Hieroglyphics of the Film

Stuplimity and Static in the Films of Ja'Tovia Gary

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For Arturo Lindsay

Abstract

This essay discusses film and video works of artist, Ja'Tovia Gary, focusing on the strategies she employs to address blackness as both sociopolitical narrative and a material quality of film. Gary's interaction with the staging of her experimental films and film as matter are historical and technical. Looking at the Giverny Suite *films, I recount how the filmmaker encouraged her audience to move about the screening space during the opening night at Paula Cooper Gallery, February 2019. These films were projected onto the gallery walls giving them a monumental effect that I argue left the audience in a state of stuplimity, Sianne Ngai's term for the experience of the hybrid affective condition of stupor and the sublime that is common to the gallery and museum setting. The experience of stuplimity and the artist's response raise questions about blackness as narrative and a quality of the material substrate we call film. I then turn to Gary's earlier film,* An Ecstatic Experience *(2015) for a different example of the filmmaker's involvement in the sublime aspects found in archival footage of black theatrical performance and decaying film celluloid. In the film, Gary uses direct animation to draw onto archival footage of the television series,* History of the Negro People, *while also suturing Black Lives Matter street uprising television footage. These historical, social, and technical strategies mark film as a space and substance of care and caring, allowing us to consider the noise and signals of black lifeworlds in a way that accords with Michael Gillespie's account of "film blackness."*

What I want to do in this essay is to attend to the specifics of film technique not as a dilemma of black production where the mistake or technical problem corresponds to the world historical "problem of the color-line" or troubling vision, but rather to suggest direct animation is a critique of black production in the diaspora that values free experiment with film matter in addition to black diasporic narrative traditions. This gesture moves the discussion of black filmmaking and the idea of film blackness into the realm of technical innovation; not only what it is that black filmmakers do with film grammar but also how their interventions into the material substrate upon which black identity and experience are narrated and archived establish alternate relationships between black lives and film as such.

I approach *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015) as an example of contemporary black feminist experimental filmmaking.[1] I am interested in how Ja'Tovia Gary's experimental use of direct animation allows her to physically interact with film celluloid as raw material in a way that reflects on the history of black labor and work in the diaspora. The filmmaker uses direct animation to enter into contemplation on the materiality of film stock, literally a form of *black matter* that plays a mediating role in the caring negotiation of black matrilineal narratives. Under Gary's coordinated senses we might inquire: What is the historical relationship between blackness, cinematic viewing, and film as such? In Gary's filmmaking are examples of an embodied philosophical approach to the question of film as "a plastic upon which project of humanization [and mediatization] rest."[2] I ask what does Gary's use of animation upon film stock suggest about how black narrative elements should be read? These comments on Gary's experiment with animation thus acknowledges Kristen J. Warner's call for the representation of black lives to go beyond "plastic representation."[3] I pay particular attention to the filmmaker's visual and sonic representation of static in key diegetic moments of the film, *An Ecstatic Experience*. When Gary materializes static both visually and sonically she is engaging in a philosophical act where blackness and being are drawn into relation through raw materials and the black people. Throughout, I argue that Gary's engagement with static and film celluloid signals a shift from cinematic narratives of black maternal femininity toward an embodied philosophical contemplation of black matter. I show how Gary's films contribute to both black experimental film and animation, two genres that receive relatively little attention in black cinema studies. These arguments draw upon perspectives of black arts and film theorists, reports, reviews, and my own experience of Gary's art gallery film screenings.

Film theorists have been loath to examine the cultural impetus and situatedness of animation techniques. As Peter Kunze asserts, "[F]ew genres remain as unapologetically white as animation."[4] While Kunze is contextualizing the creation of the "hip-hop animation" comedy, *Bebe's Kids: We Don't Die, We Multiply* (1992), the first commercial animated film about and produced by African Americans, the whiteness of animation even includes Sarita McCoy Gregory's discussion of Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (dir. Ron Clements, 2009), centering on an unlikely black princess from segregated

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New Orleans that staged a "classic return to 2D animation, joining the ranks of mildly profitable princess films grossing over $140 million domestically and internationally."[5] Among the various meanings of animation, Sianne Ngai notes, is the influence of the technology on inscribing racial difference. Animation is a technology and a racialized affect. Animation's play of meanings brings the body into affective relationships with film technologies, seen for example in Lisa Cartwright's study of the Rotoscope.[6] Animating blackness on film and through affect can be seen in *The PJs* (1999), starring Eddie Murphy and Loretta Devine, which depicted a primarily black cast portraying public housing residents in foamation, a stop-animation technique used in the controversial California Raisins commercial in which anthropomorphized raisins danced to classic Motown.[7] Animation is a vibrant form whose disciplinary techniques Deborah Elizabeth Whaley shows contribute to the aesthetics of race in media forms beyond comics and graphic novels. Through the "use of the framing and animation of characters' faces" film animators "imply an idea or an assemblage of ideological positions."[8] Whaley's analysis of the visual articulation of anime characters demonstrates how racial designation can both open and confine marketing opportunities, conditioning relatability between animated film characters and audiences. The writing concerning animation as a technology imbricated in representing racialized affect also pertains to analyses of the role of animation in the noncommercial experimental film genre. In a predominantly white film studies milieu, the bulk of analyses develop links between animation and new materialist concerns of eco-philosophy and anthropomorphism, the disruption of stable boundaries between media forms in our digital era, and the auteur's use of particular techniques.[9] There is less discussion of the role of animation by black filmmakers and the relationship between animation and a notion of black expressive form.

An Ecstatic Experience is a noncommercial experimental film composed of over six minutes of archival footage from the nine-part television miniseries *History of the Negro People*, airing in 1965 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) street demonstrations against police brutality. Through film editing and the technique of direct animation Gary's film pushes further into the acoustic limits of raw film matter by amplifying static noise. As Ruby Dee's character describes her mother's ecstasy the spectator reads "static" markings that appear on her face, visually materializing in the atmosphere around her. Chalky lines move on film, collecting themselves into flashing lines and scintillating tiny particles that form borders and halos around Dee's talking head. Straight lines dart out of Dee's eyes and her head is suddenly encased in a three-dimensional cube made of lines of chalk. As she recounts the day of her mother's fateful epiphany a grid appears, covering her face. By manipulating the archival film Gary highlights the static elements of the footage

sonically and visually. The film experiments with archived footage through direct animation, remixing it in a way that brings the spectator to consider the difference between film animation and film editing and the significance of film matter in the philosophical negotiation of what it means to be black.

According to Pierre Hébert, animation is "based on a dissociative, disjunctive action inflicted upon the very structure of cinema," which "sends cinema back to the moment just prior to cinema's very existence."[10] Rather than rehearse a view of animation as a neutral history, Gary's experimental film illustrates relationships between contemporary animation and black diasporic cultures as obscure historical, cultural, and economic entanglements between black people and the invention and production of the material substrate we call film.

Gary's film and exhibition work occurs in the context of two important debates: in arts and culture, a shift in the traditional relationship between the art object and what the work is assumed to be "about," and in feminist philosophy, a renewed emphasis on the racialized and gendered character of care. These debates become compressed in the artist's tactile and technical engagement with film matter and gallery space, suggesting we direct our attention to the *about-ness of care*. If, following Kandace Chuh, the art object should be decoupled from a presumed about-ness, might not care and caring be similarly decoupled from their traditional objects and subjects?[11] In other words, what might happen when we ask, what are care and caring "about?"

In Gary's oeuvre care and caring are problematized through brief interactions with archival film footage and the gallery space. The artist's use of animation and direction in the gallery space where her experimental films are screened are emergent feminist representations and performances of care. I have written elsewhere about the ways feminist mourning aesthetics surface to unsettle civic spaces like the museum.[12] Black arts and literary criticism, in particular the writing of Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, and David Marriott, invest in the possibility of a "new woman" and what she might bring to black cultural production and its analysis between 1968 and onward.[13] The investment in a new woman, properly appreciated, is an example of "thinking with the commodity" of racial capitalism.[14] Further, in her performance as a historical commodity, the new woman represents the fulfillment of a promise, one fundamentally associated with rendering a need, or service, with performing *care*. Gary's intervention into film matter and gallery space unsettles film's association with traditional notions of care that are about rendering a useful service, providing for needs emotional, physical, and spiritual of black folks in the vein of the new woman.

In the work I examine Gary can be seen to think with a different commodity—that of old film grain and traditional spaces of cinematic projection. I suggest that Gary's animation work thinks with the commodity in

ways that expand Nicole Fleetwood's idea of the racial icon, referring to the "significance and valuation of key black political, social, and cultural figures and the meaning that the national public attaches to such icons" beyond the individual public figure, into a philosophical meditation on racial *iconicity*.[15] Imbued with the icon's traditional religiosity, the *racial* icon "stands for a marking of a democratic notion of racial trajectory" while continuing "to serve as a plea for recognition and justice for black Americans in light of historical and ongoing forms of racism."[16] In *An Ecstatic Experience* the filmmaker can be seen to think through the commodification and fungibility of black life in at least two ways: Gary's choice of subject—black actress and activist, Ruby Dee—affirms her status as a racial icon, while Gary's choice of medium and method—film animation—performs an example of racial iconicity. It is here that I want to consider Gary's work in terms of care. Spectators of *An Ecstatic Experience* are given access to resources not conventionally associated with care and caring. Instead, notation practices conventionally understood as 'film editing' or 'director's notes' as in a stage play occur in ephemeral moments of Gary's film and exhibition that give participants access to the enigmatic, the ecstatic, and ultimately, as I argue, absolute knowledge, long a preoccupation of Western metaphysics.[17]

Stuplimity in the Gallery Space

Cultural critic Kara Keeling, who writes at the intersection of queer of color critique and postcolonial and French theory, argues the figure of the black femme intervenes in Western cinematic processes of common sense making. Guided by Frantz Fanon's idea of the black imago she argues "the black's existence is a generalized effort to evoke a past disaster whose specificity and uniqueness the black's appearance does not call forth" meaning that "the black is a passing present preservation of a general past that keeps reappearing" where the black femme "might reveal time's differentiation into presents that pass and pasts that are preserved."[18] This recursive language also characterizes Gary's work with found footage in *Ecstatic Experience* and her subsequent forty minute three-screen video installation project *The Giverny Suite* in 2019. Several patterns and recursions are enacted that foster consideration of how black filmmaking in its negotiation of origins, culture, and history is a negotiation of being black. These effects and affects are the result of Gary's preferred method of suturing together archival materials that includes federal documents, television footage, Facebook Live bystander video, live concerts, mainstream commercial film, and close-ups of lush green foliage waving in the wind.

Gary's use of found footage is expansive, material is sourced from traditional film forms and contemporary social media platforms. Clips from the 1934 film *Zouzou* (dir. Marc Allégret) starring Josephine Baker, and Stan Brakhage's 1963 experimental film depicting plant matter, *Mothlight*, are given a new context through film editing.[19] But the spectator would be mistaken in thinking they are viewing a new film. By suturing together found footage Gary raises the question of whether new contexts are really possible. What might be present narratively, sonically, and visually on screen that could affirm or authenticate the existence of a new context? I am particularly interested in how this question is posed around the spatialized figures of black women and plant life across Gary's films. *The Giverny Suite* is a helpful example of how the figures of the black femme and plant life and architecture are used to evince what Keeling means when she writes of the reappearance "of a general past that keeps reappearing."[20] During the opening of *The Giverny Suite* at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York in 2019, the entire wall is used to screen the film. An antique settee one might find in a nineteenth-century parlor is positioned at the center of the gallery space. The legs of the sofa have been cut causing an upward tilt of several inches. The dominant placement of the sofa combined with the wide white walls results in audience members taking physical distance from the film and the vibrant foliage dancing on the wall. In a political moment of heightened recognition of the cultural and political-economic contributions of black women to world history the audience renders itself vestibular to the installation space. We disinvite ourselves from the parlor and huddle together, offside near the door. After several minutes a representative of the artist, who was present for the opening night, enters the space and encourages the audience to sit closer, and alternately to feel free to get up and walk to the wall to get into closer contact with the moving images.

One of the complications of Gary's craft work is its experimental film status. The discourse of experimental black film observes how black independent film is confined to academic and niche spectators. This is perhaps even more the case for experimental film given its traditional association with art school juvenilia. As film critic and curator Terri Simone Francis points out, "Black film spectators learn their viewing habits from Hollywood, and while black casts, characters, and stories might be warmly welcomed, experimental forms may not be so readily embraced."[21] Yet, recent exhibitions of Gary's work at New York City art galleries and social media circulation have changed how the work of black filmmakers is publicized and made accessible to spectators.[22] In our era of ubiquitous computing and social media activity spectators are more likely to see information about black film publicized on Instagram, Twitter, and blogposts than traditional movie trailers or coming attractions advertised on television. This saturated social environment can

be productive of boredom and the banal. Thus, my attention to Gary's digital interventions into film is informed by the need to acknowledge the digital media ecology currently shifting black experimental film forms from niche to popular media. It is also informed by a desire to consider black filmmakers' early work, what we might call juvenilia, because this work is structured by pedagogical forms of experimentation associated with being at the beginning of a career where the visual artist tries out various cinematic voices and techniques in a context of financial constraint.

So, how do we read Gary's gesture in the context of a film screening that cannot be separated from a world riven by misogynoirism? What "past disaster," however briefly, did the audience rehearse in the gallery space? We might read the audience's refusal to take up space as evidence of the intimidating and exclusionary logic of the white cube. The centuries-old elitism of gallery and museum space caused the spectators to go off-kilter, like the sofa. I suggest the film screening of a black woman visual artist who also appears in the film constituted a moment of the stuplime. As the filmmaker is seen weaving her way through vibrantly colored foliage, audience members respond by cramping themselves in the gallery doorway, barely entering the screening room. In a sign of both awe and terror, fear and respect Gary's monumental presence gives way to the audience taking a seat on the floor rather than walking around the space to view up close or from different vantage points. The 2017 *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)* depicts Gary wandering through Claude Monet's famous garden, located in Giverny, France where the filmmaker was in residence at the Terra Foundation for American Art. The garden scene is juxtaposed with a street scene, the video Diamond Reynolds recorded of a white police officer shooting and killing her boyfriend, Philando Castile in their car. The disaster that recurs is the arsenal against which black maternal femininity negotiates. In the gallery *The Giverny Suite*, its filmmaker and their audience critically responded to how the structure of the white cube and the parlor furniture—mere stand ins for colonial domination and racial/ethnic and gender antagonism—dominating the center influences the spatial relations between spectators, screen, and projection apparatus.

In keeping with the idea that the sublime and its affective negotiation occurs between Gary and a socially and politically spatialized audience are profound metaphysical questions about what care ethics inform black filmmaking and black film viewing. Of *The Giverny Suite* Gary says, "I don't want the work to lull people into a sense of complacency" and further "I don't want them to be merely satisfied or entertained."[23] Far from simple complacency, viewers that night were in the throes of what Ngai terms "stuplimity."[24] Stuplimity combines the feelings of stupefaction and sublimity to encapsulate our mediatized modern condition that is characterized by simultaneous

boredom and overwhelming hyperawareness. The crooked settee spatialized the center of the screening room into a stuplime vortex that implicated the diverse archival footage Gary sutured together playing on the wall. While sublime is a signifier attached to "black female," stupor and boredom are attached to the museum and gallery display spaces.[25] The somatics associated with black female filmmaker and film screening space converged and cooperated. Gallery goers could not easily overcome the sense of being off kilter in a space organized around traditional and stale protocols of museum viewing pleasure without prodding from the artist. As Ngai suggests, "the shocking and the boring" are dispositions that "prompt us to look for new strategies of engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible."[26] Stuplimity is the phenomenon at the intersection of shock (at the sublime) and boredom and is constitutive of the disposition of the gallery film screening activity.

We find black women filmmakers caught in the intersection of these aesthetics of astonishment and boredom, sublime and ordinary. This is an in-betweenness which prompts Gary to discover new strategies of engagement that differ from traditional representations of the onslaught of racial capital's inequities under which black women's thinking occurs. The filmmaker's gesture toward her audience, where she welcomed them to engage more expansively with the film installation space is guided by a confidence in directing, a sense of ownership and agency toward how one's artwork should be displayed and viewed. Fred Moten has written extensively on the nonperformance of blackness in which categories like agency, free choice, and ownership do not work for black people.[27] He argues that the liberal vocabulary of freedom and agency—categories that require the slave *both to exist and be refused*—may depend on an obscene and recurrent freedom and agency to give *freedom away*.[28] The effort, personal and historical, it takes to make and screen a black woman's film in a New York City gallery that garners press coverage complicates Moten's elaboration of the "black woman's homeless, stateless imperative."[29] To be sure, the imperative remains and will remain. But another possibility is also emergent. As Gary gave direction to the stuplimified audience that night, she assumed a command of her work and the etiquette informing its consumption that reorganized a heterogenous collective. Though a fleeting moment, her direction to the audience to move about the space gave *freedom a way*.

Despite giving way to freedom there is a sense in which the filmmaker's direction and her quote about how the audience should (not) feel and think about her work speaks to a form of didacticism that has organized the discourse of black film for decades. Working both within and outside the canon of black film theory is Michael Gillespie's generative concept of "film blackness," which clarifies the problem of didacticism facing many aspects

of black film production.[30] For Gillespie, film blackness is compelled not by "disinterest in the black lifeworld" but rather "disinterest in claiming that the black lifeworld be the sole line of inquiry that can be made about the idea of black film."[31] By working through the didacticism of black film discourse Gillespie complicates Keeling's indictment of common-sense such that the presence of the black femme can participate in the reification of the progressive and policy-oriented motivations ascribed to black filmmaking in the very act of its disruption, or, gallery screening. On the question of the projection of common-sense both Gillespie and Keeling contend that the arc of black film does not bend exclusively from slavery to freedom. Moreover, the black femme can play a special role in disrupting the hold of common-sense that cinema manifests for the spectator. The events of Gary's film exhibition I describe are indicative of recent theories of black film that contend with the issue, articulated by Fleetwood, of seeing black as "always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness."[32] Gary's concern for the viewer's reception is marked by a sense of creative control mixed with concern for the spectator to work through the fearful respect, awed terror and banality of the "art scene" that the encounter with a black experimental filmmaker of growing acclaim is in danger of suffering. Yet, there are still other aspects of Gary's approach to black narrative, archives, and film celluloid where she exercises a different kind of control upon film matter.

Flesh That Needs to Be Loved

Writer Yasmina Price observes that the work of black women's film has "always been less about canons than archives" in that they "prioritize the recovery of [archival] omissions in order to disrupt dominant structures."[33] Film—its material substrate—is one of the dominant structures to which Price alludes. *An Ecstatic Experience* permits the viewer to attach to something other than narrative; the spectator is caught up in the image of decaying celluloid and the accompanying sound of static, features which Gary enlivens or makes shine through direct animation. The film's reflexivity indicates film as an object of ontological inquiry, a metaphysical dimension of Gillespie's concept of film blackness. *An Ecstatic Experience* plays simultaneously with dark matter and the dark *mater's* sublime experience of freedom. Through animation Gary interacts with the medium of film, treating "the celluloid as fabric, a material dyed and cast" such that the "animation continues to stir as an instrument for improvisational and tinting historiographics. Chromopoetics. Haptic texturing. Scalar intimacies."[34] While Gary's reflexive film points toward the filmmaking process it also nods to Kathleen Collins's

1982 film *Losing Ground*, a film that is part of the LA Rebellion films of the 1970s and 1980s and equally concerned with black women's pursuit of interiority and ecstasy through aesthetic theory and experience ("I want magic, real magic. All of a sudden things start to happen") as previously examined by L. H. Stallings.[35]

While ecstasy entails desire for a fuller, more sensual life, the slant rhyme heard in the phonemic break between ecstasy and static, two elements brought together in Gary's film, brings forms of mysterious communication in union. Ecstasy and static have common linguistic roots. The word ecstasy from the Greek *ekstasis* means enhancement, astonishment, insanity or "any displacement or removal from the proper place." *Ekstasis* refers also to a trance. Static alternately derives from the Greek root *histanai*, "to place or cause to stand" or, *statikos* "causing to stand, skilled in weighing."[36] *Statikos* shares the root *histanai* (to place or cause to stand) with *ekstasis*. As the common root between ecstasy and static is rendered sonically and visually on film the sensual takes on a meaning beyond the organized self. The work of Gary's hands upon film stock is an embodied practice of sensuality where ecstasy and static manifest as signal and noise. At the archival level of Ruby Dee's maternal narrative (signal) and the ontological level of film as film (noise). The animation is productive of the key diegetic moment in *An Ecstatic Experience* that moves the discourse of the flesh to the matter of film celluloid. This maneuver occurs over the black female speaking body. Analysis of scenes from this earlier film by Gary expands the concept of film blackness to incorporate the tactile intervention into film matter in the disruption of the cinema's hegemonic production of common-sense.

An Ecstatic Experience uses found footage of the television series, *History of the Negro People*. The series' "Slavery" episode, airing in 1965, is an adaptation of Fannie Moore's 1937 slave narrative that was archived for the WPA's Federal Writer's Slave Narrative Project. Moore recounted her memories of enslavement at the age of eighty-eight. Her memories are part of several concurrent projects that collected slave narratives after Reconstruction. As such, Moore's archived testimony participates in several forms of recursion and repetition discussed shortly. One of these oral histories would be repurposed for the "Slavery" episode of *History of the Negro People* where matrilineal lineage is explored historically and technically. In the episode civil rights icon and actress, Ruby Dee, recounts a crucial moment in Moore's mother's life as a slave. The scene begins with churchgoers coming in for worship. In one of several recursions and repetitions Dee performs two roles, two memories: Moore the daughter and Moore's mother.[37] Amber Jamilla Musser argues black femininity is "closely connected to the flesh, objectification, and Thingness and exterior (other) to discourses of sovereign subjectivity and the symbolic." Fannie Moore's slave narrative and Ruby Dee's acting performance evoke a

black maternal kinship line that crosses the boundaries of the entertainment stage and the testimonial narratives of slaves. The climax of the speech is the moment Ruby Dee recounts her mother's epiphany about freedom. Daughter replays her mother's experience of freedom in the very moment she is whipped by the master for lollygagging—for taking freedom of movement during the extraction of labor. Here the mother realizes that somehow enslavement will end and freedom will return. The scene of Dee's performance, which belongs to mother, daughter, and the world, is a scene of the black acquisition of absolute knowledge that assumes the form of ecstasy in the black maternal body. We might imagine Ruby Dee through Fleetwood's notion of the "racial icon," an ambivalent sense of black iconicity experienced among black public figures deriving from the charged quality of religious icons. Here a Black Madonna, activist, and actress, Ruby Dee, plays the daughter playing the mother; she rehearses an ancestral communication, exclaiming, "I'm free, I'm free."

Dee recounts the episode on the plantation field—an experience that recurred so many times over so many years—through broadcast interference, atmospheric disturbance heard as crackles, blips, and pops, and seen as lines and specks and inks on the screen, and remembered as cracks of the master's whip and the energy it transfers to the body. The trance-like performance erupts into a crescendo of Dee repeating, "I'm free, I'm free." The words are neither sung nor simply spoken but something different. "I'm free" is uttered in a fragile and quivering distinction between weeping, laughing, and catching one's breath. Static accompanies Dee's utterance in the background. The sound of static is "noise," the sound of nothing that sounds like something. Literary critic Janet Neary describes static in the following way:

> Recalling the black-and-white snow on a fritzed out television screen, the noise in the fallow spaces between radio stations, as well as the electric charge produced by friction—one sees that static is both insurrectionary and obscuring, charged, interrupting our reception of clearly-defined images and sounds with clean edges. As such it calls attention to representation and authentication as mediation, asserting the precarity of reception over the verisimilitude of narrative depiction, as well as the priority of enslaved experience over white abolitionist authority or witnessing.[38]

Gary's focus on static enfolds the sound of nontransmission and can be associated with the ways black artists have used shine to convey un-visibility and opacity in relation to the knowability of blackness and the people who are called black. Krista Thompson, Amber Musser, and Anne Cheng examine how the application of shine to flesh and photography illustrates the fetish of transparency that indicates the availability and value of the commodity to the consumer through a shiny surface.[39] When mobilized by black people

the practice of shine "highlights the spectacular display of material excess" which is inseparable from the black body.[40] Or, as Musser puts it, "shine makes it difficult to separate the fleshiness of black bodies from the materiality of the decorative."[41] Gary's direct animation on film is an example of this fleshiness matched with feminine sensuality that tracks beyond traditional understandings of mothering grounded in the communication with child offspring that conditions language acquisition. Instead, a form of matrilineal work is performed through Gary's interaction with film matter that displaces the woundedness associated with black femininity and black mothering onto film. Such a displacement forces a reckoning with the politics of representation of black femininity and maternity on film. Gary's emphasis on the static elements of sound can similarly be read as a commentary on the black body as commodity, albeit *thinly described*. Following Denise Ferreira Da Silva's concept of black feminist poethics, film animation demonstrates the excesses of the film, not only as a material, but as a crucial one through which the white gaze and black resistance reside.[42] Static calls attention to black self-representation and the representation of blackness.

The authenticating role of film projection in the portrayal of black life-worlds may be further sourced in raw materials and black laboring hands through the kinds of "thin" reading practiced by Da Silva. *An Ecstatic Experience* uses compositional aesthetics to meditate on the relationship between freedom, labor, and raw matter. Da Silva's poethics "refigure how current global geopolitical and economic lines have been designed by layers of trade, vanquished imperial powers, and the juridic-economic subject they created."[43] This is exemplified by Gary's fragile embellishment of the film that returns the spectator to forms of slave labor that expanded from cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rice production—agricultural labor to industrial labor.[44] In order to locate freedom in the black body one must look (and listen) to the conditions and raw materials of black labor, the economic and sovereign purposes for which their flesh is accumulated and made fungible.

Here a thin reading of Gary's animation would point to the ontological limits of film, the basic form it takes as black matter, substance. Da Silva's attention to "matter in the raw"—thinly read—may include celluloid, a composition of camphor, colorants, fillers, alcohol, and other chemicals. Plant matter and tar are two forms of black matter and substance imbricated in the commodification of black people. Tar is a derivative of plant matter, a sap harvested through slave labor during the summer months that was often applied to plantation gates as a security measure so that slaves who tried to escape would have the black sticky substance stuck to their clothing.[45] Black matter—black people, film, and tar also converge in Thomas Edison's Black Maria, "America's first movie studio," which was covered in black tar paper to help process film. The history of the cinema is thus the history of

the representation of black labor. The question of black representation goes beyond who is on or off camera to also include those who process raw materials. Borrowing from critic Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, film is a plastic through which blackness emerges in a "theater of sovereign power and manipulated matter."[46] While Jackson's use of plastic makes sense of black people in both master-slave and trans-species relations, I consider plastic to speak of flesh and film relations of projection. Film animation is a process akin to animality, using tools such as ink, paint, etching, and the like as raw material. If blackness, Jackson asks, "is a natal function rather than an identity or experience, then what/who are black people?"[47] The question must also include the natal function of film in making blackness, scientific facts, and cinematic art in ways that accord and expand Allyson Field's generative discussion of what kind of asset (or, "useful cinema") that filmmaking would become to the "raw material" of emancipated black folk in the early twentieth century.[48] As *An Ecstatic Experience* enjoins Dee's sublime vocal performance with static phenomena, rendering both visible on film stock, black flesh and film emerge as plastic ways of being. It is a way of being echoed by the *Giverny Suite* as the filmmaker wanders through lush and color rich plant life.

Are the excesses performed with static film animation Gary's or Ruby Dee's? Gary makes her mark on film and becomes one with Ruby Dee's performance. Sometimes the static whites out, sometimes particles appear to form tears on Dee's face. Gary calls this process an "ethic of care," one equally subject to risk. As Suzanne Preston Blier suggests, "Art's similarly diverse and often competing referents are sharpened in contexts of risk, invigorated, polished, and thrust into the public to be renegotiated, redefined, and created anew."[49] Risk is always attached to Gary's tactile engagement with celluloid. Interfacing with the found footage of *History of the Negro People* risked breaking, tearing, and wrinkling the film—the very actions Gary applied to the celluloid with intention. The relationship between risk and creativity moves "artists (and patrons) into thinking about materials, techniques, and art forms in striking new ways" so that "rather than being detrimental to artistic creativity, encourage[s] new levels of technical and aesthetic brilliance."[50] Risk, creativity, and art concern multiple possibilities where being is oriented toward becoming and a "dynamic of risk engagement via personal skills, wisdom and character."[51] The visual patterns and flows of chalky lines are combined with Dee's vocalization and the static noise occurring in the background producing a rhythm.

I want to think more about "the doing" Gary performs through direct animation as it relates to the phenomenon of static, not as a problem of communication but as a poethics directed toward the doing of direct animation. Direct animation is a technique that purposefully etches, marks, and scars film that is previously used. If the violence of slavery is written upon the body, if the techniques of enslavement are enfleshed upon the subject then

more theoretical work is needed that deals directly with the presence and vitality of film celluloid in writing the lives of black people. Gary's use of direct animation transforms what it means to write and narrate blackness on and through the visual and audible in film. Similar techniques are used in another of Gary's films, *The Giverny I (Négresse Impèriale)*, a film that juxtaposes archived footage, analog animation, and high-definition video that, as Gary describes, "assert[s] an oppositional gaze in the re-telling of modern history."[52] Gary's techniques are physical engagements not only for the filmmaker but the spectator as well. The physical aspects of Gary's work also includes how the filmmaker intervenes into film matter.

Direct animation is experimental because the act of cinematic production places the film in physical danger. The film may tear in the moment Gary's hand scratches shapes onto the film. In *Ecstatic Experience* it is not solely the image of Ruby's speaking body and the audibility of sound that are synchronized through direct animation practice. The etch marks, and shapes which conjure black lifeworlds from African scarification practices to transatlantic slave narratives to electromagnetic noise. The animations have a radically maternal and material relationship to the blackness of film matter. As Gary's experiments with the limits of what film can withstand—human touch—she opens a window onto the weight of the transatlantic slave trade and the limits of black being. Blackness as a world.

Gary's handiwork materializes the illegibility of static on film through hieroglyphs. The etched hieroglyphics vivify film celluloid in a way that draws the spectator's attention to the surprises often effected through improvisation (experimentation). This is also the case in the scenes where ink stains are applied to the film. The ink stains on the film are about vitality and energy that connects both social movements to each other and returns us to the film matter that mediates memory and knowledge production from these moments in the movements of black collectivity. Gary's interaction with film offers another way to think about static, not as a non-transmitted broadcast but a poetically transmitted one, a form of what Neary calls "representational static." Representational static occurs in visual artists' strategies of resistance and critique "in which visual and literary discourses of race are regularly juxtaposed to reveal their discontinuity."[53] An example of this occurs in Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience* when the spectator apprehends the ecstasy of Ruby Dee (portraying the mother) and the open rebellion of BLM protestors. Gary's stains on the film might first appear to harmonize the black choir and the bystander recordings of street actions by black demonstrators. Equally however, the stains juxtapose the black choir's traditional and non-threatening performance of negro spiritual with the threatening destruction of the commons by black folks, whose violent exclusion is the real convention underwriting public space. The disjuncture between the black noise of negro

spiritual and breaking into the commons "draws attention to the forces [of film projection] that produce and transmit images of enslavement and their authenticating infrastructures."[54] There is striking visual similarity between the fuchsia stains Gary applies to the television footage and the red and yellow flames emanating from the burning car. It is a technique that recurs in *The Giverny Document*.[55] When the film is projected the fuchsia dye and red and yellow flames behave similarly. The protest footage becomes a way to not merely echo but also decode the layers of recursion in the television show's reenactment of the testimony of former slaves. By animating static the vibrational dynamics between found footage and Gary's editing allow her to use film as a stand-in for the commons. The ink stains amplify the rhetorical strategies of ex-slave narrators, including the producers of *History of the Negro People* and bystander videos of black rebellion, to challenge the authenticating powers of film.

An Ecstatic Experience lends film celluloid the status of flesh. Gary's film is decidedly invested in redressing the effects of an anti-black world upon black people. While this might at first appear to fall short of Gillespie's entreaty to consider black film as an artistic idea quite apart from social issues and policy solutions, the operation of digital animation techniques does extend the idea of film blackness from black mater to black matter.[56] For Gillespie argues the idea of black film "cannot be tantamount to an ethics of positive and negative representation that insists on black film in terms of cultural policy, immanent category, genre, or mimetic corroboration of the black experience" which means the analysis of film blackness must include filmmakers' technical engagement with film celluloid, such as direct animation and the use of "old" media.[57]

In *Black American Cinema* J. Ronald Green observes how technical problems and failures condition the "dilemma of Black [film] production" such that "technical 'problems' then would become technical characteristics, elements of style and texture."[58] For Green any notion of the 'mistake' in black film aesthetics "must be proven as mistakes according to explicit criteria derived from the black folk culture or the African American culture of the maker" rather than criteria derived from Hollywood production standards.[59]

Conclusion

Ja'Tovia Gary's filmmaking asks that we see into the density of film as such, including the spatial conditions where experimental film is screened, echoing Gillespie's proposition that black film might be something other than embodied; that it could be speculative, ambivalent, immaterial, and

bodiless.[60] Obviously, this does not mean the tradition of familiar narratives of black lifeworlds are overwrought or no longer matter. Rather the project of experimental film is informed by these narratives to question film as a signifying core of blackness that is less about identity and narrative than a natal function for creating art. The stuplime setting of *The Giverny Suite* and *An Ecstatic Experience*'s animation confirm "other prerogatives that concentrate on discourse, sedimentations, and modalities."[61]

At the beginning of *Stolen Life* poet and cultural critic Fred Moten states

> the regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant's critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing and regulating human diversity, grounding and justifying inequality and exploitation, as well as marking the limits of human knowledge through the codification of quasi-transcendental philosophical method, which is Kant's acknowledged aim in the critical philosophy.[62]

I have argued the filmmaker's use of animation in *An Ecstatic Experience* accomplishes nothing less than a dematerialization and rematerialization of film as such. The regulatory properties of film, technically and narratively, are laid bare through animation. Direct animation can be seen as an experimental approach to the dulling and irritating, astonishing, and boring effects of black film and its criticism. Engagement with found footage, both narratively and technically through drawing on film performs care and negotiates risk. Film editing and direct animation submit to the tedium of filmmaking that is the aesthetic intersection of care and risk. So, too, does Gary's enticement of the gallery attendants opening night of *The Giverny Suite* to explore the space of the film screening and, by extension, themselves as spectators. The example of Gary's experimental use of direct animation contributes an embodied critique of Western metaphysics constitutive of what Gillespie means by *the art of film blackness*. The mode of the critique uses black film matter to rethink and rewrite black performativity toward absolute knowledge as an aesthetic criterion.[63]

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Notes

1. Ja'Tovia Gary, (2015), *An Ecstatic Experience*, https://www.jatovia.com/#1.

2. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 81.

3. Plastic representation is a mode of diverse filmmaking in which the "wonder at seeing characters on screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more" prevails. See Kristin J. Warner, "Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 32–37.

4. Peter C. Kunze, "Close-Up: Hip-Hop Cinema: 'We Don't Die, We Multiply': Bebe's Kids, Hip-Hop Aesthetics, and Black Feature Animation," *Black Camera* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 226.

5. Sarita McCoy Gregory, "Disney's Improvisation: New Orleans' Second Line, Racial Masquerade and the Reproduction of Whiteness in *The Princess and the Frog*," in *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012), 185.

6. Lisa Cartwright, "The Hands of the Animator: Rotoscopic Projection, Condensation, and Repetition Automatism in the Fleisher Apparatus," *Body & Society* 18, no. 1 (2012): 47–78.

7. See Sianne Ngai's chapter, "Animation," in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 89–125.

8. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015). Whaley also cites Amy Shirong Lu's important study, "What Race Do They Represent and Does Mine Have Anything to Do with It? Perceived Racial Categories of Anime Characters," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 2 (July 2009): 169–90.

9. Vicky Smith, "Experimental Time-Lapse Animation and the Manifestation of Change and Agency in Objects," in *Experimental and Expanded Animation: New Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Vicky Smith and Nicky Hamlyn (New York: Palgrave, 2018).

10. Chris Gehman and Steve Reinke, eds., *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (Toronto: YYZ Books/Ottawa International Animation Festival, 2005), 183.

11. See Kandice Chuh, "It's Not About Anything," in *Saturation: Race, Art and the Circulation Value*, ed. C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

12. See Kimberly Juanita Brown and Jyoti Puri, eds. (in press), "Feminist Mournings," Special Issue of *Meridians, Feminisms, Race and Transnationalism*.

13. In their respective path breaking texts Frantz Fanon's (*Wretched of the Earth*); Hortense Spillers (*Black, White, and in Color*); and David Marriott (*Whither Fanon?*) theorize the new woman and what she might bring to black cultural production and its analysis.

14. See Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

15. See Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2.

16. Ibid., 3.

17. My claims about Gary's film and absolute knowledge are informed by critical approaches to art objects developed by scholar-artist, Arturo Lindsay. See "Toward an Understanding of Ashé as an Aesthetic Criterion," *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 1, 52.

18. Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 69–70.

19. Ayanna Dozier, "On Ja'Tovia Gary's The Giverny Document 2019," *Artforum*, February 03, 2020, https://www.artforum.com/film/ayanna-dozier-on-ja-tovia-gary-s-the-giverny-document-2019-82077.

20. Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 69–70.

21. Terri Simone Francis, "Flickers of the Spirit: 'Black Independent Film,' Reflexive Reflection, and a Blues Camera Sublime," *Black Camera* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 20.

22. Lovia Gyarkye, "The Artist and Filmmaker Envisioning a Safer World for Black Women," *New York Times*, August, 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/t-magazine/jatovia-gary-film.html?searchResultPosition=1.

23. Ibid.

24. See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

25. For a discussion of the association between the sublime and the black female see Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's "'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2018): 617–48.

26. Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth Century Aesthetics," *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (January 2000): 9.

27. I am thinking here of Fred Moten's "Erotics of Fugitivity" chapter in his essay collection *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

28. Moten develops his argument through Sora Han's discussion of Betty, a slave woman who "decides" to accompany her masters back to the South after being transported to the free north where abolitionists attempt to legally secure her freedom. See "Slavery as Contract: Betty's Case and the Question of Freedom," *Law and Literature* 27, no. 3 (2015): 395–416.

29. Moten, *Stolen Life*, 246.

30. Michael B. Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NH: Duke University Press, 2016).

31. Ibid., 2.

32. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.

33. Yasmina Price, "Kathleen Collins's Ecstatic Self-Discovery," *New York Review of Books*, February 29, 2020, https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/02/29/kathleen-collinss-ecstatic-self-discovery/.

34. See Michael Gillespie's ASA film note at http://asapjournal.com/cinema-notes-american-letters-elizabeth-reich-courtney-r-baker-and-michael-b-gillespie/.

35. See Kathleen Collins, *Losing Ground* (Harrington Park, NJ: Milestone Film & Video, 2016), videodisc. See also, L. H. Stallings, "'Redemptive Softness': Interiority, Intellect, and Black Women's Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground*," *Black Camera* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 48.

36. Oxford English Dictionary.

37. Nico Wheadon, "La Petite Mort: On Art, Ecstasy and Death," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2020, https://brooklynrail.org/2020/02/criticspage/La-Petite-MortOn-Art-Ecstasy-and-Death.

38. Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 6.

39. Concepts of shine and surface are examined in the following texts by Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Amber Jamilla Musser, "Surface-becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and brown jouissance," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, no. 1: 34–45; and Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

40. Thompson, *Shine*, 24.

41. Musser, "Surface-becoming," 36.

42. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "In the Raw," *e-flux* 93 (September 2018): 7, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/. See also, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 81–97.

43. Da Silva, "In the Raw."

44. Ibid. Also, Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 81–97.

45. Bryan Wagner, *The Tar Baby: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

46. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 66.

47. Ibid.

48. Allyson Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

49. Suzanne Preston Blier, *Art and Risk in Yoruba Aesthetics: Ife History, Power and Identity c 1300* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 20.

50. Ibid., 17.

51. Ibid., 21.

52. Ja'Tovia Gary, *Giverny I (Negress Impériale)*, https://www.jatovia.com/giverny-i-negresse-imperiale#1.

53. Neary, *Fugitive Testimony*, 5.

54. Ibid., 5.

55. Michael Sicinski, "Garden against the Machine: Ja'Tovia Gary's The Giverny Document," *Cinema Scope*, December 29, 2019, https://cinema-scope.com/features/garden-against-the-machine-jatovia-garys-the-giverny-document/.

56. I use the German mater to visually signal the presence of the mother concept in the word "matter."

57. Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 2.

58. J. Ronald Green, "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 33.

59. Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, 33.

60. Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 157.

61. Ibid., 158.

62. Moten, *Stolen Life*.

63. Absolute knowledge, I suggest, is one of many concepts from Western philosophy that may be encompassed by the concept of *ashé*, from the Yoruba belief system, meaning "life force and the power to make things happen." See Lindsay, "Toward an Understanding of *Ashé*", 52.

"Baby I'm a Star"

Prince, *Purple Rain*, and the Audiovisual Remaking of the Black Rock Star

Jack Hamilton

Abstract

This essay explores the 1984 film Purple Rain*'s role in the refashioning of Warner Bros. recording artist Prince from an R&B prodigy into a movie star and a rock star simultaneously, both through specific audiovisual techniques deployed by the filmmakers as well as more subtle, ideological work. I argue that* Purple Rain *exploited three concepts central to rock music's self-understanding—locality, liveness, and authenticity—to establish Prince as a "real" rock star, a designation which certain aspects of his music and image, most notably his race, had previously rendered unavailable to him. In so doing, I also argue that* Purple Rain *marks an underacknowledged landmark in the historical trajectory of Black movie stardom more broadly, as the first time in a narrative rock film that an African American performer held a lead role that had historically been reserved for white artists. In its exceptional intertwining of music industry and film industry through the sort of star vehicle made famous by the early films of Elvis and the Beatles,* Purple Rain *was a cultural watershed that managed to be simultaneously old-fashioned and groundbreaking, transforming Prince into the first enormously visible Black "rock" icon since Jimi Hendrix.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Revolution." These are the first words that the viewer hears at the beginning of Warner Bros.'s 1984 blockbuster music film *Purple Rain* (dir. Albert Magnoli, 1984), uttered by an unseen, monotone announcer as the film opens on the stage of Minneapolis's First Avenue nightclub. It feels like a throwaway line, particularly after the arrival of the next ones we hear, this time from the film's star, Prince: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life." So begins the spoken intro to "Let's Go Crazy," *Purple Rain*'s opening musical number. Not long after the film's release, "Let's Go Crazy" became the second song from the *Purple Rain* soundtrack to reach Number One on the *Billboard* Hot 100 pop singles chart.

Jack Hamilton, "'Baby I'm a Star': Prince, *Purple Rain*, and the Audiovisual Remaking of the Black Rock Star," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 77–103, doi: 10.2979/blackcamera.14.1.04.