, and communal interests as a film maker also identified as a Black woman, not because this was her only option as a Black woman director, but because she felt it a way to contribute to ongoing fights for collective uplift and racial dignity. In Violet's own words, "I use film for, like I guess a lot of political purposes...to convey messages, certain messages in an artistic way. And I use them to, like yeah, that mostly". She then explained her reason for pursuing film,

Well, I started working on YouTube videos when I was like 18.... It was just [videos of] me speaking. And it was about, just different things related to race and gender and- I don't know-philosophy...a lot of philosophy, a lot of religious... just stuff, you know. I kinda knew [that] whatever I wanted to do, I wanted it to be kinda like YouTube. But I didn't know what that was. Then Spike Lee came to my school and he gave this whole talk about how you need to fuse your major to what you're passionate about because no one's gonna give you a break or choose you just because you majored in business [or] something that seems like it's more lucrative. So, you might as well just do something that you love because everyone's gonna be struggling anyway. So, I immediately rushed to change my major to film. At that point I didn't have a high enough GPA to get into the film program. It was the last semester that I

could transfer so I had to get my grades up really high to be able to transfer, so I did. (Interview, 2015)

Importantly, Violet was not alone in such commitments. Writer/director Janelle (discussed above), spoke of a similarly positioned colleague as follows:

I have friends who are extremely militant, political. Like [another director's name] is somebody. And she's black and a woman and gay...she's like *very* political in terms of like her work is very much through that lens. And you know, she makes a conscious decision to work with black women...I mean like she working on a new film and that crew is black women. She's working with two black women producers...so the thing is that we all know each other. So, like you know when you have an idea, you're gonna wanna talk with black female producer friends first um just because we all know each other. A lot of that is, you know there aren't a lot of people who wanna talk to you. (Interview, 2015)

Setting up the anecdote featured below, I ran into Violet unexpectedly at a community screening of short films and web series episodes hosted by a local Black media organization. Proudly queer and black woman-identified, Violet was a film director in her late 30s and an original co-collective member of Tanya's (though she later phased out of core collective membership because of a move). Like Tanya, Violet was upfront in her challenges to racial discrimination and disparities in media production and consumption, as well as wider social dynamics. Her brand of professionalism diverged from conventional markers: neatly pressed and covering dress, crisply enunciated speech, firm handshakes, and proliferated publishing and/or production footprints. Rather, for Violet, success as a media authority had less to do with personal appearances or a prolific number of projects, and much more to do with the details that imbued a project with social awareness throughout its making while also priming it for public uptake, even use in community actions.

That night's film program was not set up in a permanent theatre, whose rental fee would have been much pricier and perhaps less communally welcoming. Instead, organization representatives had rented out and installed a portable projection screen in

an enclosed and tented patio area behind a Brooklyn bar. The film program started later than scheduled, a fact emphasized by the sun's gradual drop towards the horizon. Finally, it began, each film followed by the expected round of applause. However, as one film in particular screened, I noticed Violet grow increasingly restless. She whispered a few comments to me that made it clear she was frustrated with the film, re-adjusting herself in her seat every once and a while to shoulder reactions building up inside of her.

In the film narrative in question, a white male protagonist who looked to be in his early-to-mid thirties worked as a public servant, and eventually forged an unexpected bond with a young white male student in a secondary school class that he visited for career day. Even to my relatively untrained eye, the pivotal classroom scene in which the two main characters met was evident in its demographic imbalance. In the whole class, only one white student- a boy at that- was present in a room otherwise full of Black and Brown students. To make matters 'worse' *as per* Violet's interpretive lens, the visitor posed a question to the class and, despite many other visibly eager non-white students who hurried to raise their hands in want of the man's attention and intellectual recognition, he proceeded to call on the young white pupil. Conveniently, the boy was one of only a few students to keep his hand down and purposely avoid eye contact in hopes of not being selected at all. The audience soon discovered through the adult protagonist eye's and actions that the young boy suffered regular domestic neglect and abuse. In this way, the narrative's attempt to compel relied on the comparatively round and fleshed-out story of this racially 'compatible' substitute father-figure to reach its affective apex.

When this film's end credits scrolled, the director's name appeared before the rest of the cast and crew. I watched with interest before turning my head to find Violet shaking her own back and forth with a reaction somewhere between disgust and disbelief. As soon as the evening's moderator introduced the question and answer panel, Violet levitated her right hand levitated above her thigh as if preparing to thrust it into the air so that she would be called on first during this approximately thirty-minute Q&A with the directors. Then, from the way Violet shot her hand into the air and waved it sharply about, I could tell she fervently wanted to make her thoughts known. However, she was not first to be recognized. A small chill settled over the group (now after sunset), visibly causing several attendees to shift uncomfortably in their seats or, in the case of a small but resolute number of folks, pick up their belongings and leave before program's end. I worried that my colleague's perturbed disposition would lead the moderator to evade her completely. However, about five people deep, the moderator finally acknowledged Violet's hand, and called on "the lady in the back". Quickly, Violet rose from her seat.

She drew in a sharp breath, presumably filling her lungs with enough air to share her lengthy gripe with the congregation. "I couldn't help but notice," she started with polite skepticism, "that all of the children in the classroom scene except for the one was Black or Latino." She went on express the offense she had taken with that work. The two directors were the only ones standing, each looking intensely in the other's eyes. Violet's question sent an uneasy wave of 'hmmms', gasps, and silence throughout remaining attendees. Every now and then, Violet would peek down at her notes filled with mentions of the responsibility 'we' have to 'our' community, and the ways that this film about the highly significant topic of educational settings presented marginalized students as if they

did not belong— an implication quite discernible to audiences (however unintentional). Expanding the film’s diegetic content to account for its social implications, Violet made sure to address all the points she had jotted. Of everyone present, only I had met her previously and thus was the only one expecting her rebellious and politically overt approach towards questions of filmmaking as a ‘love letter’ to Black and Brown people largely ostracized in the United States context, and so many other locales abroad.

In reply, Black male director described and defended his story of ‘two people.’ Mostly, he confessed that there was a much more diverse mix of students initially, but many of their parents had notified him last minute of their inability to follow through for an array of reasons. Therefore, faced with already committed resources and tight scheduling, he had done what he could to handle the situation most cost- and time-efficiently. His economic focus did not convince Violet to dismiss or forgive the children’s imbalanced racial demographics, which she saw as irresponsible amid the moral and socio-political significance of such portrayals. In a response she lobbed back at the director up front, Black and Brown youth are generally placed outside of discourses that sanctify childhood as a time of presumed innocence. As she told me in the interview referenced above, past experiences of dismissal and sexualized microaggression in supposedly professional domains had toughened her resolve and lessened her patience with ethically volatile situations. She was beyond self-effacing diversion or self-protective euphemism. Particularly at this screening of works curated and hosted by a Black-run non-profit focused on creating space for diverse voices, Violet dug her heels into her consequence- and community-oriented belief that filmmaking was a weighty tool of import and impact to be appreciated and wielded strategically.

As Violet recalled her time in and takeaways from a New York Masters film program from which she successfully graduated during a 2015 interview (conducted a week after this screening event):

But I always put Black women in all of my films. You only make three films [in her Master's program]. I put Black women as protagonists in all of them. None of them were about race, but they were all different. They were all, I had to have a Black female protagonist in my film you know. No explanation necessary. I didn't need, I wasn't trying to...I didn't feel a need to make a film about race. I just wanted to have Black women in there. It was hard enough to get a Black female protagonist. (Interview, 2015)

Violet's words rang out to me because of the complexities they contained. At their core, Violet seemed to be asserting, 'Yes, I am and do identify as a Black woman. Yes, I purposely cast Black women as protagonists in all of my films. No, not all of my films carry explicitly racial themes or issues. Yes, I have faced struggles to cast Black women and not have people make assumptions about my intentions simply because of said women's presence. No, I do not feel that I need to explain myself for wanting to cast certain bodies into supposedly universal roles.' Exemplifying the blend of frustration and creativity that can come from confronting negative stereotypes, Violet exuded a rebellious spirit unconcerned with the likability of her personal image or politics. Also, against shaving her legs, wearing frilly 'feminine' attire, or abiding by the docility of respectability politics, Violet literally embodied resistance to gendered expectations. It was from this same place of self-assertion that she positioned Black women at the center of films whether or not they foregrounded racial issues or featured other matters of concern, and made political statements on inclusion, possibility, and ability.

In the described interaction, the bald-headed Black male director and Violet- a director in her own right- engaged over differing terms and takeaways regarding what factors should and ultimately do shape casting and filming. Violet's lengthy query

centered the extensive dangers that representations could posit and possibly perpetuate when viewed by people without requisite embodied knowledges or racially sensitized interpretive frameworks. From this perspective, she focused on the symbolic violence of depicting a predominantly Black and Brown classroom in which the ‘chosen one’ is white, male, and relatively detached and mediocre in conduct. Moreover, this character got a rounded out and complex narrative treatment that no other student received. Instead, the latter disappeared as props and appendages to the white male-to-white boy dynamic. Delivered through a sprinkling of stutters and pauses; the director’s concerns avoided the moral, ethical, and ideological interests that Violet stressed: namely, the practical, logistical, and tactile realities of real time, on-the-ground production.

He disclosed that some children who had been cast as extras in the classroom scene with parental approval had cancelled abruptly. In a pinch, with money and other resources on the line, he had located other kids willing and available to replace them. However, these students happened to be mostly of color. In some ways, these actors were brought in not for how they looked, but for their ability to sufficiently perform their assigned roles. From there, an uncomfortable conversation unfolded. Momentarily, it broke from the traditional question-answer template as Violet refused to yield. She retorted, highlighting the significance of directors recognizing the implications of choices made for expediency. Minutes later, an impasse was established between the two of them. Violet sat back down, twitching her leg and counting down the minutes until we could leave without attracting side glances. This night had climaxed in an unanticipated but powerful clash between conflicting approaches to casting, politics of team assembly, and authoritative displays.

When I finally met up with Violet for an official sit-down interview at a Brooklyn vegan cafe, I had to mention that evening which loomed as the figurative ‘elephant in the room.’ She managed to do little more than look down at the floor, shake her head from side to side, and mutter ‘What was that?’ Next, we shifted to the relevant topic of her personal team recruitment and casting principles. Confirming her commitment to embedding her counterhegemonic socio-political views into her professional praxes, she exclaimed, “I only cast strong women, usually woman of color, to crew on my sets!” At this moment, I realized just how deeply Violet’s personal interpretation of authoritative responsibility was inexorably intertwined with goals of self, community, and social group legitimization. This was something she consciously imprinted into her leadership methodologies.

By bringing highly competent media specialists who also happened to be women and nonwhite on her projects, Violet’s politics and positionality saturated her work process from conceptualization to recruitment, from production negotiations to distribution plans. In this standoff, the two directors’ understandings and expressions of authority clashed. While the director up front seemed to center completion and cost-effectiveness as his highest responsibilities (at least in the case of that film), Violet held her political and ethical dedication to Black communities closest to the figurative vest.

Molly’s Advice: Self-Presentation as Reflective of Work Ethic

While some aspects of authority and authority-making may stay true to one’s motivations (be they social, political, ideological, artistic, philosophical, experimental, etc.), others must take shape in recognition of how other parties –possibly higher ups– perceive them and what such perceptions mean to one’s ability to move their career

forward. Helen's contextually rebellious style and Violet's rejections of conventional beauty norms (aversion to shaving or 'feminine' dress) appeared to oppose those of Molly, who – no longer in the early phases of her career – juggled volunteer time on independent projects and her own production LLC with a mainline career as a corporate executive's assistant. More experienced timewise than the first three creators mentioned in this chapter, Molly shows how lessons learned are also steps in what turns out to be a lifelong process of crafting mindsets and practices that attempt to balance personal goals with public judgments of one's image and consequently, one's work capacities. Molly comprehends physically-centered measures such as looks and beauty as part of her strategy in media spaces. She has very clear ideas about which appearances are acceptable and which are intolerable outside of one's home.

Molly's authority became apparent to me in several ways. First, I met her through a film initiative on which we both worked for one year, me working as the assistant to her central announcer role for the weekend-long event of film screenings and workshops. She also shared with me lessons she had learned as an authority in various other spaces, both corporate and artistic. Despite the array of spaces that she involved herself in, Molly utilized similar organization, time management, public speaking, and interpersonal skills across them all. Additionally, she conducted herself quite seriously in spaces seen, as well as unseen, by the general public. Her unyielding commitment to performing professionalism resulted from years of work in media spaces in which she had overheard employers' reasons for hiring some people over others. Through this, she had come to terms with the uneven terrain on which the supposedly merit-based fields of media

production operated, accepting some and adapting others to find an operable middle ground.

For instance, in downtime during a shared volunteer shift at an annual film festival, Molly explained three of her guiding principles for work conduct to me in what felt like an act of mentorship. First, always thoroughly prep for events that you and/or your organization host. Second, be just as strategic about how you put yourself and your look together as you are about putting your work together, for one can be interpreted as a reflection of the other. Third, internalize a work ethic inclined not towards mediocrity, but excellence. She recited the tenets with passion and an oral rhythm that suggested she had sermonized them several times before.

To help me envision what it looked like to embody and live out these values in practice, Molly described her morning routine. It required her to wake up hours sooner than her schedule might otherwise demand in order to earmark ample time to ‘put on her face.’ Replying to a follow up question that I posited, Molly added that if she found herself in a rush that forced her to choose between applying her make-up and setting aside explicit time for clothing selection, she would favor the former. “You can pretty much grab anything (from an already meticulously acquired wardrobe), but when they look at your face, it needs to be put together. I mean, what if I get caught in [the back of] a photograph? I need to make sure my face is snatched!,” she snickered in shameless confession.

For Molly, the idea of being ‘caught’ (itself a pessimistic term of spatial congestion and/or containment) in a surprise photograph at a semi-professional or professional event while ‘looking a mess’ (unkempt, of inadequate or unappealing

appearance) was deplorable. From personal and witnessed examples, she had learned that such a visual state might lead potential collaborators or investors to assume that carelessness for one's own appearance indicated the lack of care that one would put into any project they worked on and/or led. Hence, through this logic, one would be perceived as undeserving of a professional authoritative role. Molly concluded that such a person could lose out on job opportunities and deter their own chances at success before they even knew what possibilities were out there for them based on their actual qualifications and networks. Similarly, I can recall numerous research participants looking for mirrors or fishing in their purses for compact mirrors to retouch make-up for interviews or other recorded events. These behavioral reflexes support Molly's notion that being authoritatively intentional about composing one's appearance in artistically pleasing and industrially digestible ways is widely interpreted as a 'mirror' into one's capacity for quality work and public image management. While such narratives that connected dress and professional mobility could not be claimed by Black women alone, Molly's emphasis on others' perceptions of her was addressed alongside mention of the uneven odds that we – as she shared this lesson in whispers as a kind of pseudo-mentorship – already faced as Black women in media systems historically structured on the absence of our voices. In this way, Molly saw dress as an aspect of her appearance that she could control, and that might be able to quell – at least partially – any negative presumptions or suspicions that potential collaborators brought into their interactions with her.

Although Aisha, Violet and Molly seemed to take different stances on the meaning and role of visual and performative aspects of self-presentation in one's professional ventures, all saw their bodies as pivotal elements in interactions in which

they wanted others to not only hear their voice, but to take them seriously as competent and capable project authorities.

Gretchen: Jumping Between, or Empathy as Path of Least Resistance

Dominant mainstream and/or investor rationales can only imagine Black women claiming authority over the creation of certain kinds of stories, which works to restrict their claims to universal storytelling (Dyer 1997). However, many Black women push back by acquiring and demonstrating their ability to empathize with, and tell the stories of various kinds of people. To examine the various considerations of public image, private sensibilities, and technical and/or social knowledges that comprise this process, I end this chapter with Gretchen, a woman in her sixties whose career accomplishments seemed to reverberate throughout Black independent communities in New York City and across the nation. Having worked at a number of Black film media organizations and non-profits throughout her career, her producer and budget-writing skills were renowned throughout New York City's Black independent film community. Organizers from different film workshop series even booked her to give public presentations on how to successfully determine a project's audience(s) and write a competitive budget that catered to and clearly communicated that.

Frequently welcomed into Black independent film events with gasps of excitement, Gretchen arrived at film series, lecture, or panel sessions with a walking cane in hand to steady her slightly uneven stride. If organizers were notified that she was coming to an event, they would reserve a spot just for her. At such community events, I even saw some speakers pause their prepared remarks to offer an impromptu shout-out to Gretchen as a kind-hearted guru and veteran with extensive production and budgeting

expertise. After such events, I would watch newer media makers approach Gretchen for advice, now curious about her far-reaching media legacy. Reminiscent of Danielle's incorporated routine, Gretchen held a steady grin on her face that contradicted any sign of physical pain or compromise that barely managed to escape, only for her to tuck them away quickly. A wince here. A decision to wait for the elevator even if it risks missing the subway there.

Gretchen's self-proclaimed devotion to intergenerational communication and mentoring was evident in a non-matriculated digital technologies college course she had recently completed when we first met. It also showed through her habit of taking younger Black attendees gently by the hand at networking functions to lead them over to more established figures for formal introductions. Sometimes she facilitated these connections to inspire greener creators, and other times she envisioned possible collaboration between the two. I can still feel the tug of her light grip as if to say 'follow me.' The crowd would part choppily at her requests of "Excuse me", carving out just enough space for her to guide me to meet new people. "Hello!" Gretchen said. "I thought you two should talk. This is Marlaina Martin. She is an anthropologist studying Black women filmmakers..." More often than not, Gretchen's quick and usually on-point summaries led to constructive dialogues between parties involved.

More mature in years than many of my other interlocutors, Gretchen opted for taxicabs outside and elevators down to subway platforms because of a gait that made climbing staircases or walking long distances somewhat hazardous for her. Occasionally, she would disappear from the screening and lecture circuit for lengths of time, only to pop up at a meet-up with her signature smile beaming. I asked myself how Gretchen

performed joy (whether sincere, strategic or both) so persistently in her engagements. As I got to know Gretchen better, I thought more about the convergence of not just appearance, conduct, strategy and possibility but also empathy in Gretchen's reputation and exercise of authority. Echoing throughout people's willingness to abide by her advice from lessons learned, Gretchen's authority sang of and through empathy, kindness and grace. People valued her presence and opinions not only because of her expansive list of production credits, but also because she was one to willing make time to talk to someone no matter their years of experience or fame. She was always thinking about what connections she could make between others to do her part in strengthening the Black independent film community, even if she was not going to participate in the final production at hand. Close and constant observation revealed to me how her care for people around her and championing independent production among people of color motivated her to push a body occasionally unwilling to cooperate.

Furthermore, I wondered if her work-life balance wove professional concerns into personal ones, or compartmentalized them apart from one another. How did Gretchen handle being a Black woman who had made such a large imprint on pioneering Black independent film networks in New York City, and inspired future generations of producers and strategists? How did she negotiate fragile contradictions between the adoration she received from Black independent creators, and a broader media industry who envisioned and (mis)treated her differently?

In a group study room at a Columbia university library of Gretchen's choosing, she and I sat at one end of a conference table as I readied my recorder for her first official interview with me as a research participant, although we had met and chatted several

times prior in screening, festival and public workshop contexts. In what ended up being a ninety-minute oral history interview, Gretchen described her nonlinear career trajectory of chance encounters, serendipitous opportunities, and educated risk-taking. In fact, she asserted that the jobs that had most changed her life and fed her inner interests had been only tangentially related to core obligations of the time. For example, she accepted an internship with a Black film non-profit organization whilst completing requirements for an undergraduate degree in History. Also of note, there were few famous Black and/or women filmmakers for Gretchen to model herself after in her formative years, which disheartened her in some ways but also encouraged her to creatively combine interests that may have seemed disconnected to others. Among these were African Diasporic histories, English literature, and social justice issues.

Gretchen's acquaintances had learned to expect her joviality and kindness. However, she emphasized in our contained one-on-one conversation that not even her ostensibly charming personality had shielded her from the prejudice, obstacles and setbacks of 1970s film communities. Then, almost immediately hiding away her disappointment, Gretchen chuckled as she talked about the continued deferment of her own directorial debut. This landmark venture, though she certainly desired it, had not yet come to be despite her numerous credits on other people's productions over decades of work— which came in part because she put so much “time and psychic space” into other people's “intense” projects though this situation “is on me,” in Gretchen's words. She confessed to having pitched a percolating idea to associates and investors a few times in the past, only to have them turn down what they interpreted as a seemingly awkward

premise and fit for her-as-director. Gretchen explained the project – or, ‘her baby’ – as follows:

Me: Can you tell me a bit about your own projects?

G: That’s ...that is what it is. Well, I haven’t worked on it in, goodness ...a couple years, at least three or four years...I’d been working on and off, on my own, but technology and things change. But *my baby*, which I’d love to do– and it will get done in some form – is a documentary film...

I was getting super into my yoga studies, which I’ve been interested in for a long time [during a project on which] we were interviewing people who worked directly with Dr. King...I noticed that several people who were King advisers were using yoga terms, and I was like what the...But it turns out that not only did people learn about nonviolence by studying Gandhi, the writings of Gandhi, but a lot of people actually went to India to study with disciples of Gandhi. And that was during the Civil Rights movement...Bayard Rustin studied extensively in India ...Lawson and King and Rustin, their mentors in the 20s and 30s were part of the Pan-Africanist movement and they had spent time studying in India too...

In order to keep calm and focused, they [protestors who trained personally in yoga traditions, and their mentees] would use these ancient techniques to make a change...a lot of people today are using yoga mediation to make a change because we’ve got a Black president but we are still messed up in all levels of ways...’They’re standing up for freedom by sitting down on a yoga mat.’

All that to say, it’s a different look, so people are like ‘No, no I mean everybody was like, ‘this is ridiculous.’ People were *absolutely*...Not even like, this is interesting. They were like, this *sucks*... They’re like, a bunch of black hippies.

Me: Is it a question of audience?

G: Yeah, or even just the subjects, ‘black hippies’ as subjects. People who are interested in it...it’s too soft, it’s too squishy...I’d applied to a diversity fund. I’d gotten it to the second round, and one of the reviewers said personally, they thought the project was great but it was nothing they would ever fund ever. But she gave me all these things ...you should try this and this and this and this...I like it but, it’s not. I think people, all people think about is some wild hair, lady with Patchouli and tie dye pants. Yeah. Yeah. So that’s uh that’s my baby, it’ll come when it comes.

Gretchen had wanted to direct this documentary about relationships between Blackness and yoga during the Civil Rights Movement for years, despite the fact that

many people could not understand the project or her attachment to it. Multiple times, the project had been postponed because funders (such as the one above) could not compute her want to follow Black people as yogis, nor Gretchen as a fit for directing an expensive media project on such a topic. Similar to Stuart Hall's analysis of Britishness' connotation as 'white' (1997), Gretchen faced an entrenched multifaceted imaginary she had no part in fashioning, as she tried to speak up as a racialized and gendered person living in a nation convinced that only white people can propose and construct universally appealing claims about any topic they so choose (Dyer 1997).

Though many of her projects engaged Black studies and history, Gretchen carried a filmography and future aspirations that challenged the notion that Black women could only claim authority over and/or produce work on certain issues, while also exposing the limited social blinders placed around conceptions of U.S. Blackness more broadly. Similar to the gendered norms that encouraged Molly to wake up early and perform conventional beauty standards in order to influence others' perceptions of her competence, Gretchen came up against ideological boundaries that narrowed her authoritative reach. In addition to investors' inability to understand why Gretchen would direct a piece on Black people and yoga, Gretchen also could not claim Blackness as a validating connection between herself and the subjects of her proposed documentary. Despite Gretchen's capacity to embrace various topics and empathize with varying perspectives, her foray into directing has been put on hold indefinitely in part because she dared to stray beyond the status quo and contradict niche production ideologies that believed her capable of only catering to the images and stories of those who looked like her: that is, Black women.

Throughout her still ongoing career, Gretchen had developed an adaptive and empathetic repertoire of embodied knowledges at intersections of racism, sexism, social expectation, and increasingly ageism. To illustrate how ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ folded into one another in Gretchen’s now-engrained practices, I reproduce one of her comments about the creative process at the end of our Columbia University interview:

We have to jump from, ‘Okay, what does it feel like to do that or to think that?’ You jump from empathizing with your boss, you jump from empathizing with your partner, you jump from empathizing with the bus driver, you jump from empathizing with [...] So you’re in a lot of other people’s skin and that’s just part of [the habituated routine]. That’s like breathing, being able to ‘be’ in other people’s skin. And so that’s helpful in the creative process, so that I can jump into, and it’s not a problem for me to jump into. You know, anybody out there, I can jump into their skin you know? And that’s just ‘cause you have to. But I think, for other people to jump into our skin? They can’t go there, you know. So, as far as getting support for your creative vision, that’s very difficult. But for the idea that you can envision lots of different things and you’re open to lots of different things, I think being a black person, being a Black woman where you gotta be fluid, it gives you lots of opportunities to be creative ‘cause you gotta make it work. You know? You have no choice.

In this statement, Gretchen referred to socialized expectations that Black women should seamlessly weave ‘being able to be in other people’s skin’ into their lives to the point of being natural, ‘like breathing.’ Via bodily metaphors of ‘skin’ and ‘breath,’ Gretchen intuited the body as a professional investment that called for her to consider if not anticipate the thoughts and actions of those around her. The quote described her ways of melding her personal and professional selves into one intricately functioning organism. Likewise, many Black women media makers are constantly figuring out how to navigate and negotiate a field and nation driven by white-male-dominant imaginaries through demeanors and interactions that incorporate these other, more socially powerful people’s perspectives to some degree. Therefore, empathy serves not only to create bonds between

marginalized media makers, but to appease and/or collaborate with people across power discrepancies. As Williams puts forth,

...the shifting that took place in their everyday lives, and some of the shifting they participated in as they prepared for their trips, highlights the ways Black women are constantly contorting themselves- their bodies, their appearance, and their emotions- to fit into or make peace with the diverse expectations that others have for them and with those they have for themselves. (2018:53)

As temporary (and for some personalities, sustained) resolution, Gretchen and other producers practice such patience, code-switching, and adaptability to have others respect their authority. In other words, they minimize confrontation and dismissal by cultivating awareness to different people's viewpoints. Though this dynamic sometimes forged lasting bonds between the two parties, it also opened one up to the tiring praxis of sensing and circumventing power hierarchies in which the other party was not necessarily required to reciprocate such deep attentiveness.

Gretchen was not alone in internalizing just how important it was to know how to address different audiences; and using that skill to communicate with and traverse different domains of belonging (Ulysse 2007, Pierre 2002, McClaurin 2001) if and when such mobility is desired. In fact, many media makers with whom I worked deployed intimate knowledges of society's social margins around as well as within their realm of artistic activities. Whether in content or production stages such as recruiting crew and developing publicity methods, tasks of maneuvering or 'jumping' between markers of technical and embodied knowledge aptly illustrate the practices through which Gretchen had come to know, be and become in the world (Mauss 1992 [1934]). 'Jumping between' also demands committed expense and command of 'affective labor' (Hochschild 1979), as it required Gretchen to smile and perform joy amongst people who might have perceived her differently if she let them see signs of opposition or physical weakness.

Another sort of ‘two-ness’, for Gretchen and several associates to whom she introduced me, ‘jumping between’ locations, projects, attitudinal displays and other entities was a fundamental and inevitable aspect of working in media production as a woman of color. They had translated lived alertness to, and quotidian life skills of fluidity and ‘way-making’ (Cooper et. al. 2017) into professional sensibility and methodology.

Conclusion: Learning Authority to Cultivate Authority

In practice, media power is an intricately morphing terrain of knowledges and assumptions that can be difficult to traverse as a figure whose very presence is thought to, and at times does explicitly challenge the status quo. Whether in response to institutional hierarchies, personal insecurities, community politics, knowledge of field tendencies, or empathetic leanings, these media makers consciously worked to craft authoritative personae not out of naïve assumptions of equality, but through the exhausting nimbleness of constantly having to negotiate overlapping and conflicting work conditions that relentlessly relegated them to professional margins as followers rather than leaders.

Analyzing how an array of participants worked to ascertain and withstand hegemonic racial and gendered codes, this chapter examined the disposition needed for these creators to unmask the dominant, and later fathom their own avenues to authority. Through the stories of five media makers in stages of their careers and lives— Danielle and Helen (in their twenties, entering media), Molly (in her forties, established in corporate media and building a name for herself in independent media), and Gretchen (in her sixties, established and mentoring others in independent media)- it unpacked authority as a flexible, relational, conditional, and ongoing undertaking. Their stories highlighted how they digested power relations and developed alternative approaches to

attain necessary resources and maintain necessary relationships. Defying taken-for-granted attributions of authority, these women all wrestled physical, psychological and affective challenges in spaces and/or networks ‘not built for them,’ learning, incorporating and sharing various lessons along the way.

Through a heuristic framework of ‘authoritative features,’ the chapter posited authority-making as a concept and exercise beyond simple notions of ‘Authority’ popularly attributed to abstract entities such as ‘the elite,’ ‘the state,’ or ‘the Man’ (often embodied by white men in the U.S. context). Conversely, these women’s on-the-ground cultivations of authority drew both on their abilities to competently practice skills and make decisions honored by others, and on their willingness to channel and express their lived experiences as marginalized human beings. Especially as numbers of Black women media makers increase globally, close studies that track strategies and shifts in how these women go about spearheading, refining, and reinforcing personally effective practices of authority – intellect, competence, leadership, teamwork, integrity and other facets integrated therein – become all the more critical.

Danielle read what she experienced as the stifling of race and racialized gender in film production training as a signal of the larger media industry’s complicity in master narratives that position whiteness as the accepted universal standard, quashing perspectives to the contrary. By privileging ‘technical’ over ‘social’, such practices denied the realities of marginalized creators for whom social difference and disparity were not peripheral, but central to their identities and motivations as media makers. Thus, while Danielle appreciated and made use of technical skills honed in formal coursework, she reflected on the overall experience of schooling less as an all-encompassing and

inclusive education, but more as a stepping stone from which to cherry-pick and operationalize aspects in their continuing quests to build production communities and produce media forms.

Aisha, the other Black woman film student in Danielle's cohort, learned that authority could arise in the most unexpected or seemingly trivial— at least on her part— of decisions. Even though her spat with her colleagues initially began beyond the walls of their schooling institution, the forces and expectations of wider societal discourses—and largely, of media fields as well— informed the ways that the latter were prone to read Aisha's selection of location. In learning how authority operated, Aisha grew clearer that day on the fact that racial and gendered hierarchies would not be undone or outrun merely because she held a hypothetical position of power. However, unlike Danielle's strategic smiling and later recourse to communities with which she felt more comfortable, Aisha confronted this realization with an unwillingness to conform or back down. As a second year reflecting back, Aisha now entered film production spaces aware that things could turn in directions she had not anticipated. Hence, she had nurtured and was continually cultivating her aptness in improvising amid relations in which she felt underestimated and reduced to shallow racial and gender stereotypes.

Violet, a former film student with years of time separating her and graduation, had had time to flourish beyond the walls of a schooling institution by the time I met her. Without the daily imposition of normative production standards and attitudinal climates, Violet had allowed her social and political commitments to what she referred to often as 'the Black community' to guide her practices of authority. While there is no essential demand or restriction upon Black women to only deal with issues of race and gender,

many creators working in this moment chose to take up film as a medium able to reach large masses and magnify perspectives little heard by dominant powerholders. Via her creation of films in alternative spaces on small-scale fundraising efforts that she could either control herself or strictly manage their development, Violet voiced a determination to create community media that actually placed the community—Black people, especially women and queer people – first. Holding authority, for Violet, had an uplift element whereby one should use any place of privilege achieved to represent social issues responsibly and hire competent practitioners who were overlooked in hiring searches disproportionately often (a position she also had known, and still knew well at times). A political radical, Violet embraced comportment styles and gender performances that pushed normative boundaries, going along with her want to challenge and expose injustices in media worlds simultaneously.

With a very different approach than Violet's, Molly highlights the expanse of diversity among Black women through her close attention and abidance by media industry convention. Molly, similar to Opal (see Introduction), understood that other people in image-focused domains of media production would likely make assumptions of her personal work ethic and commitment to projects based on the care that she put into her outside appearance. Rather than trying to convey a spirit of rebellion or political forwardness, Molly foregrounded her attention to detail vis-à-vis makeup and clothing, and her ability to perform within corporate expectations. While both Violet and Molly were highly cognizant of the obstacles they had faced and would probably encounter again as Black women in a white-male-dominated, technologically-driven work environments. Splitting her time between a mainstream office career as an assistant, and

attempts to engage in volunteer positions with several independent film organizations as well as lead her own LLC, Molly has developed her own well-oiled machine of logics, preparations and advice for navigating existing structures to her best advantage.

Finally, as the elder of this chapter's featured creators, producer and budget expert Gretchen still confronted obstacles, but showed the least surprise at their arrival.

Gretchen had been working in independent media for decades, her history background and interest in social issues faced by U.S. Black communities converging in a chance internship opportunity that would start her on a path similar to that more recently boarded by Danielle and Aisha. Gretchen still expressed frustration with her inability to direct any project she chooses with merit-based avenues for investor support, and an acute recognition of having to continuously 'jump between' not only spaces but different people's comfort levels and preferred modes of collaboration. Gretchen illustrated most conspicuously the skills that Black women involved in media production had to develop in terms of being attuned to the various and shifting needs of the people they worked with, particularly when those people held more social or economic power than them.

Looking across generations, this chapter argued that attempts to balance societal expectations with personal desires last throughout Black women media makers' careers, challenging them to find footing in contradiction, contention and compromise along the way. It is not only people's skin color and perceived heritage that contours prejudiced predeterminations of authoritative capacity, but also social locations such as gender, education and class as well as other physical and enacted traits such as clothing, voice tenor, and demeanor. Studying production environments clouded by 'racial affect'

(Ahmed 2004), this chapter examined how five media makers variously yet continuously worked to challenge historical and still reigning normative notions of authority.

CHAPTER 3:

Coming to Terms: Media Making as Psychosocial Coping and Community Care

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”

– Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

– Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, 1988

“Most of us are not compelled to linger with the knowledge of our aloneness, for it is a knowledge that can paralyze all action in this world.”

– James Baldwin, “The Creative Process” in *The Price of the Ticket*, 1985

“I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black race has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it.”

– Frantz Fanon, *White Skin Black Masks*, 1967

What is ‘Unthinkable’?: Art, Ambivalence, and Coming to Terms

Surrounded by national ideologies and systems that have constructed Blackness as a non-ideal ‘Other’ for centuries, few research participants seemed thrown or shocked when topics of on-the-job mistreatment or underestimation came up during interviews. Most described hostile work experiences with airs of nonchalant exhaustion, suggesting a maddening familiarity with such encounters. These project conceptualizers and leaders were regularly challenged to navigate structures that framed them—ambitious and authoritatively capable Black women—as historically and socially ‘unthinkable.’ After all, what is ‘unthinkable’ intimately intertwined with stratified realities that allot some groups’ perspectives more structural influence than others. Going beyond mainstream unthinkability to embrace those lived experiences occluded by its imposition, this chapter analyzes one woman’s story in depth to examine the affective experiences of people occupying spaces and forging visions ‘unthinkable’ to hegemonic representatives.

As elaborated in Chapter Two, many media makers I met could quickly recount instances of feeling misunderstood by and/or illegible to their occupational counterparts. However, it is also illuminating to engage not only how people recall such perceived dismissals through memories, but also how they use media making in real-time to cope with the emotions that result from present-day personal and/or collective mistreatment. This chapter highlights authority's processual quality by featuring two stories in which it is not guaranteed, but made and co-constituted through processes of media making and presentation. Vulnerability comes to the fore in the stories of Helen and Jayla to show how producers caught in moments of confusion or doubt craft and worth through stages of media making—its techniques and relations—to come to new understandings of self as a technically skilled and socially situated creators invested and involved in larger circles of production and support.

Stressing how artifactual boundaries forward certain socio-political agendas by placing certain possibilities beyond general consideration, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) discusses the concept of 'the unthinkable' to explain how narratives stabilized in archival and other historical documents typically speak to and reinforce the interests of ruling hierarchies. In Trouillot's featured case of the Haitian Revolution, most lasting accounts of that historical era sketch Haitians as passive recipients of European instruction and mimicry, making unthinkable their potential for agentive and strategic planning. Such depictions of the Haitian Revolution further ensconce and moralize Whiteness as innate, infallible, and absolute, literally erasing notions of Black leaders from Historical representations. Exposing demarcated mainstream norms as arbitrary yet seemingly insurmountable, Trouillot writes, "when reality does not coincide with deeply held

beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to represent the unthinkable and to bring it back within the reality of accepted discourse” (1995:72, emphasis added). Hence, in siloing off and silencing ‘the unthinkable,’ gatekeepers for dominant norms and expectations work to invisibilize groups for whom such ‘unthinkables’ are not only fathomable but constitutive of everyday life.

While what is ‘unthinkable’ in a given context is much easier to spot in retrospect than in real-time, one has the best chance of locating cracks in the veneer of present-day normativity at society’s ‘margins,’ especially concerning those where dominant institutional powers fail, or actively work *not* to recognize. In light of this, I ask: what does it mean for Black women to feel ‘unthinkable’ (Trouillot 1995, discussed more below) in the eyes of dominant media powerholders as both creators and agentive social subjects, and how do they utilize their artistic capacities to reckon with, work through, and find the confidence to lead projects despite such positionings? How do members of marginalized groups make sense of, and work through the complexities of their own lived temporal, affective, semantic and corporeal realities, however consistently others reduce them and treat them as unworthy of equal consideration? Finally, how one can study groups, themes, viewpoints and concepts consistently sidelined as ‘unthinkable’ by mainstream society?

While much can be said about the public nature of street protests or the orchestrated largess of coordinated multi-person film projects (Chapter 4), generative action also lay in individuals’ personal processes of digesting and expressing the pains of living in a society that has repeatedly framed women of color as deficient (Lewis 1966,

Moynihan 1965). While Trouillot maintains that hegemony – even when its reach seems total – can be opposed, the actual lived experience of continually enduring a barrage of societal forces structured to convince you of your incompleteness can be exhausting, however attractive. Tapping into Trouillot’s insistence that no one social future is inevitable merely because it is all that people seem to be able to fathom at a given point in time, this chapter traces artistic and psycho-social strategies that a few media makers developed to cope, come to terms with and contest contradictory racialized messages espoused in a free but not all too free United States.

In this chapter, I examine creators’ encounters with strife and ambivalence to illustrate how larger ideological and social forces converge in, color, and guide individual artists’ relationships with media production and its outcomes. To shed light on the uncertain aspects and affective benefits of media making, I center this chapter’s ethnographic core on interviews with Helen, a first-time director of a Black Lives Matter documentary, and Jayla, an institutionally-trained photographer in her mid-thirties who moved to New York from Oakland, California for a degree she had earned years prior. Renowned in the independent film communities as a non-profit founder and proud transgender man, *Strong Island* director Yance Ford described such a place of personal fulfillment and freedom as one of ‘zero fucks.’ As he explained on a panel at *Black Public Media’s* 2018 Black Media Story Summit (referenced in Matthews 2018):

I have to say that there was a certain amount of freedom that made *Strong Island* possible when I did two things, when I gave up the safety of my day job which I was able to do, and it’s not something that all storytellers can do and I point that out specifically because I think that the storytellers we need to support are the ones who can’t afford to walk away from their day jobs. When I realized I was only going to make this film once, cause this is the type of film you only make once, all of the fucks I gave flew out the window and I think that’s a real place of freedom...I have zero fucks to give and that is when literally the first time I was

able to work instead of just being up all night staring up at the ceiling being in a panic attack. I was up all night working. So, I am a huge proponent of getting to the place of zero fucks and whatever that means for you that is my biggest suggestion. If it's taking from you, cut it out. If its draining from you, cut it off. If its stressing you out, put it away. There's where you have to be, because otherwise, everything that's coming at you as a society for example, all of the people who are dying on social media and on the news and on Facebook every single day like those are enough to actually back you into a corner and come out swinging right? And so, when you get to the zero fucks place and you realize that your energy has got to be focused outward and it has got to be a propellant as opposed to this thing that weighs you down, that's how I got through it honestly.

While Ford's proposition of "zero fucks" or 'no fucks' was so compelling that it inspired a smattering of audience members to whoop and holler in agreement, the act of acquiring such a mindset and set of ensuing behaviors invited along with it a host of other practical complexities and confrontations. Finding and accessing such a space is not easy, as it depends not only on one's communities of financial and social support, but also on one's personally cultivated strategies for overcoming discomfort in pursuit of confidence, self-advocacy, self- and/or group (re)definition, and ultimately authority.

Vulnerability as Legitimacy

Before diving into Helen and Jayla's stories, I find it significant to mention that studying how creators learn and consequently handle power discrepancies requires scholars to see interlocutors' openness to self-reflection, personal circumstance and vulnerability as significant research data. Influential literary criticism, social science, and law scholars have long idealized 'objectivity' –and its later iteration of 'scientific distance'– throughout the twentieth century (Behar 1996), making one of a researcher's worst possible offenses being 'too personal' or 'too close' to research subjects. Hence, assertions that social experience constitutes a legitimate and thought-provoking kind of expertise of its own mark a critical departure from normative research models. For

example, *The Nation* contributor and proud Black woman Patricia J. Williams insisted that generative insight could come of an intellectual praxis informed by an open embrace of her personal background. As celebrated in Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer*,

But if you're an African-American legal scholar writing about the history of contract law and you discover, as Patricia Williams recounts in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, "the deed of sale of your own great-great-grandmother to a white lawyer, that bitter knowledge certainly gives 'the facts' another twist of urgency and poignancy. *It undercuts the notion of a contract as an abstract, impersonal legal document, challenging us to think about the universality of the law and the pursuit of justice for all.*" (1996:13, emphasis added)

Along similar lines, McClaurin's edited volume *Black Feminist Anthropology* (2001) extols subjective experience as an inextricable motivator for many scholars, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds (also see Scott 1991). Both Williams (vis-à-vis Behar) and McClaurin contested canonized anthropological mentalities that valorize scientific distance at the expense of concern for human emotion and experience, as if a zero-sum game were the only way to make sense of their relationship. Likewise, Barbara Christian's article "The Race of Theory" (1988) challenges the notion that Black women's intellectual contributions are inferior to and merely anecdotal in comparison to traditional Western canonical theory.

Helen: Sensing, Responding to and Provoking Discomfort on the Job

Authority has not only to do with figuring out the lay of the land but also with identifying one's personal strengths and weaknesses and assessing how best to approach situations in light of them. As a first-time co-director, this was the predicament faced by twenty-four-year-old Helen – a sienna-skinned woman working on a feature length documentary about the uprising in Ferguson – when I first met her at a pitch competition in which she and her co-director participated in hopes of attracting investors. Beyond mannerisms and comportment modes, sartorial practice is another strategic arena used by

newer creators as they become more familiar with the intricacies and politics of media production fields. As Helen rushed into the café for our scheduled interview about a week and a half later (after which she had a meeting with the documentary's editor), I noted her black t-shirt. Across the chest area in bold white print was the tagline "Not Your Respectable Negro". Her outfit centered the intrepid graphic tee, as it otherwise featured basic pieces including loose black beanie, tight-legged blue denim jeans and draped olive-green jacket.

With my tape recorder's red light blinking, I asked Helen what got her into filmmaking. Unlike Danielle, who aspired to a film career and had an array of future projects already in mind, Helen told me that her introduction to film was directly linked to this particular project. Film seemed the most effective medium to amplify unheard voices— first to circles of documentarians, investors and documentary enthusiasts, and later to audiences across the globe.

While Helen had much to say about uneven racial politics that she remembered experiencing from as early as primary school, I chose to ask about her shirt not long into our session. I was curious as to whether she consciously debated what clothes to wear depending on the day's agenda. In response, Helen gestured her hands towards her torso to show me that she understood my implication. "You'd wear something like that to a funder's meeting, let's say?" I inquired without sarcasm, interested in her answer. "Yeah," Helen replied nonchalantly. She explained that, over time, she had curated an eclectic wardrobe style with both conventional business pieces and more radical statement pieces such as that shirt. Perhaps, she added, she would layer it under a blazer to dress it up for a special occasion.

However, she tried to remain mindful that her documentary's content was not only politicized but overtly political in nature, which could have perceptual and discursive implications on investor reception. As she stressed time and time again, her work-in-progress was 'for the people.' From this perspective, she framed her authority as the project's co-director and public face less as a complement of her individual ego, and more as a canvas or billboard through which she set out to amplify the already intellectually and civically solvent demands of her interlocutors in Ferguson. Hence, Helen had embraced film as impassioned protest. Helen explained her entry into film in the following way:

As a storyteller, I'm always thinking what's the right medium, the right time, the right place. For me, it felt like the digital space was really inundated with writing, think pieces and columns, long form short form whatever you want. And I didn't feel I could necessarily add anything that wasn't being said. But I felt like the film space, the film space is dominated by white men pretty much and so if we didn't tell this story, if we hadn't been able to kinda get a stronghold in the documentary community, then it would be up to probably a white man or a white woman to tell our stories. So, it just seemed like it was a space that was really calling for that kinda voice. (Interview, 2016)

With humility, Helen made concerted efforts to downplay the significance of her own name and position, and to celebrate the courage and self-assuredness of the protesters, organizers and other community partners featured in the film. Without explicit film training *per se*, Helen refined on-the-job sensibilities and professional acuties as she went through encounters with colleagues in the field and/or the cause, and white people whose control of monetary resources who could greatly aid her project's progress on the financial front. In both cases, positionality stood out as particularly anxiety-provoking for Helen. When she spoke about the violence and injustices continuing in Ferguson despite media distortion or absence, she spoke solidly and with conviction. However, she admitted that, when the focus shifted to put her at the center of things, she had hesitations

about being made into as a distributable public face for an experience that was not her own (regionally or experientially), even if she and the film's subjects were phenotypically Black.

Helen's honesty and vulnerability entranced me. Obviously having mulled over the issue before, she expressed her particular discomfort with funding-oriented spaces arranged to introduce investors to projects to which they may want to offer monetary or other kinds of support. Just imagine: you walk into a room full of people, most of whom look like one another but not like you. While events and demographic distributions such as these are apparently 'just part of the business', as a first-time director you are thrown off by the actual experience of entering a space alleged to afford you voice, no matter how many contrary cautions colleagues had given you in advance. It becomes taxing to welcome people approaching you as an exotic presence, and a tokenized representative of a film on Black protest and subsequently on Black life and culture in general. This may be frustrating, yes, but you must digest the reality that they hold purse-strings that could further a project that has inspired you and showed great aesthetic and/or social promise despite its many labors. All the while, this internal complication must be concealed with a smile, which Danielle (Chapter 2) interpreted as a symbolic performance of the field's structural violence of racialized silencing. Helen did not get involved in film to fulfill some long-standing creative passion, but as means to expose and debate buried narratives of injustice. For Helen, a newcomer unprimed with the tempering process of film school, this mix of white investors, their perfunctory if not racially leading comments, and her own performative asks for money was distressing. Even acclaimed industry

writer/director/actress Lena Waithe has named the particularly jarring impact of such tensions:

The hardest thing about being a black writer in this town is having to pitch your black story to white execs...Also, most of the time when we go into rooms to pitch, there's one token black executive that sometimes can be a friend and sometimes can be a foe. I wonder if they think it makes me more comfortable, if that makes me think that they're a woke network or studio because they've got that one black exec. I want there to be more of them. (Woodson 2018)

How might one mediate and settle, at least performatively in the moment, the tension that this jumble of considerations might have on the psyche? For Helen, in spaces “where I’m the only one” (evocative of Tanya’s statement at the open of Chapter 1), she sought to shake up the established equilibrium with a politically uncensored shirt in order to attain a feel of more equal affective footing. Frankly put, if she had to be uncomfortable, why shouldn’t they? Ironically, but predictably, power disparities hung thick in the air in climates of self-purported meritocracy whose project leaders and goals were said to be judged solely on content and production quality. Helen may have struggled with her position as their project’s public face, but her shirt was its opposite. It was boldly upfront in ways that her personality might not allow until she warmed up to a room’s dynamics. Cognizant of her potential for shyness and the racialized and often gendered disadvantage in many such funding settings, she sometimes opted for shirts that made statements that her voice would later build up enough pride-based gusto to affirm. Helen’s presentation of self was tiered, as she first asserted herself via boldly politicized clothing and next through a better-acclimated verbal delivery of her extensive knowledge of Black history and politics.

Helen’s strategy got me thinking more consciously on the role of dress and self-presentation more broadly, in media making and image management. Similar to Danielle,

Helen absorbed others' perceptions into and onto her literal person, but not without self-protective reasoning and adjustment practices. While Danielle's imagined path to authority-making included systematic education through which to assess the system and test out appeasement practices that invite support from others without causing self-harm; Helen embarked on more of a patchwork, on-the-ground learning experience with media partners collectively anchored in a shared goal. While Danielle's strategy invoked a jovial attitude and smiles, Helen attempted to curtail and channel nervous energies through her wardrobe. She found comfort and confidence through clothing. Statement shirts would not only to speak truth to power, but also could provoke some of the discomfort in others that she so often felt brewing within herself. Helen's account alludes to longer traditions of socially marked people trying to compose professional appearances that not only enable but embolden them to access, occupy and perform authority .

Jayla: Self-Care, Comfort, and Coping with Anti-Black via Art-Making

Teased throughout childhood for playing tennis and 'talking white,'⁴⁶ Jayla grew up hypersensitive to what others thought and expected of her. As a result, she had often set her personal aspirations and passions aside in acquiescence to strangers' glares and her parents' oft-reiterated hopes that she would find a financially stable, corporate job. However, when I initially met Jayla at a Black women media makers' networking dinner in Brooklyn (which brought photographers, and film and television creators together for sociality, support and potential collaboration), she had already – albeit recently – entered a phase of life in which she was consciously pushing herself to reject expectations that others projected onto her without her input. She had even booked and gone on a retreat to

⁴⁶ 'Talking white' often refers to speaking too eloquently for others to accept her Blackness.

Vermont to escape everyone else's chatter, literally carving out time and space to refocus on – or in some cases, identify for the first time – what she wanted to do with and get out of her artistic practices, and her life more broadly.

My first interview with Jayla echoed with pain. Yet she created nonetheless, showing how one used art-making tools and processes as pathways of socio-affective reckoning. Jayla's art production, exhibited pieces, and attached narratives and meanings were flush with desirous notes of social emplacement and empowerment. Viewing production as Jayla's primary language and means of reaching within herself and later out to audiences and/or support networks, she formulated work styles that positioned her as a technical authority skilled in certain photographic terms and methods, but also facilitated her personal want and search for comfort. Contrary to beliefs that vulnerability inherently breeds discomfort, photography comforted Jayla precisely because it accessed and expressed vulnerability in ways that did not condemn her as weak or invisibilize her further. In a time of desperation (described below in more detail), Jayla took to art to help her redirect intense emotions, reassess her social location and all its baggage, and claim space in the face of a seemingly unending chain of anti-Black violence that she learned of through news program headlines and/or social media threads.

On a brisk mid-December morning in Brooklyn, New York, I clutched my insufficiently lined windbreaker for warmth as I charged into a *Hungry Ghost* café to find a place for Jayla and I to settle in. Finally, one and a half months after meeting Jayla at a mutual friend's networking dinner, we had managed to arrange this face-to-face interview. Only minutes after I entered and claimed seats, I watched through the café's front wall of glass windows as Jayla dashed up the sidewalk and into the establishment.

Her dreadlocks up in a loose bun, she took off a yellow button-up jacket to reveal a white crochet top and dark-wash jeans. In contrast to Jayla's kind and gregarious demeanor the night we met, the first twenty minutes of our interview proceeded in a fashion I had not expected. Nursing her chai tea, Jayla was initially reluctant to speak about her own career. Instead, she spoke of her recent trip to London to see a friend and fellow Black woman's art show and talk at the Tate Museum. While I was impressed by this other woman's accomplishments, I interrupted Jayla as politely as I could at that point to try to shift our conversation's focus back to her.

Discerning my intent, Jayla accommodated the shift but fled right to technical jargon. She explained her 'camera-less' methods (i.e. photograms and cyanotypes) as strategic executions of chemical reactions, object placement, and light exposure rooted equally in training and intuition. "Do you know what a photogram is?" she inquired, likely in response to the confused look that had likely come over my face. "It's when you take a light sensitive surface and create a sort of paper negative." When I registered Jayla's immediate flight to techniques, I thought of current film student Danielle's complaints (Chapter 2) about a schooling experience that she accused of dodging her politicized content by concentrating on 'practical' decisions such as framing, editing and lighting. I am not saying that this was Jayla's intent, as there are several possible reasons that Jayla was reluctant to speak about herself straightaway. Perhaps it was shyness. Perhaps it was humility. Perhaps it was a defensive reflex that prioritized her knowledge of the field to prove that she was capable of legitimate media work.

Furthermore, Jayla also told me that the body featured in her current art series was her own. Her artistic procedure involved setting up strobe lights in an otherwise dark

environment and activating a remote trigger to photograph her form as she lay on special paper on her apartment floor. The main living space of her shared apartment served as her makeshift studio at the time of this interview, which occurred mere months before she rented out a formal studio space in Brooklyn. As a print developed, she explained, places where her body contacted the paper darkened while untouched portions remained white, producing an abstract silhouette. “If parts of me aren’t on the paper, light will go through.” Through this process, Jayla created irreproducible, unique images that relied on her choices and movements (with an added element of chance): stillness, body positioning, and composed lighting angles and intensities among them.

Curious about what ideas and sentiments Jayla associated with this intricately layered praxis, I asked her what the silhouette series *meant* to her. After a pause and harsh exhale, Jayla answered wistfully as if entering a daze: “This project is all about taking care of yourself...myself. Self-care, sanitation, comfort. I wanted to make the whole process comfortable.” In line with William Mazzarella’s assertion, Jayla’s “affective body is by no means a tabula rasa; it preserves the traces of past actions and encounters and brings them into the present as potentials” (2009: 292). Finding words insufficient, she soon jolted out of her haze, reached into her purse, and searched around briefly before pulling out her cell phone. She signed onto the café’s wireless Internet network and swiftly typed her website’s URL into the browser’s navigation bar. The page elicited gasps from me, even as its contents were still loading.

At first glance, the pieces in Jayla’s most recent art series looked like enlarged versions of Western psychiatry inkblots. Varying shades of black, white and grey, the referential object of these amorphous blots was almost indecipherable by sight alone

(although I now knew it to be Jayla's own body). I pondered possible metaphors lurking in the art and also wondered about her decision to leave a majority of the pieces in the series "untitled. I later interpreted this move as part of Jayla's implicit performance of refusal towards predominant social categories. Conversely, she was determined to bask in and embrace all of her self's shifting and conditional parts as neither she nor her work could be defined absolutely. Jayla's refusal method of non-naming resonated with Carole McGranahan's assertion:

To refuse is to say no. But, no, it is not just that. To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another. *Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities*, especially but not only the state and other institutions. And yet, refusal cannot be cast merely as a response to authority, or an updated version of resistance, or a concept to subsume under already existing scholarly categories. (2016:319, emphasis added)

Akin to McGranahan's 'refusal'— as well as 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 2013, Kelley 1992) and 'weapons of the weak' (Ferguson 1985)—, Jayla's refusal did not involve resistance in the form of rallies, signs, chants or street-centered action. As her case demonstrates, refusal can also happen, and sometimes most powerfully happens, within individuals trying to establishing themselves and their work modes on their own terms. It takes a lot to go against the grain of social norms, as political science professor and former television commentator Melissa Harris-Perry analyzes in reference to U.S. Black women's contentious experiences as U.S. citizens: "The struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle... To understand black women's politics, we must explore their often unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and search for identity" (2011:4). Along these lines, Jayla's textbook and intimate awareness of Blackness' narrow definition in mainstream U.S.

imaginaries stirred in her an inclination to defy expectations even through minutiae such as leaving ‘untitled’ what others assumed could be simply understood and classified.

Kamala Visweswaran explained such defiance in the following way:

To suspend disclosure, then, is also to forestall closure. This analysis thus will shroud itself in a series of delaying tactics, reticences, equivocations: questions posed, left unanswered, hinging on the practices of deferral. In so doing I hope to construct what Belsey describes as an ‘interrogative’ text, one that emphasizes the subject split into both subject and object, as continually in the process of construction: a ‘subject in process’ This interrogative text discourages identification of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation. (1994:62)

Having thus rejected being ‘a unified subject of enunciation,’ Jayla was emboldened enough by the sight of her work to open up more about its semiotic import. Her voice grew a bit raspy from the run-on sentences with which she described behind-the-scenes specifics of her artistic labors. “In order to make this [she pointed out a particular piece on her phone screen], I had to lie down on the paper in the nude, so I had to trust a few friends and make sure people didn’t come in and out of the dark room—or else, the prints would be ruined.” She delivered that detail so matter-of-factly that I just kept nodding along, only seconds later pausing at the realization that she had actually stripped down naked to make this series, her body literally and figuratively bared in a room declared for a period of time as hers – and only hers – to occupy. For Jayla, “the precarious, ethereal existence of a place gets hard-wired into senses in a state of sheer attunement. *It is not, therefore, a contradiction that place, in this always emergent place, exists as an impassive corporeality.* It is a mantle of redemption, a glacier of impatience, a high desert of anxiety dissected by fault lines of rage. These affects are performed in *little scenes of recognition*” (Stewart 2012:519, emphasis added). Hence, vulnerability

and comfort were not mutually exclusive phenomena for Jayla, but indelibly linked confluences in artistic as well as spatial production.

Physically, Jayla dared to take up space. Supported by trusted friends, she intentionally sprawled her unclothed Black woman body out on the floor of her apartment, *alive* and largely engulfed by darkness. In this carefully constructed environment, Jayla took slow, deep breaths to put herself at ease. Here, Katherine McKittrick's analysis of the visceral consequences of spatial demarcation and claiming reverberates:

Geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing...the earth is also skin and...a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with. So this philosophical attention is not only needed because existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways. *This attention is also needed because...these rules are alterable and there exists a terrain through which different geographic stories can be and are told.* (2006:ix-x, emphasis added)

In building a space that not only validated but also relied on her decisions, Jayla urged herself to feel and be present in her body, whose beauty and ownership she sought to claim through this artistic method. She concentrated on doing so happily and repeatedly despite (or perhaps to spite) standing ideologies that presumed her inferiority and undesirability as a Black American woman. However, as Williams (2018) argued, happiness is an ongoing political project for Black women that can come at great financial, interpersonal, psychological and social costs. On Jayla's apartment floor, society's antagonisms were temporarily reduced if not suspended. The room's controlled conditions enabled Jayla to feel in her words, "comforted by the art process," rather than berated and demeaned. She stressed how much her art's skillful and necessarily isolating

procedures consoled her, as they got her away from others' immediate judgment and unsolicited advice. She cherished being alone without such excessive external stimuli.

As an artist with years invested in refining her craft, Jayla channeled emotional overflow from psychological and/or bodily disturbances into works that could grapple with what had managed to haunt her without words. As a bonus, her end product could be displayed in gallery exhibitions and engaged by wider publics. It turned out that Jayla engaged media production forms and contexts not only to reckon with general professional and social forces that disadvantaged her communities, but also with specific reports of anti-Black violence.

“Your reaction is valid”: Jayla’s Artistic Reply to the Charleston Church Shooting

My running thoughts on Jayla’s emergent narrative took clearer and clearer form as she scrolled down her webpage on her phone, then slowed up to linger on a particular photogram. Jayla centered the selected image with tiny, careful swipes of her index finger, before tilting the screen in my direction to let me absorb its power more fully. In it, a black silhouetted female form was frozen in a bowing position captured from a low frontal view. Her arms extended forward, palms flat facing downward and fingers spread out wide. In a kneeling position, she bent her abdomen forward and pushed her forehead and chest into the ground so firmly that it spread out her bosom, exaggerating the girth of what appeared to be her untethered breasts. She pressed her legs in towards one another in what appeared to be a show of deference to whatever had brought her to her knees. After a few moments of silence, without provocation from me, the actual Jayla who sat beside me looked into the distance and avoided making eye contact as she began to share more information about what had inspired this piece:

During the week of Charleston, something just snapped. I used this [artistic process] to bring [me] some comfort. I felt out of control. I grew up in the AME church. There is a similarity in how things are run, how people pray, how things go... They were run down by a white supremacist...I could imagine it because services are all the same. (Interview, 2016)

Briefly described, the tragic event to which Jayla was referring started with young white man and later exposed white supremacist Dylann Roof walking into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. On June 17, 2015, Roof had the gall to sit in on a Bible study session before fatally shooting all of the nine Black parishioners who had welcomed him into their meeting with open arms and hearts. Beyond its gruesome physical violence, the shooting's moral, social, and racial implications shook people across the nation. Moreover, it forced many of them to consider questions such as: In what type of society can a white man stroll into a supposed religious sanctuary and murder innocent people in the name of some perceived superiority? How can Black people process and push through sentiments and acts of this nature, which are not only common but increasingly overt practices in the contemporary U.S. climate?

Jayla's personal affiliation with the AME church seemed to merge with the incident's dire brutality to intensify the pain and empathy rocking her. Jayla's words seethed with rage, and her leg noticeably quaked as she spoke of the church invader. Next, she arced her arms out in front of her – at one point, mimicking the art's stance – before continuing to circle her hands back in toward one another as if hugging the air in front of her. With that, she whispered so quietly that I could barely hear her: “I wanted to hug the Diaspora.”

When the saddening encounter took place, Jayla had been working at a museum with little racial diversity among its staff members. She contextualized her pain thusly,

suggesting that it only further compounded her torment. “No one could relate...” She trembled at the unresolved memory and said again but louder, “I just wanted to reach out and hug Charleston.” Next, she pointed at what looked like thick white bands that streaked diagonally across the top corners of the photogram. “...I just clawed at the paper,” she explained. Then, she lifted up her hand to show me exactly how she had caused the streak. She began closing her hand as one would start forming a fist but stopped midway to curl her fingertips in towards her palm to imitate a clutching motion. “I cracked the paper a bit.” Elucidating her anger, she said, “it’s challenging, this project, it’s been two years trying to keep comfort in this process.” In her art, with body bared, Jayla did not see comfort as an inevitable and permanent outcome of her artistic practice, but as an experience through which she persistently had to will, stage, and reclaim “flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed” (Weheliye 2014:2). In other words, Jayla internalized Blackness’ beauty through acts and later displays (i.e. museum exhibits) of its reclamation as such.

“Is my perspective important?” Jayla admitted to asking herself in despondent times. “I scared myself,” she stated. As a Black woman who could have easily been in that church or could be in a similar situation sometime in the future, “I even thought to myself, ‘I’m prepared to die’.” This was not a suicidal thought but rather an unfortunate reference to disproportionately anti-Black and anti-Brown homicide rates across the nation. Contrarily, people at Jayla’s workplace went about their routines as if nothing had happened. The disturbing juxtaposition led Jayla to keep to herself. When she ran into a co-worker who knew her well enough to sense something was wrong, Jayla told her, “I’ve been trying not to cry all day.” In reply, that woman could only confess that she had

not heard about the shooting. This confirmed Jayla's fear of others' ignorance, taking an even greater toll on her mental state.

Jayla recalled that she was "secretly going around trying to hold it together after some white man was welcomed into a church and prayed for before he got up and shot [his victims] systematically." Her shoulders dropped sorrowfully as these words exited her mouth. Traumas of unending anti-Black violence nested in Jayla's consciousness, indicated by her conviction that U.S. norms taught Black residents – especially Black women – that "what you know is not important, that you're going crazy!" Jayla's ways of reclaiming authority over her work and life foregrounded the seemingly fading realities that Black people are human, and that "feelings matter. They are an integral part of human consciousness and behavior. Human beings are as much feeling creatures as they are thinking ones. Hunches and intuition play a major role in reasoning, and passion provides impetus for action" (Skoggard and Waterston 2015:111).

In Jayla's broader process of finding her footing by way of these silhouetted creations, she had rendered her anatomical form into art, the latter object more regularly treasured and attributed higher symbolic value than Black bodies. Moreover, art allowed Jayla to imagine her body otherwise, representing herself as an embodiment of enigma whilst distancing herself from, and defining herself apart from, delimiting tropes associated with 'Blackness' and 'Black womanhood. However, while Jayla partook in artistic production to achieve a semblance of calm, she also knew it was not a surefire cure for pain nor did it resolve worldly ills. Rather, it was an attempt to express herself, confront social vexations, claim moments and material references for comfort, and resist full collapse under the psychological weight of tragic climates littered with recurrent

murders of Black and Brown people. Fighting tears, Jayla attested, “Then there was something else, there was another Black man who was shot. I can’t remember the timeline. I said to myself ‘this is too much’...”

To regain her composure, Jayla brought up the positive benefits of searching out and finding community in Charleston’s wake. Rather than trying to appease her parents’ plans for her future or answer back to those who accused her of internalizing whiteness, Jayla pursued mutually fulfilling and uplifting interactions. For instance, she told me, “I called my sister and one of my best friends. It wasn’t a clinical depression but a weariness... We got together and talked it out... [this world and this field] can be very emotionally abusive.” Even during the interview, which seemed to reinvigorate some of Jayla’s original post-Charleston hurt, her real-time frustrations lessened as she recalled ways in which contact with friends and family strengthened her. “It is only by finding solace in other women, in actually speaking your ideas aloud to other listening and affirming people” that you can remember and assure yourself that “you’re not the only one. All this time, you thought you’ve been overreacting and that you’re crazy. However, you come to see that your reaction is valid.” Jayla’s insightful reflection resounded with testimony offered by renowned feminist scholar and eventual cancer victim Audre Lorde:

I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken for myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you but for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (2007 [1984]:40)

Amidst the broader Black Lives Matter movement, Jayla’s perspective echoed wider domestic and international protests rising to critique what their proponents called a

police brutality epidemic. Therefore, while I discuss art as an intentional organization of sound and images into viewable material wholes, most media makers I worked with put less time into delineating and enforcing boundaries around ‘Art,’ and more on doing what was necessary to bring their works and messages to fruition. Hence, while the imagined gains of media production are plenty, it is vital to recognize the corporeal realities that media can (in)validate (Pink 2006) as well as the fashions in which vulnerable positions of witness and/or personal struggle can spur projects. Many of these creators also worked knowing that the risk of not speaking up had grown exponentially over the last few years. Besides nationwide protests, a volatile atmosphere emanated from a controversial presidential campaign round laden with slanderous talking points about ‘the Other’ that carried both executive purchase and deadly consequence.

Conclusion: Media as Affective Embodiment and Expression

Many Black women media makers weave reflections on self and society into assembling and executing media production plans. Translating concepts and emotions into coherent, technologically feasible audiovisual materials requires practitioners to step back from a situation, break it down into substantive pieces, and conceive of a wider picture built out of reconfigured and/or reimagined narratives and strategically deployed techniques and aesthetics. In other words, in order to develop materially realizable production methodologies, creators must contrive legible diegesis from haphazard thoughts, finding ways to digest melancholic conditions (Cheng 2000) and transmute them into words and visions.

This chapter looked at how two women utilized self-presentation and art to re-frame emotion as a legitimate spark and influence in cogent creations as well as practices

of refusal. As Fanon expands on Freud with explicit attention to race, “It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny ...” (1967:11). The chapter delved into Helen and Jayla’s stories to examine how art can function not only as a cathartic modality but also as means to make sense of what might at first be experienced as chaotic.

Helen, Jayla, and several other research participants, commenced media projects without full awareness of what to expect. While Helen attempted to use self-display as a way to cope with the literal odds against her, Jayla embraced art-making less for profit margins, and more for the endearing prospects of self-discovery, self-definition and – as I observed in subsequent exhibitions of her work – community-building and affirmation. In the face of consistent structural and physical affronts to women and people of color, these media makers utilized media making to work through anxieties, confront the messiness of social difference, and document (and for some, challenge) inequality’s instant as well as lasting effects on marginalized bodies and minds. Throughout, Jayla also forged spaces and images of comfort for herself, for others in her social networks, and – she hoped – for attendees at future public exhibitions of her works.

While not exclusively, it was no coincidence that many people who Jayla contacted during this search for communities not only of practice but also of support, care, and understanding were other Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins proposes, “For African American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification is another Black woman” (2000:104). Concurring, Jayla found solace through engaging the symbolic and aesthetic facets of the artworks themselves, as well as connections and empathy afforded to her through her production and personal

networks. All of these factors helped Jayla to escape the paralysis of all-engulfing sadness to see and depict issues with different, potentially more generative mindsets. With and through processes forwarding comfort as well as vulnerability, Jayla reminded herself to mindfully know her worth, practice self-ownership, and project her voice into the current landscape of violence: hopefully one voice of many contributing to a brewing climate of protest against conditions that seek to diminish if not eradicate minoritized persons' wants for a better tomorrow.

CHAPTER 4

Production Choreography: Situated Navigations of Horizontal Power Relations on Film Shoots

“Assertions about passion, knowledge, experience, and quality are all ways that members of the film industry attempt to make sense of the uncertainty of the film business- to impose some meaning and order on the highly unpredictable and disorderly commercial universe in which they operate. These production fictions enable filmmakers to continue with their enterprise, for they provide a way to explain the randomness that marks commercial filmmaking”

– Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood*, 2012

“Whatever Pauline wants to do is fine by me.” – Henrietta, On-Set, 2016

“Whatever makes it work!” – Pauline, On-Set, 2016

“We’re gonna go for it!” director Pauline hollered across the parking lot that served as their shoot location that day. Film team members looked up to acknowledge that they heard her statement before quickly returning to whatever tasks they had to finish before scene rehearsal commenced. People hurried every which way to gather lighting and art design materials, set up apple boxes on which sound operators would later perch with boom mikes, assemble camera parts and accessories, and transfer pieces of equipment to predesignated spots. Acting talent sipped water, chatted and prepared lines. The set’s three co-producers dashed in and out of sight to handle logistical details such as catered food arrivals, refreshment provisions, and schedule finalizations. Amidst this flurried activity, Pauline and shoot cinematographer Henrietta huddled at lot’s edge to discuss what camera angles, movements, and related technical arrangements would make for the most compelling filming outcomes.

In addition to the vertical power disparities between funders and producers discussed in previous chapters (and much wider literature on film production), I use this chapter to examine film shoots as means to track how horizontal power relations develop

and shift on the ground in ways that complicate visions of Black production as wholly circumscribed and determined by white-dominant ideology. Anthropologist and film director Tejaswini Ganti states in *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*, “as my research progressed, I realized that film shoots not only yielded information about specific production practices, but also many insights into the structure, organization, and social relations of the film industry itself” (2012:155). Amending her Bollywood-centered study, I ask: How do Black women media authorities assemble and lead film projects in ways that are both sensitive and flexible to realities of being non-male and of color in media production? What kinds of material content and immaterial provocation do teams craft to convey certain social and/or political intentions on screen, and with what attention to media’s ultimate controllability? Do modifications (or anticipations thereof) made during shoots due to lacking funds or constraints on alternative, non-hegemonic networks differently produce and potentiate film shoot choreographies? These questions concern Black women media producers who combat ideological, monetary, and socio-political refusals of their legitimacy to pursue creative approaches that center community interests in ways that simultaneously look to the realities and resource limitations of the present, and to potential messages and impacts that it may have in future contexts (i.e. entertainment, social, political, etc.).

Ethnographically, this chapter follows two writer/directors – who I call Jenelle and Pauline – on their respective film shoots to watch how they exercised and managed their authority in real-time. Through these examples, I analyze how Black women leading film shoots (this media in particular) aim to establish and enforce inclusive modes of on-

set engagement and produce films to inspire future audiences to ruminate on, and perhaps even take action against psycho-social, structural, and societal systems of prejudice.

This chapter also investigates how communities of practice built on complementary technical interests, compatible personalities, and/or recognition of shared struggle are mobilized amidst and for independent media projects. Overall, it highlights interactions on these particular shoots in order to argue that Black women media makers negotiate and also challenge their marginalized social positions through shoot praxes of recruiting, reconfiguring relationships of authority, and relating to cast and crew.

Choreography of Production: An Interpretive Lens

“And I would like to get this choreography, we’re doing this twice, once with extras going out...”
 – Pauline, On-Set, 2016

During my single day on Jenelle’s weekend-long short film shoot, and all but one day of Pauline’s crammed week-long feature film shoot, I watched team members bounce between intensive focus on specific on-set responsibilities, and wider chats with members of other departments⁴⁷ about mutually affecting decisions and changes in the face of emergent needs, pressures, and budgetary concerns. Each director worked to forge, maintain, and/or adapt authoritative stances not based in egoist top-down control. Instead they cultivated humility, deference, respect, and attention to different team member’s strengths. To do justice to the generally hectic atmosphere witnessed on these and other shoots, and to adopt language that Pauline actually used during the shoot (as in the quote at the top of this section), I employ an analytical framework charged with a similar sense of kinetic flexibility. Anthropologist and trained dancer Cox’s concept of ‘choreography

⁴⁷ Departments refers to the different teams responsible for lighting, camera, sound, actors, art design, makeup and hair, costuming etc.

of citizenship' serves as inspiration. Inter-reading action and interaction, Cox's *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* examines constellations (i.e. interconnected if not always interdependent groupings) of movement among interlocutors at a Detroit group home for Black girls. Importantly, her definition of choreography does not apply exclusively to dance. Rather, she broadens the term's scope to account more generally for the interconnectedness and interdependence that swell and wane between group members who move around and adapt to one another's material, and sometimes immaterial presence towards typically agreed-upon ends. Cox writes:

Choreography is concerned in a very fundamental sense with the ordering of bodies in space. Choreography is shapeshifting made visible. Choreography is embodied meaning making, physical storytelling, affective physicality, and an intellectualized response to the question of how movement might narrate texts that are not otherwise legible. (2015:28)

In the above statement, Cox claims that choreography, or 'shapeshifting made visible,' attends as much to the affective, intellectual and imaginative aspects of attributing meaning to moves and spaces as it does to the physical. People plan, alter, and pause choreographies, weaving in and out of one another in search of common ground. Therefore, I utilize choreography-as-framework to assess and celebrate movement's integrative role in (re)visiting, (re)questioning, and (re)creating knowledge-making.

In choreography's most popular iteration, dance companies arrange shows to guide audience reactions and emotions in particular directions, however nondeterminative their intentions will be in the long run. While I draw this literal and figurative parallel, I also found media producers to approach and perform labor in significantly divergent ways. Cast and crew members fixed sights and made choices concomitantly interested in what made the most sense in the present, as well as on what they wanted *eventual*

audiences to garner from their works. Thusly uniting present and future prospects, shoots were complex arenas flush with overlapping temporalities and layers of authoritative prowess. Directors were cognizant of such complexities, as exemplified by time blocks they intentionally reserved for rehearsals during which they could work out an upcoming scene's details, and verify that cast and crew were in sync to lessen (though not eliminate) the amount of unpredictability before rolling the cameras. Taking advantage of rehearsal's trial-and-error openness, everyone involved in the scene could test out which actions to replicate and which to avoid (e.g. pacing, line delivery, equipment techniques) in subsequent recorded takes so as not to squander working hours, human energies, and memory card space unnecessarily.

However, the feel of the set shifted almost instantly once the Assistant Director hollered "Action!" to signal that cameras were recording. Pressure spiked, as performances both on screen and on its peripheries adopted a superhuman capacity to transcend real time and physical proximity vis-a-vis the technical reach of digital equipment and transferability of image capture. Hard drives holding hours and hours, files upon files, of people's gestures, words, interactions, and pauses would go from Director of Photography to Editor for possible inclusion in the final film. Hence, the result of a split second's decision - an arched eyebrow, jolt in camera stability, or momentary hesitation - could end up in films later screened and made subject to audiences' varying interpretations amid a diversity of intellectual comprehension, embodied empathies, and cultural allegiances.

Both in conversation with and beyond questions of virtual worlds enabled by recording and/or digital technologies, analysis of social commentaries and purposes

towards which people craft media production also speaks to Cox's elaboration of choreography's implicit relationship with social ideology and resistance:

Choreography, in its most radical sense, can disrupt and discredit normative reading practices that assess young Black women's bodies as undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place. Choreography suggests that there is a map of movement or plan for how the body interacts with its environment, but it also suggests that by the body's placement in a space, the nature of that space changes. (2015:229)

In this quote, Cox presents choreography as a series of intuitive acts that are at once calculated and flexible, historically durable yet constantly amenable to confrontation and adjustment based on the specificities of a political or social moment. In such contexts, choreographies' expectation of indeterminacy metaphorically mirrors the two-sidedness of Black women's quests to accept disparate racial and gendered disparities as realities while not losing hope for a future mass recognition of Black women in media fields.

United States' discourses of neoliberalism (i.e. an individual's hard work will yield reward) clash with fundamental discriminatory structures, creating a messy legacy that these media makers had to negotiate on the ground, personally as well as collectively. In one-on-one and group interviews as well as public discussion panels, I heard many media makers I met and/or followed through production spaces voice frustration with widespread perceptions of Black women-led media projects as unprofitably niche or driven by personal agendas: inferences they believed were based on their phenotypes as Black women rather than anything they actually said. Many interviewees felt as if others were treating or had treated them as walking transgressions of U.S. cultural codes (Crenshaw 1991, Crenshaw 1989) that dismissed and devalued Black women as 'undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place' (Cox 2015:229).

Therefore, most imagined their technical decisions not as outlets for escapism but as potential carriers of future societal implications. This inspired these women to closely deliberate how their products might contribute to the larger social and material contexts of resilience, victory and struggle. Their minds toughened by personal contact and collective memories of stratified realities, these women learned to understand investors' flippant judgments (different from constructive criticism) not as personal insults—however irritating or painful— but as typical of larger mainstream production norms. Consequently, they each cultivated ways of discerning and exposing structures affecting what 'outsiders' might naturalize in relation to particular groups or populations.

In this chapter's vignettes, media teams comprised of complementarily trained media specialists engaged in collaborative media efforts imbued with artistic as well as humanistic import. What they recorded and produced were rich confluences of past, present, and projected choreographies never devoid of their creators. In a tradition comparable to David MacDougall's *The Corporeal Image*, I contend that media choreographies embed traces of makers into their products, for "corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world" (2005:3). As human beings first and foremost, authors and audiovisual creators leave indelible marks on their works, as they enter and move through production contexts with situated perspectives and perceptions of the world that inevitably sway their work praxes on conscious as well as subconscious levels (Caldwell 2008). As Powdermaker says about the methodologies of her *Hollywood* research:

Since no social system can be understood without a knowledge of the people through whom it functions, the personalities of those who sit in the front office, of producers, directors, actors, writers and others were observed. Their backgrounds, goals, ways of thinking, frustration and compensation were all significant. Equally

important were their relationships with each other and among the key ones were those of producer-writer, director-actor and of all with the front office. All influence the creative aspects of movie production and leave their imprint on the movies. (1950:10)

Tweaking Cox's concept to address film production's specificities, I posit 'choreographies of production' or 'production choreographies' as a lens through which to inspect the overlapping projects and labors of film departments that cooperate to ideally accomplish shared production goals. Film shoot choreographies coordinate a variety of *moving* parts including physical traversal around and off the shoot location, spatial placement and proximity of persons and equipment, verbal commands exchanged by people in different but cooperating roles, and anticipation of a film's future distribution routes. In sum, I foreground collaboration as an integral physical as well as semantic aspect of media production, undermining 'lone author' imaginaries (see Introduction) by situating every specialist's work in authoritative but ultimately collective matrices.

Overall, this study of how production choreographies take shape, and for what reasons, highlights interpersonal links that form, break down, and shift over the course of shoots. Ethnography of these two women's ways of navigating, discussing, and articulating power structures *as authorities* reveals both directors' methods for managing professional and/or public images, and creating media products that showcase their authority, and that shoots are comprised of numerous specialists who try to most efficiently work in separate but coordinated departments, or workgroups.

Meeting Jenelle

I first heard about Jenelle and her work portfolio from a former boss at a summer media internship. Following weeks of buildup through this kind intermediary, I finally made my first face-to-face acquaintance with the shapely, mocha-skinned director in her

forties at a networking reception. At that time, she had already been working for nearly a decade to build a reputable career for herself in media realms (corporate and independent) generally reluctant to employ, let alone bestow leadership roles on, non-white and/or non-male people. After our positive interaction that evening, I did my best to keep in contact with Jenelle via e-mail, reminding myself that her busy schedule required her to volley her attention and body between independent film and television meetings, shoots, and festivals, which would likely delay her responses. Fortunately, my perseverance paid off when Jenelle thought to invite me onto the shoot of a project that she had conceived, scripted, and was preparing to direct. We agreed that I would come on as a student researcher and give back to the project as a Production Assistant, or 'P.A.' In this role, I would assist where I could. This turned out to include replenishing refreshments, fetching materials from a local technology store when needed, and retrieving special lunch orders. I would also remain on deck to serve as an 'extra,' or background actor..

On the first scheduled day, I strolled up to a Brooklyn café with large glass front windows. As I rounded the corner, I saw three people with tool-laden waist belts scurry up a metal ramp into the back of a large white equipment truck, resolving my worry about finding the correct location. On this shoot, I served on one of the lowest rungs of the film shoot hierarchy. However, firmly positioned within its infrastructure, I observed who made requests of whom, how authority rippled from the director outward, how inquiries moved from team members inward, and how team members decided which small issues they could work out amongst themselves without Jenelle's direct and immediate input.

Choreographing Collaboration and Leadership

Jenelle followed a principle that she and other creators preached as a central reality of the business: “there is no such thing as a one man/woman show”. Having initiated this personal project on her own⁴⁸, Jenelle gathered team members to perform staggered but organized choreographies. Generally, formal recruitment and hiring procedures in independent film entail a director or director’s representative (perhaps an Assistant Director or Producer) extending contracts to prospective cast and crew members who would sign on only after having spoken with a project head, understood the project’s premise and their responsibilities in it, and decided to attach their names, labors and reputations to it without assured financial gain. Independent production relies on team members being invested in projects⁴⁹ for reasons beyond money, such as ideological disruption, awareness of current social issues, historical revisionism, or political commentary. Likely, those who joined Jenelle’s team thought it a worthwhile endeavor and a new resume item.

Jenelle’s team leadership style largely relied on delegating and entrusting duties among team members so as to free up her creative energy for her directorial tasks of guiding actors with character motivations and support and making sure that a project’s different departments worked as generatively and co-beneficially as possible, especially when obstacles such as budget restrictions, actor sickness or schedule conflict, or weather conditions threatened to interrupt plans as scheduled, if not usurp them completely. In

⁴⁸ In other situations, other participants became directors by being brought on to direct another person’s work-in-progress or commissioned by a corporation to direct a work on their behalf.

⁴⁹ Some producers even told audiences at public events that they were prepared to accept lesser pay for their services on projects they see as important to a cause, cultural history or other necessary intervention.

practice, this took shape in the following way. To head each department, Jenelle appointed a reliable associate and permitted them to suggest assistants which Jenelle would then confirm or veto. At the top of the day, Jenelle and department heads would gather to discuss strategies for setting up, kicking off, and managing time on the shoot. Eventually, this leading group agreed to divide the café into two equal parts, then allocate parts of one half as equipment holding/staging areas for the different departments. This half would also hold the café's tables, which would double as a place for people to wait whenever their specific jobs slacked up momentarily and to avoid interrupting recording. The other half of the café's main atrium housed the props and camera equipment and comprised the *mise-en-scene* for the actual scene.

Once this leadership group finished deliberating, they broke and reported back to their respective work groups to relay updates relevant to them. As a two-person unit, the wardrobe designer and her assistant (both Black women as well) separately rolled a clothing rack full of character wardrobes into a back corner and unrolled an opaque sheet that they would hang up to create an impromptu dressing room for hasty costume changes. A curly-haired makeup artist set up her station on a table nearby, assuming that her busiest times would correlate with those of the wardrobe department.

In the furthest corner, gaffers and the key grip⁵⁰ unloaded and rifled through their gear to retrieve metal stands, translucent sheets, and other items needed to set up Jenelle's desired lighting scheme. Primarily listed under the job description of the 'key grip' and 'gaffers, a lighting scheme is multifaceted in its considerations of a director's wanted genre references, brightness level, shadow intensity, and general overall aesthetic. The

⁵⁰ Gaffers and grips are the members of the film team in charge of setting up equipment to light and otherwise secure the mechanic elements of a scene.

camera crew unpacked their kits⁵¹ closest to the scene because cameras and their accessories were typically largest in size and had to be transitioned first between scenes for other departments to set up around them. On a different table near the front window, the sound technician fiddled his equipment, namely directional lavalier microphones clipped onto or near actors' shirt lapels to capture audio of spoken words. that would be pinned either to his waist belt or actors' lapels to record audio as clearly as possible. He then attached a 'mixer' to his own waist belt to help control and record incoming sounds more crisply. The sound technician—tall, caramel-skinned, and bald—also experimented with angling the 'boom mike': a long, oval, foam-covered microphone attached to a pole that he would hold over each scene to record sound while managing to stand far enough away for the boom and its shadow to be out of frame. Every so often, he would take the initiative to approach the cinematographer to resolve potential boom placement issues in a coming scene.

As a P.A., I witnessed choreographies evolve, devolve, be rearticulated, and morph again. People bustled about and slowed up intermittently to collect things from holding areas, perform specialized jobs, take needed recuperation breaks, or clarify problems with colleagues on the spot. Functionally, people and departments operated as 'cogs' in a shoot's media-making machine while trying to evade costly mistakes such as erroneous and/or redundant assignments. Always in motion, projects moved forward by way of flexible envisioning, as people evaluated short-term goals step by step alongside long-term goals established and/or occasionally reassessed in group contexts such as official departmental and team meetings, as well as more casual conversations during on-

⁵¹ 'Kits' is the industry term of a specific departments' equipment bundles.

set lulls. I also watched team members try to minimize error by constantly beckoning the director for her insight, guidance, or approval. Therefore, even when team members' different personalities and temperaments co-mingled amicably, directors still needed to perform the exhaustive mental gymnastics in having to think through, predict and act in numerous material, temporal, and affective directions. Throughout my time on Jenelle's shoot, Jenelle and various team members exchanged words, requests, opinions and advice with other team members; and witnessed them take actions, plan strategies, confirm or change blueprints, and undergo negotiations with associates amid frenetic conditions.

Authority and The Question of Directorial Style

"Cut!" Jenelle hollered after yet another take. She walked over to compliment and confer with the main acting duo, and then made her routine rounds to check in with departments wanting to dialogue with her before giving the scene another go. Jenelle's upbeat voice and proficient problem-solving resounded in her ongoing efforts to balance her original vision with others' suggestions. She spoke in a welcoming but measured tone that inspired confidence, which was all the more necessary given the project's limited funds and shooting hours. Those new to Jenelle's directorial style quickly learned that calling her name, or gently tapping her shoulder to get her attention did not yield an instant reply. Instead, it put them into a line of people awaiting Jenelle's attention. Over years of commissioned work as a television and film producer, Jenelle refined personal techniques to juggle mounting inquiries. Between takes, she would hurry between actors, camerapersons, ADs, gaffers, and sound operators in an order determined by her own experienced assessments of urgency, timeliness, and accountability.

Alongside her grounding presence and sociable management style, Jenelle's extensive practical knowledge of the field also showed through in her ability to shift impeccably between technical jargons, developing a directorial choreography that jumped between each department's focused but parallel choreographies. A common point made across dozens of interviews I conducted, most interlocutors were convinced that it was necessary to train in, or at least expose themselves to work in different roles (i.e. screenwriter/director, director/producer, etc.) just in case they did not have enough money to hire out certain jobs on a project. However, each team member hired for Jenelle's shoot came in a single capacity. For instance, the art director was in charge of developing an aesthetic signature for the project and - if approved by Jenelle - designing and arranging props to materialize visuals. This person would not hold a dual role as cinematographer, even if she was known to have prior experience in camera work.

Amid such conventions of job partition, Jenelle acted as a human bridge and reference point to smooth out relations between qualified specialists working on related but disparate obligations. While she never claimed to be an experienced implementer of all equipment on set, Jenelle had a competent enough grasp of each department's responsibilities and terminologies to provide eloquent character direction to actors, discuss lens types, light exposure levels, and zoom intensities with the camera operations team, and then move right over to gaffer and grip's lexicon. An organizational hinge of sorts, Jenelle toggled communicative modes, finding motivation from constantly morphing and flourishing ideas of what the final narrative film product could and/or might look like.

Overall, Jenelle and her team challenged normalized racial and gender ideologies in two main ways. First, resistance infused the team's counter-hegemonic storyline, which centered and delved into an aging Black woman's sexual desire. Second, Jenelle's execution of authority demonstrated that that efficacious partnerships could form around Black women specialists and technicians.

Performative Choreographies: Staged and Un-staged Aspects of Directing a Scene

In the quaint New York café that Jenelle and her assistant directors had scouted out and reserved a month prior, the film team employed official acting and filming choreographies for a scene in which a Black woman sat next to her male spouse as they interviewed possible third parties to their sex life. While the guiding screenplay certainly carried comedic undertones, Jenelle did not take filming lightly. Rather, she led it with great geniality and care for both actors and crew, as well as more broadly to the movie's propelling themes of love, sexuality, and aging. "Cut!" she said again before darting off to speak with her actors in hushed tones. "How was that one [most recent take] for you?"

Over the last month, Jenelle and her two assistant producers had spent long nights working out financial and scheduling details for this two-day, weekend shoot. They had confirmed with the building's owner what parts of the establishment they could move, manipulate and reimagine as befit the project. This included turning off air conditioners during filming to reduce the excess noise picked up in audio tracks. Nonetheless, because they were using the shop's actual physical dimensions as a location, particular challenges arose. For instance, the two-floor site (the lower floor of which Jenelle and department leaders had decided to restrict to actors' wardrobe changes) had a fixed square footage and immovable major fixtures (i.e. refrigerator, air conditioners) that delimited where,

when and how people could move about the space while still staying in frame or maintaining established camera angles.

As stated above, Jenelle executed a similar movement pattern at the conclusion of each take. First, she conferred with her two main actors and extras involved. They took small but crucial slices of time to share ideas and opinions on the upcoming scene in light of what they imagined for characters' individual approaches and ensemble development. Sometimes, the engagement that ensued was as brief as Jenelle saying, 'Great, let's do it again!' Other times, it grew into thoughtful evaluation of performance minutiae - duration of pauses, tone of line delivery, prop handling, glances between characters- that may improve future takes. Such "notes" included, "Try pausing in between [designated lines A and B]," or "Don't rush [line A], because you have to make sure that we hear everything you say," or even "Commit to the look you were giving right there."

Occasionally, Jenelle would also entertain comments from her team, some of whom trumped her in age and/or years of industry and/or independent media experience. As one example of how she regarded their input, the lead actress (senior to Jenelle in both ways mentioned above) summoned her after a take to critique the speed and lyricism of her monologue, and propose modifications that might produce a more powerful and compelling outcome. Open to the views of trusted cast and crew, Jenelle pushed the shoot forward through cycles of repetition, commentary, and compromise. Incorporating the latter two, repetition –whether in terms of shooting a scene over and over or performing one's technical role over and over throughout a shoot–allowed Jenelle to intercede in a scene's creative and semiotic development, worked as an iterative space for rehearsal and

performative resignifications, and erected ephemeral spaces in which collaborative experimentation was not only permitted but expected.

After checking in with the talent⁵², Jenelle walked speedily between departments (gaffers, cinematography team, AD) to discuss alterations or mull over questions that seemed to come up after all but the final take. Their inquiries addressed practical issues such as how to place, frame, rotate and/or pan (move from side-to-side) the camera; how aesthetic and timing elements were translating on the camera's attached monitor; and how to dress characters for on-screen appearances. Only later did I realize how much of an impression the speed of work on this and other shoots left on me, and consequently on my writing. Eventually, I analyzed Jenelle's movement patterns as her way of trying to inclusively account for and listen to everyone's voices, comments, and critiques, especially as a woman with experiences of a larger society primed to ignore or blindly appropriate Black women's input or communal belonging. Furthermore, I saw her 'darting about' as testament to one of the most crucial skills a Black woman media maker can nurture: the ability to motivate emotional commitment and draw passionate performances from team members. Exemplary of a leadership type that I heard a panel moderator describe in 2015, Jenelle led with a "creative collective politic" that revered "how art is used to express, endure, survive, and liberate" members of historically and presently disadvantaged communities. Because many team members were participating from places of passion and investment to some degree with commitments other than potential profit at play, consultative relationships evolved in ways not usually expected

⁵² 'Talent' is not meant to imply that crew are not talented. Rather, it is just a term used to refer to actors as those who are featured in the final on-screen product.

from its mainstream media counterpart. At their core, the shoot's production choreographies interlaced physical, psychological and emotional labors.

In return for her attentiveness, Jenelle's team paid her a general deference. I did not see anyone overtly challenge her authority during my day on set. Assuming this to also be true of the shoot day on which I was not present, I would attribute this dynamic to a number of factors. First, Jenelle performed an efficient professionalism that exuded values of structure, kindness, trust, and cooperation. Second, having endured media's ups-and-downs for years, Jenelle tolerated the field's economic and psycho-social gymnastics with a leadership model that combined instruction and adaptability, concern and calculation. Third, Jenelle had worked with most of the crew on previous shoots and had shown her dedication to the group by working with them yet again. Fourth, she had many 'producer' and 'director' credits in television and independent film projects to her name. Fifth, Jenelle worked intently despite societal narratives that undermined curvaceous Black women as producers, and fed off of obstinate national anxieties about Black bodies daring to take up space as well as the lasting sway of 'Sapphire' (i.e. the bossy and demanding Black woman) and other distorting archetypes (Mullings 1994).

However congenial, Jenelle's relations with cast and crew unfolded on what was ultimately precarious processual ground. With budget as an ever-present issue, Jenelle had to push through personal fatigue, uncertainties, and temper flares in order to handle problems rationally, quell arguments between coworkers, and lead regular meetings with department heads to keep all abreast of the shoot's progress. Jenelle also wrote and e-mailed out nightly 'call sheets'- spreadsheets composed on Microsoft Excel to distribute necessary information for the following day such as the shoot location's address, names

and positions of key crew members, people's arrival times, Assistant Directors' phone numbers, and expected weather conditions for outside shoots.

Observing shoots firsthand also exposed me to the under-discussed affective tensions of media makers' efforts to make progress in ways both contractually expected and unexpected of them. To make headway in the face of financial constraints, shoot choreographies often had to reach beyond contractual obligations in times of need, asking people to suspend professional egos to run errands for which they may not have been technically responsible. As John Caldwell wrote of production culture (though notably in Hollywood), "What film and television are influenced by macroscopic economic processes, they also very much function on a microsocial level as local cultures and social communities in their own right" (2008:2). This could involve driving people from train or bus stations to the set and back again or picking up refreshments from the store (as I had no vehicle). Several people were willing to fulfill their roles and add other items if it helps to advance the project as a whole, as long as their actions did not hinder fellow team members' attempts to do the same. In independent film, pride, titles, and divisions surely exist but seem to have a less pronounced impact than in Hollywood. As another producer— an exuberant, dreadlocked Black woman—said on multiple occasions, "you gotta do what you gotta do."

For instance, on the first independent film set I ever volunteered on as a P.A., I remember getting a call over my earpiece receiver. *Copy Marlaina Copy...* After listening hard through a slight static for my next assignment, I walked briskly out of the building to meet an arriving white van that the team had rented to transport objects that were either cumbersome or needed in bulk. Within five minutes, the van pulled up. Its

window rolled down to reveal aforementioned shoot producer Aisha behind the steering wheel. As I climbed into the passenger seat, she explained that we were looking for a store where we could refill the set's bottled water supply most cost-effectively. Aisha was not exceptional in this regard. Across independent film sets I visited (including Jenelle at present and Pauline's below) people seemed relatively willing to do extra tasks for the project's sake, illustrating cultivated values of flexibility, social affinity, and interpersonal aid.

Studying Repetition and Embodied Praxis via Self-Emplacement

During research, I would frequently ponder other ways to study how directors incorporate social themes into technical strategy. At first, I maintained a somewhat sidelined position on Jenelle's shoot, confirmed by two directors who explained my presence to their associates as 'a fly on the wall'. However, when a chance to appear as an extra in Jenelle's film arose, I took the opportunity to diversify my perspective on the shoot process by surrendering my initially peripheral position on Jenelle's set for one of the set's most central choreographies: the performative space in front of the camera.

Around noon that day, I had returned to set from a store run, passed on the receipt to Assistant Director (or A.D., for short) Sophia ⁵³, unloaded the snacks I had picked up on the designated refreshments table, handed her the receipt⁵⁴, and reported back to the holding area to await another request for assistance. About thirty minutes later, I heard a

⁵³ As mentioned earlier, on Jenelle's set (and several others), it was a rule that we always attain material proof of anything bought on the production company's credit card for purposes of strict budgetary tracking and investor/fiscal accountability.

⁵⁴ Pushing against socializing forces that framed them as incapable of efficiently exercising authority, Jenelle and her team never mentioned broader social or financial obstacles out loud—even if they did acknowledge them implicitly, such as when the shoot's Assistant Director indicated a tight budget by emphatically stressing the significance of returning any and all receipts for purchases I made.

familiar voice. “Marlaina...,” Sophia loudly whispered when she believed herself to be within earshot of me. “Marlaina!” she repeated. I whipped my head around once I was aware of being her intended target. “Yes?” I replied, snapping myself out of a haze that befell me in a P.A. lull at times when I would shift into an outwardly oriented observational mode. “We need people to fill in this shot. Jenelle asked me to come get you. Would you mind being in the next scene, please?” Sophia’s words landed as more of a nicety than an open question.

I had not written off the possibility of someone asking me to stand in as an extra—here a ‘café patron’— at some point. By that point, I had already served as an extra in other independent films and attended panel and film festival discussions whose participating media makers attested that financial shortages and budget hyper-management were regular occurrences for independent media projects, making such recruitment favors likely. Realistically, P.A.s on standby were the people most readily available to visually populate scenes. However, my shyness peeked through each time this prospect arose. I felt my eyes widen at the thought of being in front of this shoot’s recording cameras. However, I wrestled back my initial shock to start coming to terms with the fact that I would be adding another positionality atop my presence as a researcher and P.A. on Jenelle’s shoot.

Years of anthropological training poised me to deeply reflect on this shift of position and perspective from home viewer, to researcher and intermittent novice, to supporting actor. I have since attributed the distinct change I felt in the latter transition of roles to a mix of factors. For one, people’s experiences of shoots typically oscillated

between periods of delay and haste⁵⁵, pushing me to make quick decisions of action or non-action, participation or polite evasion, that I was left to question afterward. Also, partaking in shoot culture as a P.A. and ‘extra’ encouraged me to critically consider the assorted aspects of layering, coordinating, and performing a ‘realist’ scene. Hence, such ethnographic repositioning further heightened my corporeal and affective sensitivity to the busy, less composed activities that made film products possible— however unseen they typically were by the general public.

In flustered obedience, I rose from my seat and said my temporary goodbyes to the small shoot’s one other PA. I had been chatting with this film Masters student and hijab-wearing, self-identified Arab woman to pass time between our sporadic assignments. We joked about the limited options that higher-ups had in terms of helping out, and the ‘either you or me’ anxieties this stirred within us. Later that day, I learned that she had appeared in a scene that morning while I was out collecting a hard drive from an electronics store. In order to suggest that different patrons had cycled in and out of the café over time, it was now my turn to make an on-screen appearance.

Nervously, I ambled behind Sophia to join the group of people awaiting instruction from Jenelle. Having just concluded a chat with the cinematographer, Jenelle turned to see Sophia and I in her peripheral vision, which reminded her that she still had to tell me what to do. “Hey Marlaina! ...Okay, I just need you to walk across the back of the shot this way and sit down over there,” Jenelle stated. As she spoke, she quickly pointed out with her index finger what was to me an initially indecipherable route from beside the camera between high-backed café stools before stopping at one in the

⁵⁵ Insiders refer to this back-and-forth between rest and rush is referred to as ‘hurry up and wait’ culture.

rightmost back corner. Presumably, this was at an edge of the frame she had already established with her Black male D.P., who was in main charge of camera operations.

Apparently, the scene's unpersuasively empty imitation of what would have actually been a bustling little New York coffee shop in 'real-life' had underwhelmed Jenelle. To remedy the discord between her vision and what had played out in a prior take, Jenelle coached me to wait a few seconds after she called "Action!," and then walk along the indicated path at not-too-fast yet not-too-slow a speed. At a 'right' moment judged by the pace of the main duo's line deliveries, and camera movements happening around the scene itself, I was to take my seat silently and feign waiting for a friend in the background so as not to disrupt audio of the central character dialogue up front. "Don't worry, we'll practice it first," she added as if she had noticed my glassy stare and sensed the nerves I had at the thought of enacting this seemingly routine choreography. In this instance, my 'acting' was to be tested beyond pantomimed chatter or limb cameos at a higher level of difficulty that would require me to physically meander across a live set and sit down while producing as little extraneous noise as possible.

In another nod to choreography, Jenelle informed the cinematographer that he would be countering my movements on a makeshift rolling camera rig that he and some of his gaffer associates had improvised to achieve Jenelle's requested shot effect. Such camera mobility, like my addition, was intended to inject more energy into the scene and amplify its sense of fullness and realness. The cameraman stood proudly next to this dolly, which mechanically enabled the camera to pan (a smooth, sideways moving shot) left to focus on the stationary couple as I wandered off accessorially toward screen right. Despite having the tiniest of on-screen roles, I dwelled on how to act out Jenelle's

commands without looking robotic. “Marlaina, walk a bit slower,” she critiqued my first practice stroll. I went back from whence I came. “That’s it!,” she rejoiced after two more runs spent synchronizing my and the cameramen’s moves, and assessing our respective paths in relation to the shot’s main activity: the featured couple’s center-frame interaction. Speaking to repetition as literal as well as symbolic theme, Tanya L. Shields analyzed rehearsal in particular through a feminist lens (to which I add interests of racialized gender as well) to frame it as a practice and method with great import and implications:

Feminist rehearsal is a methodological approach to reading texts that promotes multivalent readings and foregrounds gender, *encouraging unity and consensus building through confrontation with overlapping histories of knowledge, power, and freedom*. Emphasizing the feminist aspect of rehearsal reveals and confronts the ways in which national belonging has been imagined and privileged as a solely male enterprise...The word ‘rehearsal’ implies several events: (1) *repetition until something is mastered*, (2) constant *reexamination* of what has already been done, and (3) the *suggestion of orality and physical presence of the body* engaged in rehearsal because of the added inflections, pauses, nuances, and bodily shifts resulting from each repetition or revision. (2014:2, emphasis added)

Likewise, I read these arranged collaborative moments of choreographing and re-choreographing, of imagining and reimagining as holding not only physical but meaningful heft. Rehearsal – here, a racially, financially and gender-conscious phenomenon – occurs as a course of repetitive actions that not only serve as scene preparation but also help to ground marginalized people in their pushes towards recognized presence, voices, historical power structures, and freedom. Together – in agreement with Shields’ vision of feminist rehearsal – they pursue mastery, insist on the significance of their bodies and movements, and take ownership of what has been largely assumed to be ‘solely male privilege.’ Rehearsal manifests as the period during which Jenelle and her film team could reexamine and re-attempt presentations before they

distributed them to wider publics. Demonstrating the Black feminist possibilities opened up through rehearsal, Jenelle and her associates were able to review and embrace the multivalence of images during runs, and then converse about which meanings and relations they wanted to fix in presenting their narrative about an older Black woman's sexual desire to a wider public viewership.

After this rehearsal period, it was time for me to perform officially for this team hard at work, and for a recording camera. With a few deep breaths, I stood on my mark off to the side and just behind the primary camera's lens. It was all I could do to ready myself for that first step into the shot. 'Don't bump the camera,' I chanted to myself. 'Don't move too fast, or you'll beat the cameraman (who was taking smooth and gentle steps to pan left smoothly at a responsive tempo),' I repeated in my head. "And, Action!" Jenelle sang out in her signature tonal run.

Thinking back on this experience, the takes I walked into (three recorded, which was a lesser count than I had predicted based on patterns set that morning) let me immerse myself in the film shoot in a more subjectively exposed and vulnerable manner than my former role, helping me understand the significance of retakes on shoots in a different light. During filming, Jenelle steadied herself with legs agape in 'tripod' stance behind the camera and eyes glued to an external standing monitor attached to the camera. Its larger surface area let Jenelle more easily see how a scene's different aspects would show up in the footage, which guided her interventions in and reworking of a scene's progressing iterations.

Yielding to hierarchy as well as my own curiosities, I shifted my research design to emplace myself in shoot activities in a way that made me not only more empathetic but

also more vulnerable, as I had been made an object of potential, immortalized diegesis. However, as part of the scene, I not only witnessed but was part of the messy, behind-the-scenes goings-on that constituted this media project's real-time evolution. In agreement with Elizabeth Chin, I am "convinced that attention to feeling and doing is an essential first step in developing not only an ethnographic eye, but an interpretive foundation" (Chin 2011:41). By allowing my position to slide from marginal to in-frame participation, I directly received orders from Jenelle in fashions and with speed that enabled me to better grasp how she led, talked and worked through possible ways in which production could translate from set to screen.

Repeated collaborations

In addition to these details, I noticed that at least four members of Jenelle's work team, especially department heads, seemed to work well together from the beginning of the day, even though much of Jenelle's focused labor went to secure actors' contentment and motivation. Initially, I wondered if Jenelle and her A.D.'s actor-oriented requests of me (to take and pick up coffee orders, check on actors in their holding room, etc.) privileged the comforts of talent over those of the crew because of some internal ranking logic. Every so often, I cast an enquiring glance at Jenelle, either to find her laughing heartily with her wide toothy grin, or intensely debating issues with coworkers who were just as determined as she was to resolve them. The absence of hostility made my original hypothesis improbable, so I went on to interpret their off-peak conviviality as indication of previous amicable interactions.

Knowledge gained later confirmed my inkling about existing histories between Jenelle and some department leaders in particular. About one third of the way through the

shoot day, Sophia informed me that Jenelle knew several of them from prior projects. Jenelle even called many of them – including this AD informant – friends beyond professional contexts. Regularly nurtured connections amongst them had practically removed the need for constant on-set attention, making their relations noticeably different from Jenelle’s relations with acting talent with whom she was working for the first time. These department heads actually cross-collaborated on one another’s projects, cultivating a sociable dynamic built on mutual respect that was able to shift seamlessly from inside jokes to technical industry jargon and back again. Broadly, when projects conclude on a positive note, partnerships between ambitious Black women media makers and their colleagues have the capacity to disrupt industry norms, encourage dedication from involved parties, yield quality performances, and inspire people to work together again. Hence, I contend that it is useful to extend the repetition theme to encompass not only the value of rehearsals and multiple takes on sets themselves, but also the interpersonal connections that Jenelle and others benefitted from and fortified through repeated collaboration across sets. As I recorded one panelist say at a 2015 women film makers’ event, without grandiose studio’s hefty funding, contracts and locations, independent filmmakers often rely on “making a film as a family.”

To project outsiders, Jenelle was its public face. However, she did her best to surround herself with other women and/or people of color not to be snobbish or exclusive, but to support in practice ideologically revisionist discourses that she fervently believed in, especially with regard to the capability and creativity of people who identified as something other than white, wealthy, straight men. Emphasizing the belonging and comradery fostered along such alternative pathways to authority-making, I

recall a comment that Jenelle had previously made about constructing teams during my first interview with her: “So like you know when you have an idea, you’re gonna wanna talk with Black female producer friends first just because we all know each other. A lot of that is, you know there aren’t a lot of people who wanna talk to you.” Jenelle’s statement presented two inseparable facets of contemporary Black media production communities: 1.) dominant cultural and industry norms that perpetually seek to undervalue, exclude and expel them, and 2.) socio-cultural community-building efforts amongst and for the betterment of ‘their own’ however perceived. Pertinently, such recurrent team-ups not only suggested that these women worked as competent and consistent professionals from job to job, but also reflected the qualities of familiarity and trust so vital in resource-limited production environments.

Overall, Jenelle refused to let statistical probabilities subtract from her professionalism as she believed that her team could and would make a product of which they were all proud. To be clear, Jenelle did not ignore structural and social disparities, but channeled them into a drive to offer corrective media imageries and hiring practices determined to acknowledge skilled women and/or people of color. Quoting Toni Morrison, “When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game” (2003).

Pauline: Choreographing Vulnerability

“Move around, I wanna see where I can see your eyes- right to left. Lean in. Play into my camera, play my camera only...” (Pauline 2016)

“What’s interesting is you can see the CEO sign from here (this angle)” (Pauline 2016)

“That one was good,” Pauline [introduced at the top of the chapter] shouted. Her voice strained to pierce the outside air despite hoarseness she had incurred from the previous day’s nine-hour-long shoot. “Let’s move on!” Though raspy, her tone was assertive, and its authority went unchallenged by her colleagues (to her face, at least). At her command, crewmembers from her generation as well as younger ones broke down the recently completed scene and gathered what they needed from their respective holding areas to set up the next scene on the internally circulated shot list⁵⁶—a narrativized encounter of police brutality. I watched four gaffers and the key grip hurry left while the four-member camera department rushed to an area they had claimed under a tree overhang to protect the secondary camera and its accessories from the blazing afternoon sun.

As the team members hustled in various directions, I felt heaviness settle over the shoot as individuals kept catching sight of or mistakenly encountering the police patrol car that Pauline and co-producers had rented and carefully positioned on the lot for the day’s main scene. One look at the shot list confirmed the next scene to be particularly crucial to the film’s plotline, which overall followed a dark-skinned Black woman who had internalized and all her life tried to dispel her father’s preference for lighter skin by becoming a business executive, only to be stopped and treated violently during a traffic stop. Fact and fiction, reality and media are blurred not only in ethnographic narrative (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but also in U.S. Black communities, which experience film

⁵⁶ A shot list is an Excel spreadsheet circulated to the team each evening that provides a breakdown of scenes scheduled to be filmed, or ‘shot’ the following day.

and television products as constantly informing others' perceptions of them and hear news reports constantly delivering word of yet another fatal, anti-Black event.

Observing one-on-one interaction between Pauline and Henrietta (the shoot's D.P.) allowed me to study some of the uniquely characterizing facets of Pauline's affable and collective-minded directing approach. First off, she had hired Black women into integral on-set roles of cinematographer, makeup artist, costumer, and co-producer not only to make use of their respective skill sets and build up their resumes, but also to show project outsiders and broader production networks that Black women can successfully forge communities of practice and work together to create quality media forms. Second, while Pauline was willing to take charge and belt out requests when necessary, she also solicited colleagues' expertise regularly and shamelessly throughout production. She led with humility, leaving herself open to hearing suggestions from collaborators with different specializations and specific experience backgrounds. Third, Pauline seemed to place great trust in Henrietta's opinions; perhaps because she herself had worked as a screenwriter, producer, and director, but never before as a camera operator (which I learned from Pauline's own mouth as well as through her on-line research and her social media posts).

In her fast-paced discussions with cast, crew and specifically Henrietta throughout the day, Pauline (like Jenelle) worked to balance things manifesting in present-day reality, with how she wanted them ideally to appear on screen. She took seriously that their immediate choices would shape (though never fully determine) spectators' later viewing experiences, identifications with characters, interpretations of content, and potential uses of the film in social issues contexts. As the more junior team members left

to confer with department heads at their stations, and actors fled inside the nearby university building to rest and rehydrate, Pauline and Henrietta remained on the parking lot. Periodically, each wiped sweat from their brow as they charted out exactly where to place and how to move people and equipment in a scene portraying police-inflicted abuse.

Intrigued by the relationship between the shoot's two creative leaders,⁵⁷ I observed quietly from about four feet away as the two strategized how to get this crucial scene up, running and filmed from all their desired angles and distances as efficiently as possible. They chatted beneath a tarp that the younger camera team members had installed to keep the primary camera from overheating, and shield the monitor from sun glare so people could actually see images displayed on it. Every now and again, Pauline pointed at the camera's monitor and then to a corresponding point on the parking lot. In response, Henrietta gently rotated the tripod to let Pauline see what she had until then only been able to imagine. Together, they blocked the scene, marking how actors would walk across or position themselves in the shot, how operators would set, adjust or move the camera during takes, and other relations between camera, cast, crew, and *mise-en-scene*. Pauline's visions materialized and 'shapeshifted' before me as she and Henrietta deliberated over which of numerous choreographic options to pursue when money, time, and human labor were on the line.

⁵⁷ While both Pauline and Henrietta identified as "Black" women, their levels of political engagement with and conscious awareness of the qualifier's effect on their media careers and motivations differed quite vastly. Caramel-skinned Pauline openly and frequently pronounced pride in her Black womanhood, naming it as a prominent influence on her work model, ethic, and community-building praxes. On the other hand, Henrietta, with much darker skin than Pauline, attributed and framed her narrative recollection of her career in a discourse of hard work that based others' appreciation and treatment of her on skills and performance alone.

Cognizant of framing's myriad intellectual and practical implications, I watched Pauline and Henrietta put their arms out in front of them, their index fingers and thumbs bent into opposite 'L' shapes and joined to frame some hypothesized scene. Here, the interplay of embodiment and production emerged again, this time not through the echoes of creators in their works, but in props that were literally made of body parts and used to picture what a director wanted the team to capture on camera. As MacDougall described such medleys of thought, positioning, and intention:

Framing people, objects, and events with a camera is always 'about' something. It is a way of pointing out, of describing, of judging. It domesticates and organizes vision. It both enlarges and diminishes. It diminishes by leaving out those connections in life to which the photographer is blind, as when it imposes an explanation on events that we know to be more complex. Or it does this as a deliberate sacrifice to some seemingly more important argument or dramatic effect. Framing enlarges through a similar process. It is what lifts something out of its background in order to look at it more closely, as we might pick up a leaf in the forest. (2005:3-4)

MacDougall's insistence that framing and other elements of film composition are always about something is substantial. A frame's demarcated edges, calibrated center, and included (or excluded) subjects are all selected to advance an end goal or tone contrived by the director, cinematographer and potentially other collaborators. While *The Corporeal Image* helpfully promoted analyses concerned with the bodies of producers as well as consumers, one glaring shortcoming is its lack of attention to the many oftentimes draining labors of actual people constructing the very frames he critiques. Hence, rather than allow the extensive efforts of media makers to fade behind their works, I propose an inverted approach focused on the negotiations and interpersonal networks that go into framing and other production choices. With this motivation, Pauline shone as a human being whose life and proudly claimed social identities informed her decisions about project material as well as authoritative positioning and posturing.

Arresting Logics: A Dialogue between Two Directors

Both strong-willed, Pauline and Henrietta volleyed ideas they had each prepped for this brainstorming session. The scene's importance radiated through their setting time aside to discuss this scene explicitly despite the day's— and larger shoot's— imminent time crunch. “We should put her right here,” Pauline said of the protagonist. She went quiet awaiting Henrietta's more technocentric reply. The latter paced a bit to survey the site from Pauline's proposed angle for about thirty seconds before agreeing, “Yes, we could put the camera right about there. The ground is stable enough.” She dragged her foot across Pauline's indicated section of ground to detect any cracks or dips that might endanger the shot's stability or camera's balance. “And this spot would be perfect for her to kneel on.” Henrietta pointed to a small divot in the blacktop that could double as a marker for the lead actress to repeatedly land on so that she would maintain the same relationship to fixed camera angles from take to take. Relieved at Henrietta's approval, Pauline continued on, “Now how should we point the camera? What angle would work best?” Both sought to minimize the number of shots (i.e. wide, close up, panning, etc.) and adjustments needed to capture adequate footage for the editor (also a Black woman) to get Pauline's intended storyline across in the final product. As the two experts concurred, it would be “better to get it all in one shot.”

In the integral scene under discussion, the president of a corporation- who had been cast as a dark-skinned Black woman- was to be pulled over and spoken to condescendingly if not abusively by a White male police officer. As the project's writer and thus its first visionary, Pauline was determined to show the officer's unabashedly flagrant racial profiling, as well as the power disparity that disfavored this woman

regardless of the professional credentials she carried. The protagonist would be ordered to “get out of the car, now!” and down on her knees by the officer after an alleged traffic violation and his recent notification of a reported theft in the area. This would prompt the woman’s struggle to hold back tears as her uniformed opponent went to his vehicle to run her license plate number through the system to check for outstanding warrants and other criminal insignia. Through his unconcerned voice and her teary eyes, Pauline wanted embarrassment, shame, status dissociation, and violence to ooze from the on-screen encounter.

Plotting out production choreographies to stir envisioned socio-affective response in viewers, the duo thoughtfully sorted through their options, aware that every variation of the scene’s choreographic blueprint might carry different semiotic freight. I heard them mutter to one another multiple times, “they [each of the infinite number of arrangements possible for the scene] could mean totally different things!” While a tight budget required them to manage time effectively enough to complete all scenes on that day’s shot list, they deemed this particular engagement as deserving of close enough attention as to merit this sideline interaction. Perhaps they knew from experience that the amount of time invested in climactic scenes was integral to yielding a strong product.

On the lot, Pauline and Henrietta’s exchange ensued as precisely that: a dialogue in which one party could agree or disagree with, or question, the other. It evolved as a back-and-forth lobbing of stances and justifications that resulted in one convincing or yielding to the other, or the two striking a compromise. As the shoot’s director, Pauline voiced her ideas first, laying out the creative vision she had pictured while and since drafting the screenplay. Trained in technological details, Henrietta would refract

Pauline's words through her own lens, unafraid to tell Pauline what was feasible and made the most sense in light of the rigs and talents to which they had or could get access. The duo proposed, reworked, and re-orchestrated the police encounter, mapping out steps needed to create materials capable of instigating audience reflections on discrimination.

In this multifaceted meeting, Pauline and Henrietta evaluated mechanics of the cinematographer's scale of zooming in or out, camera and main actor placement; and actors' (supporting and non-speaking extras) absence or inclusion as still, pacing or passing figures. In terms of framing, a couple of issues were primary: zoom depth and the protagonist's on-screen position. Below, I present and expand on their ideas with my own interpretations. First, there was the question of whether to maximize 'zoom in' or 'zoom out' functions or to settle on a satisfactory in-between point. Pauline suggested that zooming in would guide viewers to concentrate on the protagonist's face. As I interpret this, as close up shot had a higher chance of encouraging audience to focus in on the protagonist's dignified but sorrowful disposition, as the screen would be filled mostly by facial gestures fighting to hide away the pain (i.e. swiftly blinking eyes, faintly quivering lips). In this case, little to none of the landscape behind her would be visible, thus featuring the protagonist's struggle to conceal her distress from those around her-perpetrating cop and uninvolved civilians alike.

Conversely, Henrietta proposed the option of zooming out so fully as to get the horizon in frame. The different protagonist-to-background ratio could shift the scene's general affective inference. As I understood their comments, by shrinking the size of protagonist in relation to her physical environment, her face's intricacies – whatever small movements she used to show shock, fear and rage – would be less noticeable and

thus likely reduce the severity of their impact on viewers. Rather, this approach would make the audience more prone to identify with the character's isolation in this structurally and corporeally abrasive face-off. It would also provide them with visual reminders of her unresponsive background, whether or not extras were included (another topic of consideration). Overall, zooming out to an agreed upon extreme would push viewers to situate this woman in an outdoor climate by which she paradoxically felt trapped, as it continued on without regard for her mistreatment. Of course, potential shot compositions could vary along a spectrum of intermediate zoom levels, effectively trying to activate aspects of these two poles.

After choosing how tightly to frame the shot on the protagonist, Pauline and Henrietta next contemplated where to place her in the frame. They could center her in the shot or, at Henrietta's provocation, place her somewhere off center. They mused on what meanings that each optic might convey. In particular, they wondered if centering her could subtly hint at empowerment and internal resilience, whereas putting her nearer to one side of frame or the other might otherwise suggest sensorial imbalance and unsteadiness. Eventually, they chose to put the protagonist approximately center frame. In my analysis, centering the protagonist's tragic, frustrated and kneeling figure afforded her a bit more of a sense of fight, making the moment that much more emotionally intense and evocative for viewers identifying with her dehumanization. Pauline intended for it to enthrall and incentivize viewers to enhance and mobilize knowledges of racially disparate politics, police brutality and injustice in their everyday, three-dimensional worlds. The final frame reached just below the protagonist's shoulders, just wide enough to show the blurred body of the male lead as he wandered up behind her, paused to

inspect her misfortune, and backed out of the picture from whence he came. That was the only ‘relief’ the protagonist received on screen, and the only added element that might break the audience’s cinematically-structured focus on her pain.

Third, Pauline and Henrietta mulled over the presence or absence of other main characters or ‘extras’ in the scene. My interpretation of this consideration developed thusly: leaving the background unpopulated stood to spike the scene’s solitary feel and add a fantastical, almost other-worldly element of nothingness to a space in which only perpetrator and victim of racialized violence seemed to exist. It would also suggest that no outsider felt the least bit compelled to come to her rescue. However, adding supporting actors to the scene could also serve as powerful commentary. Interestingly, the main sentiment would still be one of loneliness. However, instead of leaving questions of other people’s concern to the imagination, the scene would actually show background actors blatantly unaffected or unmotivated to intervene in the episode. It would feature bystanders (all of whom happened to be Black and/or Latinx) reacting with facial expressions and body language of disbelief, snide humor, hesitation, or fear for their own safety. This approach would heighten the moment’s awkward cruelty by exhibiting passersby’s judgmental stares and infantilizing gossip. In ultimate consensus, Pauline coached one extra on how to walk across the width of the parking lot, gawking in uncomfortable amazement as she journeyed to meet an equally shocked co-worker. As Pauline articulated the move, “I need bodies behind her, this is her close up...I think this moment’s all about her.” Such an addition would illustrate a distance between the protagonist and those others behind her, visibilizing the disconnect we could imagine her feeling from both her credentials and her surroundings.

With the preceding issues in mind, I contend that Pauline's guidance and commitment to the process shaped how she managed the production of imageries as well as the times and ways they were released and made subject to public interpretation and dialogue. As Pauline's co-producer and fellow Black woman Jenica explained, "when you have any issues going on in a society, in an organization in a family, it doesn't start at the people on the lower level. It's being modeled by the people at the top". Aware that her temperament (as well as her skin color, gender, and appearance) could affect cast and crew temperaments especially when it came to newcomers who had not worked with her before, Pauline crafted a calm and levelheaded exterior with which she constantly tried to maintain composure. She only expressed annoyance with indolent crew members in a few, and mostly retrospective backroom whispers with me and other trusted associates. Pauline's dedication to ostensible tranquility went so far as to knowingly put her body and mental health on the line. She suffered from regular headaches induced by stress and sleep-deprivation while preparing and leading that shoot. I later learned in an under-the-breath confession from Pauline that she had hidden throughout the filming process abdominal pains for which she had scheduled to have surgery only days after wrapping this shoot.

Ever since she acquired the rights to adapt a book into the screenplay at hand, Pauline had envisioned this film as a catalyst for socially conscious collectivity and intervention. Various facets of Pauline's leadership journey convinced me of her belief in the project not only as a notable career accomplishment (as she attempted to do in a week what took others months if not years to finish) but also as politically evocative commentary on inter- and intra-racial relations in the contemporary United States. She

and publicity expert Jenica arranged interviews with experts on racial law, history and discrimination using Facebook Live and Livestream (real-time, on-line streaming modules) video streaming capacities to promote the film, and raise awareness of its themes' pertinence to actual communities working towards social and political equity.

Another choice that the two made was aesthetically practical and symbolic. Henrietta shot the film in black and white, a color scheme primarily applied because it reduced time necessary to color match scenes, thus speeding up the shooting and editing processes. Pauline also had politics in mind when co-designing the film's aesthetic signature, as 'black-and-white' also riffed on a society of populations whose racial politics and have been concurrently framed as clear and elusive. Pauline's attentiveness shows one strength of creators depicting lifeworlds they personally claim. To illustrate a perilous alternative, I cite one recollection that actor-scholar Bee Vang made of his work on Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* to professor and article co-author Louisa Schein:

Another scene that is almost comical is the one where the Hmong neighbours start making offerings of food and flowers on Walt's doorstep to show their appreciation that he saved Thao from the gang. The thing is- there is no such Hmong custom of making food offerings, much less to express thanks. It just doesn't exist. The film makes it look all ritual and legit. I've done public interviews where white commentators actually told me that they love that scene because it shows how beautiful Hmong culture is. But what it shows is the beauty, in their eyes, of brown people obsequiously making offerings to powerful outsiders since the brown people are unable to act themselves and just remain inert and culturally static. (Schein and Vang 2014:7)

In his above reflection, albeit on a white-man-direction Hollywood production, Vang calls out the dangers of separating notions of visual and cultural 'beauty' from the politics, complexities and stakes of people ascribing and demanding them on the ground. Aware of a centuries-long threat that has cast Black women as not beautiful, Pauline and Henrietta deliberated for about twenty minutes over frames and placements that could

contest the shallow visions imprinted on society by classic as well as contemporary Hollywood. In discussing production details, Pauline made occasional reference to the representational politics and social norms she hoped to challenge. “Not like [another director],” Pauline would sometimes say in clarification. Amid their psychological, logistic and performative considerations (which shaped Henrietta’s instructions to the camera team, and Pauline’s overall direction of cast and crew), Henrietta, to a degree, but primarily Pauline sought to highlight the emotional, psychological and communal afterlives of ongoing thoughts and acts of racial prejudice.

In side chats with me on set, Pauline and Jenica separately informed me that resonances between their personal, communal and professional lives made this project all the more pressing for them. From a self-proclaimed platform of embodied knowledge, Pauline guaranteed that she and Henrietta (though the latter mentioned that she did not see her career as having been distinctly affected by her Blackness or womanhood) treaded with caution. Like Pauline, so many Black women in the U.S. have either directly felt effects of social difference or understood that such instances could have easily happened to them. Pauline seemed emboldened by this intimate sensitivity to the rich interiorities and all-too-common plights of Black womanhood. Thus, her protagonist’s narrative echoed them, running the risk of airing truths in manners capable of offending future audiences- especially those who identified as Black women themselves and were charged with the potentially tasking prospect of seeing traumas of their communities on-screen.

Conclusion: Situated Choreographies of Authority-Making

In this chapter, I argued that many Black women leaders in independent media production approach film shoot proceedings as contexts through which they can hire and lift up fellow marginalized media makers, collaborate with other specialists (aspiring, burgeoning, and established) in the field, and deploy technical savvy and social acuity in ways often denied by larger society. To do so, I analyzed interactions on working film sets to claim that human creativity, ingenuity and adaptability should not be viewed as trivial nonfactors to be eclipsed by media products they manifest. To the contrary, individuals imprint their own backgrounds, encounters, and interpretations onto media forms they take part in fashioning. This could happen through who they decided to recruit for a project in what capacity, how they negotiated camera angles and frames, what character motivations they provided to actors, what criteria they used to delineate target audiences, and through what markers they would foreground and market project themes. Further splintering the issue, interactions occurred on several pragmatic scales: between a director and their projected audiences, a director and film team constituents, between film teams and wider communities of investors, and between media makers and/or audiences, and amongst audience members.

I also proposed ‘choreography of production’ as an analytical lens through which to study movement, negotiation and human agency on film shoots. To this end, I also credited the wider populations of people actively laboring in seemingly persistent invisibility. Amidst ever-shifting forms of racial discrimination, these media makers remained steadfast for perceived personal as well as public benefits. They treated technical and social concerns as inseparable elements of production. Aware of the deeply

embedded effects of media on public cultures, creators I followed strove to get representations ‘right’ via channels of relatively open communication and advice between team members over the course of a project’s evolution. In examining Jenelle’s commitment to evocative shot composition and a congenial work environment, and Pauline’s careful conversations about and choreographies of racial violence, I observed how two directors willingly allowed embodied knowledge to inform their professional praxes.

Finally, in watching these directors’ leadership styles unfold firsthand, I discerned that trust, adaptability, and open-mindedness were crucial to Jenelle, Pauline and many other Black independent women creators’ chances of completing projects despite the plethora of forces against them (i.e. social discrimination, doubt from institutional representatives, budgets, tight timelines). Not only did shoots require several technical competencies but their shared spaces presumed interpersonal support between team members- both at odds with lasting stereotypes of Black women’s idleness and dependence. Hence, while research participants’ ideas of what professionalism entailed varied, their respective production choreographies were comprised of horizontal power structures driven by flexible power relations propelled by differential specialists’ acuties and constant eyes towards audience diversity. Thus, only so much of a film was ultimately under a director and team’s control, especially when its portrayed content addressed touchy issues for a particular social sector. In eventual situations of public interface, choreography’s reception abandoned neat and linear expectations to let emotion carve out, explode, and experiment with material at hand.

CHAPTER 5

Aesthetics, Play, and Temporality in Contemporary Afro-Imaginative Media

"To be black and not only envision yourself in the future but at the center of the future - to be the agent and subject of the future, and not relegated to a primeval past, used as props or pawns, or disappeared altogether - is an act of resistance and liberation, particularly in a present plagued by white supremacy and imperialism."

– Susana Morris, 2016

"What Afrocentrism is really intended to do is to restore a sense of pride and dignity... for too long African Americans have been conditioned to the same negative beliefs about Africa and Africans as have whites and others." – Audrey Smedley, 1998

"Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken." – Kodwo Eshun, 2003

This chapter examines how research participants creatively pushed conventional boundaries of media content and form – production and exhibition – to create media viewing situations that support collective contemplations of the 21st century United States' acutely volatile race and gender politics. With regard to screenings, creators saw sharing their products as means to bring people together for much-needed discussions that ideally would continue to stir thoughts and yield effects beyond the screening venue itself. As I have thematized throughout this dissertation, these media makers not only utilized media making to (re)envision structures and systems that undervalued them, but also deployed imaginative, even experimental event setups to orchestrate sensorial media experiences that would reflect and represent race and racism as they presently comprehended and lived them. This chapter examines Afro-imagination as an extension of post-millennium Black interventionism and protest methods of authority-making. Creators deployed calculated strategies of authorship, editing and screening to contest

existing power inequities and to digitally conjure worlds in and over which they held power.

Reflecting race's insidiously subtler dynamics in the post-Civil Rights era, these media makers embraced hybrid aesthetic styles and alternative exhibition forums to demonstrate in practice the ultimate uncontainability of Black voices and perspectives. Furthermore, they challenged racial and ageist hierarchies of conventional authority by showing experimental films that (re)conceived the terms of Black presence in foreseeable and also in indeterminate futures. Such stylistic reconceptualizations of Blackness were inherently ideological and politicized in their demands for considerations of Black agency and/or futurity, at the very least. Therefore, attentive to relationships between content, form and style, this chapter explores how creators breached traditions of media production and distribution to stimulate conversations on varying generational visions of society past, present and significantly, future. To do so, it describes several media makers' radical ways of applying and/or breaking professional norms in order to illustrate Black people's alternative understandings of time and space as they came of age and worked to situate themselves and their communities in a somewhat perplexing 21st century U.S. climate.

National discussions of race and technology have long framed the two as divergent if not outright antagonistic concepts, particularly with regard to time. Technocentric media discourses, driven by notions of innovation and progress, persistently cast racially marked people as submissive objects of other people's representations. Countering beliefs that media advancements inherently promote democratization (Turner 1992, Eiselein and Topper 1976), Janelle Hobson's "Digital

Whiteness, Primitive Blackness” analyzes how popular film and television perpetuate assumptions that white people dominate technology as well as its futures. She explains, “What we witness, then, are new media perpetuating old ideologies, thus undermining previous narratives, which posit cyberspace and digital technologies as progressive sites that allow for our transcendence from race, class, gender, and other markers of difference” (Hobson 2008:112). From a different direction but towards similar ends, Susana Morris supports this idea: “...Afrofuturist feminism ... [as it] illuminates epistemologies that do not suggest utopian panaceas but instead underscore the importance of transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy, epistemologies that ultimately present possibilities for our own decidedly unenchanted world” (2012:147). But how has this ‘un-enchanted-ness’ trickled into real-world obstacles that Black women media makers, and through what methods do these creators craft and materialize ‘transgressive,’ or culturally innovative responses?

Take, for instance, former actress and comic book co-creator Erika Alexander’s 2018 statement during an interview with political commentator Joy Reid on the latter’s self-titled MSNBC show *AM Joy*:

I got into comic books because I was trying to sell a film and television show, and people saw the Black and Brown faces and we actually had somebody say to us—me and my partner Tony Perrier (we do this [comic book] thing called *Concrete Park*)—say to our face, ‘Black people don’t like science fiction because they don’t see themselves in the future.’ That’s a deep thought.

Even though she had become a household name for many Black and indeed non-Black people through her television role of Maxine on the wildly popular 1990s television show *Living Single*, Alexander handled such misconceptions by deploying flexible, educated guesswork to develop a more accessible production pathway—here, by

entering an entirely different genre. So, how did participants in my research—most of whom did not have such clout – strategize and go about carving out space for innovative projects whilst knowingly yet unavoidably immersed in environments largely premised on the ‘deep thought’ of Black extinction? Attending to themes and issues that connect independent media production and content to the larger African diaspora (as signified by Coffman and Vanier’s quotes around the word African), this chapter examines Black women media makers’ experimentations with contemporary ‘unthinkables’ of Black futures and Black liberation via revisionist, even radical modes of media making and sharing.

For example, one popular challenge to mutually exclusive understandings of race—particularly Blackness— and technology arose through *Marvel Studio’s* unprecedented superhero blockbuster *Black Panther*. As co-authors Jennifer Coffman and Christian Vannier write about the film’s social impact in *Anthropology News*:

Building on techno-spiritual mash-ups, cyborg identities and new class politics based on Black integrity, Afrofuturism moves beyond colonial histories and racialized processes of underdevelopment. It frequently and unapologetically deploys traditions, symbols, and other cultural markers that are decidedly “*African*” as it celebrates Black identity and sovereignty. (2018:8, emphases added)

Whether concerned with what currently is or has yet to be (a distinction between Afrosurrealism and Afrofuturism to be discussed later), Black people’s imaginings of this and other worlds creates fertile ground for debate about discrepant technological access across demographic groups. Paying attention not only to the content but also form of media products, for “form has to be in the form that we’ve lived it” as one member of Tanya’s film collective pled during the same 2015 Q&A described in the Introduction, this chapter embraces its subjects’ innovative formats as inspiration for its analytical

framework by centering not only content but aesthetics and style in its examination of a post-2000 burgeoning of Afro-imaginative media⁵⁸. A notable rise in productive and distributive experimentation at this particular point in U.S. history inversely mirrors increasingly conspicuous displays of anti-Black attitudes and violence across the nation. Several individuals I worked with imbued Afro-imaginative media production with great semiotic promise amidst (or in opposition to) multiple contentious and sometimes contradictory perspectives that people held on U.S. race relations and dynamics. Media makers' artful combinations of formal training and radical intent materialized through unconventional shooting styles (*avant garde*, for instance), editing methods, and/or exhibition forums among others.

Talking Futures at the Theater: Panel Discussions and Politics of Distribution

For an evening panel on which Tanya was scheduled to participate, she donned a light blue button-up shirt, floral patterned sneakers, black skinny jeans with upturned cuffs, and antique gold earrings that dangled down to the base of her neck. As soon as our three-person cluster entered the lobby of the Harlem-based establishment, a staff member walked up to us, confirmed Tanya's identity, and whisked her backstage to hook up a lavalier microphone to her shirt collar. Not directly involved with the panel ourselves,

⁵⁸ The term 'Afro-imaginative' is not meant to imply that prior generations of media makers were not imaginative, as Black people have always have to be creative and imaginative to imagine possibility beyond structural limitations. Rather, as an umbrella term, Afro-imaginative refers to the creation of a media production realm within which members of the African Diaspora can reflect on and attempt to creatively imagine beyond present-day strictures and expectations surrounding Blackness. In 2015, The John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Studies and the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies at The University of Texas at Austin co-organized a symposium entitled "Mapping the Afro-Imaginative: Black Queer Diaspora Studies & the Work of the Imagination." https://calendar.utexas.edu/event/mapping_the_afro-imaginative_black_queer_diaspora_studies_the_work_of_the_imagination#.XIRvjC2ZPdc

Casey and I continued into a designated receiving area to await general admission. Several attendees had already accumulated in the tiled oblong lobby, their brightly colored clothes and wooden accessories boosting the site's architectural and decorative sense of Africana pride.

About fifteen minutes later, the main amphitheater's double doors opened for the eager and still growing crowd. I looked around as we filed into the auditorium. I half expected to run into someone I knew from other film-related contexts, as had happened at several previous events. Casey pointed at a pair of open seats up front that I agreed to them once convinced that they were close enough to the stage for Tanya to spot us even with the house lights dimmed. We settled in for yet another period of anticipation. Soon after, Casey spotted and left momentarily to chat with a friend of hers who I did not know, which left me time to exhale and watch as new arrivals—ranging in age from twenties to seventies, as well as in dress from fancy shawl wraps to skinny jeans and black half-crop sweatshirts—rushed about to locate the acquaintances who had invited and hopefully saved seats for them.

Finally, I noticed the red curtains on stage right rustle a bit. A woman in her mid-thirties shimmied through the curtain panels, and began strolling slowly towards a podium already set up on stage right. Fluorescent lights overhead bounced off of her glasses, and kissed her glistening sienna skin. She fussed with a small stack of index cards (likely holding notes of some sort) as she prepared to kick off the evening. Most of the seventy or so audience members in attendance—ranging in age from early-twenties to seventies—kept on chatting, as only people who had chosen seats in the theater's first

three or four rows could have spotted the hostess's moving figure in their peripheral visions.

As the hostess finalized her arrangements at the podium, a large projection screen began to descend from the ceiling, slowly clicking its way to a final position that hung only inches above the stage. The woman then coughed gently into the podium's microphone to alert the last distracted patrons to her presence. Rather than abrupt silence, the hall quieted in sporadic hushes. Stragglers were still scurrying past the two ushers to find seats for the impending show. With her message mostly obeyed, the enthusiastic hostess welcomed everyone to the screening and Q&A with filmmakers to follow. I listened closely as she outlined the institution's mission and commitment to community partnerships, and then read sponsors' names off her index cards in gratitude. She enunciated the last name and then let out a barely audible sigh before inviting first-time visitors to become members of the host institution via monetary donation. Next, a video reel about the importance of preserving and celebrating Black intellectual and artistic legacies was played, and the speaker shifted to introduce the night's particular program. Finally, at her cue, the theater lights were dimmed, causing the room's subtle whispers to fade to relative silence.

In sequence, a hired technician projected six short films onto the screen. All directed by Black-identified New Yorkers under the age of forty, the films subsumed the room's lit visual space to capture attention and provoke critical thought amongst spectators. The program's curators had selected the six films under the umbrella of Afrosurrealism (a category further detailed below). Black people's experiences of love, pain, heartache, isolation, death and dying all came up in one way or another, some more

clearly and/or immediately impactful for audience members than others. Overall each film had its moment in front of this ostensibly receptive, even enthralled audience.

From time to time, I peered around the auditorium. No longer did I see a scatter of disconnected strangers, but a group of people united in a project to digest and interpret these Black-made, Black-centered visions. Some were perched on the edges of their seats, others sunk backward, and a few rocked back and forth. Apart and together, viewers worked through diverse reactions of confusion, amazement, contemplation, empathy, and surprise. Casey and I had seen Tanya's film many times, yet we watched keenly for we knew that showing up to support and celebrate fellow producers' achievements was integral to community-building and maintenance. I also noticed new facets or possible interpretations of Tanya's piece each time I saw it screened in a differently themed screening block.

After the fourth film's credits rolled, the screen went black for a couple of seconds. Then, Tanya's "Directed by" flashed onto the screen. As the only director to include her own title page, Tanya demonstrated promotional, business, and marketing acuties from the start. Her film opened with wide shot archival footage of an African American choir singing a spiritual. The shot zoomed in on a woman soloist belting out lyrics about wanting freedom, whether it came on Earth or in the afterlife. The footage's gritty sound and image quality did not seem to disturb the audience. Rather, it matched form to content, serving as oblique commentary on the scene's anxious but timeless urgency. Half flashback and half dream state, the scene's aesthetic evoked continuity, which Tanya was proposing to bond Black lives of past, present, and future.

The air in the theater hung heavy as spectators listened to the choir's Heaven-oriented pleas for liberation. The solo evoked U.S. foundations in racial exploitation and discrimination but also a contrarily resounding sense of hope. Tanya, who I knew to have edited the piece as well, had spliced and etched copies of archival footage to superimpose swirling white and yellow graphics over the lead singer's heart-wrenching performance. The graphic style was reminiscent of 1990s Nickelodeon animations, whose color palettes signified innocence: a complex add-in to ongoing considerations of Black people's ways of coping with structural anti-Black prejudice. The scribbles jumbled erratically, their colors startlingly bright against the black-and-white scene beneath. Reflective of tendencies for U.S. social groups to fracture violently around issues of race, the two image layers- 'fact' and 'fiction'- tugged at one another, keeping watchers questioning. The contrast may have perplexed first-time viewers, as the cartoonish cyphers danced tauntingly over 'real' videos of communal religiosity and strife. Even if viewers did not fully grasp Tanya's complex intentions, her media product at the very least incited affective curiosities about her mindset and methods.

The soloist sang on in spite of it all, undeterred by the barrage of added colorful punctuation: yet another play on time and 'reality.' All of a sudden, the bottom scene switched from the choir to a woman with large Afro and lighter, presumably caramel-colored skin⁵⁹. She sat with her body angled slightly left explaining her definition of freedom to an off-camera interviewer and insisting on possessing it for the rest of her life. Resolve dripped from her words. She stressed certain syllables to sting and linger through her voice's distinctive Southern twang. The same dashes and arcs leapt across this scene,

⁵⁹ Though grayscale prohibits exact assessment, this second woman's skin was lighter than the soloist.

as if to visually connect two people- soloist and interviewee- already related through experiences of being Black women eager to profess their respective ontological conceptions of and desires for freedom.

To end the short film, Tanya toggled its bottom layer- yellow and white bursts still jumping on top- between the earlier choir piece and contemporary video footage of #BlackLivesMatter protesters setting storefronts aflame, overturning cars, and confronting police officers armed with tear gas, dogs and batons. While the choir was not always pictured, its vocal track played consistently in the background, again joining two chronologically disparate moments plagued by the recurring ramifications of racial prejudice. Recognizing the significance of time as a culturally relativist phenomenon experienced and assessed by groups in various ways, Giorgio Agamben relevantly asserts in ‘Time and History’, “The original task of a genuine revolution...is never merely to ‘change the world,’ but also – and above all- to ‘change time.’” (1993:91). I read Tanya’s concluding montage as means to both bridge and also collapse time in order to visibilize the unfortunate timelessness of racial violence and its aftermath across generations of Black U.S. struggle.

Contemplating Afro-Imaginative Aesthetics

“This multicultural radical tradition is distinctive. It has always presumed another world is possible because it has had to, because in having to, *it looks backward and forward at the same time*. This multicultural radical tradition speaks in the future perfect tense- it will have known what is possible today, yesterday, tomorrow. This multicultural radical tradition will have been our utopian tradition.” – Avery Gordon (2017:27)

After the film segment of the film ended, Tanya and three other people who looked to be under the age of forty walked on stage and, in the same order, balanced themselves on wooden stools. Cementing the transition, the panel moderator (seated

furthest stage left) read a prepared definition of Afrofuturism aloud for the audience, vouched for its legitimacy, posed a few opening queries to the directors, and then invited audience members to address queries to the panelists as well. About four comments into the interactive audience segment of the night, a curious attendee directed an inquiry to Tanya about her work process. In response, Tanya offered a description of the tedium that went into searching through archives, acquiring and funding the rights to use select gems, and then playing with unconventional, potentially polemic styles of editing, ordering, and displaying them into reconfigured elements of larger narratives.

People seemed moved by Tanya's film, as evidence by the excited tone with which audience inquiries came her way during the Q&A. However, most of their questions pushed aside her aesthetic innovations in search of some 'deeper' truth or political aim. By contrast, I hold that aesthetics were a critical part of Tanya's professional output and performance, which laced historical dynamics and critical commentary into her work via stylistic metaphors. I affiliate aesthetics not with elitist values attributed to framed, untouchable paintings and sculptures housed in museums; but with the invaluable and situated array of societal mores, beliefs, actions and conflicts that enable certain insignia to index not only beauty but cultural (non)belonging. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Studies*, "The black aesthetic turns on a dialectic of luxuriant withholding- abundance and lack push technique over the edge of refusal so that the trouble with beauty, which is the very animation and emanation of art, is always and everywhere troubled again and again. New technique, new beauty" (2013:48). Echoing this language of dialectical troubling, I ask if aesthetics, despite so frequently being stolen from marginalized creators and re-

appropriated elsewhere, can be radicalized to serve Black women's own pursuits of recognition? Self-making? Protest? Would such goals require reworked approaches to aesthetic design and execution? If so, in what ways? Might aesthetics be an avenue for advancing the different models of expertise and socio-political ambition promoted by so many Black women creators (Lierow 2013)?

Motivated to expand discussions beyond a common politics/aesthetics divide, writer/director Tanya deemed it worthwhile to further situate the film without audience solicitation. Particularly, she expounded on the semiotic details of her production process. Tanya related the film's surrealist aesthetic to the frustratingly absurd and almost unbelievable severity of the nation's current climate of racial injustice, especially regarding police brutality. She also proclaimed that one of her production goals was to intervene in a past that, though it could not be relived, could be revisited virtually vis-a-vis the physical and emotional labors of artistic imagination and reinterpretation. Tanya's work process put her in regular contact with the recorded likenesses of numerous Black women who had preceded her. As a requisite part of archival and editing work, Tanya listened to many heartfelt speeches on resilience and resistance over and over, replaying and repurposing clips in ways that centered and privileged these women's determined spirits and by proxy, as the short film's creator, her own as well.

Tanya had started developing that particular piece as an attempt to cope with "the rage that overtook her" upon hearing of yet another Black man's murder and responsible officer's acquittal⁶⁰. Although not her personal story, Tanya's collective loyalty to Blackness and the inequities surrounding it made it so that "the text of the film becomes

⁶⁰ Note: Tanya's specific reference case was teenager Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 at the hands of eventually acquitted police officer Darren Wilson.

inseparable from the body of the auteur, herself aware of the importance of the racial economy of representation” (Foster 1997: 14). Despite the radical charge underscoring the film, Tanya openly yet sadly admitted the likelihood that Brown’s homicide would likely rise and fall from immediate social consciousness as had countless others. Directly comparing present-day anti-Black protests to violent mediated spectacles of the 1960s Civil Rights era, Tanya’s film (and subsequent discussion) problematized progress as a complex aspiration. Overall, she undertook this short film’s necessary labors as a way to tackle personal agitations and participate in wider debates on structures and ideologies propagating innumerable slaughters of Black people—by officers and civilians— in the U.S. with relative impunity. As Richard Sharman states, “Aesthetic expression encompasses the whole of the creative process, including not only the art object or event as a creative product, but the cultural context and production process as well” (1997 [1970]:183). To such holistic effect, Tanya’s added testimony demanded that people take notice of larger narratives, contexts, and forces that produced and were still peaking audience interest and increasing public awareness in the tactile, corporeal world.

An unashamed and ‘willful subject’ (Ahmed 2014), Tanya spoke truth to power through her work. She butted up against and refused normative respectability politics, never denying being angered by the nationwide murder epidemic disproportionately obliterating Black and Brown bodies. Instead of hiding her rage, she channeled it into a material artistic response that could potentially make her anger more comprehensible for and conversant with others, or at least open her ideas up to broader discussion circuits. Akin to claims made in Black feminist scholarship such as Brittney Cooper’s *Eloquent Rage* (2018) and Audre Lorde’s *The Uses of Anger* (2007 [1984]), Tanya saw no benefit

in concealing her anger. Capturing the sentiment, Lorde's Keynote Address at a National Women's Studies Association Convention (published over thirty-five years later as *The Uses of Anger*), reads:

My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also...If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth. (2007 [1984]: 7)

Seeing silence not only as fear but as unproductive in its internalization, Lorde asserts that anger is not necessarily destructive but 'can be used for growth.' Along similar lines, strength and authoritative potential surged through Tanya's metered yet emotionally shaped practices of self- and collective reflection. She interpreted and expressed her rage as a rational and justified human reaction to injustice.

Anthropology of Play: Interactive Experimentation in Afro-Imaginative Media

Tanya was not alone in her noncommittal sampling from different genres, as Afro-imaginative trends built up traction in 2010s New York media climates. In fact, several institutions organized events and/or exhibitions centered on Black science fiction and related non-realist fields. The *Brooklyn Museum's* 2014 "Off the Wall: 'Fantastic Journey'" featured an acclaimed panel of Afrofuturist novelists discussing the career and legacy of science fiction writer Octavia Butler. It also included live performances of Davi's "The Beginning of Everything eating" and Saya Woolfalk's "ChimaTEK". *MOMA P.S. 1*, a Queens satellite of Manhattan's *Museum of Modern Art*, hosted a 2016 stop of a touring film program entitled 'Black Radical Imagination' and a subsequent

conversation between the screened pieces' filmmakers⁶¹, as well as King Britt's 2014 "Moondance: A Night in the Afrofuture" which combined lecture, dance, and live music in a night dedicated to musing on Black destiny⁶². Across the city, Harlem's *Studio Museum* housed "The Shadows Took Shape" from 2013 to 2014. This multimodal, multi-level installation adopted Afrofuturism as a lens through which participating creators improvised⁶³. With titular reference to poet Sun Ra, the showcase featured twenty emergent artists working across photography, video, drawing, sculpture, and painting.

Finally, *The Schomburg Center for Black History and Culture*- a branch of the *New York Public Library* system- put on "Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination" in 2015, which displayed Afro-Diasporic science fiction-related artifacts from the institution's collections. Fortunately, this exhibit was still running during my fieldwork period, so I was able to walk through and experience the gallery's atmosphere firsthand. Set up in a large circle, the intermixture of posters, pictures, books, comics, cultural artifacts and captions showed off the library's vast holdings whilst nodding to the under-recognized expanse of literature and artwork on 'the Black imagination.'

Considering race's adaptability in micro- and macro-political U.S. histories (Omi and Winant 1994) as well as in media makers' own lives, I borrow from 'anthropology of play' subfield for this analysis. Expanded from a seemingly narrow focus on games and gaming proper, I apply play to this study of Afro-imaginative media making to emphasize Afro-imaginative media's investment in interaction, innovation, imagination, and questioning of 'the Real.' Rather than presume certainty (other than that of Black value),

⁶¹ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/2653>

⁶² <http://momaps1.org/calendar/view/498/>

⁶³ <https://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/the-shadows-took-shape>

play incurs and procures power from interpersonal negotiations and collectively discerned models for engagement. Everyone involved in a given production and/or screening is expected to contribute to the intellectual and affective space of the event. As Thomas Malaby relevantly ponders play's anthropological potential:

Departing from this pattern [seeing play merely as 'nonwork' or 'representation'] prepares us to recognize a better model for thinking about play... as *irreducibly contingent*. On this view, play becomes an attitude characterized by *a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account*. (2009:206, emphasis added)

At transformative intersections of art, aesthetic, politics, education and entertainment, play as anthropological framework is malleable enough to account for, reflect upon, and honor research participants' innovative intentions. As a multi-person exploration in which people variably accommodate and resist externally derived rules, play's creative and cooperative emphases are key to imagining new worlds, befitting the mixed conditions, mentalities and practices that participants navigated in crafting authoritative personae and validation⁶⁴. Therefore, I propose an application of such a broadly understood notion of play to underscore how problem-solving, imagination, complexity and experimentation shape encounters between the various contributors to the flexibly inventive and responsive process of media production. Better interpreted through such an adjustable lens, race can be represented not a fixed phenomenon dismissible as a resolved nonissue, but as a paradoxical phenomenon whose discursive terms constantly morph whilst underlying disparities and discriminatory effects endure.

⁶⁴ Additional factors such as class background, established field contacts, religion, able-bodiedness, political overtness, politics of casting and team-building methodology all shape the extent to which different creators feel alienated or challenged on a daily basis.

Significantly, I am not suggesting that media makers' see their processes or goals as frivolous or silly, as is the general connotation of the word play. Though the subject matter and stakes of Afro-imaginative fiction are not 'playful' in the sense of the term's more lighthearted usages, this approach frames creativity not just as a trait of many interlocutors, but also as a generative tool as well. For instance, questions facilitated by play might include: What could be enabled by imagining Blackness complexly yet realistically against existing landscapes of white-male-dominated patriarchy? What would it mean not to crudely counter or dismiss Civil Rights-era racial binaries, but to study race and gender's shifting expressions via mobile, not wholly containable, even queer logics? What would it look like for scholarship about Blackness and Black womanhood to jointly acknowledge racism's roots in systems of racial and/or ethnic discrimination and also contemporary Black people's innovative, clever, and communal methods of traversing and posturing across planes of prejudice and possibility?

In his book chapter "Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: The Watermelon Woman and the Critique of Black Visuality," Robert F. Reid-Pharr analyzes public responses to Black queer woman and New York-based independent director Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman*. Shot as a documentary, the film follows Cheryl Dunye as a filmmaker-protagonist who makes it her mission to find out more about an actress she saw in video footage, whom she subsequently refers to as 'The Watermelon Woman.' At film's end, it is revealed that the entire documentary was actually a mockumentary. 'The Watermelon Woman' did not ever exist, but was Faith Richards playing a role for which she had been cast. Though technically fiction, Dunye's play with stylings of the documentary effect – "talking heads, file footage, stills, letters, and voices overs" (Reid-

Pharr 2006:137) –grapples with the apparent inability of Black women to be taken seriously as legitimate authorities or significant contributors. Highlighting play as means to access deeper social truths, Reid-Pharr argues,

...in a medium in which it is infinitely possible to play with the codes of visuality that shoot through our society...Dunye informs us that the Watermelon Woman is a fiction, [but] she simultaneously reminds us that all of our attempts to recapture the past, to produce narratives of ‘forgotten’ or ‘lost’ histories, are exercises in fiction. (2006:136-138)

In my own research, participants similarly stressed the promise of Afro-imaginative innovation. Many of their professional ties and investments to the hybridized media field embraced ‘play’ - via forms, exhibition spaces, aesthetic styles, narrative styles, temporal references, and so on- as a socially weighted means of projecting alternative visions of the world and its constituents (actual or imagined). Through play, they believed they could visualize, portray, and sense worlds that were (or perhaps were not), or could be (but perhaps never would be). For them, media making facilitated missions to materially reproduce what they had individually or collectively conceived beyond current landscapes of prejudice, disparity, melancholy and difference.

Beyond production processes, screenings held in venues other than movie theatres also played with and pushed conventional expectations. Asking for small admission fees, donations, or nothing at all gave these creators’ wider opportunities to circulate their materials, as theatres both cost much more for organizers to rent out and structured spectators’ experiences more strictly. Grassroots production styles- whose lower budgets fostered higher accessibility- aimed to stimulate conversation, prompt critical thought amongst viewers and in turn inspire them to collaboratively hatch out next steps in fights for justice, recognition, and/or other desired goals. Shifting to highlight the public

interface of screening contexts, the following vignette argues that contemporary Afro-imaginative media makers treated the aura and setup of display situations with a sense of play, experimenting with unconventional styles of sharing content publicly to invite critical audience engagement.

Afrofuturism?

Various terms subsist under the larger Afro-imaginative umbrella, two major ones being Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism. While experimental film and science fiction are not completely new terrain for Black media makers (ex. Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa*⁶⁵), themes of Afro-futures have surged conspicuously in 21st century Black literature, visual arts, and film as Black people have projected themselves into futures from which dominant white-centric ideologies, policies, and social norms have seemed determined to erase them. Cultural critic Mark Dery coined 'Afro-futurism' in his 1993 article "Black to the Future" to work through a conundrum that irked him. Why did Black writers and visual artists express such conceptual, political and social interest in the future but scarcely get involved in the intellectually conducive realms of science fiction (as referenced in Samatar 2014)? Dery's original definition of Afrofuturism reads,

Speculative fiction that treats African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future...might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-Futurism (2008 [1993]:8)

Scholars have also reframed this contradiction between meditating on and mediatizing Black futures, proposing that the two be combined in comprehensive

⁶⁵ Directed by Haile Gerima, *Sankofa* (1993) follows a young Black woman and model who, disconnected from the weight of her ancestors' past, is transported back to and must confront the era of U.S. Slavery in an intimately visceral way as she tries to figure out how to return to her original time.

examination of Black struggle, interconnection, and resilience. For instance, Alondra Nelson asserts that Afrofuturism's embrace of the digital does "not fall into the trap of the neocritics or the futurists of one hundred years past. These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them" (2002:9). Similarly, Susana Morris contends, "Afrofuturism is an epistemology that both examines the current problems faced by blacks and people of color more generally and critiques interpretations of the past and the future" (2012:153). Afro-imaginative artists, then, craft dynamics, scenarios, climates and worlds that propel Black life into the future as a present and palpable force, couching commentary on lasting questions of biological equality and socio-cultural perseverance in entertainment forms. Concurrently drawing on *histories* of (racial and gendered) resilience and *hopes* in communally derived futures, Afro-imaginative fields use technically proficient and innovative practices to forward a relatively simple postulation: Black people are here to stay.

During the Q&A, Tanya described an editing process intended to defy genre conventions as an experimental hybrid of fact and fiction. While the film may have started off as a vehicle for personal reckoning, Tanya eventually hoped that its product would help others comprehend and persevere in their own individual and collective fights for self-definition, self-care and/or equity. She and many other media makers I met valued creating high quality content and were at the same time born into bodies and identities subject and subjected to marginalization that shaped their production efforts and goals, leading many to manifest imaginative aesthetic worlds that tackled experiences of dissonance, loss and (non)belonging. As Afrofuturism scholar Lisa Yaszek attests,

The main thing that Afrofuturist artists want to do is tell good science fiction stories and I think that if you speak with any black science fiction author from anywhere around the globe, they'll tell you that's first and foremost what they're interested in. But there are two other political goals associated with Afrofuturism as well. Afrofuturist artists are interested in recovering lost black histories and thinking about how those histories inform a whole range of black cultures today. They also want to think about how these histories and cultures might inspire new visions of tomorrow. (2013:2)

Typically, Hollywood's science fiction movies feature and follow white subjects as they imagine or navigate a world decades, centuries, even millennia ahead of our own. While content itself is fictitious, its subject matter and stylistic forms often do much more work in speaking to the racial double standards that so many people of color have to contest in order to accrue authority and recognition as imaginative creators. Moreover, these multiply-identified cultural producers toil in environments simultaneously occupied by science fiction films largely devoid of Black protagonists (actor Will Smith serving as an exception but not changing the general terrain), and widespread Black Lives Matter protests battling to prevent such a future. With the future of the race in question, great visceral charge comes with Afro-future-oriented imageries that critique messy social relations via art's creative latitudes for expression.

Broadening my perspective, I received an important correction from Tanya after I mistakenly mislabeled her work genre in front of her. Up until that point, I had used Afro-futurism and Afro-surrealism interchangeably, unaware of distinct differences between the two. However, Tanya politely yet swiftly informed me one day that she did not identify her work as Afrofuturist. In fact, she did not even fully ascribe to Afrofuturism as 'a thing' because it looked to a future dependent on a present that was in much more need of immediate attention. In other words, the future would not exist if people did not redress the present. While reluctant to categorize herself at all, Tanya

resisted the qualifier of Afrofuturist in preference for Afrosurrealism, if anything. Her interjection prompted me to engage this added internal layer of complication amongst the Afro-future-oriented media makers. Although no other media makers challenged this label to my face, I reproduce D. Scot Miller's demarcation of the two in recognition of this driving conversation about the stakes of how one relates Blackness to temporality and futurity:

Afro-Futurism is a diaspora intellectual and artistic movement that turns to science, technology, and science fiction to speculate on black possibilities in the future. Afrosurrealism is about the present. There is no need for tomorrow's tongue speculation about the future. Concentration camps, bombed-out cities, famines, and enforced sterilization have already happened. *To the Afro-surrealist, the Tasers are here. Four Horsemen rode through too long ago to recall. What is the future? The future has been around so long it is now the past.* Afrosurrealists expose this from a "future-past" called RIGHT NOW. (2009, emphasis added)

In this quote, Miller centers temporality as a central distinguishing factor between the terms, foregrounding the time period that each spoke to and how each sought to intervene in normative race relations. While Afro-futurists derive futures for Black people based on implicit (politically, spiritually, or otherwise motivated) assumptions of continued Black life, Afrosurrealists offer politically overt interjections about social and environmental ills threatening present-day Black lives and livelihoods. Repeating Scot's words, "Afro surrealists expose this from a "future-past" called RIGHT NOW." As Terri Francis offers,

Animated by Amiri Baraka's chant "AfroSurreal Expressionism," we seek through our creations an entirely different world, a marvelous world, that lies just beneath the surface of this one- its vernaculars, its haunts, and oh, its delights and curiosities. We draw up on an electric mash-up of folklore, history (sub)consciousness and location in order to engage representations and refractions of reality through film's necessary framings and inevitable distortions. Sensual in all we do. Industrious and tenacious, we retreat whenever possible for contemplation, conversation and creativity. Black Liberation! And Beauty. Abstraction. With roots. (2013:209)

This centering of the RIGHT NOW charges Afrosurrealism with urgent potential that creators can channel via ‘its vernaculars, its haunts, and oh, its delights and curiosities.’ It concentrates not on past offenses or utopian (or dystopian) dreams but a ‘now’ plagued with structural, emotional and corporeal violence. In juxtaposing what is and what could be, scholarly traditions have called out divides that fallaciously demarcate fact and fiction as mutually exclusive entities (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Perhaps, then, Tanya’s frustration with the term also tapped into the tacit implication that it could be simply assumed that Black people would survive today’s widely abusive power hierarchies. Interpreting her shift from Afrofuturism to Afrosurrealism for its different socio-political assumptions, I understand Afrosurrealism not as ignoring historical or future-oriented formations, but it collapses them into current layered realities via refusal to obediently construct time in accordance with linear, progressive, and/or Eurocentric fashions. As Frantz Fanon analyzes the mutual interdependence of present and future, “And it is for my own time that I should live. *The future should be an edifice supported by living men. This structure is connected to the present to the extent that I consider the present in terms of something to be exceeded*” (1967:15, emphasis added). Hence, praxes of invention and intervention play with aesthetics *as* political, challenging mainstream discourses of time and progress in defiance of portrayals of Black people as ‘Others’ stuck in time (Fabian 2002, Hegel 1977 [1952]).

Black Socio-Poetics: Production, Politics, and Praxis in Afro-Imaginative Media

Most textbook accounts of U.S. Black history center issues, acts and ends of overt political resistance. However, such imaginings are narrow because they neglect

alternative, more holistic and intersectional manifestations and aspirations of Black potential. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain in *Racial Formations* (1994), race is not as simple, static, nor simply resolved, even when governmental decrees try to suggest as much. Aware and determined to depict and discuss such complexities, Tanya and her co-panelists – also independent film directors – refused to ‘play it safe’ with stock mainstream templates of Blackness. Instead, they used media production and distribution opportunities to juggle problematic racialized gendered histories and implicit paradoxes of millennial Blackness in a media subfield that largely associated futurity with white characters and creators. Making use of Afro-imaginative media’s more lenient (unbound to ‘realist’ criteria) and fantastical aesthetics, many interviewees saw this approach to media as a promising way to circumvent everyday frictions that existed for them as Black women and cultural producers. They contrived alternatives for re-envisioning and/or challenging heuristics of past, present and future; race, gender, and class; joy and pain; professionalism and emotion; hypervisibility and invisibility. Sheree R. Thomas’s compiled anthology of Black science fiction literature shines light on this gap via her metaphorical usage of ‘Dark Matter’:

After observing the motions of galaxies and the expansion of the universe for the past five decades, most astronomers believe that as much as ninety percent of the material in the universe may be objects or particles that cannot be seen. This means, in other words, that most of the universe’s matter does not radiate—it provides no glow or light that we can detect...

Dark matter as a metaphor offers us an interesting way of examining blacks and science fiction. The metaphor can be applied to a discussion of the individual writers as black artists in society and how that identity affects their work. It can also be applied to a discussion of their influence and impact on the sf [science fiction] genre in general. (2000:xi-xii)

While categorization is a common way for people to gain introductory knowledge of formerly unknown topics, danger lies in people drawing conclusions on tidbits of

information. In being satisfied with discursive knowledge of ‘the other,’ dominant media communities are ironically unable figuratively ‘to see’ - Black creators as active contributors to science fiction and other speculative genres. In the field, I noticed that many creators understood that racial and gendered hierarchies guided ‘sight’ towards certain people and made points of resisting common genre prototypes.

Beyond questions of aesthetics, people also demonstrated resistance through narrative form. While some media makers associated their skills and careers with one genre (*cinema vérité* that follows real-world subjects, or *narrative* scripts and storylines) or described efforts to translate expertise between genres (Pauline in Chapter 4), I also met a notable subset of creators who sampled from both while variably choosing to mix, remix, and play with existing and newly imagined forms. These creators experimented with assorted formats, techniques and materialities—sound, visuals; pacing; features, abstractions or absences of human forms—to compose differently affecting projects and products, and rethink and redevelop audience engagement in ways that better reflected the more elusive qualities of contemporary racial sensibilities, discourses, and encounters⁶⁶. Here, I propose a (re)consideration of a Black socio-poetics, which would take into clearer and more open account the manners and extents to which Black creators attempt to mirror in form what larger structures of race and power (or lack thereof) they are seeking to reference and/or confront. As film scholar Gladstone Yearwood writes,

Although black filmmakers have tended to utilize aspects of Hollywood film in their work, the body of independent black films which has developed from this

⁶⁶ This statement is made in comparison to the more racially dichotomous social landscape of the 1970s The L.A. Film Movement, also discussed in academic and film community parlance as the L.A. Rebellion, refers to the group of mostly Black film students accepted into UCLA as part of an “as part of an Ethno-Communications initiative” (UCLA Film and Television Archive 2011). Some graduates included directors Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, Charles Barnett, and Alile Sharon Larkin.

early period [dating back to the World War I years] contains important characteristics which establish a ground of difference from the Hollywood cinema...black film (much like black literature) is capable of functioning as a vehicle for expressing the unique aesthetic sensibilities which emanate from the black experience. (2000 [1982]:9-10)

The directors on the panel that opened this chapter described their respective breaks from dominant cinematic traditions to employ more culturally salient production frameworks. They refuted reigning production norms not because of disdain for or comparison to whiteness (Morrison 1992), but in pursuit of desires to construct Blackness positively⁶⁷.

Black speculative media's experimental themes and design elements not only demonstrated interlocutors' technical competencies and capacious imaginations, but also helped them to engineer lifeworlds that questioned the naturalized persistence of uneven socio-political and economic landscapes. On scales both grandiose and mundane, this- and other-worldly, their Afro-imaginative content visibilized disparity (Mahon 2000). Some did so by constructing utopian societies of equality and/or achievement. Others went the opposite route, fabricating hyperbolically dysphoric scenarios that amplified current wrongs to the point of irrefutability. Thus, Afrofuturism and its paradigmatic cousin, Afrosurrealism served and pushed others to rethink current as well as ensuing environments of struggle.

Referencing Tanya's short film again, its concluding compilation directly interposed people on Ferguson's streets chanting, falling, and standing strong in the face of tear gas, with gospel music naming lived effects of racial discrimination. Without

⁶⁷ By positive, I do not necessarily mean self-congratulatory. Rather, I mean positive as in something defined on its own terms, as opposed to a negative framing structured to see, define, and register things in relation to their opposite- as when Black is thought immediately as the 'lack' of whiteness.

explicit voiceover narration, the scene delivered impact through its aestheticized visual demonstration of the violences fundamental to U.S. Black experience. Furthermore, though Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism differ, they share parallel missions to disrupt normalized everyday routines so as to promote mass reckoning with depictions and related claims of Black futurity. Both venues of Afro-imagination also require their makers to confront currently occupied worlds whilst having courage and expansive (arguably optimistic) enough thought to conceive new ones.

Depicting Policing via Exhibition of Afro-Imaginative Video

After meeting Tanya during preliminary research, she became a key informant with whom I maintained regular contact via phone texts, Facebook messaging, and e-mail. She would reach out from time to time via these communicative platforms to update me on work developments and local screenings. In Spring 2016, Tanya told me that her Black women film collective had organized another screening, this one featuring short films and videos directed by Black-woman and non-gender conforming people including but not limited to their members.

Just after dusk on the designated date, I walked down a Brooklyn sidewalk, repeating the location's street number in my mind so as not to forget or hustle right past it. The building numbers descended, creeping closer to the address on the invite. Finally, I noticed a tripod chalkboard perched on the sidewalk. Atop the night's special board was an event title scrawled in temporary neon pink, orange, and green chalk. Still confused as to my exact destination, I slowly pulled open the heavy front door of what turned out to be a bar. Dimly lit and "L"-shaped in layout, the bar's thin, long side ran about halfway down the establishment before expanding ninety degrees to the right at the other end.

This architectural design served to separate the bar's congested front area from its less crowded rear, only the latter of which had the capacity to accommodate larger groups.

Still looking for Tanya, and somewhat unsure whether I had entered the correct place, I wandered further into the bar. People did their best to shuffle around and make space for me: a tightly improvised dance. At one point, people jumbled about at just the right speed to open up a sightline that revealed Tanya, who leaned on the far side of the bar. Quickly, I realized that Tanya and her event co-organizers had rented out and flipped the bar's back area into a makeshift screening space for their shorts program. Behind her, a Black woman with headphones around her neck had her disc-jockey (DJ) equipment set up on a table borrowed from the location's storage room. The DJ would be hidden from view by a portable projection screen during the films, then exposed during breaks to charge the space with sensorial ambiance other than general chatter from the front of the bar and to add excitement and fluidity to the program's overall flow.

Tanya's signature locks were up in a regal bun, the side of her head neatly shaven. For the spatially (and what turned out to be affectively) intimate occasion, she wore a bright red lipstick that I could spot despite the bar's low atmospheric lighting. Briefly gazing up from a lively conversation with a few earlier arrivals, Tanya saw and waved to me. She and the four other collective members multitasked greeting attendees, finalizing the order of the night's events, testing out technical details for the upcoming screening, and catching up with one another. I neared the growing mass of attendees to see people gathered in clusters passing time by discussing their days, social frustrations and (for some) films-in-progress.

After peeking down to check the time on her mobile phone, Tanya decided to commence the evening. The night's apparent hostess, she snatched up an in-line microphone that had rested on the bar beside her and tossed it from hand to hand. This gave her an extra moment to scan the room and gauge her authoritative voice. She was not only tasked but determined to command this back but still open bar area's noisy and chaotic environment. Additionally, there was no stage or other raised platform in this exhibition space for Tanya to mount during her opening monologue. Hence, she could not rely on the advantage of physical elevation to visually distinguish her from everyone else and imply her authority. Instead, she depended on her publicized role as one of the night's coordinating directors and her strong performative presence to assert her status.

Readied, Tanya let out a couple amplified hellos and craned her neck to make eye contact with members of the crowd in gratitude for their attendance before verbally thanking everyone and introducing each of the night's films. Tanya deployed her uniquely personable wit to grab the attention of all who had come for the event, promoted as proceeding both as a think tank of sorts and a space that would facilitate a healthy dose of commiseration amongst attendees. However, after a jolly welcome, Tanya dropped her pitch to transition into the emotionally sensitive themes connecting the films and videos to be screened: police brutality and racialized police states around the world. In that gathering of mostly Black and Brown people (some joined by white friends and/or 'allies'), pressure built around the anticipated witness of these filmmakers' transnationally concerned takes on such timely issues.

Ardently, Tanya explained that the Black women film collective of which she was part had curated a block of short video and film projects to screen that evening, not all of

which were directed by collective members. After the first two films, they began to hold breaks of a few minutes between films to accommodate spectators' mounting emotional momentum. During these reflection periods, spectators could think over and talk amongst themselves about any powerful scenes or takeaways that moved them to words. This gap also respected people's other potential commitments should they need to weave through the crowd and depart. In total, the film collective exhibited six diversely innovative, technically experimental, and affectively visceral film/video projects on racial injustice.

The films encouraged counterhegemonic reflections of spectators through unconventional styles meant to evoke response on rational, aesthetic, synesthetic, and emotional levels. For instance, the night's first showing was not a narrative film as popularly conceived. Instead, it featured a screen recording of someone- likely the video's creator- perusing a Google map dotted with numerous points, each of which correlated to the site of a fatal police brutality incident within the last year. As the video played, its maker explained that a team of activists from locales across the nation had created the map to denounce the lack of a centralized, systematic means of tracking police brutality statistics nationwide. This allows brutality's structural largess to slip into a sea of isolated accounts discussed as 'exceptional.' This guided tour through the multimedia project was set against a harrowing background of police sirens and news reports about such slayings. The video showed viewers Google's street-level images as if to situate spectators in the geographies of victims' final moments. The video also zoomed out at times to acknowledge these murders as epidemic in number, and the overarching plane on which cultural abjection and social disrespect propagated climates of racialized fear. Not a film in the traditional narrative sense, the video sampled from publicly

accessible cartographic resources to launch the night's broader investment in recognizing these and a variety of other overlooked lives and voices.

Another project shown that evening had several minutes-long segments with no visuals at all. As evidenced by gasps and worried whispers, a bunch of its first-time viewers thought these swaths of black screen time were resulting from a projector malfunction or other technical error until they registered that music was still playing. In fact, original melodic composition and audio arrangements carried a majority of the short by way of combined and/or isolated chants, repeated words, and energetic funk tunes and rhythms. This speaks to Black traditions of music and orality for, as Nicole Fleetwood says in *Troubling Visions: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, "Seeing black in the film was a multisensory experience and a revelation of how synesthesia shapes the audience deciphering of blackness and black subjects" (2011:3). Whether resolved or left open-ended, codes floated through the soundtrack as 'multisensory' stimuli for each audience member to interpret for themselves.

A third film on the program brought intra-racial demographics to the fore, examining how gender and age have shaped different people's confrontations with police and/or stories of police activity. It followed a Caribbean Black woman dancing through her village's streets, which were haunted but never paralyzed by looming police presence and the actual walls that her joyous movements had to negotiate. Neither fully free nor trapped, her twirling body tapped into crucial yet too often ignored overlaps between women, state action, state violence, and nationhood.

Despite their divergent approaches to chosen material, all six pieces reflected on and/or re-envisioned a present afflicted by discomfortingly frequent clashes between

police and (Black) citizens. Also connecting them were the fact that bodies were prioritized in presence, action, and capacity: whether through dancing (in simultaneous nods to mobility and freedom, or at least the illusion of freedom), persecution (such as the homicide of Trayvon Martin), or structurally supported removal (via mentions of the large percentages of Black men incarcerated and/or killed each year). Some of the works meditated directly on vicious clashes of discourse and reality upon Black bodies vis-a-vis gunfire, batons, drug epidemics, and governmental neglect. Others took more fantastical composition and editing approaches, using repetition, soundless visuals, playful alignments of sensorial layering, and other surrealist effects to address at times harrowingly visceral corporeal realities. No matter how realist or abstract their visions, all commented on what had been fathomable – opposite of ‘unthinkable’ – for Black people of past, present, and anticipated futures. Through inventively mixed images, words, and music, their works provided ample groundwork for discussions of the toxic essentializations of Blackness that cast it as thuggish and deserving of the mass slaughters that have shaped not only U.S. history, but histories across the globe.

Such desires to expand and adapt established cinematic techniques and imagine beyond existing hierarchies inspired not only the night’s organization of its showcasing as well. As the event’s organizers, Tanya and her fellow collective members had explicitly discussed how people’s actual viewing experiences- and thus their takeaways- might be altered to promote a more communal screening experience that did not isolate audience members. Challenging industry norms concerning content within and architectures housing a screening, they attempted to shock viewers out of normative discourse and complacency by setting up a viewing situation that defied traditional

expectations of entering a theater, taking one of many seats facing a single direction in a dark room, and staying isolated for the film's duration. In this case, Tanya and other collective members played with relationships between image, sound, and space in renting out this bar space and organizing the night's proceedings.

Ytasha L. Womack's *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy*

Culture outlines space's literal and figurative importance within Black-centered science fiction. She writes,

Space is a frequent theme in Afrofuturist art. Whether it's outer space, the cosmos, virtual space, creative space, or physical space, there's this often-understated agreement that to think freely and creatively, particularly as a black person, one has to not just create a work of art, but literally or figuratively create the space to think it up in the first place. The world, it seems, is jam-packed with bought-and-sold rotated images, some as stereotypes and others as counterimages that become stereotypes mounting into watershed debates about "positive" and "negative" images in the media. (2013:142).

Here, Womack argues that space is not simply an area that people occasionally inhabit and abandon. Instead, its' occupation often involves meaningful and contentious acts of claiming undertaken by people with differing levels of access to social and/or political privilege. Hence, space and spatial relations evolve with significance, as people and voices typically ousted and/or omitted from mainstream forums demand to be seen- at least, by one another- and populate actual physical environments on previously discouraged, if not prohibited terms.

The bar vignette not only supports but expands considerations of space to apply not only to Afro-future-oriented content, but to broader considerations of viewing contexts and audiences. Simultaneously occupying and reimagining the space of the bar's open back area, Tanya and her film collective (all under forty years of age) refashioned this semi-public area into one in which they belonged and could deliberate their diverse

and sometimes conflicting positions on the 21st century's 'color line' (DuBois 1903). They and the intergenerational crowd they gathered basked in the space's coziness, which invited closeness on literal and metaphorical levels. People treated, moved, and held space with care and consideration for the most part out of respect both for those who had organized it and for the featured subject matter. Also, most people who had come specifically for this event also likely carried commitments to social discussion and action. Whether during screenings, small group interludes, or the concluding question-and-answer session with directors and other major crew members, this group of media makers and watchers colluded to participate in co-occurring missions to celebrate generations passed, acknowledge lives untimely taken, and fight for societal betterment for the sake of present-day as well as future generations.

Curious about the effectiveness of screening media in a bar, I took note of the drastically divergent bodily dispositions of people who had entered the establishment for the event in particular, and others nearer to the front of the bar who likely came for its usual provisions. In addition to the film's profound themes, the bar's architectural layout also nurtured- or perhaps forced- a cozy communal viewing experience that walked a fine line between pushing, crossing, and transcending individual boundaries. One of the screening's most distinctive features was that a majority of audience members were standing throughout. In this way, this viewing context centered bodily experience not only in a conceptual sense, but in a corporeal one as well. Though some original attendees left and late arrivals did appear, most people stuck around from start to finish to engage in this arranged toggle between film screenings and collective conversation. Rather than tuning out the people around us to escape into a parallel universe, the

intended experience had us watch as a collective perceivably willing to convene, connect, and communicate during appropriate periods interspersed throughout the screening event.

However, as time passed, people started swaying from side to side, whether in hopes of landing chance sightlines of the screen between the heads of people in front of them or relieving the practically inevitable ache that gradually set first into ankles, then ran up through calves, thighs, and finally into lower backs. While I do not suggest to know how everyone endured, I can attest to our hours-long upright communion. In general, people had little choice but to gather in bunches - some with shoulders touching - since the area had limited square footage considering how many people showed up and did not offer seating other than some stools that event organizers reserved for physically disabled, elderly, and V.I.P. persons, and a few small booths claimed early that evening.

Patrons undoubtedly cavorted in the uninvolved part of the bar, laughing over alcoholic beverages to release pent up energy and temporarily escape life's pressures. However, for the group at the heart of the bar (most Black but several white, Asian and Latino as well), interpersonal communion and artistic investments united people- whether friends, acquaintances, or strangers- in a joint headfirst dive into some of reality's most imminent, mortal threats. Apart yet together, our bodies battled varying degrees of soreness, paradoxically reminding me of my own body's presence and functioning. It also further fueled my commitment to observing all going on around me. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the booking of this locale assumed that most attendees would be young and able-bodied. Besides the few barstools and chairs reserved for select groups, people were exerting a considerable amount of physical effort to stay for the entirety of the program. People braced their legs and backs to watch films whose total play time – with

breaks added – were mostly unknown to the audience. In ways, our sharing of space in such a way amplified our sharing of minds and worlds as we ventured on this collective journey to manifest a cogent Black radical imagination. As Kelley fittingly argues in *Freedom Dreams*, “the black radical imagination...is a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation. It is fundamentally a production of struggle of victories and losses, crises and openings, and endless conversations circulating in a shared environment” (2003:150).

The crowd’s willingness and excitement to claim the bar’s typically and still very much public space also held political implications (both formal and informal) for this crowd of millennials and mentors. Constructing interplays between physical and virtual space, the night incited a multiplicity of viewer takes on racialized and other social foundations for targeted systematic overpolicing, as voiced in the Q&A. Hence, in reserving physical space in an establishment regularly open to a general public, we were asserting ourselves in and carving out a domain for expressing Black joy, cooperation, support, pain, and discussion. As Joan Cocks describes in *The Oppositional Imagination*,

This is theory’s acute dilemma: that desire expresses itself most fully where only those absorbed in its delights and torments are present, that it triumphs most completely over other human preoccupations in places sheltered from view. Thus, it is paradoxically in hiding that the secrets of desire come to light, that hegemonic impositions and their reversals, evasions, and subversions are at their most honest and active, and that the identities and disjunctures between felt passion and established culture place themselves on most vivid display. (2012 [1989]:141)

Through content, space, and openness to the ebbs and flows of collective emotional response, Tanya and her collective joined a growing number of media makers who positioned their works as critical alternative imaginings of societies currently rife with high rates of abuse against people of color, from the spectacular to the mundane.

Conclusion: Contemplating Generationality and Black Futures

“For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

– Paulo Freire, 2000 [1970], Page 7

Time and space, reality and fantasy greatly inform past and present experiences of race, here concerning U.S. Blackness in particular. From 19th century hymns that enslaved Africans sang to imagine futures beyond New World plantations, this tendency to imagine freedom rather than yield has long been a practice of Black people in what is now the United States. However, questions of what will actually constitute Black people’s corporeal, cultural and intellectual futures propelled what I discussed in this chapter as Afro-speculation amongst Black women independent media makers. Resonant with Afro-speculative media’s propensities to experiment with and push up against present-day limits of physics and official historical archives, racism also accrues power through its ability to shift, hide, or distort surface-level discourses and expressions whilst upholding core fundamentals of hierarchy and selective oppression. This comparison is one that did not escape creators but became a political plaything in the hands of inventive thinkers interested in contexts as varied as Outer Space proper, alternate parallel universes, or superpowers discovered by a children in their bedrooms.

Many 21st century Black creators were born and bred post-Civil Rights, further normalizing conditions in which racial binaries were constantly felt but no longer explicitly named and enforced by law. Members of successive generations experience, react to, and represent racial issues differently than their Baby Boomer predecessors. Therefore, they also differently assess race, racism and representations thereof in ways

that make sense for specific social contexts they occupy and encounter. As David Scott writes, “Each succeeding generation constructs anew out of its inheritance and its own experience the relation to the formative events of the past that have organized the imagination of the future” (2014:120, cited in Allen and Jobson 2016:130). Evidenced by mushrooming literatures on post-Blackness, attempts to construct possibility and futurity in this moment are heavily marked by post-structural definitions of race that resist strict itemizations of racial belonging (Jackson 2005a, Jackson 2005b) and insist rather that Black people can, so and should, exist in infinite number of different ways.

However, in order to suggest that an era is ‘post’ anything, a practical follow up asks ‘then what is next? What does one propose to replace whatever ‘pre’ was at issue? It is the inquiry without coupled proposition that suspends people in the no-man’s land of negative challenge and ultimate irresolution. As one kind of reply, many Black media makers (film makers specifically studied in this chapter) used Black speculative art (Afrofuturism, Afrosurrealism, Black-oriented science fiction broadly) to imagine pasts, presents and future prospects in which equality- or oppositely, destruction- reign supreme. Such visions of worlds other than and beyond this one critiqued standing dominant criteria for home, belonging, and worth by circumventing or trying to crack through normalized structures of marginalization. While much of their content may have appeared fantastical and socially detached at first, further conversation and analysis revealed it to offer grounded, reflective political commentary on racialized, gendered, and otherwise partitioned lifeways in the U.S. and abroad (via evocations of the Pan-African Diaspora). Creative inventiveness of 21st century millennial perspectives on race relations shaped not only their production process, but also subsequent choices of where and/or

how to screen films for optimal audience congregation and engagement. In this chapter, I returned to one of my key interlocutors, Tanya, as she and her film collective screened and held space for small and large group conversations about a collection of short films on global epidemics of police brutality and anti-Black violence.

Finally, to contest the reductive assumptions that people often project onto Black creators, this chapter contended that Afro-Alternative aesthetics deploy more abstract and nonlinear aesthetics to mirror in form what layers African cultural heritages and hidden discourses of racial hatred (coded terms of class or ethnicity, essentialist views of work ethic, etc.) afford the contemporary U.S. Black experience. Drawing from scholarship on Black science fiction, Afrofuturism, Afrosurrealism, Afro-Diasporic aesthetics as well as anthropologies of media, race, and play, the chapter overall examined Afro-speculative aesthetics as culturally sensitive mixes of art and politics that aimed to expose omissions, implications, and potentials little seen and/or recognized by mainstream media.

Racialized subjects' ventures into speculative media production sought to defy typecasts of Blackness and Black womanhood as idle and inferior. To attain visibility that was generative and not empty, these creators took advantage of art's wide expressive latitudes to fashion work styles, practices and products that respected their personal and communal realities. In this way, they instrumentalized their artistic skill sets to visualize aspects and aspirations for society that have long been 'unthinkable' (Trouillot 1995) by the general American public. Nodding to variegated experiences of race, gender, class and other social classes (Baker 2010), their diverse Afro-Alternative imaginaries did not plead for acceptance, but focused on acknowledging, if not championing. Black brilliance and contributions not only of the past but in futures, near or distant. In such usages,

imagination was not a capacity resigned to spew out unmoored fantasy, but one that could show a production team's individualized and collective determination to shatter limitations unevenly imposed on minoritized persons' lived and/or learned experiences.

CONCLUSION

“The paucity of literature on the black woman is outrageous on its face. But we must also contend with the fact that too many of these rare studies must claim as their signal achievement the reinforcement of fictitious clichés. They have given credence to grossly distorted categories through which the black woman continues to be perceived... Many have recently sought to remedy this situation. But for the time being, at least, we are still confronted with these reified images of ourselves. And for now, we must still assume the responsibility of shattering them.”

– Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in Community of Slaves,” 1972

Tales of Media Production: Storytelling as Authority-Making

“Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” More than once, I heard Black women presenters quote this African proverb during film festival awards ceremonies and panel discussions. In their formulation, ‘the lion’ served as a metaphor for Black women media makers striving to exercise representational authority in (or for some, outside of) domains that have historically ignored their contributions. The lion here is not an weak victim, but a discerning being capable of predatory action but also of assessing where and to what extent to deploy her power. However, her potential is misperceived as weakness by gun-wielding hunters eager to strike her down without warning. She was never silent, but rather silenced in numerous ways: first by bullets in real-time, and then over time by archival omissions and distortions guided by hunters’ moral, social and cultural mores. As Charles Taylor says of recognition’s tricky imprint on subject formation,

... our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994:25, emphasis added)

Such acts of nonrecognition, according to Taylor, are both structurally and intimately wounding. How, then, I ask might researcher attunement to and between such acts enable intellectual reflection on Black women media makers not as absent or incapable, but rather as deterred by (and in some cases, ardently distanced from and unconcerned with on principle) structures that chronically misrecognize their potential? Embracing Ginsburg's inquiry as to "whether minority or dominated subjects can assimilate media to their own cultural and political concerns" (2002:79), this dissertation has suggested what must be done to hear the lion, and what choices and concessions must be made on her part in order to be heard.

This 'lion' adage sang out to me each time it popped up. In dozens of interviews, different creators mentioned having definite input in the diverse aspects of storytelling – content, structure, narrative realism or other artistic approaches – as one of the main reasons they decided to pursue media production work. For them and the colleagues of various backgrounds with whom they shared? space, storytelling served as a central and centering practice for cultivating authority, as well as community. Broadly, stories function as powerful artifactual forms through which people from countless societies learn social values and taboos, and come to think about and frame conversations in everyday happenings (White 1987). However, to fathom the heft of storytelling one must go further, lumping together the power of the narrative form itself with the power of having control over the construction and telling of stories as well. Queer black feminist scholar Barbara Christian is one of several scholars to emphasize how the content and focus of stories can and often does change when spearheaded and authored by people (here, especially non-men) of color. As Christian writes, "people of color have always

theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs” (1988). Understanding media as means to display and to theorize – non-dominant ways of knowing and experiencing the world, many research participants tailored the numerous stages of storytelling (among them, scriptwriting, casting, shooting/creating, editing, and sharing with the publics) in interactive and culturally aware ways that subverted traditionally external gazes that reductively objectified them to position them as head authorial and authoritative gaze-makers.

For example, in one interview, screenwriter/director/actor Jacques cooed, “I’ve always loved telling stories” as they explained their initial - and what they presumed would be lifelong - attraction to filmmaking. When I first met Jacques at a Black woman-of-color networking event, they were publicly ‘she’-identified. However, over my years of knowing them, they became more and more comfortable asserting a preferred ‘they/them’ gender identity⁶⁸. Fifteen minutes before their affirmative coo, I had watched Jacques rush out of the pouring rain to join me in a coffee shop after their work day. They nursed a cup of tea patiently as I began the interview, their timid demeanor relatively unaffected by my questions. However, as soon as the word ‘story’ passed their lips in one

⁶⁸ The ‘they’ pronoun with which I refer to Jacques is a singular, nonbinary gender identifier. Several times, I witnessed Jacques correct event presenters and attendees on their gender identification with grace, unless met with resistance. I find it important to add Jacques’s story here because they addressed at length the importance of story in their life both personally and professionally. Furthermore, Jacques was not the only gender-nonconforming person I met during research. Therefore, given the limited space of this dissertation, I hope to do future research on the experiences, approaches and obstacles against persons who do not identify with gender binaries in the U.S. or elsewhere. How do acts of violence such as dismissing one’s (non)label, or ejecting them into micro-niche spaces thought incapable of universal address affect creators not only in terms of their inspirations and drives as media makers, but also with regard to more structural questions of spatial access, communal (non)belonging and career development?

reply, the corners of their mouth turned upward into a visible smile. From there, they excitedly explained their drive to tell stories through words, sounds, animations, and personal biography. Their speech gradually hastened, and their voice grew brighter as they unpacked their commitment to aims other than financial gain or awards, signaling the immense promise they associated with taking the lead in creating and publicly sharing the kinds of stories they wanted to see in the world, particularly as it concerned fluidities of gendered experience and presentation.

For Jacque and many other creators, the ways that stories could spread perspectives? Novel imaginaries? and inspire relationship- and community-building were strong enough motivation for them to invest money, time, and physical and affective labor into media projects that did not promise commensurate monetary returns. In positing ‘story’ as a motif bridging all chapters in this dissertation, I argue that storytelling’s ability to engage publics through layered calls to ‘the specific’ and ‘the universal’ gave creators senses of social, affective and even spiritual gratification. For example, Jacque intermittently mentioned life difficulties such as affording groceries or public transportation throughout the interview, as if economic strain were an occasional but worthwhile collateral effect of a greater commitment to the arts. Alongside their mainline, sustenance-directed career that moved between corporate and non-profit graphic design contractual positions, Jacque worked on animation projects that helped them to apprehend internal strife and challenge later viewers to confront their own empathic (in)capacities to grasp other people’s viewpoints.

Jacque and many other creators I interviewed celebrated storytelling for a variety of reasons. First, stories told via media could make ancestral linkages more tangible for

people living on the earthly plane. Resonant with African orality traditions and the griot figure of African villages (Stoller 1994), stories have also been a central practice in African Diasporic communities for generations. Furthermore, interviewees working directly with Pan-African themes interpreted storytelling as means to connect and share values between Black communities dispersed around the world. One West African director I met on several occasions lived in Brooklyn and was undertaking a massive, transnational film project shot partially in Africa and partially in the U.S. For her, the output of finances and energy was worthwhile because of how much the project stood to say and show about the continuing significance of the African Diaspora.

Second, interviewees championed storytelling's potential to advocate for certain social groups or futures more broadly. While some state and institutional representatives design media in alignment with the status quo, members of marginalized groups can also use media technologies towards more inclusive and/or liberatory ends. Aware of media's historical role in perpetuating hegemonic structures (Mullings 1994, Riggs 1986), many of my research interlocutors aimed to have influential input in production priorities. For instance, Pauline paid close attention and even reflected aloud on the possible implications that her film team's depiction of police brutality might have on eventual viewing publics.

Countering charges of essentialism, Violet described that her political themes arose as a needed counter-representation, citing a film school experience that she felt belittled if not ignored student reactions to institutional and societal racisms: "They [film school professors] were very limited in what they showed and they had certain films about...they had *Birth of a Nation* or whatever, there was no critical analysis of, like, any

social issues or anything that, because that's all part of film. *It wasn't critical enough and that's where I try to take it with my films*" (Interview 2015). Building an authoritative stance on tenets that diverged from those of her professors, Violet saw representative team composition as one method of intervening in institutional narratives that have reduced the complexities of Black people. Similarly, Danielle explained the careful thought she put into making a media product that would evoke certain emotions within certain audiences:

With my last piece, which was a spring narrative, it was based upon a short story that I wrote while I was abroad in Italy. And so that wasn't necessarily me taking some type of current event and putting my own twist on it but it was me you know adapting a short story into a narrative and, I don't know, it was tricky at times because things that you can easily put on the page in a book, you know you allow the reader to just fantasize and make up their own conclusions *but with film you have to be very strategic about what you actually want the person to be feeling from beat to beat so yeah, but I really just go after stories that I'm so super passionate about and feel like I won't get bored with doing them at all.* (Interview, 2015)

While Tanya, Danielle, and Violet all poured great effort into creating and finishing projects with particular socio-political import in mind, it is important to stress that conspicuous politics did not always take the fore in the works of people who self-identified as Black women. Some, for instance, chose to center demonstrations of artistry, amplifications of generally unknown historical figures or events, or an array of other goals. For instance, Molly focused on developing and consistently performing an externally identifiable kind of professional self-composure that combined conventional markers of sartorial and corporeal 'beauty' with a magnified – albeit often internalized and performed, but unspoken – ambition that she believed was necessary for women of color wanting to move up through the ranks of U.S. media production and/or distribution cultures. Molly, for instance, channeled a *politicized* recognition of her marginalized

social location by directing some funds earned from daily routines in largely-white corporate media spaces towards independent projects more under her immediate control; but she, never in my presence named driving aspirations to make conspicuously political work.

Third, media making's constituent technological and social processes assisted some in processing their own emotions and/or trepidations. For Jayla, rage and frustration about seemingly epidemic anti-Black murders across the U.S. escaped words at first, which kept her from generative reflection. However, once she decided to create photography, she consciously directed her energies to confront the disturbing pattern through the expressiveness of the artistic process. More specifically, Jayla utilized art-making to claim humanity, and re-route her emotional strife into external beauty. For Jayla and other practitioners who saw artistic creation as catharsis, they embraced the challenge of grappling with and then breaking down an underlying point of conflict or confusion into parts that could be rendered into material, distributable cultural artifacts. Whether in reference to Danielle's switch to film for its creative potential, Helen's desire to highlight Black activism through the activists' own voices and points-of-view, or Aisha's belief that stories of Black women should not be kept only to certain socially-expected spaces, being the storyteller was a key driver of how my research interlocutors forged and deployed authority on technical and social levels. As contemporary writer and personal friend of mine Shanti Marie Blanchard asks in an *I Am Woman Project* blogpost: "Though the word storyteller has become a common synonym with creative as of late,

one subject of debate within this realm has remained a constant source of dialogue: whose stories are told, how are they told, and who tells them?" (2017)⁶⁹.

Denouement

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how a bevy of creators self-identified as Black women learned, adapted, challenged, and/or developed alternatives to hegemonic notions of authority that presumed and structurally privileged white men. Storytelling (with capacities to echo oralities of pan-African ancestry and amplify creative capacities frequently omitted in dominant media) was but one of many ways that Black women media makers grew, exercised and instilled within themselves the confidence to advance their own types of authoritative positioning and praxis. Tracking racially uneven histories (Chapter 1), initial obstacles and searches for different communities of support (Chapter 2), affective trials (Chapter 3), production choreographies (Chapter 4), and futurist potentials of Black women media makers (Chapter 5), this dissertation has examined a host of sophisticated and contingent details that shaped the encounters, challenges and mindsets of various Black women (albeit from different backgrounds and with different strategic approaches) in media production and, to a lesser degree, distribution fields.

In addition to leading in the many practices that comprise storytelling (as it informs and is informed by scriptwriting, casting, shooting, editing, and public exhibition and discussion), other elements of flexible, community-minded models of authority-building included looking for and drawing on community values outside of formal

⁶⁹ The *I Am Woman Project* is a website dedicated to embracing and empowering women through attention to the various issues that differently affect their lives. Some of its headlined themes include 'Wellbeing & Nutrition,' 'Wealth & Work,' 'Love & Life,' 'Home & Garden,' and 'Beauty & Style.'

institutional settings such as photography or film schools, deploying casting and/or distribution models intended to bring on talented Black and/or women creators who had relatively few job opportunities available to them.

Rather than neoliberal individualist understandings of authority, most of the directors, producers, writers and editors I interviewed and/or shadowed during fieldwork incorporated imaginative formations of authorship into their work process. Moreover, in constantly (re)thinking and visualizing production strategies that would work for them as doubly marginalized subjects, most of my interlocutors developed – at least to some degree – non-linear and non-normative approaches to authority-building that expanded and remixed field conventions. By jointly and malleably accounting for technical skills honed as well as the infinite potentials of embodied knowledges of Blackness (both personal and collective), these creators worked to narrate alternative stories that dominant Hollywood portrayals have historically dampened. In their actively ongoing processes of crafting their own versions of authority, Black women labored against already financially restrictive structures of independent media while also having to consider overarching dominant tropes and statistical odds against them, potential questions of community benefit, and for some, imaginings of something ‘other’ or ‘else’ than what currently is. As Tanya put it, media’s structural violence may not consciously govern all Black women’s attitudes towards media production and distribution, but it disproportionately informs – along lines of race, gender, class and others – likelihoods of funding, general recognition of talent, schooling conventions, and public or institutional legibility of their hard-earned accomplishments .

Overall, this dissertation advocated for a shift from authority-as-status to authority-as-process to highlight the human decisions, relations, and uncertainties that inflect marginalized creators' media production journeys. Community-building and imagination function as two centering forces that stand out as Black women rarely have the luxury to assume success on an individual, merit-centered plane. Instead, many have begun to imagine different pathways to accomplishing their goals in the field, regularly turning to support systems and collaborations with fellow Black women and allies to provide forms of a social capital able to move their projects – and hopefully, those of their associates – forward. On one hand, Casey replied to a Q&A inquiry about what differentiates Black women media makers from those with other identities:

C: Do you mean female directors? Or women of color directors?

Man: Both, I guess

C: Because we live in a patriarchal, white supremacist society. I mean, that's really it. It's racism, and it's also sexism. It's an external force that's suppressing people. And also, film is a very expensive medium and there's not a lot of support for people of color and it's very male dominated. And you know, for women that can be a very intimidating space to be in, right? So, I think that a lot of women sort of get bullied out almost very early on, like in middle school or when they first get on set, you have these men who are talking down to you all the time, so that can be very intimidating so unless you have...you're a certain type of women who can overcome those things umm more than likely by the time you reach the age where you can make feature films for Hollywood you've probably stopped. There's a lot of women who are editing, but not on set. That's a different type of personality, a different type of situation. That's my theory.

However, despite the many interpersonal and structural trials that disproportionately face Black women aspiring to authoritative media positions, Black women's strength – imbued with historically resilient perseverance, imaginative maneuvering, and self-preservationist collectivity – resonates across most of the situations in which I observed my interlocutors. In fact, as an apt closing to this

meditation on authority derived and exerted through imaginative reworking of the dominant media environment, I recall a powerful quote from first-time director Helen. When I asked the activist storyteller/director “What or who inspires you?” she explained in galvanizing celebration:

The ‘person’ that comes to mind... [pauses, as if to signal her inability to select and name just one] is Black women. Both within this movement and within my life I just see us as a group of people - and I mean Black queer women, Black trans women, all the shapes and sizes that we come in - as a group of people that is so often misunderstood and discounted and degraded and yet cannot stop the shine. You just can’t stop it and it just makes me warm and fuzzy whenever I get to build with and highlight the stories of some of these women who are doing the work because most people would crack. Most women would, one of the women we are following has a seven-year-old daughter, she’s in nursing school, she caught a felony charge for a direct action she did and she’s about to beat the case... I think we are a force on this planet, and I think when change comes around its only gonna become more and more obvious who’s doing the work, who’s putting in the analysis, who’s taking the risk. It’s black women. (Interview, 2015)

EPILOGUE: “Have Things Really Changed?”

“Who is winning in all of this?” — Jayla, Participant, 2016

Scene #1

On January 29, 2018, Marvel Studio’s *Black Panther* film premiered in theaters to immense public response. The film, which held the number one spot at the box office for over a month, features Prince T’Challa, leader and protector of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. Its’ citizens possessed sole knowledge and ownership over a secret powerful mineral called *Vibranium*. Concealing the ore enabled them to avoid European colonialization and outpace the Western scientific advancement. The *Black Panther* character first appeared in Issue #52 of Marvel’s *Fantastic Four* in July 1966, but did not get his own comic book for another eleven years (Mattimore 2018). Decades later still, people applauded director Ryan Coogler and a celebrity cast including Chadwick Boseman, Lupita N’yongo, Danai Gurira, Angela Basset, Michael B. Jordan, and remaining cast and crew for their ground-breaking cinematic rendition of the comic as well as the superhero’s larger statements on Blackness’ richness, legacy, and promise. Groups of Black-identified people made cultural experiences out of going to see *Black Panther* in theaters, donning African print garb, bright colors, headwraps, and/or film merchandise and posing for pictures in front of Wakanda cutouts with signature crossing-of-arms in an ‘X’ shape. For them, it was not just about a film, but also constituted a celebration of Black Diaspora communities for what they were, what they have and might have been, and perhaps most importantly, what could be in the future.

Co-creators writer/editor Stan Lee and writer/illustrator Jack Kirby originally introduced the character during the peak of the concurrent Civil Rights and Black Power

movements, both of which sought equality and respect for the nation's and world's Black people. A pertinent section of Gary Groth's 1990 interview of Kirby unfolded as follows:

GROTH: How did you come up with the Black Panther?

KIRBY: I came up with the Black Panther because I realized I had no blacks in my strip. I'd never drawn a black. I needed a black. I suddenly discovered that I had a lot of black readers. My first friend was a black! And here I was ignoring them because I was associating with everybody else. It suddenly dawned on me — believe me, it was for human reasons — I suddenly discovered nobody was doing blacks. And here I am a leading cartoonist and I wasn't doing a black. I was the first one to do an Asian. Then I began to realize that there was a whole range of human differences. Remember, in my day, drawing an Asian was drawing Fu Manchu — that's the only Asian they knew. The Asians were wily... (2011 [1990]:6)

While Kirby's assertions may be problematic in their self-aggrandizement, the duo's invention of *Black Panther*—and realization that Black audiences were worth appealing to—injects into a largely white masculinist universe a Black superhero whose competence, strength and national pride spoke to national climates of then, and also 'now.' However, as Joy Reid opened her *AM Joy news* segment during *Black Panther*'s opening weekend asking, "The film, which features an almost all black cast and a black director is set to pull in \$194 million this weekend in the US alone. Now with the success of this movie, will we see more opportunities opened up for creators of color?"

Scene #2

The likelihood of Joy's question having an affirmative answer seemed all the more likely when, on February 26, 2018, *A Wrinkle in Time* hit theaters across the U.S. For months prior, advertisements played on television and social media lauded its director, acclaimed and oft exceptionalized Ava DuVernay. Adapted from Madeleine L'Engle's science fiction children's book, the film tells the coming-of-age story of Meg,

a rebellious young girl struggling to find self-confidence who goes on an epic quest with her younger brother to find and retrieve their father from a parallel dimension.

Like *Black Panther*, the film flaunted an A-list cast of established mainstream actors. Among them were Oprah Winfrey (who DuVernay also worked with on her 2014 film *Selma* about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement), Mindy Kaling, Reese Witherspoon, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Chris Pine, and Zach Galifianakis. In the lead role was newcomer Storm Reid, a young curled-haired African-American girl whose hiring and acting not only reached out to universal relatability of the *bildungsroman* but also illustrated the film's intentional embrace of diversity in front of as well as behind the camera. Much clamor rose around *A Wrinkle in Time*'s production, whose majestic cinematography and evoked nostalgia were set to grace movie screens during U.S. Black History Month almost one month after *Black Panther*. The film debuted to mixed reviews as to whether the film did the original text justice. However, with the Disney film's release, DuVernay became the first Black woman to direct a live-action film with a nine-digit budget (approximately \$103 million).

Many audiences watched and talked about the above Black-directed movies with excitement and fervor, especially in light of *Black Panther*'s majority-Black cast and *A Wrinkle in Time*'s racially and ethnically mixed one. These two mainstream films accrued hype not only for their content and backing by large production companies and/or franchises. They also came out during a timely moment in U.S. cinematic and social histories.

Scene #3: But...Have Things Changed, Really?

Each directly linked to mainstream studios and brands, *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle in Time* led numerous people to contemplate if they signaled changes in media industry priorities, or changing cultural attitudes overall. Amidst anti-Black murders and protests happening across the nation, I remember my own social media newsfeeds exploding with images of Black people making cultural experiences out of seeing *Black Panther*. However, dissenting voices interjected just as strongly against the film's content and popularity. Conservative and progressive news commentators debated about the whether the film's fantastical re-imagination of Black histories— with particular regard to colonization, scientific innovation, and African pride— did more to unite or divide people. *Black Panther's* politicized storyline and contemporary resonance made it particularly volatile fodder for this discussion. Either way, the films provoked response from countless members of the general populace.

Since formally finishing fieldwork and phasing into the analysis stage of research, I have received multiple questions from colleagues and intellectual seniors that have implied that my research premise has become somewhat outdated. “But what about Black Panther?” “But what about Ava DuVernay?” “But what about Dear White People?” “But what about Issa Rae?” Given that two of these references were directed by Black men, and two exemplify continued moves to exceptionalize Black women creators without mention of their originating communities or conditions of production, I present this epilogue to counter such kneejerk instincts to find resolution. Instead I challenge the reader to complicate and historicize the exceptionalization of certain figures as proof of

progress in the neoliberal U.S., which in turn enables the collapse of individual achievements and structural equity.

Over the course of research, I heard several participants detail ideological and structural obstacles they faced, and situations in which they had to assess and figure out how to navigate others' expectations of them. The release of *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle in Time* did not magically reformulate structures and conditions of independent media makers, or their mainstream counterparts for that matter. While numerous examples of ostensible progress – *BlackkkKlansman* and *Sorry to Bother You* as more recent contenders⁷⁰ – portend a light at the end of this tunnel, the fact remains that seeing Ava DuVernay and Ryan Coogler as Hollywood directors, or finally seeing Spike Lee receive an Oscar after over three decades of prolific work, still frames Black excellence as needing approval from mainstream gatekeepers.

A host of questions arose for me as I considered the persistent relevance of this dissertation's interventions. Is diversity as means of validating a 'progressive' media sustainable, and to whose benefit? Can Black, especially women, media makers attain legitimacy and success without Hollywood marking and thus ghettoizing them as icons of diversity? What steps must marginalized creators take, what facets of the image's power might they take advantage of, what structures must be exploded and re-built from the ground up, how must larger ideologies of whiteness and power be challenged to frame Black excellence less as a surprise and more so as a demonstration of competent and technically trained as well as socially inflected expression worth public attention and engagement? With the public reception of various voices and viewpoints at stake, on

⁷⁰ *BlackkkKlansman* (QC Productions) and *Sorry to Bother You* (Significant Productions) premiered more recently, but without ties to such major production companies.

what grounds can practitioners in conventional, social and new media forms engage or refuse Blackness as a valid platform on which to affect change without being reduced to that single trait? How do identities of power and privilege intersect with those of disadvantage and denigration through spaces of media production and distribution?

To conclude this dissertation, I decided to search the Internet for the freshest perspectives and opinions shared on topics related to Black-authored,-written, or -directed media and communities inspired and/or challenged by them. On the first page of



Issa Rae's *Insecure* is just one example that shows that black audiences are showing up for series and films that represent them.

Getty Images

my *Google* search, I found an article that leans largely in a hopeful and optimistic direction: “Black Creatives are Helping Reshape the Entertainment Industry.”

Published on 02/26/2019

and penned by a young Black woman Ashley Richardson-George in the VOICE section of Adweek.com (including the above photograph), the article claimed in its subtitle that ‘This shift is indicative of the need for a larger change.’ In the article, Richardson-George notes two trends that have risen to poke holes in conventional presumptions that Black film and television are too niche to pull audiences or have wide appeal. For one, Black creators are leaving notable imprints in the contemporary social fabric, as creators Ava DuVernay, Issa Rae and Shonda Rhimes as well as Viola Davis, Erika Alexander, Michael B. Jordan, and other actor/actresses starting their own production companies have demonstrated the creative and entrepreneurial prowess of which Black people are

capable. Two, as captioned beneath a photograph of the laughing cast of *Insecure* (the HBO show that Issa Rae created and stars in), “Black audiences are showing up for series and films that represent them.” Combining the relative spike in Black production, especially Black women’s, with the trackable high levels of support from Black audiences presents a promising look at career prospects and media structures willing to adapt so as to acknowledge Black genius as legitimate as has been demonstrated many times over.

However, I find it necessary to return to the question of appearances versus structure, as writer Adedamola Agboola of blackenterprise.com also aptly addresses in a 2018 article entitled “Despite Black Panther’s Success, Black Content Creators Still Can’t Get Projects Funded.” Along similar lines, award-winning comedy writer/director/actress Lena Waithe unabashedly confronts that very conundrum head-on. In the *Vanity Fair* issue that bears her likeness on its front cover, Waithe asserts:

It was a symbolic moment when *Moonlight* literally took the Oscar out of *La La Land*’s hand. It is a symbolic moment when Issa Rae’s poster is bigger than Sarah Jessica Parker’s. Now the hands that used to pick cotton can pick the next box office... See what I’m saying? There’s a shift that’s happening. *There’s a transition of power. But we still aren’t in power.* (Woodson 2018, emphasis added)

As Waithe attests, power is tricky and difficult to grasp in its entirety of applications, meanings and manifestations (Davis 2015 [1981], Foucault 1995 [1975], Christian 1988, Said 1978). Therefore, in replying to proposals that things *have changed*⁷¹, most participants who I was able to catch up with two years after official

⁷¹ The phrase *Have changed* implies a complete shift from one state of things to another, and assumes a stability that Waithe, DuVernay, hooks (1996), and various others have argued to not be the case as of yet, no matter how promising the situation seems amidst this ‘Golden Age of Black Cinema.’ (Darling 2018, see <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/hdn/hrlm/p/callback.html>)

research ended either paused to search for the ‘right’ words, or immediately scoffed at the suggestion. Although trends looked promising, and the surging fame of creators such as DuVernay, Rhimes, and Rae was indeed welcomed, many of them were learned in histories of U.S. film. As such, they knew that apparent uptakes in Black production had occurred before in the nation’s past only to again wane into relative obscurity. As Waithe’s mentor and a figure widely cited as evidence of ‘progress,’ DuVernay said during the *Vanity Fair* interview showcasing her mentee:

It’s a good time, but it’s not the first good time we’ve had, and previous good times have not become *That*.’ She reminds me that a similar moment existed in the 90s, thanks to filmmakers like [Gina] Prince-Bythewood and Julie Dash, the first black women to have a theatrical release, with her groundbreaking film, *Daughters of the Dust*, not to mention Kasi Lemmon’s *Eve’s Bayou*, and, on the queer side, Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*. At that point and now in this one, DuVernay notes, you can easily count the black directors. It has been the same, she maintains, for women’s creative progress through the years... black artists are blowing up the screen, with everything from Kenya Barris’s *Black-ish* to Donald Glover’s *Atlanta*, to Issa Rae’s *Insecure*. But this isn’t yet ‘a moment.’... If no other black woman makes a film more than \$100 million past me for another 10 or 15 years, if no other woman wins an Emmy for writing, for the words that come out of their head, then we’re kidding ourselves that we’re in a moment that makes any difference other than momentary inspiration. (Woodson 2018)

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