(Re)imagined Possibilities
The Resilience of the Black Woman Griot

ABSTRACT This essay and accompanying conversation examine the works of filmmaker and scholar Zeinabu irene Davis, whose work centers Black women, engaging their histories and contemporary stories, and thus representing their agency and complex personhood. Davis acknowledges Third Cinema and African/Afro diasporic influences in shaping her style of storytelling and in evolving her fierce Black aesthetic that disrupts the normativity of the dominant white gaze in mainstream media. These choices signify Davis’s ethos and priorities as a filmmaker, a documentarian, a womanist, and a community organizer who humanizes and celebrates her characters on-screen. KEYWORDS affect, blackness, gaze, labor, media privilege, race, representation, resistance, visual literacy, womanism

African women must be everywhere. They must be in the images, behind the camera, in the editing room and involved in every stage of the making of a film. They must be the ones to talk about their problems.

—Sarah Maldoror, Écrans d’Afrique/African Screens 12, 1995

Toni Morrison once said, “As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think.” It is a guidepost, a provocation, offered by one of the world’s greatest storytellers, whose books (many made into films), lectures, and interviews incisively cut to the root of what any thinking person must do when handling the stories of others.

Zeinabu irene Davis (fig. 1) is an independent filmmaker, a professor at the University of California at San Diego, a mother of two, an arts advocate, and a community organizer. These roles intersect in a rich creative life and a significant body of work showing Davis’s intention to meaningfully weave the histories and ordinary lives of the African diaspora with a commitment to representing “othered” voices through Black protagonists. Her work has been screened at conferences, theaters, and festivals in the United States and internationally, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Pan African Film
Festival in Los Angeles, Burkina Faso’s Pan-African Festival of Cinema and Television (FESPACO), and the Toronto International Film Festival. She is the recipient of a number of awards, including the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame and the National Black Programming Consortium for *Cycles* (1989), the Gordon Parks Directing Award from the Independent Feature Project for *Compensation* (1999), and Best Documentary feature film at the 2017 San Diego Film awards and Best Diaspora Documentary Award at the African Movie Academy Awards for *Spirits of Rebellion* (2016).

Surveying the twenty-five-year span of her filmmaking career makes clear that Davis understands the power of media to address social justice issues as they affect women, and specifically Black women. Employing documentary, experimental, and narrative filmmaking methods, she features rarely seen intimacies within Black communities, and often includes her own personal narratives and relationships in her work (fig. 2). Davis honors the fullness of women’s humanity by celebrating menstruation, friendship, and ancestral rituals in *Cycles*, by foregrounding female sexuality and desire through young love in *A Powerful Thang* (1991), by confronting restrictive social codes in *Co-Motion: Tales of Breastfeeding Women* (2010), and by envisioning the mystical experiences of an enslaved girl in *Mother of the River* (1995).
Davis is a self-described Black womanist, as inspired by Alice Walker, who coined the term “womanism” in her 1979 story “Coming Apart” as distinct from “feminism” in advocating for the humanity and well-being of all genders and peoples, with specific anti-racist activisms by Black and Brown women. In one of her better-known films, *Compensation*, Davis puts womanist social theory into practice where as a hearing filmmaker, she reimagines the functions of silent film conventions, refashioning the tool of title cards for hearing audiences to enter the interior world of deaf culture rather than to patronize it. Since its premiere at Sundance in 2000, the film has been screened widely, most recently as the spotlight feature in the 2020 Seattle Deaf Film Festival during COVID-19, demonstrating that it still bears timely witness to unconsidered Black deaf lives. For the Black deaf community to still feel so poignantly represented by this film stands as testimony to Davis’s values and her understanding of how to honor the power of a trusting community.

One of the hardest things for an artist to consistently accomplish in a lifetime of practice is a clarity of vision, and how to communicate this effectively. The African and Afro-Caribbean influences interspersed throughout Davis’s films draw from music, rituals, religions, and folklore that she has learned from colleagues, community, family, mentors, and scholarly research. Her cinematic approach deliberates the African female voice, a leitmotif
through which she situates larger conversations of gender, race, sociopolitical discourses, and pride in African cultural coding and spiritual practices. She achieves this through interdisciplinary methodologies and by studying the actions of Black artists, activists, dancers, musicians, poets, and writers.

Moreover, she rallies Black authors, media makers, artists, and intellectuals as voices intrinsic to a cinema capable of expanding social consciousness and radical empathy. Davis feels that all literary forms help diversify how our histories are understood and challenged, and these perspectives deeply influence the stories she has chosen to tell. Functioning much like a griot in every conversation we’ve had, Davis readily perpetuates the tradition of calling the names of those who came before, situating the honoring of Black women storytellers as a point of departure for how we truly diversify filmmaking and programming. Here in the United States, she says, we needed Kasi Lemons and Neema Barnette for there to be Ava DuVernay. That without Barbara McCullough, there would be no Cauleen Smith, who laid the way for there to be Ja’Tovia Gary. And in the United Kingdom, Michaela Coel stands on the shoulders of Ngozi Onwurah.

Davis speaks also to the significance of having positions of power in film and television, naming producers Yvonne Welbon (documentary) and Stephanie Allain (independent) and writer-producer-actors like Issa Rae (of *Insecure* [HBO, 2016–]) and Michaela Coel (of *I May Destroy You* [HBO and BBC One, 2020–]) as changing both the contemporary and the historical programming we now enjoy on major streaming platforms. It is therefore no surprise that Davis’s current project (in preproduction) interweaves the still-timely work of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers and activists, namely Phillis Wheatley, Marie Joseph Angélique, and Sojourner Truth (fig. 3).

Davis’s career began when she was a student in the 1970s and 1980s. While pursuing her undergraduate degree at Brown University, she studied abroad at the University of Nairobi under the mentorship of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a giant in African literature, political theater, and critical public scholarship whose social practice shaped her approach to filmmaking. She went on to earn her MA in African studies and MFA in film studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the early 1980s, working closely with lauded African cinema scholar Teshome H. Gabriel, who further expanded her collaborative methodologies.

Words like “diversity,” “inclusivity,” and “representation” were barely used in the 1980s, let alone considered important within academic and cultural
institutions or the commercial studio film industry. When Black people did appear in films, they were routinely dispensable, one-dimensional characters, lacking humanizing complexities, interior conflict, or nuance, visible only as background filler, functioning at most as an accessory to elevate white protagonists or as victims of white antiheroes. Black people rarely appeared as societal members of value with families, virtues, flaws, love, sexuality, and joy. For Black viewers, then, the dearth of media representations capable of mirroring their actual lives, of portraying even an inkling of personhood, meant that their participation in the cathartic promise of cinema often fell short or was simply nonexistent.4

Davis grew up keenly noting this inadequacy and sought to fill it, supported by a community of like-minded filmmaking students who later became known—thanks to Clyde Taylor’s coinage—as the LA Rebellion. The group’s activity dates back to a 1969 shooting on the UCLA campus that inspired students to push for the creation of the Ethno-Communications Program, specifically designed to train Native American, Chicano/a, Black, Brown, and Asian students in how to tell their own

FIGURE 3. Image or “shadow” of Sojourner Truth, dated 1864, that Truth copyrighted and sold to support her activism around antislavery and women’s suffrage. Image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum, public domain.
Within a forty-year period, notable storytellers such as Julie Dash, Jamaa Fanaka, Haile Gerima, Barbara McCullough, and, later, Zeinabu irene Davis (affectionately referred to as the baby in the group) emerged from this program to give US audiences, according to Taylor speaking in Davis’s critically acclaimed documentary *Spirits of Rebellion*, a “body of films that were the best representation on screen of Black people in the United States.” *Spirits of Rebellion* features many of these filmmakers. It functions as a collective archive and legacy project, a testimony to their craft and the visibility they gave to Black, Brown, and immigrant communities. But many of the LA Rebellion filmmakers, including Davis, acknowledge that their influences also came from Third Cinema productions, following practitioners from Africa and the Caribbean such as documentarian Sarah Maldoror (Guadeloupe) and narrative filmmaker Ousmane Sembène (Senegal).

While various figurative and stylistic choices weave through Davis’s different films—for instance her use of animation, stop motion, archival imagery, ambient or multilayered sounds, monochromatic tableaux, and ethereal cinematography—one thematic thread is the self-determined existence of her Black characters. She achieves this by invoking dreamscapes, sexuality and desire, naturalism, ritual, vodun, ancestral altars, and Afro-Caribbean folklore. These are still uncommon or underrepresented themes in US Black cinema, a point Racquel Gates made in a recent *New York Times* article that revisits the restorative oeuvre of Davis and her contemporaries. Gates cautions her readers not to rely on Black Lives Matter film lists now emerging for a public hungry to consume Black culture, a subject freshly prioritized, even fetishized, in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Toni McDade, among many other victims of state-sanctioned racist violence. Though Gates recognizes the massively visible successes of Ava DuVernay and Ryan Cooglar, she poses a challenging question: “How many [other] Black films languish on the verge of disappearance, films that may not have been deemed ‘important’ because they cared more to focus on the lovely intricacies of Black life rather than delivering Black pain for white consumption?” “Black film,” Gates continues, “is still too often assessed for its didactic value, with artistic and intellectual contributions deemed secondary.”

Davis’s films represent Black life and conjure Black mysticism without needing to qualify their existence. Blackness as a point of *beingness* is a confluent matter of nuances that accessorize rather than predetermine the central dramatic focus of her characters. Much like Octavia Butler’s creation of worlds unshackled from the violent discriminatory erasures of Black life,
Davis’s films offer an array of imagined possibilities and dimensions. In *Mother of the River*, for instance, we witness the difficult horrors of chattel slavery, yet we simultaneously see coded parallels of ancestral dreamscapes through a child’s point of view, suggesting that either place could be real. When Davis gives young Dofimae (performed by Monique Coleman) a choice of how to exist, we too are given the choice.

The current moment is not dissimilar to 2018, when the contemporary art world produced similar “must-follow” lists resulting in powerful reflections from leading Black women artists Lorna Simpson, Simone Leigh, and Amy Sherald to assert who we make work for, and why. In 2019 the Whitney Biennial, curated by Rujeko Hockley, became notable for its historical inclusion of numerous Black artists and (young) artists of color. After one critic’s shallow dismissal of the show as not “radical enough,” Jamaican American sculptor and scholar Simone Leigh posted on her Instagram page (alongside a picture of Patrice Lumumba’s widow, Pauline Opango) a formidable list of global Black cultural figures and events presumably unknown to the critic, adding in her closing line, “You lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work. And that is why, instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.” Leigh’s Instagram post has since become an artifact utilized in public debate and Black scholarship. Such cultural tensions invariably confront us with difficult questions of who we see, who we erase, where inclusivity or performative powers figure in apologetic uses of the word “privilege,” and the aspirational use of the word “representation.”

Davis’s film *Compensation* speaks directly to the social and political lack of representation, identity, and belonging of marginalized groups within mainstream media. This film is a master class in disarming ableism, in de-privileging normative or dominant gazes. Davis does this first by placing narrative control solely in the hands of deaf female protagonist Malindy (performed by Michelle A. Banks). The film is also remarkable for the aesthetics of its period settings; there is a tangible softness and ethereal quality to the exterior scenes of the main characters Malindy and Tildy (performed by Nirvana Cobb). A similar aesthetic can be discerned by juxtaposing scenes from *Compensation* with Impressionist paintings like Claude Monet’s *Camille on the Beach at Trouville* (1870), or the beach paintings of French Postimpressionist Paul Michel Dupy, where women and children abound.

In contrast to the Eurocentric gaze of Impressionist painters, however, Davis forcefully and intentionally disrupts the narrative erasures of Black women and replaces this with the Black feminine gaze (fig. 4). Curator
Denise Murrell’s 2019 exhibition *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* at Columbia University’s Wallach Art Gallery positioned Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) as having liberated Black women from “exotic” ornamentation, bringing them into the realm of everyday life. Nevertheless, Manet’s Black Laure still occupies her corner in the background in contrast to Victorine Meurent, the central white figure. Laure continues to battle the complexities of societal erasure within the oppressive nuances of class hierarchies, still occupying space as a servile figure in the composition, still denied her personhood.

To say that Davis liberates Black women in her films stresses a crucial point: she refuses to define the Black woman by virtue of her relation to whiteness or maleness. In *Cycles*, for instance, she removes these metaphorical shadows, situating the Black female protagonist Rasheeda Allen (performed by Stephanie Ingram) conspicuously front and center, focusing exclusively on her interior life. In doing so, Davis subverts what Audre Lorde refers to as the “master’s tools.”¹¹ She also grants her characters what Édouard Glissant calls the “right to opacity,” meaning, the right to expressions of Black life needn’t take on the labor of the reactionary or explanatory to enjoy a valid existence.¹² The central right of being human is to be unfixed and perennially rediscoverable, to yourself let alone anyone else. This is freedom, and Davis’s active resistance to systemic erasure and oppression in films like *Cycles*, *Co-Motion*, and *A Powerful Thang* emerges through the affirming absence of any need for permission to exist. Dominant white structures that shape narratives and audience reactions to them are rendered irrelevant to the central action on the screen. As Alice Walker powerfully and succinctly asserts, “Animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.”¹³
There is a Haitian/African cultural metaphor of the beautiful and the ugly that Davis uses to elucidate the dichotomous nature of filmmaking. The beautiful emerges through the possibility of creating a cinematic world for people to experience stories, and perhaps even life, in a different way. The ugly persists in navigating the challenges of financial burden and distribution. As Davis emphasized in our conversations, “Making films is a battle. You can’t make a film if you don’t have any money.” Even though she has received grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Film Institute, and the National Endowment for the Arts, she still has had to self-fund a number of her projects. Amy Adrion’s *Half the Picture* (2018) documents with unflinching candor how these challenges are disproportionately magnified for women filmmakers.

We first met Davis at a screening of *Spirits of Rebellion* at the Henry Art Gallery auditorium in Seattle on February 21, 2020—two weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic forever altered our world. As programmers for Black Cinema Collective, we were invited to facilitate the post-screening discussion with Davis by the event sponsors, the African Studies and Cinema & Media Studies departments and the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington.¹⁴ The interview below is an adapted transcript of our continued, warm and spirited conversations with Davis in a series of interviews totaling four hours via Zoom in August 2020.

**Berette S Macaulay:** One of the common features we perceive in all your films is a focus on Black womanhood, where women are the protagonists. This is a general question regarding your body of work, as opposed to a specific film. Was this a specific intention in your approach from the beginning, or something that organically came about as you were making one movie after the next?

**Zeinabu Irene Davis:** I’ve been making films since about 1981–82, and from the very beginning, the films were about Black women. Period. It was definitely intentional, primarily because as a young girl growing up in the 1970s and coming of age in the 1980s, there were not enough images of Black women readily available to us. If you wanted to see those images, you pretty much had to make them yourself. It’s a different day and age now, but it’s still very limited for the most part. So in some ways I wish that my mission of diversifying the media terrain were obsolete, because I wouldn’t need to keep making these images of Black women, but it’s still very much needed today.

**Savita Krishnamoorthy:** Was it also a conscious thought to make films about the African diaspora and African culture and traditions?
ZiD: From the beginning, it was about women and was always going to be about Black women. It was not a question for me; it was in my film DNA.

BSM: Do you think you have been exploring your own agency as well? There’s that question of Black women in how we’re represented in ordinary life. When telling these stories, were you asserting that for yourself and your community because mainstream media wasn’t offering it?

ZiD: I think definitely yes. I’m not sure that in the beginning, I had the words you just used. I don’t know if I would have said I was asserting myself at that time. It was more that I wanted to be able to create these images, or at least bring them to mind so that they could exist. Within the last twenty years or so, it has become more of an assertion, because we were seeing images of Black women but they still were very stereotypical and limiting. They were not bringing in the full beauty of what Black women are like. We were still seeing very light-skinned women with very Europeanized features. We weren’t seeing Black women with natural hairstyles, or Black women with bodies other than the stereotypical pencil-thin type that we’ve been assaulted with for so many years as what the perfect body is supposed to look like.

The work was always trying to go against some of those notions. I specifically remember about *A Powerful Thang* that I did not choose a trained actress for that role. I chose someone who had long dreadlocks, dancer Asma Feyijinmi, because that was something that I wore at that time, and it was something you did not see represented in mainstream media at all. In the late 1980s, early 1990s, we were still in that mindset (well, we as Black women were not, but certainly White America was) that dreadlocks are dirty or unkempt or not professional, so on and so forth. So my character has these long dreadlocks, and I have her flipping them in the bathtub showing how she washes her hair (fig. 5). I mean, I couldn’t tell you how many times people asked me, “How do you wash your hair”?

BSM: Oh, my god! I just got that question two days ago!

ZiD: See?! It’s 2020 and you are still getting this damn question. Anyway, that was the impetus for trying to show the beauty and the rituals that Black women go through, and their preservation of self and their identities at the same time.

SK: Regarding *A Powerful Thang* and *Cycles*, I was struck by how unapologetic you were in celebrating female pleasure, and how you approached it so artistically. It was the woman taking agency over her own desire.
BSM: And this aligns with contemporary discourses about still having to fight for that right to assert desire. Look at “WAP” and the controversy around this with Cardi B.15

ZiD: Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B!

BSM: Yes, it’s a little bit more intense than what we’re referring to in the film, but it’s still the same critiques being made, especially regarding the complexity of Black women expressing desire. It’s interesting to think about the arc of your work as an artist through all of these historical “moments.” It’s how you speak about your work that changes, I imagine, because you’re constantly measuring it against what is happening and what’s changed (or not) in society.

ZiD: Exactly.

BSM: As an artist and a scholar, would you call yourself a Black feminist? Is this a theoretical thread running through the work?

ZiD: I refer to myself as a womanist rather than a Black feminist. There are problems with some of the ideals of feminism that do not encompass all of what I am as a Black woman, mother, daughter, wife, et cetera. I think we as Black women need to look to ourselves for identification and purpose. Alice Walker’s bold proclamation of womanism in the early 1980s was an outgrowth of how many women involved in the feminist movement felt. Walker’s need to coin the term womanism rather than feminism was born from history and context, and it encompasses the spirits of educators like our ancestors, the educator Anna Julia Cooper and the abolitionist and women’s rights leader Sojourner Truth. Walker’s womanism allows us to include blueswomen like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who did not hide their sexuality or...
behaviors. Walker looked to other writers, like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, (and for me) Toni Cade Bambara to solidify this term, “womanist.” We needed to create and honor our experiences that involve race, gender, and class, where most times feminism turns a blind eye to race and class.

BSM: That’s powerful, because yes, the word “feminism” is so limited and attached to white feminism, which definitely wasn’t inclusive or representative of all women. It also has a lot to do with people not understanding the full and complex histories of feminism. It’s interesting when you say so specifically that “Black womanist” is a term coined by Black women. Black women use “Black feminist” too, but something about “Black womanist” comes from a place of invention, agency, and self-determination, whereas “Black feminism” is almost reactive.

ZiD: Yes! I think so. At least for me, I would say that I look to my fellow Black women artists, sisters, and elders to see what directions they are laying out for us, before I would take on something and express it in a way that didn’t come from the history or the experiences that went before us. I think it’s really important because I am a filmmaker, scholar, and professor, and I have the privilege of time, resources, and energy to do that research and to know that history that I impart through my artwork.

SK: How has your training in academia influenced your filmmaking? Whether it’s in the process or in your choice of stories? And conversely, how has your training as a filmmaker influenced your pedagogy? And we mean this within the institution, but also as a filmmaker who is deeply invested in community.

ZiD: I’ll speak to the part about being a filmmaker first. I was fortunate enough to go to UCLA for film school, where I was exposed to the works of the LA Rebellion filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry (fig. 6); Third World filmmakers from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; and beloved professors like Teshome Gabriel. Having that as my primary background and influences, I also learned more traditional ways of making film and collaborating with people through the rest of UCLA’s film program. But what stayed with me were the ideals we formed as the loose group of filmmakers that became known as the LA Rebellion. We did not call ourselves that when we were in film school, but as scholars and critics began to look at our works, we became known as the LA Rebellion filmmakers because of the similarities in how we worked (fig. 7).

Having said that, I have this tension between being taught filmmaking in a very hierarchical manner—the way that Hollywood studio filmmaking is generally done—and this other model of involving the
community as much as possible (fig. 8). The latter is the one I gravitate toward and try to impart to my own students, because it lets more people into the media-making process and makes it seem less removed.
from our own experiences. Even if you don’t have means, you can still do a lot with the materials available to you. Ironically, that’s become even more important now, since we don’t have the ability to come together under these COVID-19 circumstances. My students currently do not have access to equipment or editing rooms. So the challenge is teaching them without the access that is normally available. But again, the beauty is to use what you have, and figure out ways to tell stories and document your experiences.

As a professor and a filmmaker, I generally have my students work on my films as much as possible, in whatever capacities. Of course I use professionals, but I will figure out ways to have students work as assistants so they can learn. Because unfortunately there’s a lot of nepotism in media production. If you ain’t somebody’s relative, you might not get an opportunity to be on a set. Even if you have a degree in media production, there’s still no guarantee that you’re going to get work. But if you have work experience that has visibility somewhere, that can translate into more work. I work with a lot of students of color, and those are not the ones who are getting the jobs. It’s usually my other students who happen to be white that are getting the jobs, and more quickly.
BSM: That immediately brings to mind Haile Gerima’s line in *Spirits of Rebellion*: “They graduated into an industry, we graduated into a desert.” Speaking to how you address this in your pedagogy and your practice, while watching *Co-Motion*, we recognized women from your other films. Who were the women you interviewed for this? Do you involve your immediate community when making films? Because as one sits with your work, it starts to feel like you’re making work with family.

ZiD: That’s totally true! [laughs] I am inspired by my family, and also want to make it clear, especially to my women students, that family does matter and that you don’t have to have an artificial separation between that and what you do as a filmmaker. Things overlap, and sometimes it’s overwhelming and frustrating, but there’s ebbs and flows in your life. Sometimes the family is more important, sometimes the filmmaking is more important, and sometimes you have to mix the two (fig. 9).

My oldest daughter sat underneath the edit room table as I was working when she was very small, and now she does photography and editing of her own. So you don’t know how those things will actually influence your own kids and families. I’m always saddened to hear my female students, even still in 2020, ask me, “Professor Z, I want to have this career, and have a family too. How did you do it?”

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**FIGURE 9.** Michelle A. Banks of *Compensation* (dir. Zeinabu Irene Davis), 1999, speaks of breastfeeding and motherhood in the documentary *Co-Motion* (dir. Zeinabu Irene Davis), 2010. Screenshot by authors with permission from filmmaker.
I’ve been really grateful to expose students to the filmmaking process whenever I can, to show them other women who are doing the same thing. I had this very profound experience when I taught *Black Panther* (2018) in the spring, where I had several conversations with my women of color students—Black, Asian, and Latina—about how you can be a mother and still work in this industry. They were actually in tears because I showed them this video where *Black Panther* cinematographer Rachel Morrison is talking about being on the set (not of *Black Panther* but on other films) and being pregnant. Her Twitter account blew up because she shared a picture of herself with this big pregnant belly and a camera in her hand, and the concept of that was mind-blowing. They never imagined that someone could do that. This is so messed up that even in 2020 we still have these prescribed roles we must fit into. It’s up to all of us, including myself, to open up the field for more people to come through.

**SK:** So true. Speaking to that, what is the ratio of female versus male students enrolled in the Film Studies program at UC San Diego, and how many of the women are women of color?

**ZiD:** I’ve taught at three different institutions: Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio; Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois; and now the University of California, San Diego, in the Department of Communication. That last is a bit of an anomaly, because we do media and video productions that a lot of communication departments don’t do. When I first started in 1999–2000, the majority of my classes were men, but I can easily tell you looking at my enrollments for the upcoming fall quarter that it’s probably 75 percent female now.

So there are more and more women interested in media production of some sort. But do they become filmmakers? Yes and no. What matters to me is: Do they know how to tell a story? Do they feel empowered to tell their own stories? My job is not necessarily to create filmmakers; it’s to create media literacy so people understand the images they are consuming—what they’re doing to them, doing for them, or doing with them. So they know what that power is, and hopefully educate or encourage others to do the same.

They don’t have to be involved with making multimillion-dollar films. Many of my students at UCSD tend not to go down that path, whereas my students from Northwestern are working within the studio system on projects like *Star Trek* (CBS, 2020) or *Empire* (Fox, 2015–20) or other big-name shows. I’m really proud of them. I talk to the UCSD students about them, so they know you don’t have to be born into the industry to participate in it. But at the same time, it’s also valuable to me.
that they know the value of the little things—of documenting in whatever way you can, even if it’s just with a journal entry or a photograph or a little cell phone video. That stuff still matters and it leaves some kind of record for somebody in the future to know what our lives are like, who we are, who we were, who we want to be.

BSM: This is deeply resonant. I sometimes teach photography, and that’s exactly the methodology that I use and the spirit in which I come to the classroom. Sure, I’m going to teach you all of the technical stuff and you’re going to know how to take a picture, but really, I want to help you develop visual literacy, trusting that you have a story that’s worthy of documentation. There’s this whole thing of people going, “Well, I’m not an artist. How do I learn how to be an artist?” You are already an artist, your stories already matter. You are learning how to use the tools to help you tell the story.

ZiD: Exactly. Like that beautiful exhibition you had on, Berette, while I was visiting Seattle, *Exploring Passages within the Black Diaspora* (2020) at the Photographic Center Northwest. I still think about some of those images, like that woman by the pool. That thing is emblazoned on my brain. It ain’t *Black Is King* (2020) by Beyoncé, but that image is more powerful to me than *Black Is King*.

BSM: I’ll have to tell the artist that! You’re speaking of *Colored Swimming Pool* (2019) by Courtney Desiree Morris, a very powerful image with a powerful history behind it. She’s a Jamaican American artist who teaches in Gender and Women’s Studies at UC Berkeley, so, another artist-scholar like yourself. In thinking about story, archiving, and memory, how do you describe the way African and Afro-Caribbean cultures and spiritual traditions figure in your work? Did this come from your professor who exposed you to Caribbean and African filmmakers, or do you have Caribbean roots in your family?

ZiD: It’s from multiple places. Yes, it is in my family. My grandfather was from St. Vincent, and I have other relatives who are from Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean. I’m from Philadelphia, but I went to school at Brown in Providence, Rhode Island, and I had so many friends who were from Jamaica or St. Kitts or other places in the Caribbean. But I think the other thing is, I grew up going to Catholic schools. Now, to be totally honest, there’s not a whole lot good that I can say about going to Catholic school for twelve years. But it did teach me the value of ritual, and that has really impacted my work. There are so many rituals in Catholicism—good or bad, but they exist. So I have this reverence and
love for ritual that emerges in my work repeatedly. I was also impacted by the films that Teshome Gabriel would show us in Third World Cinema class or Film and Social Change class (fig. 10). It also didn’t hurt that I fell in love with somebody who’s from Haiti.

BSM: Ah, so is that where the Afro-Haitian influence comes in *Cycles* and *
A Powerful Thang*?

ZiD: I lost my mother during my senior year in college, so she didn’t get to see me graduate. But I firmly believe that my mother is still with me. She gave me this amazing gift, which was that I’d be surrounded by a supportive community. The very first event I attended when I got to UCLA was the African Film Festival that Teshome Gabriel was organizing, and the very first people I met were the two men I would begin lifelong collaborations with. One of them is Pierre Désir, who’s the cinematographer on *Cycles* and *Compensation*. The other is Marc Chery, who’s now my husband. He wrote the screenplays for *Mother of the River* and *Compensation*. So this was a collaboration that started from the very beginning of my time in Los Angeles, but I believe that that’s one of the most valuable gifts that my mother left me with: she made sure I got taken care of in some way.
The 1980s was the time of AIDS, and Haitian Americans, along with gay men, were vilified as AIDS carriers. So, making sure people understood the more positive aspects of Haitian culture like vodun (and not the stereotypical voodoo zombies) that most people unfortunately think they know about, felt so important. To actually be able to study and learn about those rituals and to celebrate those like in *Cycles*, when the women dance on the *veve* [a symbol of Erzulie, vodun spirit, or Iwa, made with cornmeal] on the ground (fig. 11). It’s not like Western art, when you put it on the wall, to be admired. In vodun, one of the highest forms of praise is to dance, and the power of *veve* can’t be released until people dance on it. That flips people out when I talk to them about it in relation to *Cycles* and the *veve* symbol. Erzulie has many different manifestations, but the one I’m invoking in *Cycles* is Erzulie Freda, the goddess connected with creativity, fertility, and beauty. The cool thing is, people can watch the film and not have a clue, but for others I’m able to express background about culture and history that hopefully gives them a greater appreciation and understanding of Black culture and how it’s tied to Black womanhood and celebrations of Black women.

BSM: *Cycles, Mother of the River,* and *A Powerful Thang* clearly speak to memory, to reverence, and to ancestral honoring. I was seeing Ousmane Sembène’s influences in *Cycles,* too. The first half of *Cycles* felt like I was watching an honoring of *Black Girl* (1966). The interiority of hearing her speak while she’s going about these domestic actions of cleaning her room, packing away clothes—there was something about the exposition of the film, the compositional aesthetic, that reminded me *Black Girl.* Was that intentional, or subliminal? Has Sembène inspired or influenced you at all?
ZiD: Definitely subliminal. It wasn’t until you just said that that I even thought about it. Marc and I have been rewatching more Sembèné films since COVID-19, so that’s amazing you saw that in there. I clearly see the connection but it was totally unintentional. I greatly admire Sembèné’s film work. I watched a documentary on him recently, *Sembèné!* (2015), directed by Samba Gadjigo and Jason Silverman, and, well, he was definitely a human!

When you look at his work, you realize what a great sacrifice he made in the name of cinema—using it to tackle very difficult issues. And he didn’t back down. The way he used women as symbols for his themes is so valuable and important. I continue to be inspired by his films and his dedication to creating African cinema. I am not inspired by the way that he dealt with family in his life. I’m hoping that people will see that documentary and think about how documentary directors incorporate and deal with family, because you know, there are other filmmakers of his generation. Obviously, we have to talk about Sarah Maldoror.

Maldoror is from the Caribbean, from Guadalupe. She goes to Africa and marries Mário Pinto de Andrade, a poet and political figure from Angola, and begins to take on cinema in a very different way than Sembèné does. Because she’s a woman, she’s not as prolific, and she doesn’t make a whole bunch of feature films. She makes documentaries. But she has these two amazing daughters that she leaves behind, and both of them are now involved in film. Annouchka is the artistic director of the Amiens International Film Festival, and Henda is also doing other amazing stuff. So clearly, Maldoror involved her family in her filmmaking practices. Her two daughters might not have been able to participate in things when they were smaller, but clearly Maldoror created a relationship with them so that they would understand more of what she was doing when they became older. They value what their mother and father were doing and want to preserve their mother’s films in such a strong, beautiful way. I feel even more inspired now by Maldoror and what she gave to us because I think for me, it is a more holistic way of how I want to live my life as a filmmaker. Yes, I want to have a body of work, but I also want to have family and community whom I support, and they support me. It’s an interesting moment to reflect on that now in the time of COVID.

BSM: Yes, Sembèné made a lot of very important films. But some people suffered to work with him, which is the antithesis of how you’ve been working pedagogically and artistically, creating community and working with family. He did not do that. Thank you for mentioning Maldoror.
ZiD: That’s part of the problem. Of course we know about Sembène because he’s a man, and people don’t know about Maldoror, but her work is just as valuable. The fact that she did these short documentaries—a theater person who transitioned from actress to film director. We need to understand these contributions and make sure her work is preserved as well as his work is. Think of what she sacrificed to make Sambizanga (1972) or some of her short films.16

SK: Talking of diaspora and Afro-Caribbean culture, do you have specific African influences that seep into different aspects of your filmmaking?

ZiD: I was fortunate to study under Ngugi Wa Thion’o when I was in Kenya. What he gave to me, and still gives when I reread his work, is the value of history and telling our own stories. I worked on one of his plays when I was at the University of Nairobi, and my job was to do the photographs in the background of the so-called Mau Mau Revolt against British colonization back in the 1950s. Ngugi had actors alongside elders on stage doing oral histories of their experiences, and in the background were photographs of what happened according to whoever was behind the lens; we know that it was not necessarily African people who were taking those pictures during colonialism. That connection to history and performance was emblazoned on my brain, and will always come out in my work.

Because of being connected to West African religions, specifically Yoruba-based religions, Ifa, those come out particularly in the narrative films I’ve been able to make. So we see altars in Cycles, Compensation, and A Powerful Thang. I generally have some kind of altar where the ancestors are worshipped. My mom was gone before I started making films in earnest, but she is in my films because those pictures of the women in the altars show my mother. My brother and my father are also in my films. My brother plays Tyrone in Compensation, and my father is in A Powerful Thang as the dad of the lead character, Yasmine. The famous scene of Yasmine being given a bag of condoms—my dad did something similar when I was coming up.

SK: And yourself, right? I think I remember seeing you in—

ZiD: —in Co-Motion. And my students made me get into Spirits of Rebellion. I did not want to be in it, but they were like “Professor Z, you have got to tell your story too.”

BSM: Let’s unpack some specific films here. Compensation is hugely successful in how it achieves manifold or multifold resistance to the conventions of erasure, both societal and cinematic. It represents Black
deaf culture, deaf culture, and it bridges worlds of deaf and hearing relationships from the point of view of a deaf female character (fig. 12). These perspectives eschew the hearing-world gaze and the white gaze. The discursive functions of this film are complex yet so accessible through parallel timelines of two love stories a century apart that produce a kind of magic and escape. Did you know you were doing all this when you set about making this film?

ZiD: Hell, no! Thank you very much. That was beautiful, that reaction, Berette. You have to send that to me so I can keep it as encouragement. But no, it was just a series of happy circumstances. Compensation was
inspired by the lead actress Asma Feyijinmi in *A Powerful Thang*. She wasn’t a trained actor, and one of the things you experience when making a film is a lot of hurry-up-and-wait, and when people have to wait, they lose focus. For her to stay focused I asked her to keep a journal as her character. While she was waiting for us to set the lights or sound, she wrote a response to the poem “Compensation” (1905) by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Asma is a dancer, and her journal entries reflected the loss of people in her dance community due to HIV and AIDS. I showed it to my husband-screenwriter Marc, and he developed a story that included the scourge of HIV and AIDS, and also to what happened to Dunbar, who died from complications related to tuberculosis. So that’s how those two stories developed—at the beginning and the end of the twentieth century.

When Marc wrote the original screenplay for *Compensation*, it was very short—it was meant to be a twenty-minute film. How did we get a ninety-minute film out of a twenty-minute film? Well, there was always this need and desire to include imagery of African Americans from the early part of the century, because when you go to film schools, you are bludgeoned with D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and

**FIGURE 13.** *Chicago Defender* photo featured in *Compensation* (dir. Zeinabu irene Davis), 1999. Photo: Chicago Historical Society, screenshot by authors.
there’s no real reason why we’re taught that film. It is a piece of shit. I don’t teach it! The only reason we teach Birth of a Nation is systemic racism, as far as I’m concerned.

It was super important for me to include images of African Americans at the turn of the century, because we did participate in the making of cinema. But most of those films are lost, destroyed, damaged, or hidden somewhere and we haven’t found them yet. That’s why it was important for me, as a scholar and a researcher, to go back into the Chicago Defender archives and find the synopsis for the first African American film that was made by a company in Chicago. That was The Railroad Porter (1912), directed by William D. Foster. The Railroad Porter as a film doesn’t exist, but we created a film within a film using the synopsis that was in the Chicago Defender (fig. 13). And of course, because I made the film, I gave a woman a gun. So the woman is in the short version of The Railroad Porter shooting a gun at the two men who are shooting guns at each other (fig. 14). I took creative liberties with that, but the inclusion of Michelle Banks, the lead actor in Compensation, was what moved it from a story about Black folks to a story about Black deaf folks.

I was sitting on a grant panel in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the Independent Television Service, and their free paper had a picture of a Black deaf woman performing in sign. We went to the theater that night and stalked Michelle after the performance, because we saw how powerful she was as a performer. She was interested, so that moved all the wheels around. I started researching and learning more about deaf culture. I took American Sign Language classes and also tried to meet people in the deaf community, learning more about Black deaf folks—
who are in the millions yet with virtually no representation in the media, even today. It wasn’t that I was trying to make a film that was for deaf people; it was more like I was trying to make a film with deaf people. There are more Black deaf filmmakers now than back in the 1990s. I had the money to bring in a Black deaf assistant director, Anne Marie “Jade” Bryan, which made the film that much richer.

SK: How long did it take you to make it?

ZiD: [laughs] I don’t make a film unless it takes me six years, it seems like. At least the long ones. The shorter ones, like Co-Motion, are faster. Mother of the River was fast, as we had an ITVS [Independent Television Service] documentary funding contract, so I had to make it within a year. But self-funded ones take about six years, most of the time because I don’t have the money to finish. I’m teaching, so I’m not working on the film as much during the school year. I used to beat myself up about it, but it works out because you live with the material, which enriches what you’re doing. Films get made, and pieces get finished when they do, for a reason.

BSM: It shows in the film that you brought the deaf community in. This was not Children of a Lesser God (1986). It felt like I had the privilege to witness a world that was its own autonomous space, that I’m not part of a dominant gaze as a hearing person. What a master class!

SK: One thing that struck me deeply about Compensation, in addition to your extensive archival research, was the lyrical, painterly quality, for instance when Malindy and Tildy are on the beach. That frame has a softness that is beautiful to watch.

ZiD: Oh, thank you. And that was specifically because Pierre Désir, the cinematographer, and I talked about keeping that silent film tableau look, where the camera doesn’t move very much. We wanted everything to happen within the frame as much as possible. And that helped us on a few accounts. One, we didn’t need as much equipment. And two, it made us more conscious of the sign language, because Malindy speaks with her hands and body, and it’s important not to cut that off, which you would in a typical close-up that cuts to the person’s head (fig. 15).

I should mention the beginning of the film, where Malindy is writing about going to school. Those photographs actually did come from Gallaudet University, and though much of the film is fiction, that unfortunately is not fiction (fig. 16). There’s Black and Native American children in those beginning photographs from the archives at Gallaudet that included the Kendall school. Unfortunately, in 1905 when white
parents started to complain, these children were expelled from the Kendall school.\textsuperscript{17} That segregation history was something I made sure to include in the film.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Malaika (Michelle A. Banks) signs in ASL in \textit{Compensation} (dir. Zeinabu irene Davis), 1999. Photo: Devon Whitmore, courtesy the filmmaker.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure16.jpg}
\caption{Archival image of the Kendall school at Gallaudet University included in \textit{Compensation} (dir. Zeinabu irene Davis), 1999.}
\end{figure}
SK: Is it an ongoing challenge to constantly find accessibility, visibility, and reach for your films?

ZiD: Distribution is definitely still a challenge. People think that it’s easier now because you can put the work on YouTube, but you can’t get paid from YouTube unless you have thousands or millions of followers; it doesn’t sustain a career or serve independent filmmakers. I got kids I gotta feed, put shoes on, and send to college, so no, I’m not putting my work out there for free.

BSM: And in terms of circulation and licensing contracts: There are a lot of Afro-diasporic films now on Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Hulu, but what is the industry machinery behind that? Is it a sustainable mode for filmmakers? Because a lot of those platforms are trafficking in micro audiences, but there’s still a paywall of some kind. Is that paywall system enough to sustain a career as a filmmaker?

ZiD: I honestly can’t answer that question, because I don’t know. You’re talking about something that is happening as we speak. In May, when we had the known death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the platforms weren’t carrying that many Black filmmakers and their titles. But now, everybody has to have a Black Lives section. I think that’s good, yet in some ways I’m fearful of it because it’s like we’re the flavor of the moment now, but is it going to be sustained? The good news is that filmmakers are getting more work. And interestingly, it’s opening up for more work by filmmakers from Africa. I don’t see that much for filmmakers from the Caribbean or South America yet, but it’s got to be coming.

This is something Netflix is doing, more Nigerian “Nollywood” films and some South African stuff as well. DeShuna Spencer, the sister who’s running the KweliTV platform, founded in 2012, features works by, for, and about African Black diaspora and African audiences. I’m hopeful, but also very cautious because I don’t know if streaming services will be reliable to actually pay to make new work.

BSM: Winding back to Savita’s question about the painterly quality we see in Compensation, I’m wondering where that came from?

ZiD: Yes, the women and the period section on the beach, the way the dresses are flowing. I was very fortunate to go to UCLA film school when I did, and be mentored by people like Charles Burnett and Julie Dash, and that beach sequence is basically an homage to Daughters of the Dust (1991)—the umbrella on the beach, the women dressed in a similar fashion (fig. 17). I must acknowledge that as part of what I was trying to do with it.
BSM: This is also related to *Mother of the River*, and we see a similar aesthetic in Beyoncé’s album and film *Lemonade* (2016), with the plantation garden composition and blocking of characters in space. The energy is feminine, magical realism, and if it comes from your training or mentorship with Dash and Burnett, what does it mean in terms of narrative when you use it?

ZiD: That’s a really good question. *Mother of the River* is very different from my other films. As I mentioned, I had to produce it quickly because of the funding circumstances. I did not work with the same kind of crew I usually do. It was mostly an all-white-guy crew. I was in Charleston and there weren’t a lot of Black filmmakers at that time that I could tap into. I still had students working with me, like Yvonne Welbon (who continued making her own films), but there were a lot of challenges. [takes a breath] First, I’m shooting on location, which is a former slave plantation. Second, I’m dealing with a plantation owner who refuses to see me as the director, and will only speak to my white male line producer as we’re working. Third, when I’m on location late at night, I get mistaken for the cleaning woman and get told that I need to move some stuff to the trash can because so-and-so is coming to the big house the next day, or some other bullshit. And last, when we were fortunate
enough to get some news coverage while in production, I was completely left out of the footage. They showed the interview with the white DP and the interview with Monique Coleman (Dofimac), but there’s no evidence that a Black woman was directing or producing (fig. 18).

So, it was a head trip. But it got done. That’s the important thing. As far as imagery goes, every time I make a film, I do something I haven’t done before as an aesthetic or formal challenge to keep things interesting. In Compensation it was to use a dolly and track.

The whipping scene was very difficult for the cast and for me as a director, because I had to manage people’s emotions. There’s a lot of responsibility. Everybody is relying on you to tell the story and to make things right, but also to get them in a place where they feel confident that whatever they’re doing will have a lasting, positive influence, even though we weren’t shooting under a positive set of circumstances. It was important that I took care of my crew and my cast, and it was hard for both the white and Black actors in those scenes, but I think we did the best we could, and people were proud of the end result (fig. 19).

BSM: I consider how the totality of the film sits when thinking about, say, 12 Years a Slave (2013) and what it must have been like to film those
whipping scenes. I think *Mother of the River* creates a shape-shifting folklore and a way of imagining the self outside of this ontological nightmare and history. There’s true emancipation occurring in the way Black sci-fi author Octavia Butler talked about—using our imagination to write ourselves out of this, which I think *12 Years a Slave* did not do. If I can make that comparison. You held the histories and complexities of how plantation life set up the social structures we see in postcolonial life now, but you also provide this alternative space. How do you hope the film will hold up for people watching it now, twenty-five years later?

**ZiD:** Sometimes you make films because you need catharsis. When I was teaching at Northwestern, I didn’t have that many Black students; most of the students were white and privileged. One of the ways I tried to get around this was to teach media literacy classes at places like the Fleetwood-Jourdain Community Center in Evanston, and make workshop films with young Black kids. At the time, the Alex Haley sequel to *Roots*, titled *Queen* (1993), about Haley’s grandmother, was out. It featured Halle Berry, whose character was dressed in antebellum clothes. I was talking to the students about the institution of slavery and a young Black girl raised her hand and said, “Professor Davis, I don’t
understand why you don’t like this kind of film. The clothes, the way that she looks is so beautiful, so wasn’t slavery also beautiful?” I almost lost it, but I’m in front of kids nine to twelve. So, I basically turned my back and muttered, “Note to self, you have to process this later.”

I talked to them about what slavery really was like—not the glamorous thing depicted in this TV series. It was extremely difficult and horrendous. When I told the story to Marc, it reminded him of a folktale his grandmother told him, and that was how the story of Dofimae got inserted into this folklore story about Mother of the River and her powers and ability to fly whenever she wants to (fig. 20). It’s set in South Carolina because my father is from there. But it was that anger and the catharsis I needed to be able to tell that story—to get away from that young girl’s interpretation of slavery based on a Hollywood version of enslaved peoples.

SK: Even just sitting with the Gone With The Wind (1939) trope that romanticizes that era, and connecting it with that young girl’s sentimental view of slavery just because the women are wearing beautiful dresses.

ZiD: Exactly. I thought about making some of the scenes more graphic to emphasize the horrors that people probably had to endure. But this was
a film for children to see. Still, I wanted a different understanding of what that situation was like for people who were there. My husband Marc believes in subtlety as a writer. If you know more, you can read more into it, but if you don’t, it’s not going to prevent you from enjoying the story.

BSM: Accessibility is a feature of all your work.

SK: You embed layers of nuance and complexity that resonate deeply. Thank you for that, and thank you so much for the conversation.

BSM: Yes, thank you so much, this has been enriching and educational, and there’s much to research now, given all you’ve shared!

ZiD: Thank you both for your attention to detail and your insights. It’s these things that help me continue wanting to make work.

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Zeinabu Irene Davis (b. 1961) is an award-winning director and producer originally from Philadelphia, with an undergraduate degree from Brown University and an MA in African studies and an MFA in film and television production from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her work focuses on women of African descent and uses various storytelling methods, including documentary, short narrative, and experimental film. Her production company is Wimmin with a Mission Productions, and her works are distributed by Women Make Movies, Third World Newsreel, and Cinema Guild. Davis currently serves as a professor of communications at the University of California, San Diego.

Berette Macaulay is a multidisciplinary artist, photographer, curator, and scholar. Her practices interrogate ideas of be/longing, coded language, identity performance, illegibility, memory, and mythmaking. She has exhibited and published widely, and her works are in numerous collections, including the National Gallery of Jamaica and the International Center of Photography (as SeBiArt). She has received artist grants from Shunpike, 4Culture, and Vermont Studio Center, and is the 2020 Champion of Seattle Arts (COSA) awardee. She holds a BA in theater arts from Marymount Manhattan College and an MA in cultural studies from the University of Washington at Bothell, and is the founder and co-programmer for Black Cinema Collective. berettemacaulay.com

Savita Krishnamoorthy holds an MA in the history of art from the University of Bangalore and an MA in cultural studies from the University of Washington at Bothell. She taught at Bellevue College, and was a curator for a gallery specializing in contemporary Northwest art. She volunteers with Tasveer and also serves as arts commissioner for the city of Redmond, Washington. As a cultural studies scholar, Krishnamoorthy bridges her scholarship mindfully with community engagement and community building. She is the recipient of a 2019 Merit Award from the Alpha Kappa Alpha Foundation and is a co-programmer with Black Cinema Collective.

NOTES

1. This short story by Alice Walker is often cited by scholars as coining “womanism” as a humanist social theory in practice, particularly by Black and Brown women. It was originally published in Ms. magazine in 1980 under the title “When Women Confront Porn at Home,” and then as “Coming Apart” in You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down

2. Griots, originating from the Mande empire of Mali, are West African oral storytellers, poets, musicians, and keepers of community histories. We align this with the work Davis and her community of Black women filmmakers, and with the African and Third Cinema histories that influence them. See Lize Okoh, “What Is a Griot and Why Are They Important?,” Culture Trip, May 24, 2018, https://theculturetrip.com/africa/mali/articles/what-is-a-griot-and-why-are-they-important/.

3. On the specific utility of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s community theater at the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in Kenya to the sociopolitical praxis of art and performance for civic change, see Handel K. Wright, “Dare We De-Centre Birmingham?,” European Journal of Cultural Studies 1, no. 1 (1998): 33–56.


8. The post was to Instagram on May 16, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BxjJ58qL4t/?hl=en. The image was a 1961 press image of Opong grieving openly in the streets, bare breasted, after her husband and first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, had been assassinated. The image was captioned: “Lumumba’s Mourning Widow in Leéopoldville. Gone were the Paris frocks.”


10. In our interview Davis acknowledges this aesthetic sensibility as an homage to Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (1991); the delicate movement of the women’s
dresses, candid poses, subtle blending of pigments, and misty play of light are reminiscent of the Impressionists’ treatments of their painted scenes.


13. This widely circulated quote by Alice Walker is often taken out of context, used by animal rights advocacy groups and activists for obvious and arguably suitable reasons—which we too may have done here. This line was originally a responsive statement in the foreword to Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Animal Slavery and Human Slavery*, rev. 3rd ed. (Mirror Books/IDEa, 1996), 14.

14. Black Cinema Collective (BCC) was founded in April 2019 by Berette S Macaulay and originally funded by the Simpson Center for the Humanities in Seattle. With fellow lead programmers Savita Krishnamoorthy and Mateo B. Ochoa, BCC produces screenings, discussions, and watch parties that center local and global cinema productions from African and Afro-diasporic filmmakers, writers, and performers. Read more at http://www.blackcinemacollective.org.


17. Kendall Demonstration Elementary School is a private day school serving deaf and hard-of-hearing students from birth through grade eight on the campus of Gallaudet University in the Trinidad neighborhood of Washington, DC. See https://www.gallaudet.edu/kendall-demonstration-elementary-school/about/history-of-kendall.