



The Inheritance (Ephraim Asili, 2020)



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The Black Aesthetic Practice as an Agent of Community: Radical Organising in the UK and USA

by Rhea Storr

In a 1968 article entitled “The Black Aesthetic”, Larry Neal opens with the following statement: “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.”²³ Founded in 1965, the beginnings of the Harlem-based Black Arts Movement responded to rising Black Nationalist sentiment in the US and the assassination of Malcolm X. The aesthetic and political were inextricably intertwined for those, such as Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, and founder Amiri Baraka, who were associated with the movement, many of whom were already connected with other Black radical organisations. The Black Arts Movement programmed plays, poetry, and visual arts, as well as fostering its own education in history, politics and drama from its brownstone near Lenox Avenue, Harlem. Above all else, the space functioned as a meeting point for intellectuals to discuss the meaning of ‘Blackness’.

Informational, documentary, and narrative work was produced by The Black Arts Movement, yet filmmaking practices have not been foregrounded within its history. Amiri Baraka made two shorts, *Black Spring* (1967) and *The New-Ark* (1968), the latter of which explores Black Nationalism in Newark by offering an unpolished aesthetic counterpoint to that seen in news footage of the 1967 Newark riots. About *The New-Ark*, Whitney Strub wrote that there is “never any doubt that the film’s celebration of Blackness is intended as both aesthetic celebration of Blackness and also rallying device.”²⁴ Describing *The New-Ark* as hopeful, Strub shows the consistency in ethos between Baraka’s founding of the Black Arts Movement and his films. The forthright political drive which pervaded the output of the Black Arts Movement community is present too in *The New-Ark*’s call to Black Power.

The Black Arts Movement community understood that Blackness was a contested and multitudinous space. The community which enacts the Black Aesthetic

operates on both a global and local scale; it is the product of Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, a forced migration which coalesces in the between-spaces of the transatlantic slave trade. Black Aesthetic community is produced through diaspora, and its influence is not confined by its country of production.²⁵ Gilroy articulates Black community beyond Black Nationalism as formed in the space between—understanding African, Caribbean, US and European Black aesthetics as intrinsically related. In actuality, the Black Atlantic is a confused, messy, and innovative space where dancehall and dub, the carnivalesque and the mixtape, haphazard quotations, and the archive reimaged can all be located.

The Black Aesthetic conveys the experience of Black lives; it relates to those films which seek an aesthetics that challenge modes of representation used to oppress Black people. Contemporary instantiations of the Black Aesthetic utilise alternative forms of communication through experimental or non-narrative filmmaking, and are intrinsically connected to the Black Arts Movements’ legacy of nurturing community. A contemporary call to Black Aesthetics imbues within itself the right to self-determination that is present in civil-rights era organising. Black Aesthetic filmmakers or organisations self-determine when they can produce and disseminate work with autonomy. Contemporary curatorial collectives in the USA, 1980s UK Black Filmmaking Workshops, and the debut feature film of African-American artist filmmaker Ephraim Asili share common organisational and aesthetic themes, and will be used to explore the primacy of Black Aesthetics—to show the Black Aesthetic as a producer of community with historical precedent and not merely a descriptor of Black community in the present moment. By moving between community, circulation, curation, and archive, the nature of a Black Aesthetic which moves between times and contexts can be understood. This is itself a Black Aesthetic approach.

²³ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement”, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 12.4 (1968), 29–39.

²⁴ Whitney Strub, “The Baraka Film Archive: The Lost, Unmade, and Unseen Film Work of LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka,” *Black Camera*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 2015), 273–287.

²⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Verso, 2020.

Community

One site where community and the Black Aesthetic interact is in the Black Film Workshops that emerged in the UK in the 1980s. The work of the community is to visualise its own structure: define its boundaries, who it speaks to, and what it stands for. The Workshop Declaration Act provided filmmakers with resources to produce their own work, and seeing as workshops were not always tied to particular film projects or outcomes, there could be relative autonomy in the content and aesthetics produced. The way in which the films made by the Black Film Workshops' circulate is itself a producer of community through discourse.

Understanding the parameters of a Black filmmaking community requires a consideration on the form that representation and criticism takes. Some of the considerations which were explored within the discourse of the Black Film Workshops were: the depiction of a form of Black Britishness which is not idealised, Black filmmakers' inclusion within the avant-garde canon, and types of criticism that could be made outside of the racial framing of a film. The disjunction between a Black community producing its own content around issues of racial discrimination led to tension and debate. *The People's Account* (Ceddo Film and Video Workshop, 1985) was commissioned by Channel 4 but—upon objections from the Independent Broadcasting Authority due to the negative characterisation of the police in its depiction of the Broadwater Farm Riot—was never aired. *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986) which did air, instigated a public debate between Stuart Hall and Salman Rushdie concerning the politics of criticism, printed in *The Guardian*. Their point of disagreement concerned aesthetics. Whilst Rushdie asserted that *Handsworth Songs* simply reproduced tired tropes of violence, Hall argued that the aesthetics of the film—its soundtrack and dislocated visuals—were an attempt at a new language. Hall argued that Rushdie had been too prescriptive in how he supposed Black filmmakers should depict their own communities.

A cohesive Black filmmaking community is at times unobtainable; to consider that all Black filmmakers produce work with the same interests, strategies, production models, or aesthetics is a fallacy. However, the act of instantiating the Black Aesthetic creates a community in which debate and criticism can exist, challenging other means of authority. Stuart Hall articulates the need for critical discourse succinctly in the accompanying texts to the ICA's 1988 *Black Film British Cinema* conference, where he links criticism to representation. Calling for an internal discourse by the community that the films are for, or about, he states: "...I no longer believe we can resolve the questions of aesthetic value by the use of these transcendental, canonical cultural categories. I think there is another position, one which locates itself inside a continuous struggle and politics around black representation...."²⁶ The Black Aesthetic film forges its own discourse by configuring a new community through the location of its screenings. Furthermore, the critical community is diasporic. For instance, Black Audio Film Collective aspired for *Handsworth Songs* to be shown both locally in Hackney, and more widely on the international film festival circuit.²⁷

Racial discrimination in *Handsworth*, Birmingham, the subject of *Handsworth Songs*, structures the community which engages with the film's discourse. Similarly, *The Inheritance* (Ephraim Asili, 2020) is an example of community as both the subject of a film and a community formed outside of it. Asili's previous experimental shorts, such as *Many Thousands Gone* (2015) and *Kindah* (2016), are concerned with Black diasporic histories realised through 16mm film. His debut feature *The Inheritance* depicts Black radical organising in West Philadelphia by combining material depicting a fictional present day collective with the documentation of MOVE, a Black radical organisation bombed by the city's police department in 1985. *The Inheritance* not only depicts community but creates and recreates it. Drawing on Asili's experiences of living in a Black Marxist collective, the film takes place within a set, constructing a communal house and populating it with an ensemble cast of inhabitants.



Handsworth Songs (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986)

The Inheritance unfolds almost exclusively within this inherited house, in which a Black creative collective lives and labours, making music, art, and receiving visitors. When members of MOVE recount their histories to the fictional collective, fiction and non-fiction converge. In the film's opening scene, a diagram of an imagined environment is conveyed through the immediacy of a paper printout stapled to the wall, outlining the parameters of the community the film will address. Entitled "African-American Ritual Mode" (with the subheading "Environment: Edifice/House"), the diagram describes a congregation and chorus; inner and outer bodies reduced to their geometric black lines produce a circle. Prefacing the film with the structure of the community is like a roll call which indicates who is, might be, or should be, present. The "African American Ritual Mode" is a way of describing Black Church worship but has also been utilised in Black theatrical productions. Here, it is a visual manifestation of intent that states that the Black radical community will organise with consensus, and with vision, in the face of its own disagreements. This offers solid circular ground for the collective, even as those outside are working against it.

Beyond filmic discourse, materiality and affect also create community. In one of the more intimate moments in *The Inheritance*, one of the home's inhabitants, Jamel the trumpeter, cites Abbie Lincoln's moans on the Max Roach jazz album *We Insist!* as representative of freedom: "the hysterical nature of all of the things that happen". The means by which the music is expressed is liberatory, holding as much information as the meaning of its language. The Black Aesthetic functions through the gestural. Narrative becomes secondary when Asili focuses on performance: a drum kit moved back and forth; a script enacted; a poem read aloud. The use of 16mm film in *The Inheritance* engages with meaning produced through affect: the visual equivalent of Abbie Lincoln's unbridled timbre of voice. The whirl of the camera and the quality of grain in the film leaves a material impression of the space of the collective. The books, paper printouts, vinyl records, and the large chalkboard which occupy the house form a repository of works from Black musicians and writers that reverberates through time and create historical continuities. The chalkboard is a particularly analogue recursion to the historical: a blank slate which professes quotes by Black radical thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Calvin Hernton, and Thomas Sankara.

²⁶ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", in *Black Film, British Cinema*, ed. by Kobena Mercer and England Institute of Contemporary Arts, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988.

²⁷ Jim Pines, Gilroy, Paul Gilroy, "Handsworth Songs: Audiences/Aesthetics/Independence" *Framework*, Issue 35, (Jan 1988).

Circulation and Curation

Organising around the Black Aesthetic has implications beyond production and content. It facilitates the gathering of a community concerned with the discourse and circulation of Black filmmaker's work. The Black Aesthetic (TBA) is a curatorial collective based in Oakland, California whose aim is to "curate a collective understanding of Black visual culture."²⁸ In addition to film screenings, TBA has produced several books which collect essays, film criticism, memories, and photographs of their events, many of which have been held at Wolfman Books and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

The structure of TBA is an important model for understanding the way that the Black community can gather for itself. Although TBA's film screenings are located in the Bay Area, their written publications can be accessed by a wider Black community. Their third publication, *The Black Aesthetic Season III: Black Interiors* is bolstered by recollections and images of Black filmmakers or audience members taken at the events the collective has organised. TBA create a space similar to the circular African-American Ritual Mode seen in *The Inheritance*, in which the house functions as Black Interior space. TBA is a congregation of sorts, gathered not around a preacher as in the Ritual Mode but organised around the screen. TBA curates the voices of Black filmmakers from within its own community. Writing about this, TBA member Jamal Batts notes that while non-Black voices were welcome in the TBA community, Black experiences were centred. "If a conversation got too hot, contentious or specific to Black experience, non-Black folks would often get up and politely leave the room."²⁹

Black Radical Imagination, another US-based screening series, was initiated by Erin Christovale and Amir George in 2012 to screen short experimental and new media works at film festivals and arts institutions.³⁰ The screening series takes its name from Robin Kelley's book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, an exploration of twentieth century Black radical organising in America. In an interview, Christovale explains

the importance of this homage to Kelley, where the imaginative is an agent of change. It is something that can both generate a speculative future, and also something which leads to an alternative, experimental form of filmmaking. Black Radical Imagination has shown works by artist-filmmakers which use unconventional styles such as Cauleen Smith, Jenn Nkiru, and Ja'Tovia Gary. For Christovale, the imaginative has the power to initiate creative output which reconfigures the conditions in which Black artists produce and screen their work.³¹

The emphasis of Black Radical Imagination is on the formally experimental, whilst the beginnings of this more "experimental, speculative praxis"³² is still finding its UK footing in collective practice. The lineage of cultural studies (as in Hall, Gilroy et al.) has developed largely through sociological studies rather than a visual practice. Through Black Radical Imagination, an American museum-going audience is exposed to films which might ordinarily be seen in the cinema, a space where more active participation is encouraged. While some Black filmmaking curatorial collectives in the US may manage to source support from arts, film, or academic institutions, the relative paucity of similar initiatives in the UK suggests that assembling a collective with the means to move between these spaces is more difficult, or that broader adequate support for Black filmmakers, writers and curators is not available. One exception is *Languid Hands*, a collaboration between Imani Robinson and Rabz Lansiquot, who make films, write, perform, curate and DJ. Their work creates platforms for Black creatives, *Towards a Black Testimony* (2019-), for instance, included readings, performances, a DJ night, and a panel, as well as *Languid Hands'* film of the same name. This comfort in slipping between media also means that their films often employ a writerly narrative voiceover, as in Lansiquot's own *where did we land* (2019). *Languid Hands* are currently curatorial fellows at Cubitt Gallery and their output, in, and outside of, institutional contexts, is increasingly prolific.³³

²⁸ theblkaesthetic.com, accessed 25/09/2020.

²⁹ Nan Collymore, *The Black Aesthetic: Season III*, Wolfman Books, 2020.

³⁰ The series has been an advocate for the work of Ephraim Asili internationally including Asili's short films in Black Radical Imagination programmes at MOCA Los Angeles, LightWork, Syracuse, Lafayette Anticipations, Paris and LUX Scotland.

³¹ "Erin Christovale is Curating the Future Through the Black Radical Imagination", <https://freethework.com/article/erin-christovale-black-radical-imagination-curating-hammer-interview>, accessed 25/09/2020.

³² Dhanveer Singh Brar and Ashwani Sharma, "What is this 'Black' in Black Studies?" *New Formations* (99), pp. 88-109.

³³ See project "Towards a Black Testimony" which consisted of a film, talks with US collective Black Quantum Futurism, performances and a DJ night across two exhibitions at Jerwood Arts and Stroom Den Haag.

The Archive

The archive is also a member of the community of the Black Aesthetic. When archival material is accessed and represented, it acts as a resource to a future community. The Black Aesthetic filmmaker engages with a disruption or re-narration of the archive, structuring time non-linearly. For example, Menelik Shabazz (of Ceddo Film and Video Collective) structured the narrative of *Time and Judgement* (1988) using extensive, year-by-year news footage, only to disavow the chronological archive for a poetic dreamspace: an afrofuturist wandering through colour and costume. The archive is reproduced for a community elsewhere, elsewhere; for those who were not present at its inception.

Calling the archive into community speaks to diasporic experience, the Black Atlantic meeting point which facilitates an intercultural perspective and a conflation of place. *Omega Rising*, *Women of Rastafari* (Ceddo Film and Video Collective, 1988), *Dreaming Rivers* (Sankofa Film and Video Collective, 1988) and *The Stuart Hall Project* (John Akomfrah, 2013) are all predicated on UK-Caribbean perspectives and are indicative of the increase in Caribbean migration to the UK that occurred from the Windrush generation onwards.

In *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1988), the archive is restaged through the non-time of a constructed "black box" set, creating a literal exhibition space in which to display its archival photographs. Vanley Burke's *Boy with Flag* hangs eerily among them. A similarly minimal aesthetic is visible in *The Inheritance*, seen in the saturated colour-field walls on which collective members stick various photographs, including images of Shirley Chisholm and Angela Davis, turning the home into an exhibition space. The display is performative, presenting the image of Black Radical organising on screen. The collective which gathers in *The Inheritance* acts as a repository for physical items, actions, and testimonies

concerning Black self-governance. An inheritance is the passing down of an archive: it facilitates intergenerational conversation. We witness this in various forms: the MOVE testimonies of father and son; a grandmother bestowing a house upon her death; and the announcement of a pregnancy within the household. *Drylongso* (Cauleen Smith, 1998) also comes to mind as a predecessor to *The Inheritance*, equally concerned with the production and display of images of Black community. The protagonist of the film, Pica, struggles to understand how her polaroids of Black men in the Oakland neighbourhood should be exhibited so that they remain true to her intention of them as tribute. At the core of the film is an exploration into how images of Black community speak back to that same community. Pica's final exhibition is not in the gallery but in a neighbourhood front yard, where the polaroids are hung as a sort of shrine next to mason jars, toy trucks, flowers and candles. Like *The Inheritance*, *Drylongso* was a debut feature and made on 16mm film. It was an early screening choice of curatorial collective *The Black Aesthetic*. And so we come full circle.

The Black Aesthetic is a diasporic community which is called to action through many different—often competing—times and contexts; it is a community which stretches across localities and histories through the archive. An experimental visual politics can both depict and create a Black filmmaking community, through the content of Black Aesthetic filmmaking and the production models such filmmaking facilitates, seen here through the example of UK Black Film workshops and *The Inheritance*. Debate around the Black Aesthetic creates a productive internal discourse concerning where this community might exist, how it is structured and who is included, a key factor in early Black Arts Movement organising. For UK practices to thrive, they must follow the example of US collectives such as 'Black Radical Imagination' and 'TBA', moving between criticism, curation and filmmaking.