

BLACK
EXPERIMENTAL
NARRATIVE

FOREWORD
BY ELENA GROSS

In 1981, the late film historian Vito Russo penned the seminal text, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* which analyzed representation of gay men and women in film from the silent era to the present-day. Like Russo, growing up closeted, watching films was a way of seeking out representations of myself, some evidence of queer existence, my existence. Russo's work validated this life-long fascination by presenting such a rigorous and thorough analysis of gay and lesbian existence on screen—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I felt a kinship in reading, and, ultimately, in watching, that made me feel more at home, at least with regard to my sexual identity.

But that was as far as kinship would go. Much to my disappointment, Russo's analyses of race in the movies were tepid at best, and troubling at worst. There were limits to his imagination when it came to the possibilities for black subjectivity on screen—how subversive it could be, how defiant, and beautiful, messy, and necessary. I realized that, growing up, I was not only looking for my queer forebears in the movies but for Blackness in its fullest complexity and in highest resolution.

The world of Black narrative cinema opens up possibilities not merely to see ourselves represented but to witness the true breadth of Black subjectivity—the mundane, the grandiose, the lyrical, the speculative; where Blackness is not incidental, or conveniently used as a metaphor or rhetorical device, but forefronted and embodied. I seek myself and find myself within the dark, rejoined again where once I was split; the messiness and mutual contingencies of my existence finally visible, in living color.

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Leila Weefur, Professor
Trina Robinson, T.A.

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15 Items, 1.9 TB available on iCloud

THE BLACK EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVES CLASS HAS WORKED
TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL DIALOGUE AROUND THE VIOLENCE
AGAINST BLACK AND ASIAN COMMUNITIES.

"We recognize that the violence of police brutality
against Black bodies is the flashpoint of a larger structure
of power designed to marginalize members of all other racialized,
gendered and "othered" groups in the U.S."

— Department of Critical Ethnic Studies

"FIELD NIGGAS"

DIR. KHALIK ALLAH

REFLECTION ESSAY BY ZIHAO ZHAO

The film *Field Niggas* presents people's real-life in the intersection of 125th Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City's East Harlem by capturing homeless residents' faces and behaviors and neighborhood regulars gathering. This film reveals the poverty, race, and class issues in America and arouses the audience to go deep into these issues with an influencing shot.


Harlem has long been the center of black business and culture as well as being regarded as one of the poorest neighborhoods in Manhattan, New York. Over the decades, it has undergone great changes and ups and downs. Even though the birthplace of black culture took place in Harlem, specifically the Harlem Renaissance which included such black literary giants - Richard Wright, Langston Huges, and Countee Cullen, it had become a notorious "urban cancer" in the 1970s and 1980s, with low houses, piles of rubbish, broken walls everywhere, rampant criminal activity, and a deep depression in the economy. Khalik Allah depicts this place's downfall thoroughly in his film. But why are there pervasive poverty and a high crime rate here? This is not explained in the film. After research, I'd illustrate the reasons here; seeing back to American history, struggles of Harlem's black communities is linked closely to American race and class issues.

In 1964, due to the racial violence that broke out in Tenderloin, a black community near Harlem, thousands of white people and police stormed into Tendlin, carrying out violent attacks on the local black residents. Also, it was this racial riots that forced black residents to relocate to the nearby Harlem district. The constant migration of black people has strained harlem's white landlords, who are trying to do something to stop large numbers of black people from moving in, such as raising rents for blacks and making low-income blacks pay more than high-income white residents. Due to lack of access, black people who moved into the city from rural

areas in the South had lower educational opportunities and less professional training.

Meanwhile, Infrastructure construction in Harlem lags behind the rest of New York. The poverty also caused the Harlem district police force to be insufficient. It can not effectively maintain public order, so that the district once became the gathering place of drug trafficking, homicide, and Prostitution, etc. Changes in New York City's industrial structure and the "red line system" are the hidden reasons for Harlem's downfall. Now that racial inequality is the fundamental cause of the downfall, What can we do to solve race and class issues in America? I believe this is what Khalik Allah needs us to reflect, or he hopes that we can give more attention to these pressing issues in American society at least.

The director Khalik Allah utilizes the genre of the observational documentary and avant-garde technique to guide the audience to the visual world created by him. Through capturing the real situation of the vulnerable group, Khalik Allah vividly presents their despair. Also, he attempts to call for societies' caring and attention to this group. In the strong visual impact of the film, the audience can't help feeling empathy towards them. Also, the slow-motion portraits of these people make the audience to focus on these faces and the environments surrounding them. Towards the end of the film, he expressed his philosophy of human unity. "We're all one. Separation is an illusion." This is also what Khalik attempts to convey to the audience - Freedom, justice, equality, knowledge, and peace. Admittedly, Khalik's vision words are educational and thoughtful. It is easy for the audience to be immersed in the world created by Khalik and do further thinking.



"KILLER OF BETTERNESS"
ON "KILLER OF SHEEP" DIR. CHARLES BURNETT
REFLECTION BY LEON WAN

"Man, I ain't poor! Look-I give away things to the Salvation Army you can't give away nothing to the Salvation Army if you poor...no that ain't me, and it damn sure won't be."

Showing the most emotion he ever will throughout the film, Stan makes a statement that carries reflections from the past, destabilizes the present, and screams echoes into the future. An argument between a dream and reality, Charles Burnett asks to look into Stan's eyes and assure yourself that he is truly okay. His face, along with these words, show anger, annoyance, denial, and desire. Unwilling to reveal themselves until this point, Stan wouldn't tell anyone, not even the audience, what was ruining him. However, as soon as these words are uttered, and his sharp and deadly eye contact is made, only one word comes to mind: Betterness.

How did it take everyone so long to notice? Was it because Stan barely spoke? Or maybe the focus wasn't on him. What if this is what Burnett desired? Observing Stan's life through an observational-documentary method of filming, you are made to witness from a distance. Watching as if an onlooker to another's life, it isn't until the camera finally pulls in that you are forced to look and listen, receiving all the emotions that they are spilling out.

Reflective of not just Stan, but the circumstance of the Black American. To only view their lives from a distance on television or radio, Burnett uses that understanding and pushes you through the static into their lives. Lives that see a dreary present and no future, but still wish for betterness.

Rather than be carried out as a theme in the movie, betterness is carried on the shoulders of the people. It isn't talked about, it isn't addressed, it is just desired. In the things they feel, the way they move, the work they do, it shines through in the lukewarm landscape that surrounds the film. Burnett shows that betterness

exists within the essence of existing, of being. By utilizing the method of the documentary style, he eliminates the director's ability to insert emotion, and shows the viewer how the desire to be, to exist, for the better is naturally emitted from the Black American. Without words, Burnett shows you how the suffering of the Black American's past leads them to exist in such a manner: hoping, striving.

The questions and conversations held in this film provide no answer, just reflection. And this reflection rears its beautiful yet ugly head around the corner of every future, providing a new sense to the film: nostalgia. Now not only for the Black American, but for every American of color. Growing up, it was unavoidable to witness these scenes or hear the very line Stan said in the film in your very own household. As this becomes reflective of more than just the Black American, the conversation of who is marginalized broadens. Burnett showed the audience more than the prosecution of the Black American's being and existence, he showed everybody the failing system in America. The system that chooses no sides but the one that erected it, and seeks to put everybody else under its pale, cold thumb.



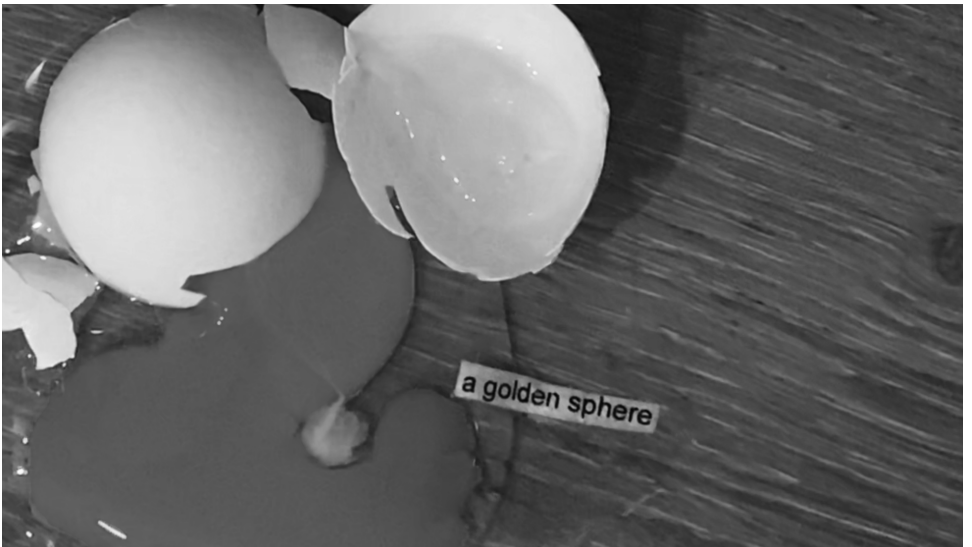
"GROWING"

REFLECTION ON "LOSING GROUND"

DIR. KATHLEEN COLLINS

SHORT FILM BY CASSANDRA ALANIZ

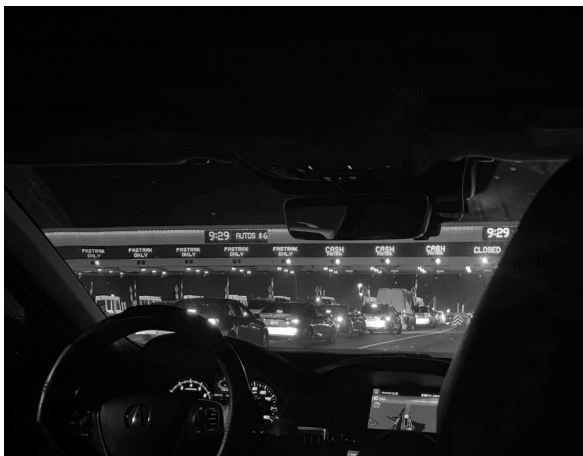




"GANJA & HESS"

DIR. BILL GUNN

REFLECTION BY AUDREY BROWN





"BEHIND THE BLURRED DOOR"
REFLECTION ON "EVERYBODY DIES"
DIR. NUOTAMA FRANCES BODOMO
POEM BY BRENDON LEE

He once inhaled the air we breath
He's felt the pain and loved the sea.
His life on Earth was filled with death,
He never once felt safe or free
And even with his smile of glee
And eyes as brown as leather dyes
Nothing said could make them believe
That he was right and had no ties

Behind one door she heard loud cries
As more black lives come to an end
She knows that Everybody Dies
Even when some will pretend
We're all equal like god intend

Though at first that may be true
Change the channel they got some news
If you're black your life's on queue

Behind one door she hears woohoo
Of people living life carefree
She knows that Everybody Dies
But white lives are equipped with three
Through this door life carries on
The system sees white as support
If you're white, don't wait come on
The cops are there to just escort

He once inhaled the air we breath
Now he face to face with her
He sees two doors behind her scythe
One with death, the other door blurred
One with death, the other door blurred

"SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE"**DIR. WILLIAM GREAVES****REFLECTION ESSAY BY ERI JI**

I admit that I was attracted by this name because this name is weird and does not often appear in daily life, I am very curious about what kind of story is told in the movie and then I was stunned by the intertwined multi-screen editing. Of course, the experimental nature has also come out, using "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm" to interpret the relationship between family and people. It is very interesting. This film embodies the absurdity of performance, the absurdity of filmmaking, and the absurdity of the director. Disassemble the filming mechanism and the power relationship in it, and at the same time reflect the race, class, and gender issues in American society through the production of a film. This film involves a philosophical discussion of the layered structure of film elements. Camera A, camera B, camera C shoot different levels, and then the audience sees the three levels in parallel in the same time and space, and these three levels have both posing and sudden and timely recording. This kind of mix makes the ordinary audience fall into the dream of reality and illusion. At the end of the "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One", I finally realized that this hypermeta film, which records how a documentary records the shooting process of a virtual film, is not dedicated to discussing the virtual and reality issues in the film medium. No matter how fancy Greaves juxtaposes the triple images, the kinetic energy between the two does not flow in three levels to form a continuum that can be read. What the film ultimately reveals is the process of creating meaning. Because the director as the author completely dismantles his own power position, the groups and viewers involved in filming have to form a symbiosis to find any model that can shape meaning. At the end of the film, a racist's angry words are added on the third level, which shows Greaves' collective understanding of art: it was produced in a specific era and social culture and therefore became a form of symbiosis with the collective. But such a fluid and completely open form cannot truly become anything. Without the process of narrative shaping, meaningful communication cannot be produced.

"IT'S IN THE GAME '17 OR
MIRROR GAG FOR VITRINE AND PROJECTION"

DIR. SONDRA PERRY

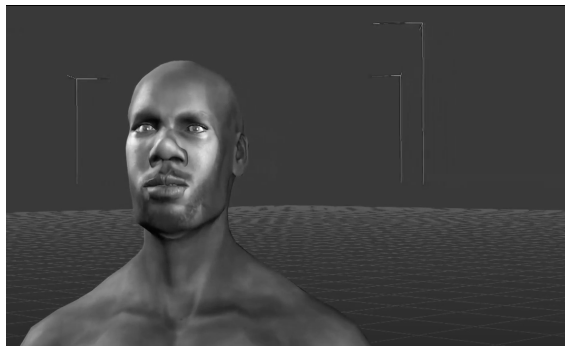
REFLECTION BY CHLOE HICKS

Identity is everything. It is validating and empowering, giving us control and making us unique. It is your physical self, your mental self, and your self in the perception of others. But what do you do when that is taken, robbed without credit?

Sandy Perry, college basketball player and twin brother of black experimental film creator Sondra Perry, faced the brunt end of thievery. EA Sports, a sports video game company, took Sandys likeness and stats, and he wasn't the only one. Along with him, the bodies and images of Sandy's friends and teammates were taken and turned into avatars for a sports game. The subject of the black body has changed forms over time but nonetheless stayed the same. From the enslavement of African Americans to present-day digital robbery into video game avatars, the idea of the black body being able to be taken, controlled, objectified continues. In a way, the black body becomes enslaved, but now as a digitized version of themselves, without their consent. Their forms are controlled, manipulated in a new way, a digital way. And it goes beyond just that, cultural appropriation, fetishization, and being seen as 'exotic', conquerable and objectified. This is something that extends beyond black culture into the world of people of color.

The subject of the black body is one that has changed forms overtime, but nonetheless, stayed the same. From the enslavement of African Americans to present day digital robbery into video game avatars, the idea of the black body being able to be taken, controlled, objectified continues.

Sondra Perry, using her interdisciplinary skills, explores this with her 2017 experimental short film *It's in the Game*. In 16 minutes and 32 seconds, Sondra tells the story of her brother in a beautiful yet overwhelming way, full of layers and overlaid video, audio, and imagery. This overwhelming sense inexplicably describes the feeling of having your identity taken, especially in a digital way, a way where often there is nothing you can do about it. Fortunately, in this case, there was a lawsuit with EA Sports against the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and the men who had been robbed were given some compensation. Their likeness was able to be taken back, ownership was granted, and the scrambled digitized version of themselves was at least given some credit. But, this doesn't make up for the fact of this objectification.




"JEZEDEL"
DIR. NUMA PERRIER
REFLECTION ESSAY
BY HASAN ALSHAKHES

The movie Jezebel is very close to Numa Perrier as she not only directed the film but wrote it and she gives us a closer view of one of the most important periods of her life. The film opens with the seductive voice of a woman saying, "go ahead," while groaning on the phone. The movie is one hour and twenty-five minutes long and is the true story of the director as she moved towards womanhood in her life. The woman, named Tiffany Tenille, is intrigued by the life of her sister who works as a phone sex operator and wishes to join her industry. Tiffany's sister gave her an ultimatum to look out for her expenses as she could not support her for free and thus gave her an "internet modeling" ad. After applying for the job, she immediately got accepted unaware of what her job would be, and she landed up in the adult establishment being the only black girl.

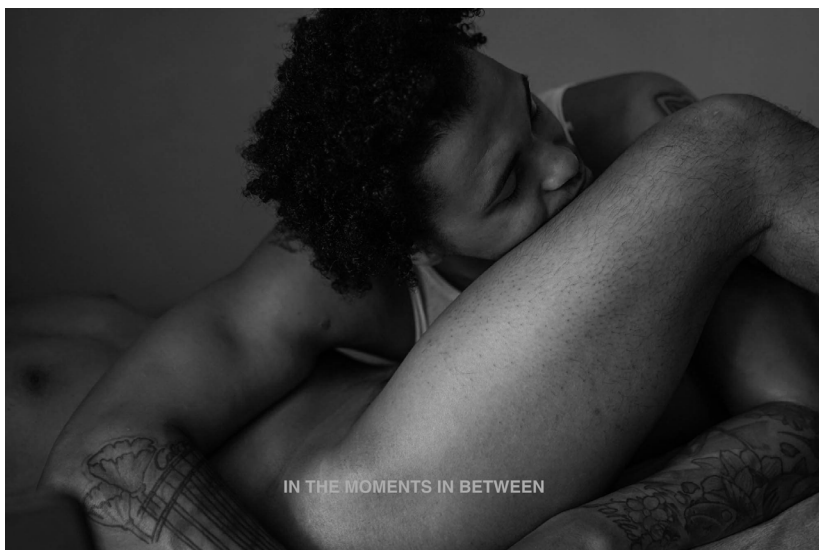
The main theme of the film was to make people aware of the struggles of being a black girl and having to do any job to survive in this brutal world. Perrier could not get any other opportunity and thus had to continue being in the adult industry. She made this film on a very personal level and wanted the audience to witness black women in a new way in films that were quite intimate and bold. Perrier wanted to showcase the bond between herself and her sister and the circumstances leading them to work in the sex industry.

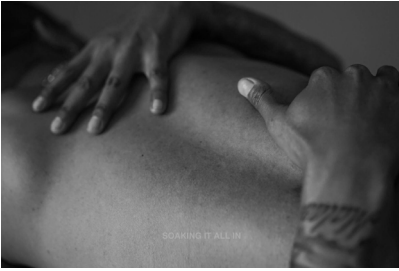
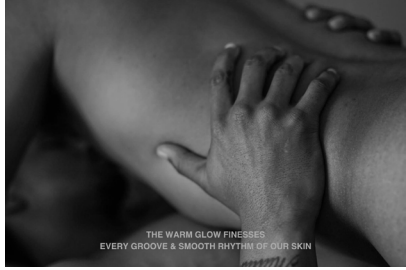
The film also highlights the politics involved in black female sexuality and womanhood. Various scenes of exploitation can be seen in the film. At first, Tiffany is seen to be excited about her new job, which is faded when she realizes that she would have to strip for her new boss. She is sad and gets discomfited at this behavior. This scene also shows how Tiffany was lacking in any form of experience and was naïve in expecting anything else from the adult industry.

Black women were considered to be lascivious and they were stereotyped to be hookers and rather seductive, alluring and tempting. White women, on the contrary, were expected to be genuine, had greater self-respect and self-worth. They were treated with much more dignity than the black women. Thus, Jezebel as a film justifies the struggles faced by black women, and the difficult ways in which they have to earn a living. Perrier believed that the adult industry is not shameful instead it helps people in releasing their tension and stress. Jezebel succeeds in highlighting the fact that black women should be respected no matter what their work is and, most importantly, the film leads Perrier to discovering her womanhood.



"LOVE IN LIGHT"
REFLECTION ON TONGUES UNTIED"
DIR. MARLON RIGGS
PHOTO SERIES BY JY JIMMIE GABIOLA





"A DESCENT INTO LABYRINTH1.0"
REFLECTION ON "THE LABRYNTH 1.0"
DIR. TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN
BY MITCHELL KIM

When dissecting the sexuality presented in Labyrinth 1.0, there are several layers to consider. The first is the film itself by Tiona McClodden. The combination of vintage gay pornography, surveillance, and original film footage comprises the surface intent of the work. Below that is the second layer which contains the poem of the same name that the film references. This second layer acts as a bridge to connect the first layer, the visuals, via the writing, to the third layer, the mythos. The mythos in question pertains to the Greek mythology of the Minotaur who within the context of the previous two layers, is symbolic of gay masculinity.

Upon the first layer we see imagery of two men in front of the urinals within the men's restroom. This alludes and ties in with the various tearoom footage scattered across the film, a tearoom referring to a place in public, often times the restroom, where men can meet for quick and casual sex. Then the two are seen half naked, reaching down into their crotches, giving no room for doubt about the sexually charged nature and intent of the film.

The second layer is the poem. Knowing that it was written for an anthology that only included gay black authors, it simultaneously reinforces the theme of gay sexuality and also adds deeper context. Its title and usage of the term "bull" is a clear allusion to the Greek myth behind the Minotaur. But it also seems viable that the word "bull" is used here in reference to an extremely sexual black male, devoid of any humanity aside from his one purpose of sexual conquest. It's hard to imagine that this double meaning was unintentional and can be seen as an example of the dehumanizing tendencies towards a black man's sexuality as described in *The Construction of Black Sexuality* by Jacquie Jones.

The third layer deals with the Minotaur. Symbolically, in the myth, when the Minotaur cast down into Daedalus's infamous labyrinth, humanity is also rejecting the validity of gay masculinity. They are portraying it as something animal, lacking reason or any human value. It is also worth noting that the myth uses the characters of Theseus and Ariadne, with Theseus representing heterosexual masculinity through his relationship with Ariadne, to kill the Minotaur. The idea of homosexuality is portrayed as inferior and barbaric compared to its heterosexual counterpart.

Whether it is intentional or not, the film provides a dehumanizing look at black homosexuality through its imagery and source materials by drawing a line connecting the words and visuals of a gay black narrative with a half-man half-beast monster that exists to conquer it's victims in an overly aggressive manner until it is killed by the nongay relationship and teamwork of the myths "hero."



"QUEER CODE"
REFLECTION ON
"100 BOYFRIENDS MIXTAPE (THE DEMO)"
DIR. BRONTEZ PURNELL
BY ANGIE CHAPARRO

The language of queerness is adapting. There is a code when talking amongst queers, a silent understanding of what our words really mean. "100 Boyfriends mixtape" by Brontez Purnell is a clear example of this.


The film introduces us to a man in a tub, luxurious lashes framing his eyes and a wired telephone in hand. The only context we are given as an audience is the fast paced one sided conversation from his side of the phone, facts about his life, relationships and personal thoughts being thrown at random.

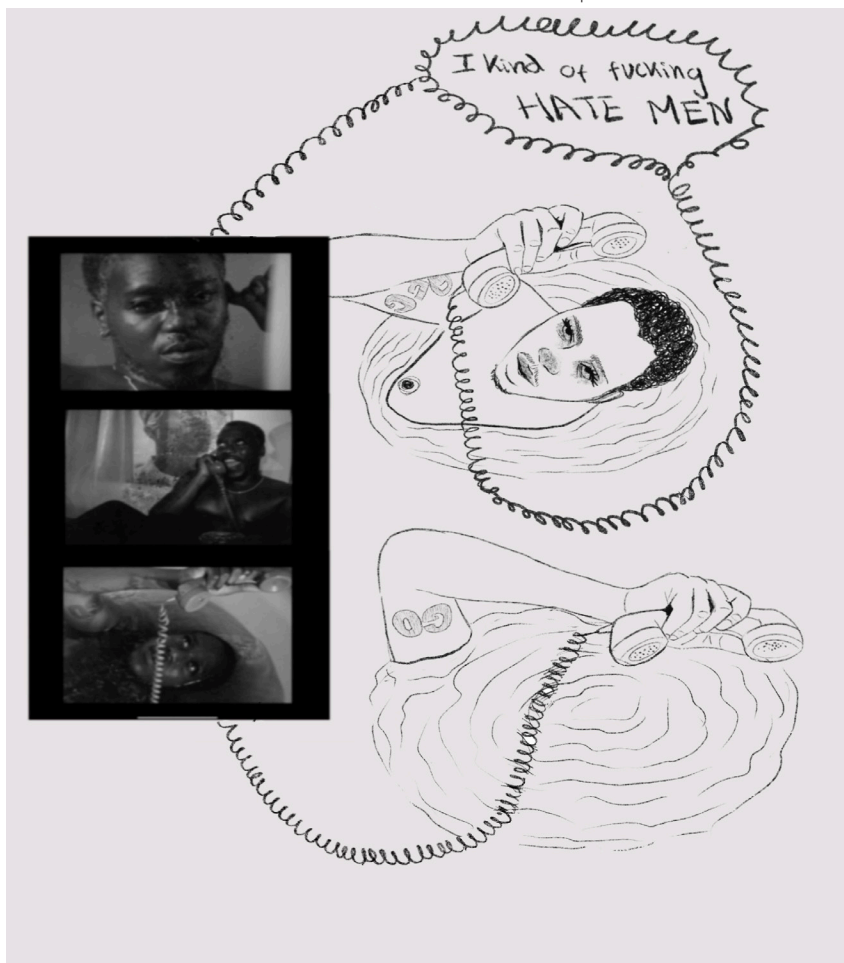
There's sort of humor to the way things are shown to us. The main character has a dramatic flare to the way he talks and expresses himself, saying things that to some would seem either too crude or blunt to say in public. But a lot of the serious things that he talks about can be lost in the way he expresses it.

Topics like being HIV positive, a relationship with a mother that didn't want him, complicated romantic relationships, all of these things that are vital to who he is can pass by unnoticed to the audience because of how it's delivered.

Shots in the film cut from him laughing and smiling calmly in the water, to a somber and numb face, as if only letting himself react to his reality in the safety of solitude.

Black queer men in particular, seem to only be represented when talking about rough sexuality and pain, but their humanity is rarely given importance. Their emotions are sidelined, their blackness is stereotyped and their state of being is objectified.





The illustration is the moment he is descending under the water after having shared his HIV results. The voiceover of him talking is animated, pushing the information aside as if not important enough to dwell on, but the imagery is of him looking angry and exhausted, wanting the water to take him. The duality of how he shows himself to others and how he really feels in the face of trauma and pain is widely known feeling amongst the queer community. So much of what we show to the world is an act of faux strength. So much of our language has had to adapt in order to conceal the many troubles we face day to day. This film represents that feeling of solitude, helplessness that surrounds us, yet the ability to appear as something else entirely.

"FINAL OFFERING"

REFLECTION ON "ATLANTIC IS A SEA OF BONES"

DIR. TOURMALINE

SHORT FILM BY MENAJA GANESH





"THE ROOT WITHIN DESIRE"
REFLECTION ON "THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE"
DIR. ISAAC JULIEN & MAUREEN BLACKWOOD
POEM BY MADISON BROOK

The following writing is an attempt to fashion public & intimate moments captured within THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE. Representing the totality and diversity of the black experience.

Men fashioned to their own being.

Mobilize people around issues and give a positive sense of Blackness.

Laying the foundation for sisters to build on

The **Women's** universal **role is not chosen.**

trying to **never refuse** his expectations

Never refusing him, an active conscience sister.

An Image designed for her but not by Her.

Scrutinized for holding individual opinions.

"You make it so romanticized"

"We weren't bright enough to control anything."

Racism Objects to **Hate, Class**

The act of saving Him.

She waited for Him to arrive.

Men don't give women satisfaction, They **claim one's own satisfaction.**

**"It's not about picking my brain it's about unpicking your own...
you've imprisoned yourself pride self of possibilities."**

"You have to want freedom by any means necessary."

"Our Lives are not debatable."

The no knock law.

The law which gives them the power to come in with no invitation.

Freeing your hands from chains didn't free your mind in a system
that tells us how to live our own life's.

"We either wake up"

To the brothers security she feels the real.

Feeling good about being active

"It was about me and you."

Black women

Black man

What do we desire?



"REBIRTH IS NECESSARY"

DIR. JENN NKIRU

REFLECTION BY JENDAYI INGRAM

Black people have a prominent connection to showing expressivity in various forms. In the short film *Black Star: Rebirth Is Necessary* by Jenn Nkiru exhibits how expressivity has a wide range of being anything. It can be through Dance, Art, Family Linage and much more. Overall, I believe that dance is one of the most powerful expressions of them all. Dance can also express different emotions through the various movements that the choreographer/dancer creates. Dance has a long cultural background in the Black community. From African dance, swing dancing, tap dancing, modern dancing, and so much more. When it comes to the film and showing expressivity. Another reason why dance is so significant to the Black experience is because Black people hold a lot of generational trauma in our physical bodies. We've experienced a lot of physical pain due to slavery and other discriminatory acts against our color. Because of that, we tend to hold a lot of tightness and tension because of the discrimination and hatred we've faced throughout many lifetimes. Since this has been going on for such a long time, we've learned how to express our generational trauma in many creative forms. The emotions that can be brought to light can alter between being happy, sad, stressed etc. As a dancer and Black person, I've been able to experience what it feels like to release generational trauma. Growing up my mother was an African dancer and seeing her move her body between slow and fast movements really opened my eyes. I was able to witness how every step she took it was with intent and extremely powerful. She was extremely powerful with her feet gesture and arm movements. It's as if she was paying respect to our ancestors with her grounded expression. Overall, I've noticed that dance has many spectrums and can mean so many different things because it's up to the person that's dancing to tell the story. When looking at the movement I think it's important to really analyze each step, and each facial expression. These examples are prevalent as to why dance is so expressive.

"BEAUTY AND TRUTH"
REFLECTION ON "REBIRTH IS NECESSARY"
DIR. JENN NKIRU
ESSAY BY ABIGAIL SHOLLY

Now and then I get up in the morning on the weekend, when no one else thinks to be awake, and the sky is still a sleepy cobalt. The floorboards creak as I shuffle out to switch on the kettle. By the window, I listen to the wind, nothing else, and slump into a comfy sofa hugged by grey pillows. I sit detached from who or what I am, what I do. Just early enough that it's quiet, so I can think. As the water rolls to a boil, I rest my eyes.

But now it's dark out. The night lacks stars and roars the echoes of distant traffic – just enough to fall asleep to. Yellow lamp-light makes my tired eye bags even more obvious, so I don't want to delay. My brain is foggy to all thoughts but a good night's rest. With some effort, I stop and glance in the mirror.

My reflection is not me, wearing gold glitter with a lively breath. She moves with fluidity without concern for anything but where the night will take her next. There's rhythm to each action as she steps back into the open air filled with friends, music, and lanterns that act as the stars. I don't recognize her. Or perhaps I don't remember. But it's how she moves that catches my attention. Not a single person beside her dances as she does, and they are alive in ways I feel I cannot be. When she doesn't there's still that same intense energy. It brings me joy and I find it beautiful. My reflection returns my curious gaze. Then smiles.

Laying in bed, I don't think to recall her. Then I fall asleep.

In the early morning, I take the kettle off and brew some tea. Then I drink it alone. I want to think I'm at ease. Somehow I realize that's not yet true. As the sky brightens, I paint. The vibrant colors bleed into one another, flowing with no serious or demanding intentions. I let each one carry its own energy. They simply flow because that's what they do. In the end, I accent it in gold.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

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Madison Brooks • Jendayi Ingram • Abigail Sholly
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