No happy returns: aesthetics, labor, and affect in Julie Dash’s experimental short film, *Four Women* (1975)

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No happy returns: aesthetics, labor, and affect in Julie Dash’s experimental short film, *Four Women* (1975)

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**ABSTRACT**

Shaped by Black feminist ideology, this essay examines how Black women, as informed by their embodied existence, manipulate film’s formal and narrative aesthetics to ask what does cinema do, and what can it do in its portrayal of Black expressive culture. I understand the cinematic (re)presentation of Blackness to be an ideological aesthetic battleground for filmmakers, and while there are a plethora of films and scholarship dedicated to “positive” (re)presentations of Blackness, this is not that study. My study examines how experimental cinema gets around, negates, and dismisses recursively predetermined film portrayals of The Black Experience through its refusal to provide answers. Black women’s experimental cinema demonstrates the expressive possibilities of cinema’s form through their use of Black expressive culture. In this way, Black women’s experimental cinema has always been representative of how cinema generates and conveys affect. To get at this, I will analyze the short experimental film, *Four Women* (1975) by Julie Dash. Additionally, I turn to Sylvia Wynter’s “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice” to draw out how *Four Women’s* experimental aesthetics counter dominant cinema’s relationship with affect through its disinterest in producing “positive” or “happy” affective returns for audience members.

Aesthetic discourse, we may conclude, composes an ideological screen of apology and glorification for a cultural regime that has remained indifferent or inimical to the rewarding development of non-white cinema. (Clyde Taylor 2003, 401)

**Introduction**

Film is a battleground. Informed by white hegemonic constructions of identity and culture, film has long been a contentious site for the (re)presentation of Blackness. This labor-intensive, ideological struggle for Blackness becomes a key tool in shaping the formal and narrative aesthetics of Black filmmaking, specifically Black women’s experimental films. Due to this ideological and cinematic struggle for Blackness, to encounter Black women’s experimental cinema is to engage with the “living, shaping fire” of their practice, that is, their labor. Through an analysis of Julie Dash’s *Four Women* (1975), this study examines how Black...
women’s experimental cinema gets around, negates, and dismisses recursively predetermined film portrayals of The Black Experience, precisely through its embodied and feminist use of Black expressive culture. *Four Women* is less interested in engaging with “positive” portrayals, or the “truth” of Blackness, as it is invested in mobilizing affect’s labor-power to demonstrate the expansive possibilities of film aesthetics and its ability to rematerialize affect (and its forms, that is emotions and feelings) through its use of Black expressive culture. In this way, *Four Women* demonstrates how Black women’s experimental cinema has always been representative of how cinema generates and conveys affect. Affect, used here, refers to the labor that is integral to the body’s self-constitution. I turn to Black feminist philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s 1992 critique of (white) film criticism, “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” to argue that Black women’s experimental cinema is a heterogeneous praxis that delinks individuals from—what Walter D. Mignolo writes as—Eurocentric knowledge systems to engage with epistemic disobedience using film’s form in dialogue with their embodiment and culture (Walter D. Mignolo 2015, 107). My emphasis on Black women as a cultural group is informed by how Black women’s bodies and labor bear the “gross insult and burden of spectacular exploitation in transatlantic culture,” while subsequently rendered by “hegemonic hermeneutics” as known, simplistic sites of inquiry (Daphne Brooks 2006, 7). My analysis of *Four Women* will demonstrate how Black women’s experimental cinema resist cultural hegemonic structures through their films doing as opposed to providing answers, or “positive,” happy emotional returns for the audience.²

Dominant film scholarship frames experimental cinema—primarily focusing on films made by white men—as films with “nonlinear structures, nonnaturalistic performance styles, challenging subject matter, obtrusive camera work, and unconventional editing patterns” (Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman 2005, 3). Feminist experimental films take the aforementioned techniques to critique the “masculine-formalist dogma,” prevalent in experimental films in the West, through the juxtaposition of conventional and experimental techniques (2005, 3). This interpretation of “masculine-formalist dogma” refers to the “auteur,” strictly formal aesthetic practices commonly expressed and reiterated in mainstream constituteions of experimental cinema. These dogmatic aesthetics favor disembodied explorations of cinema’s form that additionally disavow narrative content (2005, 3). Black women’s experimental cinema is different as their filmmaking practices are rooted in their use of Black expressive culture. Experimentation, in this context, refers to what Black Cultural Studies scholar Carla Peterson states as the “empowering oddness” that is used to create a freedom of movement in the world (2000, xii). Experimentation in Black women’s experimental cinema enables bodies at the cultural margins to restore movement and memory to their lives, histories, and futures. These film practices are informed by Black feminism’s expansive and rich ideology on the corporeal (Jacqueline Bobo 1998; Brooks 2006; Hortense Spillers 2003). Additionally, Black women’s experimental film practices are distinctively in dialogue with Black Independent Cinema as Black Independent Cinema defines the ways in which Black artists have to create and work outside of “dominant paradigms to explore alternative film forms and narratives” (Gladstone L. Yearwood 2000, 11).

While the history (as it pertains to North America and the United Kingdom) of Black women’s experimental cinema is still being catalogued (Bobo 1998; Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart 2016; bell hooks 2009), the field expanded exponentially following the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. From the 1970s through the 1990s, the UCLA Film and Television Program was the home to the film collective
the Los Angeles School of Filmmakers, also known as the L.A. Rebellion, in which Julie Dash was an early member. The students of color’s film projects at the UCLA Film and Television Program prioritized experimental aesthetics in an effort to affectively convey Black culture.3

These films were projects that encouraged experimental techniques in an effort to obtain a feel of the world. Film scholar Allyson Nadia Field writes that, “Project One functioned like a laboratory for experimenting with the medium of film as a means of expression, and the films demonstrate this sense of formal experimentation that would be foundational for the filmmakers’ later work” (2016, 86).4

While the Project One films were meant to be under three minutes in length, L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Larry Clark recalls that many of the students of color’s films exceeded well over this time limit as he states, “Well you’ve kept us quiet all these years, and you give us a chance to speak and you can’t tell us it’s got to be three minutes, it’s whatever you want it to be” (Field 2016, 86). Clark’s statement, documented by Field, reveals the desire, enthusiasm, and dedication from the incoming students to begin to work through film as a medium that can reflect, and more importantly, communicate a non-monolithic portrayal of Blackness. Thus, experimentation becomes an ideological tool for Black filmmakers to work through hegemonic identity and cultural expressions through their expressive use of Black culture. The use of cinema’s expressive properties demonstrates what Field writes as the desire to rethink cinema as a mode of communication, persuasion, and activism (2016, 87). Turning to Black women’s experimental cinema for analysis is to map out cinema’s performative, illocutionary, and embodied qualities; to ask the question what does this type of cinema do? (Wynter 1992, 253).

“The idea of a Black film is always a question, never an answer.” Michael Boyce Gillespie posits this concept as the driving force which makes up our encounters with Black film in his book Film Blackness (2016, 16). The specificity of these questions that Black film produce will differ from (Black) film to (Black) film, but the element of producing questions in film, as oppose to providing answers, is testament to the labor-power that Black films engage with in their struggle for Blackness. Film theorist Kara Keeling details this “struggle” within in the cinematic image in The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense (2007). She writes:

To describe the first sense, one can take the appearance of the “Black image” to be paradigmatic of the cinematic image. Each appearance of a Black image to an eye is an appearance of every Black insofar as “Black identity” is a historical project predicated upon a substitution that implies an aporia. A present perception of a Black tends toward cliché because each appearance of a Black to an eye is recognized as an appearance of the Black, a memory-image commonly available to memory during perception. (43)

Cinema turns images into problems for viewers to work out; viewers attend to these problems in hopes of receiving some reward. This is to say, that individuals experience cinema as a bodily investment; we watch horror films with the expectation to feel scared, for example. Keeling’s passage informs us of the “intellectual” and “emotional” reward attached to Black images that is always made “readily” available to audience members via the “memory-image,” or public memory. Hegemonic cinema shows us through its formal and narrative aesthetics that we need not to engage too deeply with the image of Black women’s bodies, as it is a site that is already known. To engage with Black women’s experimental cinema is to put some work in to see what the film is doing. I see this genre of filmmaking as resistant to both
hegemonic film practices and the representation battle of “winning-time” that produces “productive” representations of Blackness that do not question “the need for a transformed approach to cinematic images, one that recognizes the work of such images as representatives,” while additionally remaining open to the generative, transformative abilities that cinema offers through its form (Keeling 2007, 44). I use Sylvia Wynter’s article on film criticism for my argument as it theorizes the bodily labor involved with viewing not just film, but Black film, specifically Black independent and experimental film. When read with affect theory, Wynter’s “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” (1992) elucidates how Black women’s experimental cinema often produces dissatisfying affective returns. Keeling’s quote above reminds us that the engagement with Black images onscreen is structured around its “known” status to white individuals. To present alternative images informed by Black expressive culture is to challenge that conception and the affective returns it produces. To turn our attention to Black women’s experimental cinema is to see what this genre of filmmaking does, rather than what it might “mean.”

To re-think aesthetics and affect in cinema

Although Sylvia Wynter’s article pre-dates the “affective turn” in cinema studies, I argue that her essay actually maps out a methodological process of reading affect onscreen. She specifically reads affect through the lens of the sociogenic principle, which takes into consideration how embodiment and culture affects all manners of interaction and how film is always already mediated by these structures and systems. Wynter argues that aesthetics in cinema have been created to mobilize and serve the cultural construction of Man that is the white male middle-class subject in the world (1992, 269). Aesthetics refers to both the why and how social realities are expressed through cinematic practices. Aesthetics produce the “‘visual and oneiric power’ of the film’s image to shape and control our human perception and, therefore, our behavioral responses” (239). This key passage informs us that there are sets of aesthetic practices meant to affect and incite specific behavioral, bodily responses or feelings in the spectator around hegemonic, cultural identity representations. In this way, aesthetics that tend to the well-being of the global human subject, and not the well-being of the (white) middle-class mode of the subject, are aesthetics that are of a “second intellectual mutation as far-reaching as the first intellectual mutation of humanism.” Aesthetics that disavow and do not repeat the representational power dynamics of whiteness inevitably are creating a new way of thinking about ourselves as “speaking/knowing/feeling subjects” in the world (239).

Further, “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” investigates how hegemonic myths and the construction of Man are filtered and expressed through digestible concepts that rely on cinema’s ability to convey “forms of life” (Wynter 1992, 242–243); that the myth of Man, and film’s formal and narrative aesthetics that support Man’s construction, are ideologically structured to exclude racialized, gendered bodies. Bodies are reduced to symbolic codes of life—with whiteness being positively marked and Blackness being negatively marked—when cinema collapses “forms of life’s” expansive potential into stable consumable concepts. An egregious example of this collapse can be found in D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915), where Black bodies represent death and destruction with their corporeality igniting fear among the white characters and spectators. I view Wynter’s argument on forms of life as a constitutive-laboring process that is generative for considering affect as an ongoing negotiation
of bodily labor. I derive my use of affect, here, from Keeling’s working definition in *The Witch’s Flight*, where she argues how affect, as a form of labor, is tied to a political approach to viewing cinema that understands that “what we see in an image participates in the struggle for hegemony involved in capitalist exploitation” (2007, 21). She writes:

Affect … is a form of labor that is intrinsic to the body’s self-constitution. While one’s perception measures the possible or virtual action of a thing on one’s body, affection can be understood initially as the moment in which one’s perception ceases to measure an object’s potential action upon one’s body and begins to sketch out the object’s actual action. (2007, 13)

Keeling’s quote here indicates that affect is a process where the body reacts to an object in order to make meaning of its objective. Such meaning is filtered through different and multiple emotive responses where specific emotions and feelings become reflective of a specific kind of affect. Keeling’s definition of affect is useful as it maps out the work that affect does in the body, and the negotiations at play when encountering an image.

Cinema, then, I argue, profits from the stabilized and collapsed forms of affect, that is, how affect is captured, reduced, and “qualified” in the form of emotion or feelings. Cinema’s deployment of these forms of affect—expressed through aesthetics—is designed to reap emotional returns for the audience. A painfully enduring, and overabundant, return in cinema lies in the affective coding of whiteness. Wynter argues that hegemonic cinema stabilizes “forms of life,” or affect, into closed forms associated with positive associations with, to, and around whiteness (1992, 252–253). Spectators are rewarded through their complacent digestion of such forms, that is, positive affects are harvested when one aligns themselves with the “positive” codes of whiteness onscreen. This process is mechanic and one that is conditioned to secure a return on one’s corporeal labor with the cinematic image. As Brian Massumi writes in *Parables for the Virtue: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), “subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they have or possess their own emotions. … For such a subject, emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as large a return as possible” (9–10). We invest time with cinema in order to receive some “feeling” for our (affective) labor. Thus, the acceptance and iteration of such commodified codes functions as an “opium of the people,” as these codes prompt affective responses in the viewer and “are then able to activate the internal reward system (IRS), thereby triggering its opiate-induced euphoria coefficient” (247). These collapsed forms of affect serve a purpose of conditioning individuals to align (even if they do not identify) with the “positively-marked” bodies and lives of whiteness or “representation of symbolic ‘life’ (which then serves as the icon of Sameness or of fake kin-relatedness)” (247). Take note of Frantz Fanon’s oft-cited footnote of his cinematic experience while watching a Tarzan film in both the Antilles and in Europe,

In the Antilles the young Black identifies himself de facto with Tarzan versus the Blacks. In a movie house in Europe things are not so clear-cut, for the white movie-goers automatically place him among the savages on screen …. The Black man senses that he cannot get away with being Black. (2008, 131)

Fanon is pulled in to identify with Tarzan as a subject and not the “savages” onscreen as such an identification is coded to be degrading. Despite actively trying to align himself with Tarzan, his fellow white movie-goers will “kindly” put him in his place with their emotive responses to the “savages” onscreen and their affirmation to the positive marked codes of whiteness that Tarzan exhibits.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004 [2014]), Sara Ahmed assigns this alliance to whiteness as connected to power, culture, and ultimately the nation. The language, within cinema
and literature, is used to create an “us” versus “them” alliance, with the viewer aligning with “us, and you” and not the others. Ahmed similarly describes this as process of “emotional” investment and returns for the individual:

To feel love for the nation, whereby love is an investment that should returned (you are “the taxpayer”), is also to feel injured by these others, who are “taking” what is yours. It is not the case, however, that anybody within the nation could inhabit this “you.” These short sentences depend on longer histories of articulation, which secure the white subject as sovereign in the nation, at the same time as they generate effects in the alignment of “you” with the national body. (1–2)

The “you” is always meant to speak to the white audience however, the structures of white supremacy do not always exclude Black representation as some of “us” are “them.” Wynter writes that this investment to whiteness “can therefore be seen as one that is predetermined by the rules of the semantic closure principle (SCP) which govern the instituting of our present culture-specific mode of aesthetic” (1992, 243) meaning that the ideology (and myth) of Man is so prevalent that the negatively marked codes that are attached to Black individuals onscreen appear “natural,” and go unquestioned. As such, Wynter’s argument expresses a fruitful analysis for deciphering films that “resist” such stabilizing processes, films that incorporate the question (through their socio-cultural backgrounds and use of aesthetics) of “how the human subject is itself instituted as specific modes of the sociogenic subject by the signifying practices of each culture’s order of discourse” (269).\(^8\) This is not to say that films that center Black experiences (or disembodied experimental films even) solve this problem of the negatively marked Black cinematic image. In order for films to resist this hegemonic anti-Black representational practice, there needs to be schismatic fissure with the filmmaker’s use of aesthetics that is informed by culture and embodiment—what Wynter argues for as the sociogenic principle that “re-thinks aesthetics.”

Moving our attention away from the formal and narrative aesthetics of whiteness, inherently, is already bringing attention to a “crucial site of the contest out of which the human is being rewritten” in cinema. This means freeing films from even the most “radical” forms of criticism and extending our understanding of aesthetics to see how they too operate under a condition of reproducing Man.\(^9\) By addressing cinema’s behavioral reward systems, Wynter’s article demonstrates that cinema has always been interested in triggering the audience’s corporeal response. Films that focus on disembodiment (or masculinist formalist dogma) do not escape this critique as I assert that such a “disembodied” state still privileges whiteness’ ability to “transcend” embodiment, thereby negating the “specious autonomy” of cultural production and film production (Wynter 1992, 241). In the following analysis, I draw out the significance of how Julie Dash’s *Four Women* mobilizes the expansive labor-power of affect to enact how Black culture draws from and rematerializes the repertoire and choreography of Black women’s bodies and histories. *Four Women* demonstrates the possibilities of reorienting cinema’s formal and narrative aesthetics, but is not interested in producing satisfying or comprehensible “meanings” for the audience.

**Four Women (1975)**

Julie Dash’s first experimental seven-minute short-film, *Four Women* (1975), juxtaposes sound and dance as a way to rematerialize affective histories of Black expressive culture. Shot on 16 mm Fuji Color Negative film, the title is derived from Nina Simone’s 1966 song of the same name that also serves as the soundtrack for the latter five minutes of the film. Working with
dancer/choreographer L. Martina Young, Dash uses a mixture of still photography, moving images, audio voiceovers, music, and ocean soundscapes to give an account of the expansive possibilities of affect attached to the collective history of Black culture. *Four Women* functions as a diagram of the flows of affect between the soundtrack and dancer, between the dancer and director, and between the combination of the aforementioned relationships and the audience. By using dance and a juxtaposing soundtrack of Black history, *Four Women* rematerializes difficult histories of Black existence into film. The film itself becomes an exercise of affect’s labor-power in working and reworking itself into different forms and channels related to Black history.

The short opens with Young dancing her way out of a sheer fabric that covers her entire body. Quite crudely, we can draw a parallel between this sheer sheet and the veil that W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) describes as existing between the Black body and the world, but there is something else happening in this opening sequence. The first two minutes of the film’s soundtrack moves us through time; we hear horns blaring, people chanting, various stomping, a loud crack of a whip, water rushing and crashing against a ship, crying, and low mummers of moaning set to Young’s body moving her way out of the veil. The camera alternates its lens between being veiled and unveiled, suggesting that, if not the director, at least the audience may identify as Black subjects as well. The film then cuts to Young embodying the first woman in Simone’s song, Aunt Sarah who has “woolly hair and Black skin.” Although Young herself is a light-skin Black woman, the movement of both her body and the camera convey the spirit of Aunt Sarah rather than trying to *literally represent* Aunt Sarah as described in the song. Thus, we are left with the essence of Aunt Sarah or a feeling of Aunt Sarah as opposed to a stock representation of Aunt Sarah. Furthermore, the transition between Aunt Sarah and the other women in Simone’s song, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches, are conducted through still-like shots of Young’s body that gradually fade to black. The fluid form of the film reflects the fluid manner in which Dash demonstrates how Blackness is informed, which is also apparent in Simone’s lyrics as well:

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My skin is black
My arms are long
My hair is woolly
My back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain
inflicted again and again
What do they call me
My name is AUNT SARAH
My name is Aunt Sarah
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Simone’s lyrics inform us, specifically through their relationship with Dash’s direction and Young’s body, of how Black histories travel between socio-collectives, and how these histories are mediated and informed by their relationship to the corporeal. This is also evident with the sounds of the Middle Passage conveyed at the beginning as Dash does not channel, nor attempt to stabilize, any of these affects into digestible forms. Their fluid relationship is what keeps them connected. Using the sounds of the Middle Passage and not showing the corresponding images of the whip or murmuring moans, allows the film to avoid the casual visual portrayal of Black suffering. This is a crucial tactic deployed by Dash. By giving us the “sounds of the Middle Passage” instead of a visual depiction of it, the audience is left with an isolated soundtrack that drives a feeling of memory (in this case Slavery) as opposed to a depiction of an event and, in so doing, reminds the viewer that for Black individuals their
history is entwined with what feminist theorist Hortense Spillers writes as “high crimes against the flesh” (2003, 206).

The flesh, and its senses, was and is a critical praxis for Black individuals interrogating and affirming one’s humanity and liberty (Saidiya Hartman 1997, 4). In her lecture, “Shades of Intimacy: Women in the Time of Revolution” (2017), Hortense Spillers states that the body becomes flesh when it loses its integrity and is invaded upon, and that Black bodies bear an intimate history and relationship to the conception and materiality of the flesh. While there are certainly many ways of portraying the flesh—the Black body onscreen—Dash’s *Four Women* signifies how the histories that make up Black expressive culture, namely Slavery, produce difficult visual negotiations of Blackness. Hartman writes in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) that Slavery produced affective bonds of enjoyment and spectacle of the Black suffering body for white individuals (27). This history has produced a painfully dense archive of visual performative and cinematic engagements of the Black suffering body. This archive makes up Black culture by right of flesh, yet, to draw upon it can, if one is not careful, reproduce such troubling negotiations of and with Black bodies. Sound thus offers a different way of rematerializing this visual and performative portrayal of the Middle Passage. Dash is strategic in her use of sound as she does not pull from the soundscape of “terrible spectacles” that dramatizes the specific act of brutality against the Black body, and instead uses sounds that evoke and get around the performative structure of Slavery (Hartman 1997, 3). The sounds that the spectator hears in *Four Women* derive from Black culture and the Black body, including Simone’s powerful anthem. As stated earlier, Dash’s *Four Women* mobilizes the “expansive” labor-power of affect to enact how Black culture draws from the repertoire and choreography of Black women’s bodies. The juxtaposition of Simone’s vocality of the afterlife of Slavery to the jostling soundscape of waves crashing, drums, wailing, and whips evoke what Brooks writes as re-inscribing corporeal visibility by restoring social and cultural meaning to one’s identity formation (2006, 300): “Most importantly, signing makes one’s body—the thing that has been rendered ‘living-dead’—presently alive in song” (318). Not only is Simone’s body made alive through the act of singing, but the memory of Slavery is rendered visible, heard, and present. The sound of water conveys not only the Black Atlantic but the fluid frightening possibilities that water evokes, from sustaining life to the waves’ potential to consume bodies and ships whole. The over-lapping effect of these sounds, the chanting, the whipping, the murmuring, drowned in the sound of water flows—a testament to the watery graves of the Atlantic Sea. As philosopher and poet Fred Moten writes,

> It’s terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation. The absence of solidity seems to demand some other ceremony of hailing that will have been carried out on some more exalted frequency (2013, 744)

This use of sound is a conceptual rematerialization of the body’s senses that are informed by Black expressive culture. What *Four Women* conveys is the expansive (laboring) possibilities that exist through the recalibration of the senses as they relate to the corporeality of Black life, its culture and histories. *Four Women*’s labor, like the waves, overwhelms the spectator in its seven-minute timespan.

The past is not easily forgotten in *Four Women*. The memories expressed through the sound effects heard in the short film rub up against the images of Young’s embodiment of four different Black women; thus bringing their demands to life through her body. Young’s dance becomes ritualistic in her attempt to bring life to Simone’s words. The camera also
responds in kind as it takes on distinct camera angles for each woman: this is evident with the focused shots of Young’s curves and legs during her performance of Sweet Thing, a woman whose “hips invite you” and whose “mouth is like wine” as Simone’s lyrics state, and in the build-up to Simone’s last woman in the song, Peaches. Young’s embodiment of Peaches is drastically different from the other women portrayed in Simone’s song. As Peaches, she fervently kicks and jumps across the stage and takes aggressive, embodied stances. Furthermore, the lyrics, while always effective, are distinctly mobilized here in a cumulative fashion, thus when Simone sings “I’m awfully bitter these days, because my parents were slaves,” Dash utilizes a camera angle shot of Young’s face from the chin up and begins to follow Young’s movements from this distinctly tightly-shot angle. In so doing, the perspective shifts from following the “depiction of these women,” but rather these women’s depictions of the world, or their perspectives. This is further solidified by the returning stills of Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, and Sweet Thing before ending with a tight shot of Peaches’ eyes.

Dash and Young are actively remembering and conjuring up Black histories through the film. These histories and memories are not complete and often appear to us disjointed and fragmented, much like the disjointed sound clips heard at the beginning of the film. These memories and bodies are not forgotten, not dead. In her essay on the affective dynamics—specifically the embodiment and display of emotions and feelings—in the L.A. Rebellion’s films, entitled “Bruising Moments: Affect and the L.A. Rebellion,” Samantha N. Sheppard notes that affect functions as a non-conscious experience of intensity (2016, 227). Building her argument upon the influential work of Sara Ahmed’s “Affective Economies” (2004, 119), Sheppard details how emotions, feelings, and sensations are specific kinds of affect and that any one of these affects (or a combination of them) can “mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.” What Ahmed’s quote here reminds us of is that there are other ways of experiencing media and that the utilization of affect—be that in the creation of the film or within the spectator—is to link individual experiences with shared socio-psychic experiences. This is particularly noteworthy when dealing with Black cinematic practices that, historically, dig into the shared collective psyche and history of the Black “flesh” in order to evoke “bruising moments that brush up against the Black historical tragedy,” as is the case with Four Women (Sheppard 2016, 225).

I want to shift gears here and draw out Four Women’s affective use of dance onscreen. I understand dance as a way of using the body to convey feelings that cannot be expressed with words. Its relationship with Black expressive culture is both subsequently shamed and celebrated. Anti-Black racism has constructed dance within Black culture as a pejorative, one that proves the “animal-like/savage” tendencies of Black individuals (Aisha Durham 2012). Fanon notes the tension between this controlling image of dance and the spiritual and celebratory purpose it often serves within Black culture. Directly associating dance with affect and mysticism, Frantz Fanon writes in Black Skin, White Masks (2008) that it, like sex, “is a sacred act, pure and absolute, bringing invisible forces into action” (105). Further, in The Wretched of the Earth (2005), he writes that “any study of the colonial world therefore must include an understanding of the phenomena of dance and possession,” for the “colonized’s way of relaxing is precisely this muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed, and spirited away” (19). This statement allows us to think through the way the body, like the film, becomes a site of reshaping and reworking difficult affects into new forms; it is less about the outcome and more about the process.
In keeping with Black feminist ideology, dance (in all its manifestations) harnesses the possibility of channeling and redistributing labor through the body, it can be a transformational and self-making act for the individual. The “twoness” of Black women’s dancing bodies is the awareness of the colonial solipsism attached to Black women’s bodies that try to strip dance from its emotive and spiritual possibilities. The will to persist with the body under such awareness is the enduring legacy that dance has within Black culture, and therein lies its transformational abilities. Taking this legacy into account, Dash’s *Four Women* taps into the rich reservoir of Black expressive culture to evoke the corporeal dynamic that Black women historically have had in using their bodies as a mode of communication. Dash’s *Four Women* is a testament to sticking with questions and affects that we cannot answer, nor place into easily digestible forms following a cinematic encounter. *Four Women* sticks with the labor—these affective flows—and rematerializes through other expressive means, as conveyed through its use of soundscapes and dance. Rematerialization leads to a generative way of working through affect to produce new possibilities. We may not know what *Four Women* means, but we, as viewers, knows what it does. *Four Women* demonstrates Dash’s early investment with creating social realities of collective communal engagements with Black women through film and performance. Dash would follow up the formal and narrative experimental aesthetics seen in *Four Women* with her first feature film, 1991’s *Daughters of the Dust*. This holds particular significance as it is the first feature film (and experimental film) to be distributed in theaters by a Black woman in the United States, and, in some ways, is a successor to the work she started in *Four Women*.12

**Conclusion**

Affect—and its forms like feelings and emotions—are work. Film’s form can instigate that labor for us to receive a return via a form of affect, but what of the cinema that refuses? Or rather, what of the cinematic practices that situate themselves outside of (re)producing the hegemonic emotional returns tied to “positive” codings of whiteness through aesthetics? The cinema that produces unpleasant returns, returns that rematerialize archives of the senses and crimes against the flesh, or no returns at all: this is the occupation of Black women’s experimental cinema. Wynter’s argument in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” is that aesthetics are not specious from the filmmaker’s embodiment and culture. Films that understand how culture and the corporeal inform aesthetics, counter mainstream film practices and introduce a new engagement with cinema, what Wynter describes as a “second intellectual mutation” (1992, 239). I view *Four Women* as representative of this intellectual mutation. This is because *Four Women* approaches filmmaking from an embodied perspective that draws upon Black expressive culture and, in so doing, demonstrates the expansive possibilities of not only film’s form, but of the cinematic image of Blackness. *Four Women*, and to an extent, Black women’s experimental cinema, recognizes the problem with the cinematic image of Blackness, but does not attempt to solve that problem through representations of a perceived universal Black experience. It is a cinematic practice that is interested in doing rather than providing meaning, and thus, effectively counters and resists audience’s expected affective return with the cinematic image of Blackness.

I used Wynter’s “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’” to demonstrate how film’s formal and narrative aesthetics “shape and control human perception and their behavioral responses.” Cinema’s overinvestment in whiteness is affectively conveyed in a manner to reap positive emotional
returns around whiteness. Wynter’s focus on “forms of life” and how they affect behavior is key as it informs us that this aesthetic discourse—which has been in effect since the dawn of cinema—can be undone and challenged. She writes:

> It should be testable and verifiable that these counter-signifying practices (Global “culture” cinema) induce such a counter-writing and, therefore, such a counter-politics of “feeling” within the context of an emergent new “battle of tastes” between the western middle-class cultural imaginary, whose referent telos is that of the well-being of the middle-class mode of the subject, and the still emergent (and still bitterly contested) global popular Imaginary whose referent telos is that of the well-being of the individual human subject and, therefore, of the species. (Wynter 1992, 268–269)

Wynter is correct to note that the creation of criticism of this practice is a battle, one that is part of the extensive archive of Black women’s labor, their “living, shaping fire.” Black women’s experimental cinema works through the generative possibilities of cinema’s ability to convey affect by working outside and against the internal reward system (IRS) of mainstream cinema’s aesthetics through its emphasis on the corporeal. There may be no “happy” returns, but there is possibility for experiencing cinema that firmly presents itself outside of the “realm of unfreedom” (Wynter 1992, 263). How fortunate are we, as critics, viewers, and scholars, then, to engage with the genre of Black women’s experimental cinema! And just think, *Four Women* is but one early film that constitutes this genre. Black women’s experimental filmmaking enables us to take an alternative approach—one informed by the refusal to provide answers—in the struggle for Blackness by engaging with a rich archive of epistemic disobedience against cinema’s overrepresentation and “happy” returns of whiteness.

**Notes**

1. Angela Davis translates Karl Marx’s definition of labor as the following, “Labor is the living, shaping fire; it represents the impermanence of things, their temporality” (Angela Y. Davis 1983, 11; Karl Marx 1953, 266).
2. In a way, I am engaging with cinema that could be defined as “killjoy cinema” to use Sara Ahmed’s term. However, such an argument exceeds the demands of this paper and would need different film to draw out the intentional killjoy aesthetics that Black women have historically always worked with. For a previous study on difficult aesthetics in Black women’s cinema, see Ayanna Dozier (2015).
3. Project One films, as noted by film scholar and L.A. Rebellion scholar and archivist Allyson Nadia Field (2016) in her essay “Rebellious Unlearnings: UCLA Project One Films (1967–78),” were short film assignments for first year MFA students that were meant to push the boundaries of film’s form.
4. Field also notes that “Each student wrote, produced, directed, and edited his or her own Project One film, which was then screened and critiqued by faculty and fellow students” (2016, 86).
5. Fanon defines the sociogenic principle in his thesis for the disalienation of the Black man in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which asserts it is “not an individual question,” for “society does not escape human influence” (2008, xv). He further demonstrates this principle in effect through his recollection of his experience riding a subway when “Look! Ma, A Negro!” was shouted at him. This social experience flooded his body with shame and thus constituted his body in not just that moment but for other encounters to follow (2008, 91–94).
6. Sylvia Wynter argues that the understanding of existence is filtered through society’s centering of Man, i.e., the Western bourgeois subject, who also occupies our perception of human life, that is, which bodies bear the markings of humanity in “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” She writes (in full): “The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be
one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. Because of this overrepresentation … any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of this overrepresentation as the second and now purely secular form of what Aníbal Quijano identifies as the ‘Racism/Ethnicism complex,’ on whose basis the world of modernity was brought into existence from the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries onwards” (2003, 260).

7. Cinema is chalked full of examples meant to signify positive affects around the identity or identification to white characters onscreen (or structures of whiteness), even in films that center non-white individuals. A recent example can be found in the film, Hidden Figures (2016) which is about the Black women engineers at NASA in the 1960s. The filmic representation of these women’s lived experiences would call for negative representations of white individuals, but the director insisted there be an example, even if fictional, of a “white person doing the right thing,” every body needs to film examples of “white people doing the right thing” (Dexter Thomas 2017).

8. While this study does not engage with the subtitle of Wynter’s argument, that is the “Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” I feel is useful to illustrate, here, how Wynter describes her deciphering practice. A “deciphering practice” has four levels of analysis to it that enables viewers to look for the following; what the films signifies—that is looking at the film’s formal and narrative aesthetics—what the film’s socio-cultural background is, deciphering meaning based on the film’s signification and socio-cultural background, and finally addressing the collective relationship the film, as a text, has with an audience—that is, to decipher meaning based on the cinematic encounter. To execute such an analysis does not mean a “four-step process,” but rather a way of weaving these concepts and responses together in the analysis (1992, 261–268).


10. Du Bois writes that, “The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (1994, 2).

11. See Aisha Durham’s 2012 article “Check On It: Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video.”

12. When experimental aesthetics in the realm of Black film is discussed, Dash is often addressed as the sole occupier of Black women’s experimental cinema even when mentioned in the context of the collaborative framework of the L.A. Rebellion. A large reason for this could be the lack of accessibility to the films of other Black women experimental filmmakers as most of their contributions exist in archives of some sort. Thus, in the realm of experimental aesthetics, few Black women have been able to achieve Dash’s recognition. But even for Dash, the success and critical acclaim of Daughters of the Dust was not enough to sustain a profitable career as a filmmaker. Although she still makes films, Dash has publicly stated the difficulties that she and the first generation of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers encountered with the film industry following their graduation (Cara Buckley 2016). Such constraints make the task of cataloguing, let alone writing about this work, immensely difficult for many scholars writing on this topic.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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