
JENNIFER DeCLUE
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OF BLACK FEMINIST
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For Miles Violet

Contents

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INTRODUCTION

Visitation

And besides, contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over, it's still in process, which is another way of saying that when it's critiqued, analyzed, it yields new information about itself. The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being listened to for deeper resonances. Actually, it can be more liberating than any imagined future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and are willing to unleash its secrets. —TONI MORRISON, "Be Your Own Story"

I am concerned with embodied power, with power derived from the will to domination, I am simultaneously concerned with the power of the disembodied and the stories that those who forcibly undertook the middle passage are still yearning to tell, five centuries later. —M. JACQUI ALEXANDER, *Pedagogies of Crossing*

Disembodied. This is a most exquisite way of describing the quality of existing without, or outside of, or despite not having a body. I, like M. Jacqui Alexander, am concerned with embodied power especially as it relates to storytelling that counters domination and connects with the disembodied. The disembodied can be traced by following Toni Morrison's direction in her "Be Your Own Story" commencement address. Not only does Morrison's speech assure us that the past reveals information about itself upon reexamination, but it also beckons an intrepid archival explorer toward a liberatory path that enlivens dormant temporal connections. Morrison's instigation unleashes the past from ideological conventions that foreclose possibility, an instigation that resonates with Alexander's invocation of the disembodied. In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, from

which this epigraph is drawn, Alexander describes the way that dominant time, as it is bound up with secular power, cements the boundary between the embodied and the disembodied, rendering the latter void and silent and imbuing the former with value through its proximity to whiteness, manhood, wealth, and western ideals of progress. The multiplicity of time, the presence of the past in the present, and the impact of the disembodied on the here and now are actively and persistently nullified by "dominant corporate, linear time."[1] Time, as Alexander describes, "becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware."[2] Black feminist temporal interventions, like those made by Morrison and Alexander, ask us to reexamine a past full of activity and possibility. They remind us of what we already know, that the past is a woefully incomplete story and that the disembodied have crucial perspectives to share.

In *Visitation: The Conjure Work of Black Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema*, I argue that Black feminist avant-garde films use the cinematic medium to conjure visitations that defy dominant impositions of temporality. Following Morrison's challenge to consider the prospect of an unfixed past, I employ the liberatory power of listening for and parsing out the lies, distortions, and evasions that have been embedded within a past presumed unyielding, immutable, complete. In the chapters that follow, I discuss the ways that Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers push the cinematic medium to register encounters with those who once lived and who left behind a record of their time on earth. My attention to conjure work in *Visitation* reveals the ways that Black feminist artists channel stories of the disembodied and in so doing act as mediums who identify evasions, distortions, and lies while they unleash secrets from the past. The filmmakers whose pieces I have brought together in *Visitation* use their conjure work to bend the medium of film into the shape of Black feminist avant-garde cinema. Through their approach to cinema, which I read as a methodology of tenderness, Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers interrupt the force of archival violence that distorts the image of Black women. These are artists who listen deeply for what happened and intervene in the violence that is bound up in an archival document, collection, or repository through cinematic pieces that contribute something back to that very archive.

By following the lead of Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers who grapple with the shifting ground of many pasts, I became immersed in the place where

the embodied and disembodied meet. I not only recognized the practice of listening for deeper resonances taking place in Black feminist avant-garde film, but I noticed that I was also participating in this practice. As a scholar tracking this cinematic-archival relationship, I became moved by the current of tenderness in my analysis of archival documentation and the films that incorporate them. From this tender, open place I was able to tap into the frequency that eludes dominant corporate, linear time to better study the conjure work of these Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers, a process that usurps a temporally imposed order that is legitimated through archival collections, assembly, and retrieval and that has no traction or authority in this realm. Through this process, I realized that the archival study, the close readings, and the critical analysis that I share throughout the pages of this book comprise some conjure work of my own. The practice of studying the visitations that unfold in each film demands that I invite the unknown, brace for horrifying details, and listen for that which exceeds sound, time, and bodies. The process of opening to the pain that presents itself plainly in the archive, of being aware of generational suffering that can only be witnessed and not prevented, of seeing, studying, and writing from that vulnerable spot, without reproducing the violence held within an archive but rather mobilizing a love that travels back in time, this is a methodology of tenderness—a practice that allows for an experience of engaging with visitations.

The films that I discuss in *Visitation* contend with an array of pivotal and exceedingly violent moments in US history, moments in which Black women find themselves marked as targets, as people whose humanity has been evacuated from them, as people who have suffered differently yet persistently from state-sanctioned terror because of their gender, sexuality, and blackness from the time of chattel slavery and reconstruction, through jim crow segregation and the civil rights era, on through the eras of the Stonewall rebellion, the Black Power movement, and now in the age of #BlackLivesMatter.[3] While all Black feminist avant-garde films are not necessarily tied to archival documentation and imperatives, the films that I study here are all immersed therein. These artists use their avant-garde films and videos to channel the stories of disembodied Black women who have moments of their lives, albeit some of the most terrifying ones, recorded and preserved. Though these records exist in the margins of archival collections and are often dispersed across many collections, they do have places in archival repositories and can be found if the one who searches is resolute and a concerted effort is made. The filmmakers whose work I study in this book each harness resolute attention in their transfer of archival documentation into cinematic unfolding.[4]

Visitation examines the relationship between experimental cinematic visualization and the archival documentation, occlusion, and erasure with which these Black feminist avant-garde films contend. I study ways that this work uses cinematic space to respond to documented acts of violence without reproducing the horror of those acts of violence. I discuss how regimes of knowledge, which establish and maintain epistemologies of Black womanhood, are disrupted through Black feminist avant-garde approaches to cinema. The cinematic analysis that I offer over the course of this book demonstrates the ways that these filmmakers, through their use of the short avant-garde film form, exhume Black women in national archives of violence and, I argue, set about to change the past with their visual treatment. The visitations conjured and documented in the films that I discuss are informed by historical documentation of the deaths, sometimes the lives, and most certainly the suffering of the Black women who occupy these filmmakers' cinematic spaces. Together, the Black women who lived and the Black women filmmakers who capture the archival connection, direct the medium of film to magnetize stories and images and register the fact of Black, queer, trans women being, meeting, and being seen through the medium. The past does change when these filmmakers tell the stories of disembodied Black women and tenderness is the methodological key that enables visitations to occur through the conjure work of Black feminist avant-garde cinema.

It is important to note that I am writing about Black womanhood and Black feminist avant-garde cinema as a cisgender Black queer feminist who recognizes that Black womanhood is not tied to biological definitions of womanhood. While I do discuss reproductivity throughout this volume, I am not suggesting that womanhood is defined by one's ability or desire to reproduce. I am interested in tracking the ways that oppression has circulated through the apparatus of Black women's reproductive capacity during slavery and in its afterlife. I believe that *womanhood* is a limiting and oppressive category that actively excludes Black trans women, Black women who are not trans, and trans women who are not Black; in fact, it depends on our exclusion to secure its meaning.[5] In my analysis, I use the term *woman* and I push beyond its limitations to unequivocally address anyone who identifies as a Black woman, and anyone who connects with the experiences of life, subjugation, exclusion, and resistance that I am outlining here. I recognize that we have a wide range of journeys in, to, and through Black womanhood and my use of this term includes people who identify as trans, transsexual, transgender, cis, or non-trans women. If none of these terms works, if the language of gender is too constricting, I hope that the work I am doing here to describe an experience can still reach you despite the limitations that encumber it.

Visitation: Haunting and Conjure Work

The term *visitation* has a host of meanings that range from the pietistic to the apparitional; though the pressure of the former undergirds structures of power that exert themselves on the lives of the women with whom this book is concerned, the latter is the more generative description for this study. The concept of visitation provides a framework with which to discuss an elusive experience of nonnormative time and the sensations that Black feminist avant-garde films materialize. My attraction to the term *visitation*, and the spectral quality that it invokes, is informed by Avery Gordon's foundational book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination.* In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon describes haunting with some incisive specificity that bears within it a host of necessarily inexplicable details. In the introduction to the new edition of *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon reveals with alacrity what she meant by haunting in the first edition of her influential volume.

> What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.[6]

Visitations revealed through the Black feminist avant-garde films that I discuss in this book chart out pathways through the phenomenon of haunting that Gordon is describing, yet these ghosts have names. The violence that they experienced happened in very specific places at very specific moments in time. The horrific acts suffered were captured in photographs, detailed in sworn testimony, and documented in videos; those records were then stored in physical

repositories or in digital archives. The unresolved social violence that occurred was made legible, visible, and certain through the records kept about the specific acts of violence that took place. The conjure work of Black feminist avant-garde film involves this archival documentation; these filmmakers use the records left behind as springboards into pasts where unresolved acts of violence took place. From those cinematic places, they listen for deeper resonances, they let the disembodied tell the stories of their suffering and deaths, and out of this conjure work come visitations.

The films that capture my attention in this book are made by Black women who use the medium to convey cinematically what the archive reports while centering Black women in visual treatments of archival material. I argue that these films, this conjure work, contributes to, as it intervenes in, archival collections. These filmmakers use the short-film form to produce avant-garde cinematic experiences that enable ways of seeing Black women and do not reproduce hypervisibility or become pornotropic.[7] Their films refuse dominant readings of archival material and see beyond evasions and inside distortions by cinematically intervening into archival processes that have left some Black women cruelly overexposed, others obscured in archival repositories, and still others rendered dormant in or absent from archival records entirely. Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers use cinematic techniques of disruption and resistance to call attention to the process of perceiving Black women. Through their cinematic approaches to contending with archival material, these filmmakers unveil systems of knowledge production that collude to create abject epistemologies of Black womanhood; their conjure work creates the space for visitations to unfold before the camera.

Visitation searches the past, through the films that appear in it, for ways that the past can reveal new information about itself; I am compelled by the notion that liberation can be attained by searching the past for evasions and distortions as a means to see anew. I am equally as preoccupied by cinematic pieces that work and rework visual terrain and in so doing expose perversions that are embedded in archival material. Some secrets of the past hide in plain sight in archival documents, while others are scrubbed from the record or withheld entirely. No matter the state of the archival document, attention to the past—in particular attention to Black women in archival collections—unearths deeper resonances and with it lies, secrets, and revelations. My analysis of the visitations that occur through each filmmaker's conjure work studies the way these films do not simply recognize and reproduce images that serve as evidence of Black women's presences in history and in archival collections but rather invite the pres-

ence of historical figures to mount the cinematic stage and reveal history from their point of view. Visitations open up an exchange between historical figures and the filmmakers who encounter that subject's archival presence, filmmakers who then find ways to communicate, through the cinematic medium, something fundamental and otherwise occluded about that subject's experience. In this way, Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers are the intrepid souls who become conduits to the past through cinematic conjure work that clears the terrain needed to visualize visitations unleashed by their archival investigations.

On the Avant-Garde

My use of the term *avant-garde* is not employed in opposition to the term *experimental* but rather incorporates that term in its understanding of the work that *avant-garde* does. In their embrace of avant-garde cinematic techniques, these filmmakers use tactics such as etching on celluloid, blurring and stuttering images, startling juxtaposition and repetition, disjointed and nonsequential editing, the presences of puppets, reenactment and performance, the abstraction of sound and image, and temporal contortions and expansions. In fact, the short-film form itself is an instigation that frees filmmakers from the expectations of mainstream film marketing and demands.[8] In the absence of the kinds of restraints and conventions that cleave to feature-length films, Black feminist avant-garde short films are able to innovate through the use of boundary-pushing aesthetics while also using the form to dislodge entrenched understandings of Black womanhood.

I am drawn to the cinematic category of the avant-garde because of the political resistance in which the genre is immersed, and because of the commitment to using the cinematic form to interrogate vision.[9] Though the definition of avant-garde film defies strict categorization, the innovative use of aesthetics to disrupt normative modes of perception may be the most obvious defining feature of films that fall into this category. Avant-garde filmmakers who are credited with creating the genre convey cinematic feelings through their uses of light and color, repetition and duration, overexposure and shadow play, scratching and puncturing the celluloid, voice-over and silence, shock and the mundane.[10] Avant-garde films tend to resist narrative conventions and mainstream appeal while using abstract imagery to trouble visuality, shift perspective, and demand new ways of seeing.

Black feminist avant-garde films use these kinds of aesthetic cinematic practices to instigate their multivalent disruptions. Feminist avant-garde filmmakers—

this is coded as a white feminist mode of visuality—have employed avant-garde aesthetics and techniques to evoke the quiet horror of mundane domesticity.[11] White feminist avant-garde films demand room for lesbian sensuality in the cultural imaginary of women's liberation and produce images that disrupt the male gaze—all of which interrupt mainstream appeal.[12] The Black feminist avant-garde corpus is related to white feminist avant-garde cinematic imperatives in their disturbance of the pleasure derived from watching women's bodies on screen.[13] Like films that are regarded as foundational to avant-garde cinema, Black feminist avant-garde films recalibrate and repurpose visual grammar but focus their disruption of normative conventions on images of Black womanhood, which are as instantiated as normative conventions of cinema.[14] Although mainstream cinematic representations have abstracted Black womanhood to the point of absurdity, Black feminist avant-garde films use the cinematic form to destabilize and upend outmoded tropes while elaborating on narrative conventions and interrupting pervasive depictions of Black womanhood.

Because of their disruption of the film form and their resistance to the expectation that representations of Black womanhood follow the well-worn groove of hypersexuality, criminality, or abject motherhood, these films find their audiences in art galleries, museums, and film festivals, and they produce experiences of witnessing that are decidedly not designed for the uncomplicated pleasure of the viewer. The films that I discuss are in service of Black women who lived, who were violated, who died, who are due. This body of work agitates the codified impossibility of Black women's survival; they break up and then shake loose shards from the fractured concretization of Black womanhood. Black feminist avant-garde cinema can provide a reckoning as it clears space for the complicated act of witnessing—with specificity and without spectacle—acts of violence and violation that have been overlooked or discarded or occluded or overexposed.

The discussion of Black feminist avant-garde cinema forwarded in *Visitation* fills a lacuna in cinema studies, as it relates to both avant-garde and Black film, and addresses a gap in African American analyses of the avant-garde. The field of avant-garde cinema has paid exiguous attention to Black feminist film, and analyses of feminist avant-garde cinema rarely contend with Black women, but when Black women filmmakers are recognized as avant-garde, two filmmakers emerge: Cheryl Dunye and Julie Dash.[15] Unlike the prominent feminist avant-garde filmmakers whose work resists, or disregards, or is indifferent to mainstream appeal, Dunye and Dash are included in the annals of avant-garde feminist film *because* their work has garnered a measure of mainstream success. Dash and Dunye were able to make short and feature-length films that defy cine-

matic convention, center Black womanhood, embrace avant-garde aesthetics and techniques, and achieve award-winning acclaim.[16] The blackness of these avant-garde feminist filmmakers demanded that they reach a wide audience if they were going to be seen at all, yet they existed on the periphery of the feminist avant-garde cinematic intervention that was taking place throughout the mid to late twentieth century.[17]

While the discourse of the Black avant-garde spans a wide range of artistic mediums and is alive with debates surrounding the essentializing effects of locating a Black aesthetic, discussions of the avant-garde in Black culture have been concerned primarily with literature, visual art, theater, and musical traditions. Black abstract and revolutionary sentiments of the twentieth century that usurped imposed conceptions of Black identity and pushed conventional generic boundaries in poetry, visual art, stage plays, and musical arrangements constitute the preeminent understanding of the Black avant-garde. For example, the insurgent spirit of Black avant-garde approaches to artistic expressions of Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni are linked to the Black Power movement through the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s but can be followed back to the New Negro movement through the work of Langston Hughes, Romare Bearden, Jean Toomer, James Van Der Zee, and Marita Bonner.[18]

Filmmakers from the L.A. Rebellion film movement (1960–80) were creating short and feature-length films about Black experiences that pushed cinematic convention, yet this body of work is not readily described as avant-garde; the blackness of an artist or the subject matter represented within becomes the most indelible descriptor of the work.[19] The form, the resistance to form, the interrogation of seeing and being that is issued forth by Black filmmakers, even if it is consistent with avant-garde aesthetics and imperatives, is not often read as such. Films that bend cinematic convention and produce aesthetics of resistance cohere within the rubric of avant-garde cinema, yet the subject of blackness—in form or maker—precludes Black films that share these same characteristics from being read as works of avant-garde cinema. Consider L.A. Rebellion School filmmakers such as Zeinabu irene Davis, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, and Charles Burnett, who made films that could be read as avant-garde but are not recognized by cinema history as filmmakers foundational to the genre.[20] Chantal Akerman, Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Jack Smith, Yvonne Rainer, and Su Friedrich are a few of the filmmakers whose work is regarded as foundational to avant-garde cinema; the obvious non-Blackness of this group of filmmakers produces the canon of avant-garde film as that which is distinctly white. To be clear, I read Black feminist avant-garde films as ex-

panding and complicating and provoking the category; I am not making an argument for acceptance or inclusion but remarking on the way that whiteness is embedded in the understanding of avant-garde cinema.

In his reading of Duke Ellington's sound in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Fred Moten discusses the relationship between blackness and the avant-garde. He draws out the meanings of each category to examine how they have been produced as incommensurate. Moten insists:

> What I've been specifically interested in here is how the idea of a black avant-garde exists, as it were, oxymoronically—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence upon the exclusion of the other. Now this is probably an overstatement of the case. Yet it's all but justified by a vast interdisciplinary text representative not only of a problematically positivist conclusion that the avant-garde has been exclusively Euro-American, but of a deeper, perhaps unconscious, formulation of the avant-garde as necessarily not black. Part of what I'm after now is this: an assertion that the avant-garde is a black thing . . . and an assertion that blackness is an avant-garde thing.[21]

Moten recognizes that *Black* and *avant-garde* appear to exist in a contradistinction to one another that shapes the definition of each; the avant-garde is regarded as distinctly that which is not Black—the robust Black avant-garde multigenerational, multigeneric artistic evidence notwithstanding. Despite the polarization between these terms, and the common reading of the avant-garde as a white mode of art, Moten contends that the avant-garde is a Black thing. The point that Moten makes about the avant-garde, which is invaluably germane to my analysis, is the provocation found in the second half of his framework—"that blackness is an avant-garde thing." My notion of Black feminist avant-garde cinema is as committed to recognizing the avant-garde aesthetics and imperatives at work in the films that I discuss as it is to deepening the meaning of this category by studying the ways that blackness itself is an avant-garde thing.

In *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan discusses the paradox of the avant-garde for Black women performance artists. McMillan explicates that while performance art has proven to be a launching point for artists to explore the range and depth of their practice, situating performance art as the exemplary avant-garde practice among other art practices, Black women have been categorically excluded from avant-garde performance. In the realm of performance, McMillan brings to our attention that although Black women performance artists "share qualities often attributed to the avant-garde—cutting edge, marginal, seamless moves across disciplines—

their relationship to it is deeply vexed."[22] Whether the artistic arena is performative or cinematic, Black women artists who are making work that has all of the qualities of the avant-garde are consistently excluded from the category. The value of embracing Black avant-garde cinema lies in the intervention into the genre that such a move makes as well as the dimensions that it adds to the category of blackness. Black feminist avant-garde films visualize the avant-garde of blackness while using avant-garde approaches to cinema to express this fact of blackness. What has become clear through my study of these films is not only that Black is an avant-garde thing but that Black feminism is an avant-garde thing; the films that I have brought together here visualize the multivalent dimensions of this fact.

Cinematic Tenderness and Aesthetics of Resistance

Black feminist avant-garde films share a visual integrity that balances the representation of historic acts of racialized sexual violence within the visual field by cultivating tenderness. Through their cultivation of a cinematic tenderness, these films mobilize *aesthetics of resistance* that counter archival violence; tenderness and aesthetics of resistance are integral components of the films I discuss in *Visitation*. While I focus on short films made in the twenty-first century in the chapters of this book, I look to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) to lay the foundation for this rubric, as Dash's film—the first feature film directed by a US-based Black woman to have a national theatrical release—is an exemplar of aesthetics of resistance and the mode of cinematic tenderness that I am working to describe.[23] Set in 1902 in the South Carolina Sea Islands, *Daughters of the Dust* tells the story of the fracture of the Peazant family of Ibo Landing. An unborn child narrates the languid tale of this Gullah family. Some members of the Peazant family are moving to the mainland and others will remain on the island. The matriarch, Nana Peazant, works desperately to impart familial knowledge to those leaving. It is a sorrowful day, yet one that will be celebrated with a bountiful feast on the shore. In most visual treatments of Black women who lived through slavery and then experienced emancipation, there is an inevitable reveal of a whip-scarred back or poorly healed broken bones, but Dash makes a different choice, one consistent with an aesthetic palate that produces cinematic tenderness—a tenderness that is underscored by resistance.

In an interview with bell hooks that was included in Dash's 1994 book about the film, Dash talks about the scars of slavery and how she wanted to create a new kind of iconography, one that did not reproduce the images of whelped skin and fields of scars on the backs of people treated like chattel.[24] She chose

to use the stain of indigo on the hands of women who were forced to work in poisonous indigo-processing plants. Dash's historical advisor told her that these stains would not have remained in perpetuity on the hands of elders who were once enslaved, but Dash was not concerned with historical accuracy; the scars of slavery are made of indigo in this world, and whip marks and chains do not have a place in this film, in this memory, in this cinematic record.[25] The aesthetics in *Daughters of the Dust* disrupt dominant ways of remembering a past that we have never seen with our own eyes. This is resistance. Dash is looking to the past with this film, examining what she finds there and yielding new information from it. *Daughters of the Dust* visualizes the act of looking back and trusting in the place that exists between the grave and the womb, where ancestors share memories and tell stories, where myths are made. The record of this spectral place is written in feelings rather than ink; the archival material is spoken and sensed rather than coded and cataloged. Dash's willingness to dispense with historical accuracy is an exemplification of the point of this film; this is not a documentary or an ethnographic film but a work of cinema that uses the visual and the aural to communicate something beyond paper and ink, beyond microfilm, even beyond celluloid and light, and certainly beyond historical accuracy. She is offering something beyond this world that beckons our attention. Through the visual grammar, the tone, and the quiet of the film, Dash produces images of blackness that add something wholly unusual to the archive of cinematic representation of Black womanhood; these are qualities that produce aesthetics of resistance, qualities that appear in the short films I discuss in the chapters that follow. This is cinematic tenderness.

In the conversation between hooks and Dash, the filmmaker shares another story—there was a scene that she shot but cut from the final edit of the film.[26] This scene is a flashback to Nana Peazant's mother, who cut off a lock of her hair and sewed it into Nana Peazant's baby quilt just before Nana was sold away from her. Nana Peazant's mother still had breasts full of mother's milk, and rather than have Nana Peazant's mother break down and wail when her baby was sold away, Dash has her breasts cry tears of milk. This scene, with only Dash's description as a guide, is evocative and perhaps produces an even greater sense of loss through its absence in the film. It exists in my mind now: I can see the milk teardrops; I can imagine the feeling, the burden, the sorrow, and the resistance to crying in the face of such a brutal, cruel, unconscionable theft. The scars of indigo and tears of milk are generational suffering, ancestral sorrow made visible, made known without chains, or the crack of a whip, or a scene of rape—these are the tender aesthetics of resistance at work in Dash's cinematic field.

I am captivated by this lost scene of milk tears because of its vivid imagery but also because it becomes a part of an imagined archive, yet not my own imagination. This scene moves into the spectral realm, the space of the disembodied, where the unborn and the no longer living commune. This scene does not exist in an official record, it is not a part of the story that we can see, the strips of celluloid that capture this scene do not live in the space of the film, and yet I see it. The cinematic poetry of *Daughters of the Dust* becomes more tragic and beautiful with the knowledge that this scene exists but is unviewable. In my scene, I see a woman with her head bowed: the day is ending; her dress is a faded indigo blue, dingy with soil and sweat; pools of wetness collect at her bosom. But somehow, I am able to see the drops of milk as they drip beneath her dress onto her belly, slow drops turning faster as the pressure builds. A mother too defiant, too willing to survive to let tears fall from her eyes, so her milk gives her the release.

This scene held next to another mother's story captured in *Daughters of the Dust*, that of Yellow Mary, shows a relationship if not a continuum between women through reproductive violence. Yellow Mary tells a story of fixing the titty when she was in Cuba with the family that kept her, as a prisoner of sorts, to be their wet nurse. Yellow Mary begins by sharing that her baby was born dead. At that time, she worked for a family who kept her; wherever they went, she went. She fed their baby with her dead baby's milk. Even though Yellow Mary was experiencing the world in the generation after slavery was abolished in the United States, she was still experiencing bondage to a family. She mutilated herself so that she could be of no use to them. She took her freedom. She found release. She gave herself a different future at the cost of her own body. As the women on the island observed, Yellow Mary is a different kind of woman. She is called *ruint* by pious women in the family and a new kind of woman by the young women who could imagine a future that their mothers could not. Yellow Mary was a sex worker on the mainland and she traveled from the mainland to Ibo Landing with her lover, Trula. Pointedly, Trula is quiet in this film. We hear her laughter with Yellow Mary, but she speaks only once during the film, when she is describing what she wants from the wish book, also known as a catalog, probably Sears and Roebuck. She imagines owning the plush bed pictured in the wish book. Rest and comfort and a safe place for lovemaking are Black feminist visions of freedom imagined through the wish book. The new kind of woman that Yellow Mary is, is not married, is not in need of a man. She makes her own money and she is not ashamed of how she makes it. She remains impervious to those who mock her. When she returned to Ibo Landing that day, it was not clear that she would stay, but there she remained with Nana Peazant

while her lover, Trula, along with most of the Peazant family, crossed over back to the mainland.

Trula is an interesting name in this cosmology—one character's name is Iona, which calls to mind "I own her," and another name is Myown. The name Trula in this sonic space sounds like true love. Is this Yellow Mary's true love? The presence of this intimacy and love between women, between Trula and Yellow Mary, weaves into this narrative a refusal of shame for one's own history, for one's own desires, for one's own path, while also producing aesthetics of resistance. Throughout the film, Trula, Yellow Mary, and a central character in this story, Eula, are on the periphery. The island is full and active on this day. Baskets are teeming with corn, bread, and sweet treats; pots of gumbo are cooking; children are playing; stories are being told; photographs are being made; and on the outskirts of all this activity are Trula, Eula, and Yellow Mary. Eula is pregnant with the baby who narrates this film—Unborn Child. Unborn Child moves in spirit and is sensed by the family members, if they are open and aware. Unborn Child cannot be felt by those who are shut down by self-righteousness, like one of the pious mothers who pushes Yellow Mary to the periphery. But still on the line between family and shame, between love and rejection, sits this trio. Eula was raped before she became pregnant; we do not see this violation but are living in the aftermath of it. Unborn Child is the future of this family and is mending hearts in that place between—where the ancestor and the womb are the same. The tenderness and acceptance that these three women cultivate, on the eve of this crossing, shore each other up until they break from the periphery and breach the center, where they shed some light, dispel some lies, melt some ire, and let some love happen. These scenes that brim over with lush hues of indigo and golden light, delicious seaside feasts, bountiful oak trees, and flowing white eyelet dresses utilize aesthetics to resist dominant ways of seeing Black women and produce alternative pasts that liberate Black women from the confines of outmoded tropes and limits of archival documentation.

Archives of Violence / Violence of the Archives

The films that I study here are intimately invested in archival matters; in particular, they attend to the violence that circulates in archival documents and through archival practices. The archives of violence that *Visitation* is concerned with are the records that document acts of violence perpetrated against Black women. The violence of the archive takes place through archival processes that devalue, occlude, or extract Black women from the record. A film that depicts the treacherous landscape of archives of documented acts of violence and the

violence embedded in the archival repository is another landmark Black feminist avant-garde feature, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). The first feature-length film to be directed by an out Black United States–based lesbian filmmaker, *The Watermelon Woman* is a cinematic interrogation of the archive in which the director also plays the lead character, Cheryl. The protagonist happens to be a Black lesbian filmmaker who is in search of the archival trace of an actress who is listed in the credits of the films she stars in only as "The Watermelon Woman." With *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye, the filmmaker, visualizes the frustration of archival obfuscation that has been historically leveraged against Black women, sending Cheryl, the character, on an archival research quest. Dunye, the filmmaker, cinematically renders the humiliation and dismissal experienced by the Black lesbian protagonist that unfolds in part because of who she is and in part because of the subject of her study. The character Cheryl uncovers virtually nothing about the Watermelon Woman in public archives; a bit of archival documentation is found in a lesbian archive but it is treated with careless disregard. Cheryl discovers that the records of the Watermelon Woman are not found in national repositories or lesbian collections but have actually been kept and collected by those who knew and loved the Watermelon Woman, whose name we learn was Fae Richards. Not only is evidence of this seemingly unknown Black woman's film career found, but the evidence determines that Fae Richards was a lesbian as well. Dunye's cinematic point was made even more salient by audience responses to early screenings of the film in which they believed that Dunye's fake documentary film was an actual recounting of the life of an actress called the Watermelon Woman; this confusion epitomizes the central premise of the film.[27] The archive of Fae Richards that Cheryl discovered in the film did not exist before this film was made; it was fabricated. This cinematic choice agitates the impacted archival sediment and creates a disruption of the violence of the archive. *The Watermelon Woman* is a cinematic act of resistance to the violent erasure and obfuscation of Black women from cinema history. The invention of "The Watermelon Woman," which is at the heart of Dunye's film, demands an examination of the production of knowledge about Black women and sexuality. Dunye is offering a provocation and issuing a reminder that knowledge is produced and that the archival process is subjective, incomplete, and unreliable. Through Dunye's avant-garde techniques of archival invention and the production of a fake documentary, the filmmaker produces a trickster archive that combats the violence of the archive itself.

In addition to this epistemological jolt, the act of seeing the archive—repositories, boxes, file folders, shelves, and all—in Dunye's film makes visible something that often eludes the cinematic landscape. Seeing an archival question

form, and then watching a confounding excursion unfurl that exposes the Black lesbian filmmaker and her project to dismissal, manages to make legible the covert and elusive pain of the interlocking mechanisms of racism, sexism, and homophobia that are often quite difficult to pinpoint and describe. The process of disregard for the Black lesbian filmmaker in the repositories themselves and the archival omission of "The Watermelon Woman" therein exemplifies the archival violence that takes place through delegitimization and expulsion. There is a dominant understanding that Black women do not have an archival presence at all; the audience's nearly unilateral belief in Cheryl Dunye's invention of her titular character is testament to this fact. Like *The Watermelon Woman* and *Daughters of the Dust*, the short films I discuss in *Visitation* use aesthetics of resistance to contend with the archival documentation of violent acts suffered by Black women as well as the violence of the archive itself and the violence endured by Black women researchers who enter an archival location. By reckoning with the violence of epistemological dislocations and the horror of hypervisibility, Black feminist avant-garde films make palpable Black women's archival presences, without visually reproducing the violence recorded in the documents that place them there.

The compound violence of the archive is expertly addressed by Saidiya Hartman in her stirring article "Venus in Two Acts," in which she returns to her discussion of Venus's murder and archival presence, first addressed in her monograph *Lose Your Mother.* In the article, Hartman attends to the way Venus's life and death have been obscured in the scant record of her horrifying murder and expresses her trepidation over reading more into the archive of Venus than the record has to offer. She wrestles with examining a slave ship's ledger that references an enslaved girl, called Venus, who was viciously and sadistically tortured and killed during her journey through the Middle Passage.[28] The slim, gruesome archival impression in the shape of Venus is the only evidence of her experience. Hartman refuses to ameliorate the sense of loss that surrounds Venus in the archive and is careful not to infer or create into the absence of the archive. No matter how tempting it is to imagine into the record some semblance of resistance or triumph, Hartman resists. She does not want to make an archival romance out of this young enslaved Black girl's rape and murder.[29] For Hartman, the archive of Venus is a "death sentence."[30] In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman revisits and extends the query she poses in *Lose Your Mother*. She asks: "If 'to read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold,' then to what end does one open the casket and look into the face of death? Why risk the contamination involved in restating the maledictions, obscenities, columns of losses and gains, and mea-

sures of value by which captive lives were inscribed and extinguished? Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?"[31]

Venus becomes legible in the archive through a record of her torture, which exemplifies an archival reality for Black women—the archive may be a death sentence or it may be a torture chamber, as following Black women into the archive so often leads to torture, rape, and murder. Hartman does not let the absence, the occlusion, seal the record. She returns to the past, she allows the disembodied to speak, she makes room for the past to reveal itself. Hartman forwards a theory of critical fabulation that enables her to fashion a narrative that is based on, as it critiques, archival documentation of enslaved women's experiences of violence and death.[32] Hartman explains the value and impetus for her use of critical fabulation in re-presenting what happened to Venus:

> By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object," if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity. By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices.[33]

Critical fabulation, reading the past for distortions, hearing the voices of the disembodied: these are Black feminist strategies for contending with the violence of the archive; these are the strategies that I see working in the films I have brought together in *Visitation*. As Hartman details in "Venus in Two Acts" and *Lose Your Mother*, Black women's archival legibility is achieved through a record of violence that holds them in abeyance. I, like Hartman and the filmmakers present in *Visitation*, am compelled by entering into the epistemological void that grows up around Black women, subsuming them yet rendering them through violence. This void is a field animated by the indeterminate friction between life and death, knowledge and disregard, visibility and nothingness.

Here, in what Hartman has described as the afterlife of slavery, a reckoning through visuality is quite a satisfying prospect—but a reckoning does not produce recovery from the archive.[34] As Hartman acknowledges, the archive will always be bereft, full of violence and disappointment. To recover from an archive of slavery imagines that the violence of that time is over, but as we know, it persists. As I read them, Black feminist avant-garde films are not invested in recovering knowledge from the archive, or in recuperating from the deepest,

most immense losses. Rather, these films channel spirits that linger in repositories, appear in documents, and haunt collections. Archival traces are incomplete and to attempt recovery out of such fragile and violated places is asking too much. Rather than recovery or recuperation, I contend that reckoning and witnessing is what takes place through Black feminist avant-garde cinema.

Black Womanhood and Distortion of Vision

The paradox of concomitant visibility and invisibility, a human/other/object status that ferments in this void, has been carefully and tenderly examined by Saidiya Hartman as it has been by Hortense Spillers in her paradigm-shifting essay on New World captivity and Black women's sexuality, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Here, Spillers begins to build the grammar with which to discuss the meaning of Black womanhood and the violence that shrouds Black women's sexuality and foments Black women's condition of abjection. Spillers asserts:

> First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.[35]

The reduction of Black women into things meant only for use by the captor during slavery begets the otherness that impedes Black women's ability to be; the powerlessness of Black women's captured sexualities imposes on the meaning of Black womanhood in slavery's afterlife. As Spillers elucidates, the pleasure

derived from eliciting or watching Black pain, or pornotroping, is intricately intertwined with Black women's sexuality and desire. Pornotroping, and the violence that encumbers Black women's sexuality, contributes to the impossibility that haunts Black womanhood. Though the enslaved reproductive woman was imagined by enslavers as existing without humanity, her human body reproduced human bodies into slavery. The epistemology of Black womanhood that produced her captive Black body as nonhuman under chattel slavery remains in every calculation of Black womanhood that emerges after the abolition of slavery. The machinations and contortions of logic that had to be executed in order to refute the humanity of an enslaved woman whose reproductive capacity was being exploited during chattel slavery to reproduce more enslaved people, Black people, not-recognized-as-human people, chattel, are particularly confounding.

Evelynn Hammonds, a Black feminist scholar of the history of science, draws upon her background in physics to begin to untangle the knot of impossibility, the visual paradox, that obscures Black women's sexuality. Hammonds uses the astrophysics of black holes to conceptualize the silence and invisibility that contort Black women's desire.[36] She produces a theory of the "black (w)hole" as a metaphor that can index the paradox of visibility that at once overdetermines Black women as pathologically overly sexual, while also diminishing the ability to see Black women's capacity for knowledge production. Hammonds contends:

> The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone. Therefore, the identification of a black hole requires the use of sensitive detectors of energy and distortion. In the case of black female sexualities, this implies that we need to develop reading strategies that allow us to make visible the distorting and productive effects these sexualities produce in relation to more visible sexualities.[37]

Looking at what seems like absence yet recognizing that the space is in fact full and dynamic is a reading strategy that can be applied to searching for Black women's presences in archival collections. The animated absence becomes detectable because of the effect that it has on the space around it. The places in archival repositories where Black women have been overlooked or redacted or discarded distort the space around them by indexing the terror perpetrated by white domination through organizational control, legislative manipulation, wealth building, imagined moral superiority, and coercive power. This is a dis-

tortion that has been read as lack or inability or pathology or ignorance or ineptitude. If the space around Black women is read for their presence rather than their deficiency, then the growth of crops, the health of families, the practice of insurgent survival, the invention of surreptitious communication—the fact that enslaved people survived at all—points to the genius of Black womanhood. This genius cannot be overlooked or disregarded even though archival records may not directly reflect this; the knowing through seeing what is missing—the distortion of space—must be counted as knowledge.

In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde contends that "within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings."[38] Lorde speaks to the "distortion of vision" that produces the impossibility of Black womanhood as both overexposed and disregarded. If the distortion of vision that obscures Black women's place in archival collections can be perceived by the impact it has on the space around it, and if secrets are unleashed when what appears to be an absence is recognized as opaque yet populated, then an archive becomes a repository of redaction as much as it is a storehouse of information. Hammonds and Lorde are asking us to contend with the void through which the meaning of Black womanhood is deployed and consider how it operates on the visual register—a visuality that includes occlusion.[39] Black women are obscured in archival processes by the combination of epistemological redaction and ontological splaying that codifies the void, the distortion of vision, that makes abject Black womanhood. The apparitions that animate this volume emerge out of the persistent distortion of vision to which Lorde directs our attention, what Hammonds theorizes, and what Morrison culls for new information.

A short film that eloquently captures the archival dimensions, historical stakes, and cinematic interrogation of Black feminist avant-garde cinema is an earlier work of Julie Dash, *Illusions* (1982). Beautifully rendered in 16mm black-and-white celluloid, and set in 1942 during World War II, *Illusions* follows Mignon Dupree, a Black woman film executive who is passing as white. On this particular day at the office, Mignon's Black identity is discovered while she is working to solve a problem with a film that is in postproduction. Mignon's fortitude is confirmed when she refuses to be intimidated by the white man in the office

who learns that she is Black, but a deeper issue, one that takes us into the void, unfolds through her solution to the problem with the film.

Dash sends us behind the scenes into a postproduction suite where older white men are currently stumped by an issue with the sound of the film. On a screen in that production suite, the executives roll a scene from the film in which a white actress is draped across a chaise lounge. The image is in focus, no bothersome shadows are being cast, not a hair is out of place on the actress's head, but her singing has been thrown irrevocably out of sync. The actress's mouth does not move in time with the sound of her voice. Because film is captured by a motion picture camera without sync sound, the sound is recorded with external audio equipment, and the picture and sound have to be brought into sync in a postproduction process. Something went terribly awry in the editing process and now the image and sound do not match. The original actress is unavailable to come in to the studio to sing the song in rhythm to her own lips' movements on the screen, so Mignon hires a young Black actress, Esther, to sing and match her singing with the white actress on screen.[40]

Through Mignon's passing and Esther's beautiful voice being lent to a white woman's cinematic performance, two kinds of occlusion are being visualized. Clearly Mignon is a brilliant executive, but if she were to be out as a Black woman when she applied for the position, she would have never been seriously considered, let alone hired by the film studio. Esther has the beauty and the talent to be a Hollywood star but because she is Black, she cannot be seen on screen as the protagonist of a Hollywood film; she can only have a cinematic presence that is subsumed within the body of the white actress who is center stage. When Mignon buries her blackness at work in order to have a career that she is clearly well suited for, she enters the void. When industry standards relegate a capable and gifted young Black actress to the margins of film production and the recesses of cinematic representation, she is forced into the black (w)hole to which Hammonds directs our attention. The fact that Julie Dash is not a household name is a machination of this distortion of vision, one that obfuscates the brilliance of a foundational Black woman filmmaker.

Black feminist avant-garde films bring attention to the impact that the cinematic medium, its portrayals and occlusions of Black women, have had on *seeing* Black women. In *Seeing through Race*, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that race is a medium, and not simply the object of study in visual culture but a framework through which seeing happens. Mitchell contends that the medium of race is a vehicle of illusion and reality that "can both obstruct and facilitate communication; [can be] a cause of misunderstanding and blindness, or conversely, a mechanism of 'second sight'; a prosthesis that produces invisibility and hyper-

visibility simultaneously."[41] Mitchell's contention that race is a medium of illusion calls up the work that Julie Dash has done in her short film by that name and offers a complement to Morrison's excavation of distortions and lies that become recognizable by examining the past and finding new information. Race, paradoxically, produces an invisibility that becomes endemic to visual culture and is a production of distortions and lies that are then embedded in archival documents, processes, and subsequent archival exploration. If, as Barbara Jeanne Fields argues in "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," the concept of race was invented to produce, support, and solidify the master/slave relationship during US chattel slavery, and race really is meant to signal blackness, then the medium of race is measured by its proximity to or immersion within blackness.[42] With this rubric of race and visuality as a core tenet, *Visitation* tracks the ways that seeing, recognition, disregard, overexposure, occlusion, and erasure work in concert to produce knowledge about Black womanhood in visual culture through cinematic representation in repositories, through viewing archival documents, and—in quotidian dynamics of power—through the medium of race.

The idea that race is itself a medium implies that seeing through race is a creative process and serves as a mode of communicating and exchanging information. I regard Black feminist avant-garde cinema as a medium; I use *medium* with an eye toward Mitchell's conception of race as a medium, while holding onto *medium* as an artistic form, and going further to include the concept of *medium* as an intermediary figure who acts as a channel between apparitional and corporeal entities. My analysis of spectral archival avant-garde visualizations in *Visitation* is given shape and dimension through these multiple meanings of medium. By understanding race as a medium through which seeing happens, and using the medium of cinema as the object of my analysis, I recognize Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers as mediums who channel otherworldly presences, who conjure up visitations and then present them to us on the screen.

Visitation *and Black Feminist Theory*

Visitation is an intervention into archival study and avant-garde cinema that builds on analyses of haunting, pornotropy, and Black being and contributes to Black feminist theories of visuality, cinema, and knowledge production. My understanding of Black feminism emerges out of foundational Black lesbian feminist theory forwarded by the Combahee River Collective, which recognizes the inherent value of Black womanhood, contends with the specificity of oppressive forces that impose themselves through vectors of blackness and woman-

hood, and holds fast to the conviction that when the most vulnerable are free, only then can any sense of collective freedom be claimed.[43] The imperatives of Black feminism that undergird my understanding of this critical intervention are exemplified by Audre Lorde's crystalline reading of white feminist racism in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"; Hortense Spillers's foundational essays, most notably "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; the disruptive work of Black women historians like Deborah Gray White, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Saidiya Hartman, and Jennifer L. Morgan whose scholarship exposes the horrors of slavery experienced through the particular location of Black womanhood; and the Black queer feminist power that has coalesced in #BlackLivesMatter and propelled our contemporary movement for Black liberation.[44] My engagement with Black feminism is fortified by C. Riley Snorton and Marquis Bey's Black trans theories of fungibility and fugitivity that explore the ungendering process, first noted by Spillers, that is imposed through Black womanhood. My conception of Black feminism is shored up by the interventions of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jennifer Nash, Christina Sharpe, Daphne Brooks, and Jayna Brown, whose theories of being, sensuality, performance, and power counter knowledge production that erases and devalues Black womanhood.[45] Queer-of-color critique as an intervention, a body of scholarship, and a direct descendant of Black feminist theory is fundamental to my theoretical framework. Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* has shaped my thinking about the prescience of Black feminist thought on queer theory and the relationship between blackness, heteronormativity, and queerness. Kara Keeling's cinematic analysis of Black lesbian representation in *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* and her analysis of Black trans legibility, queer temporality, and the politics of representation in "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future" have grounded my understanding of Black feminism, and pushed my thinking about Black queerness, possibility, temporality, and cinema.

These Black feminist, queer, trans theorists have fortified my understanding of the breadth and depth of Black feminist criticism and its bountiful legacies. This collective contributes heavily to my understanding of Black feminist thought as a critical intervention into power structures that impose meaning and delimit value through the vectors of blackness and the definitions of womanhood. Black feminist theory upends dominant ways of knowing by centering Black women; by eschewing white supremacist stratifications of race, gender, class, sexuality, and national belonging; and by insisting that the liberation of any of us depends on the liberation of all of us. Black feminist anal-

yses of power and conceptions of knowing and being defy boundaries of genre and discipline. They refute strictures of form, as those epistemological expectations impede the critiques, reversals, and inventions that expose the exclusions, erasures, and systemic violence inherent in white supremacist taxonomies of knowing, being, and creating. Black feminist thought carves out voluptuous space from a place of imposed negation. This body of work activates bounty as it allows us to luxuriate in our sensuality, grieve the inconsolable, name the violations, rebuff the intolerable, host an invocation of our names in a resounding chorus that builds, in defiance of slaughter, an amplification that makes undeniable the power we possess, and where together we can marvel at and imbibe the exquisite prowess of our creativity. My conception of Black feminist avant-garde cinema is imbued by all these understandings of Black feminist critique. From this place, with this understanding of Black feminism, I study the work of Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers.

The Chapters

Even as the short films and installation pieces that I focus on in each chapter of *Visitation* turn to the past through their examination and incorporation of archival documentation, the chapters themselves progress in a kind of chronological order that includes gaps, lapses, retreads, and overlaps. I open the chapters with an exploration of the mobilization of archival documentation that unfolds through Kara Walker's use of avant-garde cinematic techniques in the installation piece *National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road*. This chapter lays theoretical groundwork for my discussion of archives of violence and the violence of the archive and their relationship to visuality. Kara Walker is arguably the most well-known artist whose work I will engage in *Visitation*.[46] The 2007 exhibition *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* brought Walker to prominence as a visual artist who has the ability to tap into the national unconscious with panoramic pastoral silhouettes that spell out ghastly nightmarish scenes of antebellum life. Walker's *Bureau of Refugees* series, of which the short film *Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road* is a part, makes the archive endemic to the project by taking the titles of each piece directly from testimony given to the Freedmen's Bureau in 1866. In *Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road*, Walker throws her signature silhouettes into motion as they reenact a grisly scene of white vigilantism in which an adolescent Black girl is raped and her family's house set on fire. The archival document being visualized in Walker's film is the testimony given to the Freedmen's Bureau

by this young girl. I discuss the way that Walker uses avant-garde cinematic techniques to visualize the interior world of a young Black girl who suffered unspeakable terror and managed to register this act of violence in the Freedmen's Bureau archive. In my analysis, I examine how Walker's Black feminist avant-garde film reframes a documented act of violence waged against a newly emancipated family during the era of Reconstruction, and, I argue, through the visual field Walker reveals an affective dimension of this archival record.[47] While Walker's work does use hyperbolic imagery as an entry point into her visual historical interrogations, I contend that within the terrifying landscape of *Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road*, the artist carves out tender cinematic space for the perspective of a young Black victim of rape to enter the record.

Chapter 2 builds upon the theoretical and historical ground covered in the first chapter's analysis of Walker's visualization of Reconstruction-era white supremacist vigilante violence by examining a video that takes a lynching photograph as its impetus. This chapter explores the haunting aspects of visitation and the cinematic. My discussion of Kara Lynch's video installation *SAVED :: video postcard* moves the chapters forward in time, from Reconstruction to the jim crow era, and also reflects a progression in the technology of visual culture from the silhouette to the photograph. Kara Lynch is a video artist, insurgent archivist, and sound collector who makes time-based visual and sonic pieces that interrogate blackness, gender, and class.[48] With *SAVED :: video postcard*, Lynch offers a cinematic study of the only known lynching photograph of a Black woman, Laura Nelson, who was raped and lynched in 1911 in Okemah, Oklahoma. Lynch's treatment of this photograph manages not to make a spectacle out of the horror of this image but rather stirs up the sensation of an otherworldly visitation that ushers in a reckoning across time and space. There are ghosts that linger on the periphery of reason and being, subsumed within records of American life and value whose resurgence unearths a past rife with the rape of Black women by white men; I call these presences specters of miscegenation, and they emerge in the archive of Laura Nelson's lynching and in Kara Lynch's cinematic treatment of the photographic evidence of the terror that Nelson suffered.

While half a century elapses between the jim crow–era violence examined in chapter 2 and the era of the Stonewall rebellion in which chapter 3 is situated, that temporal gap is attended to in the fourth and final chapter. In the third chapter, I discuss Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, which visualizes a pivotal moment in the life of legendary trans activist Marsha P. Johnson. The film pairs archival documentation with historical dramatization to produce a vibrant cinematic vehicle that reverses the subsumption

of Marsha P. Johnson's role in the struggle for gay liberation in Stonewall-era New York City. My discussion of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* examines the filmmakers' use of archival footage, poetry, performance, and historical dramatization to mobilize their liberatory production. In order to contextualize the activism that surrounded the Stonewall rebellion, in which Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were major actors, I offer a brief history of post–civil rights Left social movements. This chapter recognizes the archival labor of the filmmaker Tourmaline, a Black trans woman whose years of research and publication have been fundamental in bringing the legacies of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera into contemporary conversations about trans, queer, LGBTQ activism. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* was included in the Brooklyn Museum's 2019 exhibit *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow*, which commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion.[49] My analysis of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* was initially focused on the cinematic landscape and historical context of the film, but after attending a 2018 screening in which the film was woven into a theatrical performance launched by the filmmakers, I expanded the scope of my discussion. That theatrical cinematic experience opened up the analytic field and enabled me to incorporate theories of performance into my analysis of this work of avant-garde Black feminist cinema. My discussion of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* brings together performance studies, social movement history, and archive theory to examine the way this piece cinematically reimagines the past and carries a reconstituted archive into the proscenium.

The final chapter offers a reading of Ja'Tovia Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience.* Gary's body of cinematic work is both experimental and archival, historic and personal. She uses the cinematic medium to crack open entrenched ways of knowing and seeing blackness, while capturing and visualizing an affective experience of Black womanhood—something that eludes most mediums and modes of communication.[50] In this chapter, I study the way Gary visualizes archival specters with her etchings onto black-and-white footage of a young Ruby Dee delivering a monologue from the point of view of an enslaved daughter witnessing her mother being savagely beaten. Juxtaposed with Dee's monologue is stuttering archival footage of civil rights–era Black worship, a flurry of colorful microbial abstractions, an interview with Assata Shakur in the mid-1980s, and contemporary digital video recordings of police violence and radical Black resistance. This film calls up chattel slavery with Dee's monologue, which was filmed at the apex of the civil rights movement in 1965, then moves through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first with scenes of violence, resistance, and escape that are juxtaposed. The theme of freedom courses through Gary's cinematic intervention that connects the terror of slavery with scenes of ra-

cial violence that persist in its afterlife. Gary's *An Ecstatic Experience* catalyzes my concept of Black feminist phenomenology, which I construct through an assembly of Black feminist theory, poetry, essays, and lyrics that describe what it feels like to be a Black woman. Through the analysis and theorization that I forward in this chapter, I argue that Gary's film becomes an archive of Black resistance that activates a phenomenology of freedom for Black women.

The films and artists who appear in *Visitation* are representative of a lineage of Black feminist avant-garde filmmaking. The short films that I discuss in each chapter center Black womanhood, interrogate gender, visualize desire, and produce a sensibility that captivates as it instigates. With their cinematic contributions, Walker, Lynch, Tourmaline and Wortzel, and Gary participate in as they produce a tradition of Black feminist avant-garde cinema. Their films are integral to the lineage of this category of cinema but are certainly not exhaustive. Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground* (1982), Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979), Cauleen Smith's *Dark Matter and the Postcard* (2006) and *Sojourner* (2018), and Zeinabu irene Davis's *Compensation* (1999), for example, each contribute to the category of Black feminist avant-garde cinema.[51] The films that I have selected to discuss in *Visitation* have a place in this volume because of their particular approach to archival visualization and experimental inventiveness, which they harness to conjure subjugated archival presences of Black women. All the short films discussed in *Visitation* break narrative conventions as they use cinematic landscapes to respond to the archival violence of devaluation, erasure, and obfuscation. Through their processes of image making, these filmmakers raise specters of those who suffered racialized sexual violence, while they disrupt the visual and epistemological void that confounds Black womanhood; these films create spaces of mourning and reckoning rather than voyeurism and pornotropy. The naming of a Black feminist avant-garde cinematic tradition fortifies a corpus out of works that have been regarded as diffuse, incidental, or disarticulated pieces of visual culture. A legacy of Black feminist filmmaking is before us, and not only is it vital to recognize the tradition that these films are contributing to and emerging from, but, I contend, it is an act of epistemological violence to disconnect them as a body, since they gather power together, they change the landscape, and they make room for us.

With *Visitation*, I am producing visual analysis that grapples with the history of violence that haunts Black womanhood and its attendant experiences of gender, desire, sexuality, and vitality. Black feminist avant-garde films transform avant-garde cinematic representation by using experimental film techniques to highlight Black women's roles in cinema history and expose a legacy of violence

that gathers power through the visual. These films contribute to the archival collections that they visualize as they shore up a tradition of resistance to racialized sexual and reproductive violence buried within these collections. *Visitation* brings Black feminist theories into conversation with conceptions of haunting to address the violence of archival processes, the paradox of vision, and the epistemological trap that structures experiences of Black womanhood. With their films, Walker, Lynch, Tourmaline and Wortzel, and Gary reimagine history as they connect missing pieces of the past. These filmmakers disrupt the centralizing power of archival institutions and cinematic regimes of visuality by deploying aesthetics of resistance that reveal harm inflicted and losses sustained. The tenderness that activates the conjure work of these films enlivens documents, photographs, testimonies, interviews, archival film footage, and performances in which disembodied Black women are the guiding forces, the narrators of the harm done them, and through their spectral guidance cinematic visitations occur before us.

The narratives that unfold over the course of this book exist in spaces of the unknown, the misremembered, and the overlooked. These are historic tales that chronicle life-altering events of Black women whose stories have been written down and cataloged but undermined throughout that process. Disembodied Black women are guides through events that have been half-told, untold, or categorically misrepresented. These figures are beacons to a past that is changing, a past that is in process because we are now looking there. The disembodied direct my attention here, in these pages, just as they have found their narrators in the Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers whose sumptuous work makes visible their stories. *Visitation: The Conjure Work of Black Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema* moves with the flow of the films within it, as these pieces respond to archival surges that emanate from documented acts of unresolved racialized sexual and gender violence—a confluence of betrayals that distorts the vision of the space we are about to enter.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 7

2 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 309.

3 I am purposefully not capitalizing jim crow, even though it is a proper name, in order to counter any form of reverence being produced with this name.

4 I am using *study* here as Kevin Quashie discusses the term in his book *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being.* Quashie describes this kind of study as a human undertaking that "invites us to pursue intelligence by giving attention to what troubles and what intrigues" (112).

5 My understanding of the exclusions shared by Black cis or non-trans women and trans women of many racialized experiences has benefited greatly from conversations with trans scholar and philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher.

6 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

7 Beginning with Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" and moving through the work of Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* and Alexander Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus*, discussions of pornotropy are used to describe the pleasure derived from reading about, watching, or otherwise recounting in painstaking detail incidents in which Black people, especially Black women, are subject to dehumanizing acts of violence.

8 In "The Circuitous Route of Presenting Black Butch: The Travels of Dee Rees's Pariah," which includes my analysis of Dee Rees's short and feature-film versions of *Pariah*, I discuss how the short-film form offers freedom to representations of Black womanhood that can be foreclosed in feature-length films.

9 The term *avant-garde* is a French military term used to denote an advance guard or the soldiers who were on the front lines of a military force. See Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 14. See also Rees, *History of Experimental Film and Video*, 2, which offers a military history of the term. The avant-garde film movement of the 1960s and early 1970s maintained a deep resistance to the film industry's commodification of cinematic vision and reveled in abstractionist film techniques that jarred the viewer and

created the visual space to see differently. In *Points of Resistance*, Rabinovitz argues that to consider avant-garde film a purely aesthetic cinematic concern diminishes that important facet of the avant-garde film movement. In his essay "From Metaphors on Vision," Stan Brakhage describes the potential depths that the cinematic medium could plumb if an interrogation of vision and perception were the catalyst for filmmaking (120).

10 Maya Deren's foundational *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) uses film to produce the feeling of being inside a dream and to invoke questions about the relationship between the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), a surrealist film directed by Luis Buñuel and cowritten by Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, is a groundbreaking work that jars reality and draws us into a nightmare. Stan Brakhage's opus *Dog Star Man* (1961–64) is a series of experimental short films that visualizes mystical experiences of a man who treks up a mountain with his dog. Other important avant-garde films of this era are Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975); Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971); Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1962–63); Yvonne Rainer's *Film about a Woman Who* (1985); and Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* (1984), *Damned If You Don't* (1987), and *Sink or Swim* (1990).

11 I am referring to Chantal Akerman's *La Chambre* (1972) and *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*; Laura Mulvey's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977); Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*; and Barbara Hammer's filmography, including *Dyketactics* (1974) and *Superdyke* (1975). See the commentary in Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema*.

12 The films of Hammer and Friedrich are exemplary of white lesbian avant-garde cinema.

13 Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) is an exception; this film certainly has avant-garde aesthetics and centers Black women as agitators in the struggle for liberation.

14 Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Chantal Ackerman, Andy Warhol, Hollis Frampton, Jack Smith, Man Ray, Hans Richter, Salvador Dalí, and Luis Buñuel are some of the filmmakers who are recognized as foundational to avant-garde cinema.

15 The first two feature films by US Black women to garner a national theatrical release are Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). These films use avant-garde cinematic techniques that I will discuss later in this chapter.

16 Petrolle and Wexman, in their introduction to *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, mention Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* but do not offer analysis of the film, 4–5. Kathleen McHugh's chapter, "History and Falsehood in Experimental Autobiographies," included in that volume, discusses Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* alongside analysis of work by filmmakers Lourdes Portillo and Rea Tajiri. McHugh also offers a chapter on Dunye's films, "The Experimental 'Dunyementary': A Cinematic Signature Effect" in Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema*. In her introduction Blaetz acknowledges Dash's work in avant-garde cinema but does not include analysis of her films in *Women's Experimental Cinema* because, as she reports, she was not able to find scholars willing or able to write about Dash's films, 6.

17 For more on the feminist avant-garde cinematic intervention taking place during this era, see Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema*; Petrolle and Wexman, *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*; and Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*.

18 Black avant-garde literature and visual art have been recognized as such from the New Negro movement into the Black Arts movement. Some key works from the New Negro movement are the poetry of Langston Hughes, the essays and poetry of Jean Toomer, James Van Der Zee's photography, Marita Bonner's plays, and the paintings of Romare Bearden. The poetry of Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka's poetry, essays, and plays are some hallmarks of the Black Arts movement. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but a start. In her introduction to *Renegade Poetics*, Evie Shockley offers a thorough discussion of Black aesthetics and the Black Arts movement, which was recognized as the aesthetic complement to the Black Power movement.

19 The L.A. Rebellion School of filmmakers included Black filmmakers trained at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) during the late 1960s through the 1980s. The social upheaval of the Watts Rebellion, the civil rights movement, and the war in Vietnam propelled the early group of filmmakers to respond through cinema. Filmmakers such as Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Zeinabu irene Davis, Haile Gerima, and Billy Woodbury are some of the most prominent filmmakers from the L.A. Rebellion School.

20 These are but a few examples of Black avant-garde cinema: Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979), Julie Dash's *Four Women* (1975), Zeinabu irene Davis's *Cycle* (1989) and *Compensation* (1999), and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978).

21 Moten, *In the Break*, 32–33.

22 McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 7.

23 Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* is credited as the first feature film to be directed by a Black woman. A reading of this film is necessary in a book on Black feminist avant-garde film.

24 Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 27–68.

25 Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 31–32.

26 Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 33–34.

27 I learned this detail in a postscreening conversation that I had with producer Alex Juhasz, director Cheryl Dunye, and actress Guin Turner, who assembled as a panel to discuss the film at the Outfest on the Road Film Festival that I organized and programmed at Smith College in 2016, in celebration of the 20th anniversary of *The Watermelon Woman's* release.

28 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 7–10.

29 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.

30 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.

31 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4–5. Inside this quote, Hartman is referring to the question that she posed in her book *Lose Your Mother.*

32 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

33 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11–12.

34 Hartman defines the afterlife of slavery as a condition of being in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose Your Mother*, 6).

35 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206.

36 Hammonds, "Black (W)holes."

37 Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," 139.

38 Lorde, "Transformation of Silence," 42.

39 In "Black (W)holes," Hammonds looks to Lorde's "Transformation of Silence" to discuss the invisible/hypervisible paradox of Black womanhood.

40 This postproduction process is called ADR, automated dialogue replacement.

41 Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, 13–14.

42 Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology," 97–101.

43 The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" details these sentiments as fundamental imperatives of Black feminist politics.

44 See Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, 110–13; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; A. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," 7; hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; J. L. Morgan, *Laboring Women*; and Garza, "Herstory."

45 See Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Bey, "Black Fugitivity Un/gendered,"; Gumbs, *Undrowned*; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*; and J. Brown, *Black Utopias*.

46 Kara Walker is an acclaimed multimedia installation artist who received her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. Walker is a painter and printmaker; she produces large-scale silhouettes and sculptures, and creates short films, soundscapes, and puppet shows that make visceral the intimate, grotesque, and violent history of blackness and whiteness in the United States. The artist pays special attention to the positionality of Black womanhood throughout her body of work. Walker was a recipient of the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award in 1997, which officially registers her as a genius in the annals of art history. In 2014 Walker erected a gargantuan monument of a Mammy/Sphynx figure out of sugar at the defunct Domino Sugar plant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that drew in enormous crowds: *A Subtlety: Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*.

47 The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands records are held at the National Archives in Washington, DC. These records, made primarily of letters, affidavits, and testimonies, chronicle some of the horrors newly emancipated people had to contend with in the aftermath of the Civil War, during the brief period of Reconstruction (1865--77).

48 Kara Lynch lives in the Bronx, New York. She received her MFA in Visual Arts from the University of California, San Diego, and is associate professor emerita of video and critical studies at Hampshire College. In 2001 Lynch made a feature-length documentary called *Black Russians*, and over the span of four years, between

1998 and 2002, she made a video travelogue called *The Outing*. Since 2003 the artist has been producing site-specific work in different geographic locations across the United States for the episodic, visual/sonic installation project *Invisible*, of which *SAVED :: video postcard* is a part. Lynch's work has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the United States as well as in Germany, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Palestine, the UK, and Lebanon. Most recently Kara coedited the anthology *We Travel the SpaceWays: Black Imagination, Fragments and Diffractions*, which was published by Transcript in 2019. Kara Lynch's work is defiantly queer and feminist and eloquently attends to the amorphous sensations that accumulate over generations of racialization, gender oppression, state violence, and class warfare.

49 Tourmaline is a coeditor (credited as Reina Gossett) of the anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. She held the position of activist in residence at Barnard College from 2014 to 2018. The Brooklyn Museum and High Line Art co-commissioned a film by Tourmaline, *Salacia*, which was featured in *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow* and was the first film commissioned as a High Line original. In addition to the Brooklyn Museum, the High Line, and The Kitchen, Tourmaline's work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa), PSI, BFI Flare, the New Museum, the Whitney Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Venice Biennale. Tourmaline's body of cinematic work, which includes *Mary Ill of Fame*, *Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones*, *The Personal Things*, and *Lost in the Music*, lyrically and vibrantly contends with Black trans and queer life in a way that both spans epochs and dislocates time. Sasha Wortzel is a filmmaker and installation artist living in Brooklyn and Miami whose short film *We Have Always Been Here* was included in *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow.* Her films have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the New Museum, and Berlinale, and have garnered the support of the Sundance Institute and Art Matters. She has been awarded artist fellowships and residencies across the country, including the Artists in Residence in the Everglades, Abrons Arts Residency for Visual Artists, and the Watermill Center. Wortzel has films in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum and the Leslie Lohman Museum of Art. Tourmaline and Wortzel are both accomplished filmmakers who have produced bodies of work outside their collaboration in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* A testament to the importance of Tourmaline and Wortzel's work is made clear by the Brooklyn Museum's inclusion of other films that each artist made, in addition to the collaborative piece for *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow*.

50 Ja'Tovia Gary is a Brooklyn-based filmmaker and artist whose work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum, Galarie Frank Elbaz, David Zwirner, Brown University, and The Kitchen. Her films have screened at the London Short Film Festival; the Anthology Film Archives; the Furora Film Festival in Berlin; the Institute for Contemporary Art in Virginia and Philadelphia; the AFI Fest; Filmforum at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA); the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; the BlackStar Film Festival; Art Basel; the Toronto Film Festival; and the Smithsonian African American Film Festival. She received her MFA in social documentary filmmaking from the School of Visual Arts in New York City,

and her work has been supported by the Sundance Institute. She was a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University during the 2018–19 academic year. She was the recipient of a Creative Capital award and a Field of Vision award in 2019.

51 In 1982 Kathleen Collins made the first feature-length film directed by a US-based Black woman, *Losing Ground*. Because Collins did not have a national theatrical release for the film, it is not recorded in cinema history as the first feature film to be directed by a Black US-based woman. It would take nine more years for that honor to be bestowed on Julie Dash for *Daughters of the Dust.* Barbara McCullough's short film *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* is exemplary of Black feminist avant-garde cinema, as is Zeinabu irene Davis's *Compensation* and Cauleen Smith's *Dark Matter and Postcard*.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ARCHIVE AND THE SILHOUETTE

1 I use the terms *Black*, *colored*, *Negro*, and *mulatto* in response to the language being used in texts that I examine. I work to have parity between the racial term that I employ and the language used in the archival documents with which I engage.

2 The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution declares: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

3 Walker produced work in her *Bureau of Refugees* series between 2007 and 2009.

4 "Outrage" was the term used to describe the rape and sexual assault of a woman in the antebellum and postbellum years. I have placed *outrage* in quotes to amplify the fact that the rape of Black women and girls was not recognized as a crime or an outrage. Black women and girls were routinely subjected to rape, and there was no outrage by the dominant power over this fact of life for Black women.

5 Walker's choice to name this series *Bureau of Refugees* raises questions about the status of the refugee in the United States during the era of Reconstruction. Though the term *refugee* was predominantly used as an assignation for white southerners who were destitute and homeless, I found a few instances in the National Archives Records for the Alabama District of the Bureau of Refugees, 1866, in which the term *colored refugee* was used. The term seems to refer to enslaved men who escaped slavery to serve in the Union army and their family members who are seeking refuge from the Confederacy. The concept of a colored refugee who became a US citizen during this era is a paradox worth investigating, one that I may take up at a later date.

6 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, 489.

7 Alabama was a district in 1866 and was not named a state until February 1868.

8 K. Walker, *Bureau of Refugees*.

9 Arguably Walker's most well-known series was her first major show, *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (2007). Walker also makes short films that incorporate puppet shows using the silhouette, one of which I had the pleasure to experience in person at the REDCAT in Los Angeles in 2005, *Kara E. Walker's Song*