

INTRODUCTION

WE INSIST The Idea of Black Film

I am giving a reading at a bookstore in Spokane, Washington. There is a large crowd. I read a story about an Indian father who leaves his family for good. He moves to a city a thousand miles away. Then he dies. It is a sad story. When I finish, a woman in the front row breaks into tears. “What’s wrong?” I ask her. “I’m so sorry about your father,” she says. “Thank you,” I say, “But that’s my father sitting right next to you.”

—SHERMAN ALEXIE, “THE UNAUTHORIZED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ME”

In the epigraph, Sherman Alexie dryly arrests an audience member’s expectation and perception that his story be unscripted, a direct reflection of reality in the barest of autobiographical terms. His narrative of this encounter with this white woman exemplifies the collapsing of the distance between two fictions, one writerly and the other a sociocultural marker of being. Indian and “Indian” are conflated, and the performative becomes reduced to unmediated, existential accounting. In the absence of a consideration of verisimilitude, or just literary form and style more generally, the woman’s empathetic response to Alexie’s reading illustrates an inability to distinguish the author function from embodied being. This epigraph evinces my concern for and investment in the idea of black film. In a comparable sense, the woman’s query and expectation correspond to the way that black film, and black art more broadly, navigates the idea of race as constitutive, cultural fiction, yet this art is nevertheless often determined exclusively by the social category of race or veracity claims about black existential life in very debilitating ways. But this book does not merely equivocate about the debilitating ways of social reflectionist ap-

proaches. Accounting for black film in a manner that does not adhere alone to a focus on how cinema must oblige, portend, or emblemize social truth requires attention to cinema as an art practice with attendant and consequential questions of form and politics.

The belief in black film's indexical tie to the black lifeworld forgoes a focus on nuance and occults the complexity of black film to interpret, render, incite, and speculate. This misrecognition corresponds to Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) and the scenario of a rube who rushes the theater screen to protect his projected daughter's honor; in the context of this book's thesis the title would be *Uncle Josh at the Black Picture Show*. This book is about black film, or more precisely, the idea of black film. I argue that, as art and discourse, black film operates as a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as a constitutive, cultural fiction.¹ I deliberately engender a shift to distinguish between the rendering of race in the arts from the social categories of race and thus forestall the collapsing of the distance between referent and representation.² This shift disputes the fidelity considerations of black film: the presumption that the primary function of this brand of American cinema entails an extradiegetic responsibility or capacity to embody the black lifeworld or provide answers in the sense of social problem solving. Furthermore the idea of black film cannot be tantamount to an ethics of positive and negative representation that insists on black film in the terms of cultural policy, immanent category, genre, or mimetic corroboration of the black experience. Black film must be understood as art, not prescription. This book does not insist on an aesthete's vision of a pure cinema, an art unsoiled by *incidental* or *extraneous* concerns for the cultural, social, and political. I am not arguing for a deracialized or postracial notion of black film. Film blackness means a rethinking of black film and especially the questions we ask about this cinema. In particular, this repurposing insists that to outline the idea of black film as an art entails addressing it as a practice that emanates from the conceptual field of black visual and expressive culture. This means that in addition to interdisciplinary collaboration with collateral questions that broach the art of blackness, I am framing the idea of black film in correspondence to literature, music, new media, photography, and contemporary art for a wider conception of blackness as the visualizing and creative production of knowledge that is one of the core values of the idea of black film. To be clear, instead of a book compelled by disinterest in the black lifeworld, *Film Blackness* is compelled by disinterest in claiming that the black lifeworld be the sole line of inquiry that can be made about the idea of black film.

As an example of how film blackness might offer a more inclusive and variegated investment in the idea of black film, I turn to Harry Allen's "Telling Time: On Spike, Strike and the 'Reality' of *Clockers*," not a review per se but an extended observation on Spike Lee's *Clockers* (1995). Opening with an account of his wife sighing while watching the film, Allen reads her response as a sign of disbelief, which mirrored his own frustration with the film. He also identifies a remark made by Ronald "Strike" Dunham, the film's protagonist, as emblematic of his overall impression of *Clockers*: "I ain't got the stomach no more for this shit." According to Allen, one of the film's irresolvable flaws entails "gaps in character motivation and logic" that result in a film that appears "alternately 'real' and contrived in ways that make you question the value, or reality, of what's 'real.'" While he pointed out how the film "cheats," Allen did recognize Lee's auteurist liberties and the "burden of representation": "Any filmmaker can use any filmic strategy to make a point, as long as that strategy is coherent. And Black filmmakers are burdened with the rope chain of 'reality' in ways white people simply aren't."³ Though remaining fixed on what he considers the film's duplicitous quality, Allen notes that an additional shortcoming of *Clockers* is its failure to be a challenging enough mystery for the spectator trying to solve the question of who killed Darryl Adams. Yet this overture to a formal standard of mystery and noir detection is disingenuous, as the core thrust of Allen's contention with the film is founded on veracity claims about black film.

An adaptation of Richard Price's novel of the same name (1992), *Clockers* consequentially differs from the novel's primary focalization through homicide detective Rocco Klein with a shift to a narrative emphasis on Strike that amplifies the character's depth.⁴ Aesthetically speaking, the film's color-reversal film stock remediates the light and shadow play of noir with a color palette of vivid grains that ominously evokes surveilling reportage.⁵ Significantly the film's mystery of who killed Darryl Adams in truth suggests a narrative conceit of why Strike must be the killer. Thus, echoing the premise of Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and the question of why Dixon Stelle (Humphrey Bogart) must be the killer rather than who killed the hatcheck girl, *Clockers* complicates noir form with an attention to black visuality, popular culture, and the narrativization of criminality. In other words, Strike must be the killer according to antiblack codes of criminality and not strictly by the procedural science of a murder investigation and noir justice.

Regardless, the rest of Allen's article is devoted to comments from an assembled roundtable of experts, three people identified as intimately knowl-

edgeable about the film's subject matter, with the implication that they are capable of speaking with authority on the film: "'Ace,' a self-described on-and-off drug dealer"; "Luis Arroyo, Police Officer"; and "John Hanchar, EMT [emergency medical technician]." Each responded to the film through the analytic filter of his occupational and personal experiences as a way of measuring the "credibility" of various details, but most especially in terms of the characters and their actions. Noting the actions of film characters against his own drug-dealing experiences, Ace stated that much of *Clockers* was believable, but he pointed out that *clockers* was not a term used in the drug trade. Officer Arroyo found much that was realistic about the film but said the design of the interview room and the procedural behavior of the officers—their use of racist speech and their brutality—were unrealistic. The EMT found the morbid comic behavior of detectives at the crime scene realistic but thought the montage of staged gunshot victims in the title sequence was too graphic and bordered on fake. He conceded that the photographs might be staged or that perhaps he had just become "hardened" to such images. Each respondent's final question was "Your weapon of choice?" None was asked whether he knew that *Clockers* was a fiction film, yet their responses suggest they believe it was nonfiction, a mere reflection of a truth.⁶

My intention in offering this anecdote is not to scold Harry Allen and the respondents for making extraordinarily wrong claims that are endemic of a fringe opinion, a view that black film be primarily measured by an experiential truth or authenticity claims. Rather my intention is to illustrate something ordinary and common, the notion that a certifiably good or bad black film must be a matter of what one would credibly expect to experience in one's life, or in other words, that black film must correspond to reality itself. This logic operates with the presumption that the fundamental value of a black film is exclusively measured by a consensual truth of film's capacity to wholly account for the lived experience or social life of race. Rather than merely dismiss the indexical expectation with asocial or atemporal persuasion, this book promotes contextual and relational tendencies of the idea of black film. In the end, black film does not prosper as a diagnostic mission.

I briefly offered a few possible ways of approaching *Clockers* that addressed form and style (genre), aesthetics and materiality (stock), affinity (intertextuality), and narrativity (the conceit of a problem/crime and a solution). These offerings do not exhaust all the probable considerations of *Clockers*, but they are as vital and more immediately significant than veracity critiques. Moreover as *Clockers* is indeed a film invested in commenting on issues of the drug trade,

inner city violence, black villainy, and black respectability, the real issue is that the film can be fully appreciated only as enacting the art of cinema *and* a social critique. Thus to ignore the former for the sake of the latter or to deny that the latter is mediated by the former denotes incomplete and imperfect criticism.

Film Blackness suspends the idea of black film by pushing for a more expansive understanding of blackness and cinema.⁷ What do we mean when we say *black film*? Black directors, actors, or content? Charles Burnett, not Jim Jarmusch? *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920), not *George Washington* (David Gordon Green, 2000)? Is *Soul Plane* (Jessy Terrero, 2004) “more black” than *Ganja & Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1973)? What does the designation *black film* promise, and what does it disallow? Film blackness is a resolve to reaccentuate the values attributed to black film and generated by an abounding confluence of the art of cinema and black discursivity.⁸

Is It All Over My Face?

Film blackness demands more ambition for the idea of black film as a critical capacity and not agential authority. What if black film could be something other than embodied? What if black film was immaterial and bodiless? What if black film could be speculative or just ambivalent? What if film is ultimately the worst window imaginable and an even poorer mirror? What if black film is art or creative interpretation and not merely the visual transcription of the black lifeworld? As Ralph Ellison wrote in response to Stanley Edgar Hyman’s analysis of black folklore in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), “I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. . . . I knew the trickster Ulysses just as early as I knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore.”⁹ Ellison exposes the violation of a critic’s good intentions as an anti-intellectual engagement with the artist’s choice of form and style that reduces the intertextual reserve of his work to solely the black lifeworld; the trickster is part, not parcel.

Blackness in this book functions as a term for art modalities that evince black visual and expressive culture. Film blackness particularly focuses on questions of intertextual consequence, visibility, performativity, cultural history, and the politics of cinematic form. Thus blackness functions as an interpretative and creative process that bears out what Kimberly Benston recognizes as an enduring lesson of black cultural nationalism: “[Blackness] is not an inevitable object, but rather a motivated, constructed, corrosive, and productive

process.”¹⁰ Therefore film blackness denotes a reading practice devoted to the cinematic, the visual production of blackness (black visibility), and the critical ways that art disputes, distends, and aspires. This multidiscursive property of blackness signals the interpretative and performative capacity of the art of blackness as an aesthetic, cultural, and political engineering of craft.

Race as a constitutive, cultural fiction has always been a consequential element of American history and social life, and antiblack racism, white supremacy, and the Racial Contract are foundational and systemic features of American life. This resonates with the way the idea of race becomes engendered as a natural phenomenon. As Wahneema Lubiano observes, “What is race in the United States if not an attempt to make ‘real’ a set of social assumptions about biology?”¹¹ So then, in spite of the way race functions as a constitutive and cultural fiction, once it appears on the screen how could it be anything other than social fact, the way people are *raced*?¹² This misunderstanding of art enables a critical negligence and wish fulfillment that leaves black film as fruit from the poison tree or the idea of race as quantifiably, fantastically whole. This book insists that black film matters because it offers a critical range of potentialities for understanding blackness as multiaccentual and multidisciplinary. Film blackness renews the idea of black film as a highly variable and unfinalizable braiding of art, culture, and history. There is a rigorous pleasure and politics to this strategy that requires a consideration of what desires inform our conceptions of black visibility and the need to distinguish this pleasure from the dilemma of antiblack racism.¹³ This requires engaging with a film as art on the grounds of what it does and as opposed to what it has been recursively predetermined to do as *of the black experience*.

The discursivity of *black* demands greater rigor than speculations of universal blackness. Stuart Hall recognizes that race as a cultural phenomenon cannot be simplified for the sake of maintaining the semblance of a stable racial category, for this would simply reiterate the essentialist manners of antiblack racism. In the context of my book’s focus on the idea of black film, Hall’s rhetorical query of the *black* of black popular culture echoes my emphasis on a critical investment that does not hinge on guarantees of a universal black subjectivity (or spectatorship).¹⁴ Thus film blackness and its deliberate lack of a totalizing correspondence to a natural order of things or “transcendental racial categories” proffers a regard for discursivity instead of enduring claims of political and cultural obligation.¹⁵

The crucial cadence of *Film Blackness* is attuned to the critical dialogism of cinema as an enactment of black visual and expressive culture.¹⁶ The term

itself is meant to demonstrate a methodological prerogative to incite a discrepant engagement with the idea of black film.¹⁷ Thus the concept of film blackness targets the idea of black film with a motivation concentrated on aesthetic, historiographic, and cultural consequence. With this agitated and churning interdependency of blackness, form, content, and the spatiotemporal magnitude of cinema in mind, this book contests hypostatic and canonical ideas of black film by complicating the conditional question of classifying black film and its social applicability or place in the social world. The vast modalities of black art, of which cinema is a part, often suffer the analytic impropriety of marginality, selective blindness, and indifference to the discursivity of race and blackness as potentiality.¹⁸ *Film Blackness* insists on a redrawing of the lines of influence, appreciation, allusion, causality, reference, and exposition.¹⁹ The discrepant engagement of this book calls attention to cinema's capacity to pose distinctions and dissension in the place of diagnostic ceilings or the false intimacy of doing black film a favor by denying that it is a rigorous and flourishing art.

Nicole Fleetwood vitally considers the always already overdetermined nature of blackness in the visual field as its "troubling affect." She argues that this troubling is endemic to the process of visualizing black bodies. Her work is important for my thesis because of how she frames the objects of her analysis as providing "a lens to look at the affective power of black cultural production, or the calling upon the spectator to do certain work, to perform a function as arbiter, or decoder, of visual signs that become aligned with blackness."²⁰ *Film Blackness* demands a *certain work* of spectator, critical or otherwise, to revalue black film with the active labor of reading through and across blackness by treating each enactment of black film as discrete, if not ambivalent.

The Sum of Us

Black film does not and cannot satisfy identitarian fantasies of black ontology; instead it poses conceits, specificities, and contexts. *Film Blackness* persistently wrestles with the question of identity as something other than a fixed signifier. As Robyn Wiegman notes:

If identities are not metaphysical, timeless categories of being; if they point not to ontologies but to historical specificities and contingencies; if their mappings of bodies and subjectivities are forms of and not simply resis-

tances to practices of domination—then a politics based on identity must carefully negotiate the risk of reinscribing the logic of the system it hopes to defeat. If rethinking the historical contours of Western racial discourse matters as a political project, it is not as a manifestation of an other truth that has previously been denied, but as a vehicle for shifting the frame of reference in such a way that the present can emerge as somehow less familiar, less natural in its categories, its political delineations, and its epistemological foundations.²¹

In the context of black film Wiegman's observations illustrate the tangential misunderstandings that enfeeble and excessively task the idea of black film. This is most evident in the ways that film blackness denaturalizes the authority of categorical claims by fixating on the contextual composition of the idea of black film. To demonstrate this, I turn to a film that disables the black identitarian essence impulse through a compounding of racial, gendered, and performative scripts.

An experimental short, Leah Gilliam's *Now Pretend* (1992) juxtaposes personal memoirs of black subject formation to John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), an account of his 1959 "transformation" and passing as a black man in the South. The modernist design of the film is structured by disinclinations and slippages with regards to personhood and black being. Instead of binaristic conceptions of being, the film poses a series of abstracted visualizations of blackness. It demonstrates an ambivalence toward veracity claims and identitarian prescription. The film opens with a shot of a shadow being cast on the sidewalk and pans up to reveal the back of a black woman walking, awash in the sounds of children playing. The kinetic handheld shots are in slow motion as the lighting casts her as a moving silhouette; then, with a cut to a black woman reading *Black Like Me*, the soundtrack features a reading of Griffin's account of an exchange with his doctor following completion of the final chemical treatment. As he leaves his doctor says, "Now you go into oblivion." The film cuts to a shot of an unknown figure walking in the evening through a field while carrying a flashlight that offers the only illumination. The figure's movement in the darkness and the light cuts to a black woman holding a mirror with the film's title within the frame. With a return to the kinetics of the opening sequence, the audio track shifts to a black mother talking of the effect of black consciousness on her sense of identity, while a voice slowed and accelerated whispers "Skin black" and a mother speaks of how letting her hair go "natural" became a confirmation of newness.

Gilliam orchestrates a braiding of blackness scripts in the sense of identitarian speculation, the Lacanian mirror stage, embodied masquerade, cultural standards of beauty, diasporic negotiation, and black femininity. In another poignant sequence from the film, a black woman walks through a park while carrying a ribbon. The text on the ribbon reads, “At what point did you realize the politics of your self/difference.” The audio track returns to the mother reflecting on the politics that informed her parenting: “I wanted you to be a part of the larger world. But one in which you could keep your personal identity in a way that I felt I had not been able to do in the white institutions in which I had worked and studied.” The mother’s commentary shifts to her memory of the cultural politics of hair and her eventual decision to stop processing her hair. This account is accompanied by a montage that includes an unidentified black woman on a city street; two black girls wearing pillowcases on their heads to simulate long hair; ribbons laid over telephone wires, fluttering in the wind; the scene from *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) when Sarah Jane tosses a black doll; and a reenactment of the moment that followed the earlier citing of *Black Like Me*, when Griffin has returned home to shave his head and apply the final treatment of stain to his skin: “In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger. A fierce, bald, very dark Negro glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me. The transformation was total and shocking. I’d expected to see myself disguised but this was something else. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence.” Intercutting shots of a black woman looking into a mirror that alternately features the words “identity” and “reflect,” the film is further complicated by another reflection on the audio track of a woman recounting her experience of learning to speak properly (and convincingly) black in contradistinction to the pidgin spoken by her Trinidadian parents and the “sounding-white” accusations of her peers.

The film manifests an everyday abstraction of blackness as unsustainable in the strict terms of identitarian being. Through a multiplicity of voices and with reference to cinema, psychoanalysis, and the autobiographical voice, the film proffers and parallels multiple antagonisms surrounding the notion of black identity as something finite, something to which all might universally subscribe. Instead the film’s avant-garde swagger compounds and plots blackness as the art of being, historiography, and cultural engineering. In the place of reinscribing categories, the narrator’s voice articulates self-consciousness and the agential skill of recognizing the danger in accepting scripts from strangers.

Some scholars evade the complication of black film by pursuing a critical line that advocates for ethical judgments about film in a manner that suggests edicts on cultural policy. This type of criticism, anathema to the prerogative of the artist, insists on “good” black film along the tacit rhetorical lines of “good” black people. *Now Pretend* conceptualizes the *lived experience of race* in the necessary terms of complication and irresolution. The film’s critical posture amply dissuades the impulse to wholly distill the cinematic apparatus to a reflectionist ideal.

In *Redefining Black Film*, Mark Reid attempts to remedy those issues that he believes deeply plague the writing of black film history and the reading of black film. He stresses that distinctions must be made between commercial film and those black independent films “written, directed, produced, and distributed by individuals who have some ancestral link to black Africa” and cautions against critical analyses that “[avoid] serious historical issues and [ignore] the polyphonic forms of black subjectivity.” He prefaces his remedy in the following way: “Film histories that fail to distinguish black commercial films from black independent films tend to focus entirely on the commercial films. Consequently, they bury black film history by analyzing it according to ‘relevant’ theoretical criteria that are not applicable to black independent films. They also do not consider the particular cultural experiences of African-Americans. Other well meaning critics analyze black-oriented films according to the popular Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytical approaches that appeal to the widest reading audiences—white male and female middle-class intellectuals.”²²

Reid insists that black film must be considered a practice tied to black subject formation that requires historical contextualization and a guiding attentiveness to polyphony. His thesis becomes troublesome with the absence of any real necessity to distinguish between the mainstream and the commercial other than to emphasize the importance of a black means of production, as if “for us, by us” is beyond reproach. Whatever Reid may intend in celebrating black people and black film becomes a treatise in the tacit terms of “the good black film” as “the good black.” To pose film as black cultural production must avoid a conditionally narrow sense of purposefulness. To do so in a Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic way does not constitute accessing critical analysis as an exercise in white privilege. You cannot claim to read films dialogically and then refuse to see what the films are doing. How can you be willing to appreciate black film or film blackness when it is predetermined by such a

prescriptive prerogative? Does any good really come from refusing to let art exceed your expectations?

Reid rightly raises the issue of a necessary rigor for the study of black film but then quickly states that it is inappropriate to pursue that “relevant” trajectory because it does not subscribe to the essentialist valorization of “for us, by us.” He writes, “Critics and historians must analyze the independent film in terms of the filmmaker’s efforts to create films that explore serious social issues and present balanced images of black women, men, and the African-American community. In developing such a cultural, ideological, socio-economic analysis of black film, critics and historians must describe how, by what means, and to what extent black independent filmmakers have chosen to be responsive to the needs of the black community.”²³ This ultimately does a disservice to black people by suggesting that if there is some essence to be found, it is appropriate to think that film is the proper vessel for such a covenant. Being “responsive to the needs of the black community” does not mean you have to patronize this monolithic black community. Black film offers a vast array of possibilities for conceiving race in creative terms, and film blackness follows through on that promise without devaluing a lifeworld and overvaluing an art. Film blackness restages the conceptual casting of blackness as equal parts thought, élan, aesthetic, and inheritance. That is not a simple or exact matter, nor should it be. Reid’s analysis may have been conceived almost twenty-five years ago, but the tendency to equivocate about the idea of black film with reference to a singular and fantastic black community or dampening readings devoted to black spectatorial prescription and perpetuating some notion of cinema’s capacity to project black authenticity persist. If we must *see* ourselves, then let it be in mirrors and not on screens.

Darby English importantly considers “black representational space,” the institutional/academic and cultural tendency to scrutinize black art in such a way that “can only be thought of as the effect of a politics of representation raging ever since ‘blackness’ could be proposed as the starting point of a certain mode or type of artistic depiction.” In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, English considers how the category of black art requires a “practical transformation” that ultimately bears out “the more difficult truth that the category ‘black art’ is now exposed as one among those many identity frameworks painstakingly constructed for use in a time whose urgencies are simply not those of our own.”²⁴ In the context of American cinema film blackness recognizes this urgency but also understands that framing black film with

an averred longing for a black truth benefits neither the art nor black people. What harm is there in watching a film as an invitation to think and be challenged rather than a perfunctory autopsy? I recognize the ideological hazards that English identifies as placing a cap on the creative and critical volition of art. Instead of substituting one grand theory with another, I am arguing for approaches that can account for resistances, capacities, and variables. Black film does not represent a closed hermeneutics; it represents a vast abundance.

Black Rhythm Happening

Blackness is always a disruptive surprise moving in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies. Such mediation suspends neither the question of identity nor the question of essence. Rather, blackness, in its irreducible relation to the structuring forces of radicalism and the graphic, montagic configurations of tradition, and, perhaps most importantly, in its very manifestation as the inscrip-tional events of a set of performances, requires another thinking of identity and essence.

—FRED MOTEN, *IN THE BREAK*

The reprioritizing function of film blackness, a multiaccental devotion to cinema and blackness, purposefully thrives on the searing and inscrip-tional capacity of blackness noted by Fred Moten. The “improvisational immanence” of blackness guides my conception of film blackness to enliven and amend the idea of black film as an *always disruptive surprise* that might pose new paradigms for genre, narrative, aesthetics, historiography, and intertextuality.²⁵ Film blackness thickens with the irreducible character of blackness and the radical capacity of black visual and expressive culture, a difference that ceaselessly devises and recasts.

Arthur Jafa’s *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (2013) richly demonstrates this sense of cinema’s capacity to enact black visual and expressive magnitude.²⁶ An experimental documentary, *Dreams* focuses on the meaning of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech fifty years later and whether the goals and ambitions of the civil rights movement have been achieved. The film asks, “Does the dream live on? And if so, what has changed?” The query centers on a sustained and prescient consideration of what blackness is, what the history of blackness is, and what the concept means to black people today. During the film’s opening sequence there is a reverse motion shot of young black men appearing to fly backward from a public swimming pool. A sign of deseg-

regation rolling back? In the midst of the gymnastics of black bodies cast from the water, Hortense Spillers's voice comes on the soundtrack: "I know we are going to lose this gift of black culture unless we are careful. This gift that is given to people who didn't have a prayer." Her "I know" is answered by Dr. King saying "I have a dream" on the soundtrack as her comments are ghosted by his "I Have a Dream" speech. In this prelude to the title sequence and the introduction of the film's premise there is the distance between a gift in peril and a prophecy. The film immediately signals departure from a static brand of documentary practice devoted to only the summation of historical detail. Instead the film intones a contemplative measure of the past, present, and future. It is an essay film in the sense of a nonfiction form of intellectual and artistic innovation whose black stream of consciousness is prefaced by Spillers's concern for the state of black culture.²⁷

The film employs variant speeds to accentuate and amplify gestures and movements through and across time and ideas.²⁸ Furthermore the film offers an almost ceaseless montage of images that include black vernacular photography, contemporary art, galactic locations, dance, and news photography. Aesthetically the film frames its subjects in repose or moving as their commentary occurs as a voice-over. They are never seen speaking; they are always contemplative subjects whose thoughts circulate around them. This formal discontinuity of sound and vision or spoken word and the sight of a speech act gives the effect of a thought process in place of the staid voice-of-god narration.²⁹ In one significant sequence there is a radical sense of black political ventriloquism as Fred Moten formulates how as a result of the antiblack codes of America the black desire to be free operates as a conspiratorial act of theft, a criminal action. Moten's voice overlays a scene of the dancer Storyboard P performing his improvised choreography in the street, and thus there is a confluence of schemes: joyful, political, and performative.

A visual historiography of black thought, the film seethes with a productively agnostic impression of the idea of black history in progressive terms by considering the perception and conception of history in exquisitely visual and mosaic terms.³⁰ Geographically speaking the film is structured across the landscapes of Harlem, Brooklyn, Atlanta, Mississippi, and Los Angeles. The assembly of "uncommon folk and specialists," includes Spillers, Moten, Kara Walker, Charles Burnett, Melvin Gibbs, Saidiya Hartman, Flying Lotus, Nicole Fleetwood, Kathleen Cleaver, Wangechi Mutu, and black quotidian life. Together this group of visual artists, revolutionaries, musicians, academics, filmmakers, activists, everyday citizens, and the guiding eye of Jafa himself of-

fer a history of critical resistance, philosophic practice, and black expressivity. But I would like to briefly focus on part of Moten's appearance. In the final section of the film his voice is paired with footage of him walking, and that is coupled with footage from a Trayvon Martin rally in Los Angeles. The slow-motion movement of a mass protest devoted to a black boy coded by a hoodie, murdered, and left to die in the rain with no shelter from the storm becomes punctuated by Moten's commentary that includes the following:

When you say that black people are just an effect of slavery, you raise the question: Can black people be loved? . . . Not desired, not wanted, not acquired, not lusted after. Can black people be loved? Can blackness be loved? So what I am saying is that I believe there is such a thing as blackness, and how it operates is that it is not an effect of horror. It survives horror and terror, but it is not an effect of these things. So it can be loved and has to be loved, and it should be defended.³¹

His comments are made in the context of a consideration of blackness and the object of black studies, a commentary that is interspersed throughout the film. This love signifies a critical devotion to recognize blackness in terms other than the determinism of horror. *Can blackness be loved?* Moten suggests that blackness is always already an act of faith with regard to the theological component of black studies. Instead this faith speaks to the potentialities of blackness as the immateriality of faith shadows and moderates the affective force of blackness. As an enactment of film blackness, *Dreams* demonstrates the rigor of black visual and expressive culture as a study of black thought and black performativity, a gathering and workshopping of ideas on blackness as an act of noninstitutionalized intellectual labor.³² The film pivots away from the narrative-interrupted recycling of a selectively remembered sense of Dr. King's vision to a dialogic envisioning of black praxis and freedom dreams.³³ *Can blackness be loved?* Moten's question, an exquisite explanation for *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, resounds as a rhetorical call, a devotional affirmation, an act of revolutionary hope. In its dynamic devotion to a practice of black intellectual montage, a multidimensional visualizing of blackness, Jafa's enactment of film blackness amply testifies to the idea of black film as art and discourse.

I examine the intimacies and intricacies of film blackness not as an unbroken suite but as variant case studies with distinct consequences and inventive designs that collectively defer those compulsions that delimit the idea of black film and the art of blackness. I focus on four American fiction films as distinct

enactments of film blackness, with attention to considering each across critical traditions of blackness and the arts. I chose these films for the complication and opportunity they pose for the idea of black film. Each proffers a distinct critical consequence, and my readings are focused on the conceptual mutability of film blackness as I locate each film within a particular discursive cluster that details how black film functions as a radical art.

Chapter 1, “Reckless Eyeballing,” focuses on Ralph Bakshi’s *Coonskin* (1975), addressing the film as an exercise in the racial grotesque. The film casts blackness as an absurd modality of critical dialogism with, among other things, the history of American animation, the New South ideal, vernacular cosmopolitanism, the blaxploitation film cycle, the cultural imperialism of Disney, and the countercultural comix of the 1960s. The film performs a radical resignification and critique of the stereotype as commodity fetish, especially the continued naïve and uncritical circulation of this iconography through mass media. Through a textual analysis devoted to one scene of *Coonskin*, I discuss the ideological texture of the film. *Coonskin* is a difficult film that challenges with the exaggeration and redirection of the cathected intention of stereotypicality.

Chapter 2, “Smiling Faces,” considers Wendell B. Harris Jr.’s *Chameleon Street* (1989) and the ways the film stages racial passing in the key of racial performativity. The film’s protagonist (Douglas Street) does not impersonate in the classical sense of racial passing pathologies. His passing as performative act occurs as a signifying menace, a threat to the categorical regimes of race and being. I also address *Chameleon Street* especially in relation to the “black film explosion” of 1991. This involves reading the film’s inability to gain favor critically or financially or as an independent film, art film, or black film by recontextualizing it within the historiography of 1991 as a sign of dispute with the popular and delimiting assessments of black film.

Chapter 3, “Voices Inside,” is an intervention in genre studies. With initial attention to the traditional consideration of noir and blackness, I build on James Naremore’s discursive sense of “the history of an idea” and Manthia Diawara’s “noir by noirs.” Toward a reframing of noir I consider Chester Himes’s discrepant engagement with “America” in the language of the hard-boiled detective tradition and the black absurd. My textual analysis of Bill Duke’s *Deep Cover* (1992) examines the dialogics of genre form (noir) and the discursivity of race (blackness) as “modalities of noir blackness.”

Chapter 4, “Black Maybe,” focuses on Barry Jenkins’s *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), exploring the film’s quiet accounting of blackness, the city,

and historiographic rupture in the age of neoliberalism. I argue that the film's story of a black man and a black woman who couple for a day after a one-night stand is animated by issues such as melancholy, cosmopolitanism, love or desire or attachment, fantasy, gentrification, and the cultural geography of San Francisco. In this way the film's narrativized tracking of this couple focuses on the shifting cultural and racial textures of that city. Thus my diacritical reading of the film as fiction and chronicle considers the history of San Francisco as mediated by anxieties of black diasporic absence that are further imbricated by a romance conceit. In this instance of film blackness there is a complicated sense of how place impacts blackness in tandem with negotiations of futurity and the everyday.

With a deeply contextual concern, film blackness emphasizes how films are imbricated in a vital expanse of renderings, practices, and critical traditions devoted to blackness. The conceptual framing of film blackness fundamentally abides by this range for the sake of understanding that the idea of black film thrives as an enactment of black visual and expressive culture. This book is driven by the belief that the idea of black film is always a question, never an answer.