



March 23, 2019

Heartbreak/Who Gets to Be Remembered: Black Women in and Around the Archives

Discovery with
Ayanna Dozier

Heartbreak, like history and culture, persists. For the past four years, my doctoral research has pursued numerous archives in hopes of finding a history and culture around Black women's experimental cinema in the United States and the United Kingdom. Black women's contemporary experimental cinema (1970s to the present), like other forms of Black cultural production, utilizes film's formal and narrative aesthetics to signify the memories and temporalities of Black bodies and their history. My doctoral scholarship examines Black women's experimental short films for the way this body of work materializes the expressive

properties of Blackness that include; culture, dance, hairstyles, fashion, pain, memory, bodies, and accounts of anti-Black racism through the aesthetics of the film. In addition, I argue that the films themselves in dialogue with the archives use the absence and erasure of institutional history to fabulate or create new truths around the representation of Black bodies and their history.

In conducting archival research to find films, notes, memories, and reviews on this project, I encountered what feminist film scholar Alexandra Juhasz writes in *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film & Video*, “the recurring cycle of feminist knowledge and action: feminists exist and are forgotten ... rediscovered, erased, and re-represented yet again.”^[1] While my research marks the first comprehensive study and cataloging of Black women’s experimental film in the U.S. and the U.K., I am certainly not the first scholar to write about the genre.^[2] But in addition to the cyclical framework by which we learn about Black women’s artistic productions through history, I also had to become acquainted with the heartbreak that these archives would produce.

Due to the disproportionate funding that women filmmakers receive, particularly Black women, feminist experimental films are not only scarce but are dependent upon this recurring cycle of feminist knowledge to be remembered and disseminated to a wider audience. These forms of feminist knowledge distribution include; film exhibitions and screenings, film reviews, interviews with the filmmakers, making new film and media projects around these filmmakers, film writing and criticism, film education, funding new films, and film creation. This recurring cycle is not specific to just feminist experimental films but to all feminist media work, as the work can only be remembered if the intellectual, emotional, physical, and economical labor of all the above forms of feminist knowledge are done. It comes as no surprise that this work is usually and largely conducted by other feminists, namely ones with an identificatory stake in the films at hand. This statement is sadly true of the experimental films made by Black women. The forms of mainstream feminist knowledge that surround women’s experimental film work have disproportionately been dedicated to examining the experimental films made by white women with Black women’s experimental film work occupying a space of “unknowability” or, worst, that of a lack. It is only through an intersectional feminist research

approach where the breadcrumbs left by other Black feminists become

visible.

Simply put, archival research on Black women is personal work for me. It is personal because conducting archival research on Black women is about how archives fail Black women. Archivist Saidiya Hartman writes in “Venus in Two Acts” that “the *history* of Black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing.”^[3] To repeatedly encounter failure in the archive—the failure of lives lost, omitted, erased, or misrepresented—produces an intellectual response that registers on the realm of the affective/emotional. It is an encounter that I suggest is akin to heartbreak following the rich study that scholars Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye write on emotional toll that structural oppression plays in shaping Black life in the United States and Canada in “808s & Heartbreak.” What does it mean to let heartbreak lead the methodological terrain of archival research? This type of research does not reduce empirical gathering that takes place in the archive but rather enables scholars, specifically those conducting research on Black women, to come to terms with the fact that their research questions may, and often will, produce unresolvable answers. McKittrick and Weheliye ground their theory on heartbreak through a material historical framework of anti-Black racism in North America. They write (in full):

Heartbreak captures, at least a little, those injuriously loving emulations of what it means to be Black and human within the context of white supremacy. Heartbreak works with and in excess of the bio-mythological heart, the hollow muscular organ and its narratives of affectively variegated tenderness and loss. Heartbreak represents the reverberating echoes of our collective plutocratic historical pasts in the present. Heartbreak elucidates how the violence of racial capitalism inaccurately reproduces black life. Heartbreak bursts apart. Heartbreak is feeling outside of oneself. Heartbreak is the demand to feel outside of ones' individuated self.^[4]

Heartbreak, I further add, connects is a shared structure of feeling for those who are haunted by whiteness. How does one do research that asks questions around futurity, life, and possibility when those very terms are, have been, and potentially will be dislodged temporally from connecting a tangible place for Black life, specifically Black women who have mothered themselves into this world only to be forgotten and erased?

As McKittrick and Weheliye write, heartbreak is also the ways in which white supremacy redefined kinship relations between Black

families and communities, positioning Black girls and women as subjects who labor (both emotionally and physically) for the advancement of the race. The domestic space for Black girls was (and unfortunately still is) a site of work, it is a site of trauma where the labor is also about the endurance and silence of pain. Using R. Kelly's history of sexual assault against Black girls and the blind eye turns towards them as victims, McKittrick and Weheylie write that for Black girls (and further women) the spatial parameters of the home were redefined by slavery as the home is the first source of abuse. They state, "What modes of violation follow the brutalizations, for instance, when family members and friends refuse to believe victims ... Where do broken hearts go? They probably cannot find their way home."^[5] Heartbreak as methodological practice enables us, as scholars, to sit with pain through memory and challenges assumptions of "moving on".

Heartbreak, in my scholarship, is a deindividuation from my experience, meaning it pulls me out of reflecting upon the work that I have done as mine or as "belonging to me alone." Archives are not just a storage of past events, ephemera, art, etc. but are, rather, what novelist Toni Morrison writes as the production of two lanes, the actual and the possible. We free archives from the petrification of time, when we allow it to lead us to what could be possible in time, the past, present, and future.^[6] For Morrison, archives already denote a relationship to time and space and in this way, then, archives could best be understood as sites of memory. Archives as sites of memory enable us to see their potential as sites of activation. An activation in Morrison's argument and mine refers to the new work created from the archival material that exists beyond the general report, be that a film, artwork, poem, article, etc. Such activations can be moments that break your heart, as my archival research has revealed to me. For this study, my goal was to offer a critical response to not only the unequal conditions of writing, storing, and remembering Black women's work that occurs across North America and the United Kingdom due to systemic racialized sexism but to think of the affective/emotional responses that it produces as part of that scholarly work. As artists, archivists, and researchers we should take that such a response critically and ask why some class of individuals are forgotten in the very space by which they should be remembered and to use these inquiries and feelings as a reminder that we are accountable to not just the work, but to the lives—present, future, and past—who have been betrayed by institutional ways of remembering, the archive.

Ayanna Dozier

Ayanna Dozier is a PhD candidate in Art History & Communication Studies with a graduate option in Women & Gender Studies at McGill University. Selected publications include: *Cléo Journal*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Another Gaze*, and *Liquid Blackness Journal*. Dozier is also a critical studies fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program and a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum.

Notes

1.

Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video

Alexandra Juhasz (2001)
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

2

2.

On Black women's experimental film in the U.S. and the U.K

(2019)

Selected films include: Alile Sharon Larkin's "The Kitchen" (1975), Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust" (1991), and Zeinabu irene Davis's "Cycles" (1989)

Ayanna Dozier, "Black Women and the Edit of Shame: Alile Sharon Larkin's The Kitchen," *Cléo* 5, no. 2 (2017).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Experimental Domesticities: Patricia Gruben's The Central Character and Zeinabu Davis's Cycles" in *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama*, ed. Kathleen Anne McHugh (Cary, US: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1999).

Jacqueline Bobo, "Daughters of the Dust," in *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

3.

"Venus in Two Acts"

Saidiya Hartman (2008)
Small Axe
26, no. 1: 13

4.

“808s & Heartbreak”

Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye (2017)

Propter Nos

2 : 14

5.

“808s & Heartbreak”

Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye (2017)

Propter Nos

2 : 15

6.

“The Site of Memory” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson

Toni Morrison (1990)

Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

99

© Artexxe 2020

All rights reserved

Graphic design : Supersymétrie

Development : Croustille

[Blog guidelines and policies](#)