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THE BLACK BODY AS ARCHIVE OF MEMORY

If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know.
—Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?'"

I want my whiteness back!
—Jeff Gerber, *Watermelon Man*

THE FINGER

I don't recall the year, but I remember the moment perfectly. My brother sat me down with the promise to show me something that was earth shattering, something that was so racy and daring that I couldn't even tell Mom and Dad about it.

Obviously, he had my complete attention.

Brian turned on the television, and I sat there a bit confused as we watched a tall black man in a long leather coat emerge from the subway in New York City's Times Square. This was back in the days when Times Square was little more than a red-light district, so the scene was already filled with a tension that, while visible and palpable, was beyond my sensibilities to process beyond the most basic reflections.

It was the opening scene from *Shaft*, the 1971 film that is heralded as one of the crowning moments in the short-lived history of early 1970s "blaxploitation" cinema. As John Shaft, or rather Detective John Shaft, rolled past the illuminated promises of adult entertainment, Isaac Hayes's funk offered something viscerally exciting. I was too young to understand the

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simultaneous thrill and threat of Hayes's lyrics when the singer observed that "Shaft is a bad mother" only to be interrupted by his righteous backup singers who tell him to "shut your mouth!" I didn't get it, but I knew something older than me was going on that I was not allowed to know. It turned out, however, that watching Shaft move through these city streets or listening to the backup singers interrupt Hayes is not what Brian wanted me to see. Instead, he wanted me to see a gesture.

Less than one minute into the opening, the camera pans out as Shaft, the master of his surroundings, purposefully strides past one broken promise after another and starts to jaywalk through an intersection. He weaves around a couple of taxis with ease until a car begins to speed past traffic and toward the intersection. The driver slams on the brakes to avoid hitting Shaft. That's when it happens. Before the driver has an opportunity to curse the jaywalking black man, Detective John Shaft gives the finger to the driver and provides the movie's first lines: "Up yours!"[1]

My childhood was innocent enough that I immediately knew that this had to be the moment. Giving the finger was a violation of some sort of social contract—even though I didn't have the words then to put it that way. What I wasn't prepared for was my brother's observation that Shaft's gesture was important because the public hadn't ever seen a black man act like that before, especially a black man with a badge. I had to take my brother's word for it, as he was much more experienced about the racial ways of our world.

When I watched the opening sequence in *Shaft* (my brother didn't allow me to watch any more than that, concerned, I think, that I might tell our parents that he had introduced me to such fare), I'm not sure if Brian was even aware that the movie was part of a dawning phase in the history of American cinema in which blacks and an ostensibly black world—one that was hypermasculine, violent, laced with drugs, and defined by ill-gotten gains, corrupt (white) police, and large-breasted women in skimpy outfits—became highly marketable commodities. A few months before *Shaft* appeared, filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles inaugurated this blaxploitation moment when he released his independent art film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Much less concerned than *Shaft* would be with offending white sensibilities, Van Peebles's film was, from beginning to end, one extended middle finger to white America. (Some of the film's promotional material affirmed as much, stating that it was "The film THE MAN doesn't want you to see!" The movie itself closed with an on-screen warning to white America: "A Baad Assss Nigger Is Coming Back To Collect Some Dues.")

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But out of the many differences between the two films, one distinction is salient: Whereas Van Peebles's main character, Sweetback, lived outside the mainstream, John Shaft embodied an entirely new concept of what the establishment might actually look like. This fact alone made the movie a hit in black America. Also, since Shaft exuded a cool aesthetic that affirmed law and order even while suggesting black power, he could be an object of desire to white America as well. In my brother's opinion, that the object told the desirous to screw itself was the source of the shock.

A couple of decades passed before I finally saw more than the opening credits of *Shaft* or any part of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, but my brother's story never left me. I have no evidence that his observation about Shaft's gesture was correct, even though it certainly seems right the more I learn about the early 1970s and the era's battles about who could belong to the social and political establishment. Right or wrong, my brother's mid-1970s claim is a useful starting point for a careful consideration of the fascination and fear of what blackness meant for the country in the decades immediately preceding John Shaft's gesture. To stretch the metaphor further than I probably should, we can see that Shaft's finger points backward to a history of racial desire and anxiety that were incorporated into the physical manifestation of blackness: the finger, the arm, the mind, the flesh, and so on.

But what, precisely, was this blackness? Was it the result of a set of experiences that only blacks could know? If so, was this a communal memory that could be shared if there were a way to embody those experiences? One thing is evident: In the 1950s and '60s, while blacks and whites were wrestling with the experiential, spatial, and representative meanings invested in the black body, it became clear that the terms of the negotiation were being informed by different sets of knowledge and experience. That is, blacks' understanding of their collective, representative body was constructed by a set of literal and figurative memories that were unknown to whites.[2] This much had always been the case, of course, but as this was an age of increasingly (but always fraught) conversations about the place of blacks in the larger society, the stakes of cross-racial understanding were never higher. Looking across the marketplace of culture—popular literature, modern dance, and documentary and feature film—we find numerous examples where the black body becomes a means, or at least appears to become a means, to access an understanding of blackness that was informed by trauma, framed by assertions of the authentic, and always troubled by the complexities wrought by class.

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If you were white, crossing the color line was the only way to grasp the authentic black experience and, famously, journalist John Howard Griffin did just this. Griffin, long disturbed by the challenges facing black Americans and the deepening refusal of white southerners to accept the era's social and legal changes, decided to go undercover. If Griffin knew about the *Negro Digest* series "If I were a Negro," he didn't mention it. Also, even if he did know about the series, he likely wouldn't have been satisfied with the safe musings of white people. Griffin wanted to know the black experience as his own, and the only way to do that was by taking medicine that darkened his skin. A southerner himself, Griffin crossed the color line and rediscovered his native land over the course of six weeks in 1960. Although he and his family received threats of various types and even had to relocate for their own safety when the book was published in 1961, Griffin's *Black Like Me* became a best seller and an international sensation. Still in print fifty years after its original release, *Black Like Me* was even required reading in high schools in the 1960s. Finally, it seemed, here was an honest treatment of black life even if the truth was only the result of a performance.

Not meant to be a guide, *Black Like Me* certainly functioned as one, with its list of dos and don'ts when it came to black life in the Deep South. In fact, from the very moment that he emerged—literally, since Griffin entered a house as a white man and left at midnight as a (temporarily) black man—Griffin was accosted by anxious uncertainty: "How did one start? The night lay out there waiting. A thousand questions presented themselves. The strangeness of my situation struck me anew—I was a man born old at midnight into a new life. How does such a man act? Where does he go to find food, water, a bed?"[3] In short, Griffin needed to know how to perform essential blackness.

Griffin wrote *Black Like Me* with no apparent awareness of the literal guides that had been published for years that had been helping blacks find a place to rest or eat as they traveled to new places. These documents—*The Negro Motorist Green Book*, or merely the *Green Book*, and *Travelguide (Vacation and Recreation without Humiliation)*, first published in 1936 and 1947, respectively—addressed many of the problems that Griffin would write about in his first hours as a black man. Whereas Griffin, realizing that he did not know where or how to begin in his life, was lost in a sea of a "thousand questions," neither the *Green Book* nor *Travelguide* concerned themselves with the reasons for their existence. They did not speak about

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the broken promises of America's founding documents or the structural inequalities of the intervening centuries. Instead, they simply told black travelers where they were welcome to sleep, eat, and have fun without, as the *Green Book* editors put it, the risk of embarrassment.[4]

There was no need to think too deeply about the reality that justified their value. The racial ugliness that permeated society, especially that which accompanied African Americans traveling as strangers to or through a town, was a story whose beginning, middle, and end were all well known. So instead of stories of denial and second-class citizenship, these guides projected possibility, though tinged with caution.

Travelguide "worshipped leisure and the open road." Its covers, for example, were telling: light-skinned and trim African American models with good hair stood next to never-ending convertibles in which an ever-present bag of golf clubs signaled security, access, and acceptance. The *Green Book* typically featured highways on its cover, with cars heading toward a horizon that was really an unseeable future. It mixed middle-class aspirational consumerism with a note of caution. At the bottom of every cover, one could find what was essentially the *Green Book*'s tagline: "Carry your Green Book with you. You May Need It."[5] Not to put too fine a point on it, but the *Green Book* and *Travelguide* were trying to keep African Americans alive.

It is clear that in those first moments of Griffin's newly donned blackness and in the subsequent days as he tried to establish a routine in New Orleans, he would have profited from these real guides. Griffin was perpetually unsure of where to go and how to act until he established a relationship with Sterling Williams, a local shoeshine and someone in whom Griffin confided his whiteness.

When Griffin set out for Mississippi and thereby left Williams's guiding hand, the same problems relating to safe space reemerged. As he was about to exit a Greyhound bus that took him across the state line, a fellow passenger, believing Griffin to be black but knowing that he was new to the area, asked Griffin if he had a place to stay. Griffin recalled, "I told him no. He said the best thing would be for me to contact a certain important person who would put me in touch with someone reliable who would find me a decent and safe place."[6] Griffin may not have enjoyed the luxury of the *Green Book*, but through good fortune he kept meeting blacks who already knew the logic that created the market for guides of some sort and who were willing to share their knowledge of the local landscape.

Although *Back Like Me* was and remains the most famous book of its type from the era, Griffin was not the only white person who hatched a plan to pass as black in order to gain firsthand knowledge of what it meant to

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be black in America. Indeed, ten years after Griffin's famous experiment, Grace Halsell, a journalist who specialized in deeply immersed experiences across the globe in order to better understand her subject matter, set out to reproduce Griffin's work. Surely, she reasoned, much had changed since Griffin crossed the color line. At the same time, it was clear to her that "most white people still think of Negroes as somehow different and apart. They see their skin and nothing else. The depths of sensitivity, attitudes, abilities, emotions escape the superficial, subliminal view."[7]

Before contacting numerous doctors and even Griffin himself, she spoke with Roscoe Dixon, the "cleanup man" at her apartment building in Washington, D.C., where she worked as a staff writer in Lyndon Johnson's White House. Halsell talked about Griffin's experiment and shared her interest in conducting a similar trial. She asked Dixon if he thought that she could pull it off. Dixon immediately responded in the negative, saying that Griffin's success was so much dumb luck. No white person, male or female, could endure all the shame that accompanied blackness. When Halsell suggested that "millions of black men and women did it every day," Dixon merely replied, "That's different—when you're *born* black, you get prepared for the shame."[8] Here, Dixon was referencing the kinds of storytelling that black parents shared with their children as they prepared them for a difficult world and the years of racial slights that would accrue to an increasingly thick skin. Essentially, Dixon was describing a process in which social degradation became embodied in blackness and in black memory.

Halsell, however, was undeterred. She had traveled extensively by herself in places where white people, much less white women, were not guaranteed safe passage. She was not about to let one person's snap judgment get in her way. Her resolve was only deepened when she met Griffin himself and presented her plan to him. According to Halsell, Griffin had dissuaded numerous other people from trying to replicate his experiment and was especially discouraging to white women. Until, that is, Halsell told him about her desire to pass for black and seek work in Harlem and then again in the Deep South.[9]

Predictably, Halsell encountered the same challenges and affronts that defined Griffin's time across the color line. To be sure, there were differences, most often determined by gender, but both authors wrote at length about their shock over whites' irrational ugliness and blacks' almost heroic humanity. Understandably, both authors were deeply anxious as they took their first steps into the black world. But whereas Griffin was contemplative in his anxiety Halsell was dramatic:

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The bus wheels turn and I talk to myself in a monologue of reassurance that fear doesn't accompany me. I summon the memories of my going to live in a junk with the Chinese, of floating down the Amazon, 2,000 miles on a tug, the only woman, not afraid. Nothing physical ever frightened me—so why the big deal?

Why had I not wanted to get on this bus?

Why do I fear entering this black enclave as I have never feared any other place?

Because there are signs you don't see, big, lurid signs all over this country. They shout out: you are white, you are a white woman and have no business going into that ghetto—it belongs to *them*. And the rest, *all* the rest, belongs to you.

These thoughts tumbled from Halsell's typewriter as she recounted her first day in Harlem. Losing her white privilege seemed even more terrifying than the physical risks accompanying her new blackness. By the time Halsell moved her experiment to Mississippi, she had a deeper appreciation for the limited opportunities that defined the black world. While she remained mystified and horrified at the poor treatment she consistently encountered when interacting with whites, her prose became observational. Her attempt to secure a job by visiting the state employment office reflected her new awareness: "The white woman calls me forward, without ever looking at me. I know it is beyond her wildest imagination to think of me as anything but a person beneath her." Projecting a flat affect, Halsell continued, "Pretending to be destitute, I ask about getting welfare assistance and am directed to the floor below, where a woman in spike heels places me out in the general hallway with the spittoons and passerby. I sit for half an hour, time enough to wonder about the lives around me, the clerks returning from their coffee break, idly gossiping. No white person looks at me, sees me. I'm behind a glass, as it were, that enables me to see out while they can't see in."[10]

As tempting as it is to engage a DuBoisian interpretation about the racial veil, it is more appropriate here to consider that Halsell's imagery invokes a museum setting where the blacks were objects on display for the white passerby to notice or to ignore. Living "behind a glass" meant that blacks were closer to the Aboriginal figurines posed in their native landscape as they hunted local game in the Hall of Natural History. They embodied a still life that was arranged just so, in a perpetual state of static performance.

In these instances, Halsell's thoughts—dramatic in the former instance, cool-headed in the latter—effectively reaffirm her privilege. It might have

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been easier to float down the Nile precisely because she and everyone else knew that she was different. When she passed for black, however, the privilege afforded by racial difference no longer existed. Yes, she could still be an effective and maybe even powerful performer. But she was now behind the glass with the rest of the exhibit, and that fact was more than disorienting; it was profoundly destabilizing.

Halsell followed Griffin by ten years, and by sheer coincidence Griffin followed *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* writer Ray Sprigle, also by ten years. Sprigle's *In the Land of Jim Crow* sprang from the same curiosity that inspired Griffin and Halsell to pass for black. At the time of Sprigle's writing, however, science had not advanced far enough to allow him to darken his skin chemically. Instead, Sprigle had to rely on extended suntanning sessions and, from the very beginning, a black compatriot—a black authenticator—to accompany him throughout his journey, as "it took no great acumen to realize that no Northern white man, even though fairly well disguised as a Negro, could make his way through the black South alone, and completely on his own."[11] Sprigle's black companion—an anonymous figure throughout the book except for the fact that Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, recommended him—authorized Sprigle to other blacks. Very soon, the companion was the director for Sprigle's staged performance. He taught Sprigle how to act (right) and how to hit his marks. In this way, Sprigle's project was different from Griffin's and Halsell's, whose directions came from a number of authorities. This difference, however, did not mean that Sprigle was immune to the multiple realizations of inconvenience that accompanied life on the wrong side of the color line.

For example, early in his adventure, Sprigle discovered the logistical challenges that black sojourners faced. He encountered the absurdities of segregated train travel and the importance of paying attention to every sign—even those not posted—as local custom often informed blacks where their place was. He learned about the informal social networks that provided safe lodging and meals for blacks, since establishments that rented rooms to blacks, much less provided a meal, were rare beyond the larger southern cities. More than anything else, however, he learned that blacks lived in a perpetual state of anxiety. Sprigle wrote, "Fear walks beside the black man in the Southland from his earliest boyhood to the bed in which he dies. And fear was the lesson that I learned first and the lesson that I learned best in my four-week lifetime as Negro in the South."[12] He continued:

> Why, the mere recital of the briefing I underwent before I switched races betrays the fear in the heart of the Southern black. These men who gave

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me my short course in how to survive as a black man were men of position and substance in the black world of the South. If any Negro in the South could feel himself secure and beyond reach of white malice, these men could. Yet here are the things they stressed in their instructions to me—repeated over and over again.

"Don't ever fail to say 'sir' when you speak to a white man, whether he opens the conversation or you do."

"Don't ever strike back if a white man hits you—whether he's drunk or sober. You don't have to like it but you do have to take it."

"Don't ever speak disrespectfully or familiarly to a white woman. If you should be unfortunate enough to bump into one, or offend her by stepping in front of her and she becomes insulting, don't reply, don't try to defend yourself. Just take off your hat and keep backing away."

"Don't ever argue with a white train or bus or streetcar conductor, or with any white man. Do as he tells you and keep quiet."

I could fill a couple of pages with it—but what's the use? The fact remains that the black man in the South lives in fear.[13]

The fact that "men of position and substance" were able to give Sprigle such an exhaustive list—and he tells the story in a way that suggests that the men were in accord and actually built upon one another's observations and suggestions about how to be black in America—speaks to a larger phenomenon: the fact that black life in the South was essentially a set piece. Local practices might change from town to town, but the logic of racial control was overwhelmingly consistent. Put another way, the southern scene was a static diorama in which blacks posed as the silhouetted figurines in an unchanging landscape.

Although there were some differences in structure and certainly in the authors' tone and style, *In the Land of Jim Crow*, *Black Like Me*, and *Soul Sister* can be read as a two-decade-long performance in journalistic blackface—an action driven by a desire to understand blackness and rife with experiences that captured a fundamental anxiety, either of a white person hoping to know blackness or of a passing black person afraid for his or her life or of having his or her performance revealed for what it was. Sprigle, Griffin, and Halsell all stated clearly that their views were not meant to represent blacks' views, and they were all horrified at various times about the racial cruelties they either witnessed or experienced personally. Taken together, we have the thoughts and experiences of three white liberals, at least on the question of race and rights in the American landscape. But the landscape in which Sprigle conducted his experiment

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in 1949 was significantly different from the one in which Halsell conducted hers. Laws had changed (though not enforcement), but so had the degree of general white interest in "the black condition." Whether that interest was motivated out of sincere curiosity, morbid fascination, fear, or hatred, it's certain that the demand for information, the more personal or intimate the better, about black life was increasing exponentially.

THE ARM

In the world of high culture, the demand for an intimate knowledge of authentic blackness was met onstage in the form of modern dance. At first a site of rupture with classical dance traditions that overwhelmingly took their clues from Europe, modern dance moved from the margins to the center of America's cultural landscape in the 1950s and '60s, often relying on Afro-Caribbean and Brazilian gestures and movement.

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., did not exist when modern dance was taking the national stage by storm. The Kennedy Center was built in 1971 to bring a high-culture arts scene to what some had considered the barren landscape at the nation's capital. Since we weren't much of a theatergoing family, I remember with clarity each time I went to the Kennedy Center: There was the matinee of *Pippin* with Ben Vereen (I was mostly irritated that my mother took me out of a soccer tournament so that she and I could go; once the play began, though, I recall being mesmerized); an evening performance of *The Wiz* (in rehearsal, when the tickets were less expensive); a weekend performance of a national company of Chinese acrobats (my father was working for a congresswoman at the time, and we were part of a large group of congressional staffer families who received complimentary tickets); Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) (with my family, balcony, stage right); AAADT (with my brother and sister, orchestra seats, my parents sent us); and, again, AAADT (best seats yet, except for the woman with an impossibly tall beehive hairdo sitting directly in front of us). If I'm forgetting anything from my childhood experiences at the Kennedy Center, it would only be another performance of the AAADT.

Seeing the AAADT perform was clearly special to my parents. To this day, I don't know if my mother forced the issue on the family, if my father got the tickets of his own volition, if these came to us in another round of complimentary tickets, or if there were some sort of parental agreement that the children had to see Ailey. I do know, however, that attending the Kennedy Center to see the AAADT perform was high on the Metropolitan

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D.C. black middle class's annual list of things to be done. I also know that with each performance of *Revelations* (in my childhood and beyond), I felt reaffirmed in my blackness. I strongly suspect that these two "certainties" were intertwined for many people in those audiences because Alvin Ailey knew how to tell stories in his ballets, particularly *Revelations*, which allowed the black audience members to share in communal memories that spoke to triumph over struggle, the resiliency of faith, and a fundamental black authenticity.

Alvin Ailey was born in 1931 in rural, Depression-era Texas. He and his mother moved frequently as she searched for work. Eventually, they settled in Los Angeles as Ailey was on the cusp of adolescence, and he soon started exploring the city's broadening cultural opportunities. Ailey was first introduced to concert dance on a high school field trip. At age eighteen he began to pursue a career in dance when he joined modern dance artist Lester Horton's studio. Ailey quit almost as soon as he started, however, once he recognized the limited professional possibilities available to black dancers. It took another four years before Ailey fully committed to a career in dance.[14]

Not quite a decade later, Ailey created his own dance troupe, which he named after himself. He could not have known in 1958 that he had created a company that would become the most prominent cultural export in the world of dance in the United States and that, in fact, the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater would become the most popular modern dance troupe in history. The foregoing is not meant to suggest that Ailey was fundamentally unaware of his troupe's potential but, rather, that no one could have anticipated that Ailey's success as an American cultural ambassador rested primarily on a ballet that was grounded in a commitment to an authentic African American past that, in Ailey's words, was part of his "blood memory."

This was not an incidental description. Ailey biographer and dance studies scholar Thomas DeFrantz points out that Ailey would return to the notion of "blood memory" when asked about his inspiration for *Revelations*. Quoting an interview from 1961, DeFrantz captures Ailey's near-mystical recollection of his childhood: "These are dances and songs I feel very personally about—they are intimately connected with my memories of the Baptist Church when I was a child in Texas—baptismals by tree-shrouded lakes, in a lake where an ancient alligator was supposed to have lived—the holy-rollers' tambourines shrieking in the Texas night."[15] More than twenty-five years later, Ailey still used this phrase to explain his inspirations for *Revelations* and another ballet, *Blues Suite*.

Interviewed in 1986 for a Danish television production titled *An Evening with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, Ailey spoke at length about his

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upbringing. The viewer does not hear the questions, but Ailey's responses offer a clear sense of what made for an authentic black experience:

> Well, the first ballets were ballets about my black roots. I lived in Texas, in the South of the United States until I was twelve. Came to Los Angeles when I was twelve. So I had lots of what I call blood memories.
>
> Blood memories about Texas, oh, blues and spirituals, about gospel music, and ragtime music . . . all of the things—folk songs, all those work songs, all that kind of thing that was going on in Texas, in the early thirties, the Depression years. And I had very intense feelings about all those things. The first ballets I made when I came to New York as a choreographer were based on the feelings: *Blues Suite* and *Revelations*. . . . The first idea was to make a company, a large black company, which would concentrate on southern material. A ballet which would be . . . I mean ballets which would be all about those folk songs, those blues, those gospel songs, you know, evenings of ballets that celebrated the black experience. So, those ballets were the first that I made when I came to New York. Those I have very intense feelings about.[16]

Ailey's invocation of blood memory is an acknowledgment that his inspiration for the ballets came from a deep wellspring of personal experience. Ailey's blood memories, predating his move to Los Angeles when he was twelve, suggested that the authentic black experience was a southern, rural one that drew upon the spirit and a culture of creativity in the face of unspeakable challenges. In this way, the blood memories for Ailey are connected to his childhood but, more fundamentally, to Texas and the music and performance that were inscribed in the traditions of the southern Baptist Church and the secular songs heard at work and the pleasure songs of Saturday night.

Ailey referred to both *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* as blood memories. *Blues Suite* is still an active part of the company's repertoire, but the nature of its narrative about black cultural survival is less palatable to a broad audience. The ballet is set in the "backwoods music hall/whorehouse for working-class African Americans," and its protagonists are prostitutes and johns engaged in social and economic violence from which their only escape was the communal grief and catharsis of the blues.[17] Although *Revelations* tapped into the same kinds of group memories of pain forged through systems of white supremacy, its story was ultimately uplifting. In *Revelations*, the arc of the African American past tilted toward a salvation that was secured in the redemptive power of the southern church. It became Ailey's signature piece.

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Revelations is a ballet in three suites: "Pilgrim of Sorrow," "Take Me to the Water," and "Move, Members, Move." The ballet tells the story of the African American past through dance that is choreographed to noted spirituals and gospels "I Been 'Buked," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "Fix Me, Jesus," "Wade in the Water," "I Want to be Ready," "Sinner Man," "Honor, Honor," "The Day Is Past and Gone," "You May Run On," and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham." Although the great majority of people who saw *Revelations* did not share Ailey's blood memories from his Texas childhood, his decision to connect the physical performances with this music gave his audience two means to access the black past.

The first access point was the music. Ailey's integrated audiences might not have known the lyrics to "I Been 'Buked," for example, but they certainly understood the connections between a black past and Negro spirituals. Indeed, the audience, most of whom likely had a very impoverished knowledge of the music's histories, probably fashioned an overdetermined connection (that bordered on stereotype) between the music and the history.[18] Everyone, though, could understand the lyrics that offered a plainspoken acknowledgment of having faced unimaginable challenges and yet resounded with an insistence that nothing would diminish the singer's faith:

I been 'buked and I been scorned.
Yes, I been 'buked and I been scorned, children.
I been 'buked and I been scorned.
I been talked about, sho's you born.

'Dere is trouble all over this world.
Yes, 'dere is trouble all over this world, children.
'Dere is trouble all over this world.
'Dere is trouble all over this world.

Ain't gonna lay my 'ligion down, no.
Ain't gonna lay my 'ligion down, children.
Ain't gonna lay my 'ligion down.
Ain't gonna lay my 'ligion down.

The second means Ailey offered the audience to access the black past is apparent in the opening moments of *Revelations*. The curtain rises on an austere stage upon which nine dancers in shades of brown and tan stand in a tight triangle, partially illuminated by an overhead spotlight. They rarely leave the light throughout the performance, as if the sorrow of the lyrics requires that they stay close to one another, securing strength in their proximity. As they perform a series of deliberate horizontal and vertical moves

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"I Been 'Buked" (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's signature masterpiece Revelations*. Photo by Nan Melville. Courtesy of Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc.)*

with their arched arms, one might be inclined to imagine that they are about to take flight. However, the context of the music, the earth tones of their costumes, and the shaded lighting all suggest the opposite: that their arms are not wings preparing to soar but are themselves 'buked, burdened with the weight of so much sadness throughout history. The dancers are the children of Jesus who share with him a painful familiarity with the cross. Their gestures toward heaven, though uncertain, retain an insistent hopefulness.[19]

In the rest of this first suite, Ailey's performers tell the story of a community's faith in the possibility of salvation ("Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel") and a woman's faith in a minister to save her soul ("Fix Me, Jesus"). In the second suite, "Take Me to the Water," the dancers invoke the connections in the African American past between water and freedom: both the rivers that were used by self-emancipating people to throw off tracking hound dogs and the lakes where communities bore witness as individuals sought a certain freedom in baptism. The concluding piece in this suite, "I Want to Be Ready," is an aching solo in which a man who seems to be trapped in a tight overhead spotlight prays that he will be ready for his freedom and salvation, meanwhile never really knowing which will welcome him first.

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In the final suite, "Move, Members, Move," the energy and physicality of the ballet changes dramatically. From the pyrotechnic leaps of a trio of sinnermen who seek protection from an angry Lord who told them they should have been a-praying, to the closing number when the entire company performs together in a Sunday afternoon country church ("Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham"), the audience is figuratively summoned to the stage to bear witness to desperation and then to celebrate salvation.

Using the music and movement as shared idioms to express the black past allowed Ailey's African American audiences to connect to the dancers and choreography. By employing familiar cultural signs and symbols, Ailey's black audiences could understand him as a "black poet of dance" who fashioned, with their enthusiastic and consuming approval, a modern mythology of a singular blackness that affirmed a shared set of memories underscoring their collective resiliency.[20] For a consuming white public, the cultural markers that seemed so familiar yet were so often at a remove were brought close by Ailey's dancers, who offered an invitation to intimacy that proved irresistible. Because *Revelations* proffered "cultural memory as body wisdom" through the performers' movements, the Ailey dancers could affirm (their black audience) and they could teach (their white audience).[21]

Whether affirming or teaching, *Revelations* contained an undeniable element of spectacle. Ailey was open about this and saw in spectacle the opportunity to build an audience and to entertain. For Ailey, spectacle was also about connecting a social statement to a political statement—both of which he saw as fundamental to his entire company. (In his 1986 interview for *An Evening with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, Ailey made his feelings plain on this accord, stating, "I'm concerned about making social statements because I'm a black person who has grown up in a country that is intensely racist.") Indeed, the very idea of the company, Ailey argued, was a social statement. It was a statement not just because most of the dancers in the company were black, but also because the company's existence was Ailey's way of saying "something that in addition to fine choreography is about the beauty of black people, about the elegance . . . about their ability to entertain, about their intelligence, about their . . . love of self, about their . . . wanting to transmit through discipline their feelings to the audience that watch them dance."[22]

By creating a company that commented on the American scene as well as speaking about blacks' "elegance, intelligence, and love of self," Ailey believed he was continuing a tradition of storytelling and memory work in the world of performance. In addition to speaking to an unacknowledged tradition of black choreographers as storytellers, Ailey also felt his company had

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a unique ability and opportunity to connect with collective black memories, the blood memories that he would invoke from the moment of *Revelations*'s creation until his death in 1989. Ailey clearly understood that his personal memories extended outward to black America. As he said in a 1986 interview, "I always wanted to have the kind of company that my family could relate to, that my people in Texas could relate to, that my aunts and uncles, you know, on the farms or wherever they're from, or from the ghettos in the States could understand. The dance, in particular, is for everybody. That the dance, I believe the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people."

Earlier in the same interview, when talking about the final suite in *Revelations*, Ailey referenced his family, "my uncles, my family, my mother," and its long tradition of worship in the southern, country church vernacular. Later, when talking about his aspirations for his company, Ailey again referenced his family, "my people in Texas," but opened up further, invoking a symbolic black family "from the ghettos" that could see in dance a shared heritage that was, in the end, redemptive.

When I went to the Kennedy Center to see the AAADT as a preteen, there was little, if anything, in the setting that connected Ailey's work to his "family" in the ghettos, and it was questionable if his company was delivering dance "back to the people." The formality of the Kennedy Center, with its grand opera halls, its proximity to some of the district's most expensive real estate, and the quasi-formal attire of the audience (racially mixed and surely middle to upper class) would seem to have changed the dynamic that Ailey sought to construct and convey.[23]

Ailey had choreographed many dances for his troupe by the time I first saw the AAADT in the mid-1970s. The company also had works by many other choreographers in its repertoire. The audience, however, came to see *Revelations*. As this was my first time seeing Alvin Ailey, I did not know this, of course, but even in staid Washington the audience seemed particularly alert when the curtain rose for "I Been 'Buked." I have to confess that any further specific recollection of that first experience with the AAADT is ill defined in my memory. Beyond where I sat in the performance hall and the electricity that shot through the audience during *Revelations*, virtually all other distinctive details of the actual performance have merged with the two other times that I saw the company perform in the Kennedy Center.

The only other detail that I recall perfectly from my first time with Ailey is the white dancer.

I believe that we were watching *Blues Suite*, Ailey's other signature blood memory ballet, when I became completely distracted by the white dancer's

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longish hair. His ability to interpret what even I could tell at that young age was a black experience further left me confused. There is no other way to put it other than to say that I was deeply suspicious. He could not know what I knew.

This final assertion was ludicrous, since this "imposter" surely knew far more about the history of black cultural expression than I. Also, I would later realize that my racial chauvinism was further misplaced; Ailey had made it a point to integrate his company almost from the moment of its founding. With the benefit of hindsight, I can understand that the white dancer's presence caught me off guard because even at that young age, I could *feel* the Ailey company authenticating and affirming my blackness, especially when it performed *Revelations*. Over the years, and as I learned more about the black past, seeing the AAADT perform has elicited in me ever-stronger reactions about my authentic blackness.

Part of this reaction was simply a manifestation of familiarity. While most of any particular evening's ballets were unknown to me, I knew the music and choreography of *Revelations*. I had mastered the two clear ways that Ailey invited his audiences into his memories. I also knew to anticipate the audience reaction once the first notes of "I Been 'Buked" filled the hall. I knew that "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," the ballet's closing number, had evolved into a full-throated, full-throttled revival that inevitably included some members of the audience standing in aisles, bearing witness to African Americans' indefatigable faith. Finally, I knew that when I left the theater, I would be exhilarated and uplifted as if I had been to a revival meeting and had testified before the Lord. This was part of the authentic black Sunday church experience, after all. This was in my bones, part of my cultural-racial genetic code.

Even though I know these feelings are real, they are also completely false. My family rarely went to church when I was growing up. At some point, my parents left behind their own upbringing in this way. In fact, I was so removed from any knowledge about my family's relationship with religion that I was floored to discover in my late twenties that my father had been a licensed minister before he left for college. (How was this not part of the family lore?) I also recall being eleven and mystified when I accompanied my mother to a wedding and everyone in the church—including my mother—started reciting something in unison without looking in a book or reading the wedding program. (It was the Lord's Prayer.) Indeed, my connection to the family's religious tradition was so feeble that I was beyond college before I knew that I came from a Methodist and African Methodist Episcopal Zion background. Sure, I had gone to family church services

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when we visited the grandparents; I just never paid attention to any of the names outside the building or on the programs.

Considering this personal background and the twin facts that I had never been to a church revival or to a southern rural Baptist service, I might as well be the symbolic perfection of the distracting white dancer onstage. It would seem that I was someone who could perform a culturally articulated authentic blackness but who did not know it in lived-in-the-skin fashion. This was the genius of Ailey and of *Revelations*, and it speaks to the evocative power of dance as a means to access memory. Seeing the AAADT as an African American was an act of racial affirmation and authentication, a psycho-cultural authorization that blacks, too, had a collective memory worth celebrating, even if it wasn't a lived memory. Put another way, Ailey's performative choices made his blood memories mine; they provided the fictive connections to an authentic past that felt completely real to me.

Of course, I was not the only person who felt comfortable claiming a deep familiarity with Ailey's memories. Indeed, I was part of a phenomenon that seemed integral to the Ailey "experience." In 1956, two years before Ailey formed his company, famed jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and his band went on a federally funded tour of the Middle East. Supported with funds from the White House as well as the International Cultural Exchange Service, Gillespie was the first headliner in what would become a roughly fifteen-year project of the U.S. State Department to share American cultural excellence with the world. Signing up Dizzy Gillespie and, soon after, other luminaries such as Louis Armstrong was remarkable in itself, since jazz, though an American idiom, had yet to be considered a "highbrow" musical tradition. The State Department's embrace of jazz legitimated an art form that, for many Americans, remained part of the vernacular of poverty, blackness, and excess (alcohol, sex, and crime).[24] By 1962, the State Department's cultural exchange mission had matured and broadened. And it was in this year that the AAADT went on its first state-sponsored international tour.

Although jazz seemed an unlikely choice, the State Department's use of this "black idiom" to highlight American cultural excellence was actually predictable in the context of the Cold War. Gillespie and others served as cultural ambassadors, allowing the State Department, and thus the United States, to congratulate itself for demonstrating to the world that the promise of American democracy was real. Much of this was simply pretense, and even though ambassadors like Gillespie and Armstrong often gave the State Department fits when they went "off message," the jazz tours still stood as symbols of possibility in the present and the future.[25]

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When the AAADT joined the State Department tours, however, it introduced a different dynamic into the conversation about cultural promise. On one level, relying on *Revelations* as the anchor for its performances, the AAADT offered a narrative of uplift and salvation that fit neatly into the State Department's ideas of American exceptionalism and a color-blind universalism in which everyone was free within their respective cultural frames. At the same time, because *Revelations* was the embodiment of Ailey's blood memories, the ballet offered a powerful counternarrative to American universalism that spoke to the brutality of the country's pre-emancipatory and white-supremacist past. Were the audiences watching an "authentic" black past being danced onstage able to separate Ailey's memories from the country that sponsored his tour?

During the 1960s, as the State Department tours and their narratives of American exceptionalism became fixtures on the international arts and culture scene and as the civil rights movement intensified and garnered increasing attention in the national media, a curious and anxious public wanted to know more about black Americans, their past, and their present. Experiencing an Ailey performance might alleviate some of this anxious curiosity. But the public desire far exceeded the AAADT's ability to narrate an answer. Increasingly, major institutions like the Ford Foundation and special investigatory groups such as the National Advisory Commission on Civic Disorders (more often known as the Kerner Commission) called on scholars and creative intellectuals of all types to develop a more informed recounting of the black experience.[26]

This institutional determination to know more about black America resulted in a boom in black documentary films and television shows. These productions most often focused on current events and so, at first glance, seem not to have any explicit connection to the black past. But a closer look reveals that, like the blackface journalists and Alvin Ailey before them, the black documentarians of the 1960s turned to the black body as a means to narrate African American life in the moment. Further, while establishing the embodied visual language to tell that particular story, the black documentarians were also creating a black past that was as much the product of collective memories and the fictions built into them as they were about well-sourced and historically grounded considerations of that same past.

As a result, 1960s television and film documentaries such as *Take This Hammer*, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*, *Black Journal*, and *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class* demonstrate that many forces were in play: the documentarians' understanding of the black past, the tension between the institutions sourcing the documentarians' work, and

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how expectations of telling the story of the black present and past began to change during an age of cultural, political, and social revolution.

REVOLUTIONIZED MINDS

There is no definitive beginning of the black documentary tradition. Film scholars point to the 1910 silent film *A Day at Tuskegee* as the first in the genre, or they reference the short-subject and newsreel films in the mid-1940s. Regarding "modern" documentary, though, the clear consensus is that filmmaker William Greaves is the "dean" of black documentarians.[27]

Greaves began his career as a stage and screen actor but became fed up with the dearth of complex roles for black actors. When he discovered that the director who cast him as a Pullman porter for a Broadway show with Gloria Swanson wanted the character to be a servile, shuffle-along minstrel, Greaves quit. Realizing that he wanted to be in control of stories and performances, Greaves began to take courses in filmmaking. Greaves reflected on this moment: "It became obvious to me that either I would stay in America and allow myself to be made a fool of, or become a very neurotic person, or be destroyed. Or leave."[28] Greaves opted for sanity and moved to Canada in 1952 to pursue his ambitions. There he joined the National Film Board and eventually worked on more than eighty films before returning to the United States in 1963.[29]

Once back in the States, Greaves found his footing and began to direct films for the United States Information Agency (USIA). That Greaves found work with the USIA is equally ironic and understandable: The federal government of a country where he could not find work a decade earlier now sought him out. For its part, the USIA was motivated to secure a black filmmaker so that it could congratulate itself for appearing open-minded. Race relations became more complicated in the 1960s, and as the country moved from sit-ins to protest marches to assassinations to race riots, the USIA appreciated being able to turn to someone like Greaves because it felt he would be able to get to the truth of "black stories."[30] In an interview in which he discussed *Black Journal*, the pioneering black public affairs television series that he led in the late 1960s, Greaves pointed out that the series owed its existence to the Carnegie Endowment, the Ford Foundation, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. These organizations saw in *Black Journal* an opportunity to defuse the racial tensions of the late 1960s because the series would address the fact that the "black community had no access to the media, and there was no outlet for it to express its needs and interests in the media"—concerns expressed by the Kerner Commission.

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In the same interview, Greaves clearly took to heart the concerns about the black community and the fact that its stories were not being told, that black people were simply lost in the larger narrative of the United States except when they were protesting or rioting. For Greaves, then, the black documentarian had an obligation to make films that made a difference. Black documentary films, he said, are "usually activist, advocacy-oriented productions, weapons in the struggle for freedom, dignity, equality, liberation, self-expression and human rights."[31]

Greaves's activist orientation was not unique among black documentarians. Film studies scholar Janet Cutler writes about the "urgency" driving the work of black documentarians. Arguing that African Americans have been cut off from their "ancient history and heritage" and that their cultural contributions have been "marginalized," Cutler asserts that it was up to black documentarians to "assume the role of cultural historians, filling gaps and creating significant, sometimes imaginative connections to the past and to collective experience, countering misrepresentations perpetuated by the dominant culture, and constructing more telling narratives of the black experience."[32]

Here, Cutler connects Greaves's insistence that black documentary films had to have a purpose with the need for a useable past. The "factness" of the matter was outweighed by the simple need for a set of facts that the black community could use for a greater good. This was, essentially, a call for the creation of a collective memory that could support the efforts of blacks to share a story about their community on its own terms.[33] For Greaves and other documentarians, their work was about a "revolution of the mind"—a phrase that Greaves would use to great effect in his late 1960s documentary *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class* to signal the need both to look at things from a different perspective and to recognize that black consciousness and self-conception themselves were in a state of flux.

This need for a past, a call for recognition, and a demonstration of a new consciousness resonated in documentary work even earlier in the decade. In 1964, for example, San Francisco public television station KQED aired *Take This Hammer*, a documentary that collectively addressed these issues. Shot in the spring of 1963, *Take This Hammer* featured famed writer James Baldwin, who had just returned from his self-imposed exile in France to support the civil rights movement. His visit to San Francisco was part of his own conscious, nationwide effort to speak to and for black youth. He felt this was a population that needed to be heard, as it represented the race's future. It was also a population that needed to know its past. This was Baldwin's first visit to San Francisco, but over the course of a few days

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traveling across the city with a KQED film crew and Orville Luster, the executive director of the local social service agency Youth for Service, Baldwin developed strong and, some would come to feel, alienating opinions about the famed progressive city.[34]

The film opens with an unnamed, twenty-year-old black male responding to an interviewer who wants to know more about San Francisco: "The South is not half as bad as San Francisco. You want me to tell you about San Francisco? I'll tell you about San Francisco. The white man, he's not, he's not taking advantage of you out in public like they doing down in Birmingham. But he's killing you with that pencil and paper, brother." Complaining about being laid off and then unable to find work because the white man controlled everything, the interviewee set the tone for a documentary that said the entire country was in crisis, not just the U.S. South.

The first time Baldwin speaks in the film, he alludes to the popularly held notion that San Francisco is a liberal bastion, untroubled by the civil rights and racial problems elsewhere, and he also preemptively defends the factual bases of his observations. Immediately following the angry twenty-year-old in the opening sequence, the camera cuts to Baldwin, who, the editing suggests, has just heard the opening statement of the film: "This is the San Francisco Americans pretend does not exist. They think I'm making it up."[35]

Baldwin is determined to convince the viewers that he is not, in fact, "making it up," and he speaks with passion and urgency about the state of affairs in black America. Like the unnamed man whose interview began the film, Baldwin invokes recent events in Birmingham to pull the viewer in: "And Birmingham is an instant, you know, which may become a shrine. What is really crucial is whether or not the country, the people in the country, the citizenry, are able to recognize that there is no moral distance, no moral distance . . . which is to say, no distance, between the facts of life in San Francisco and the facts of life in Birmingham. We've got a cause, you know, one's got to tell it like it is. And that's where it's at."

Of course, the "where it's at" in the film was literally San Francisco but figuratively everywhere in the United States. By likening daily life in San Francisco to events in Birmingham—a theme that surfaced throughout the film—the documentary made several important rhetorical moves: It forged a connection for the viewer to the "authentic" black experience that people had seen played out on newsreel footage throughout the spring of fire hoses and police dogs directed at civil rights marchers; it invoked a collective memory of vicious state-sponsored assaults on the black body; and it provided the space for someone like Baldwin, who had proven on other

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occasions to be unafraid to speak the truth to power, the opportunity to step up to the bully pulpit and offer his narrative of the black experience.

Toward the end of the film, Baldwin and Luster stand on a street corner, discussing the privilege of white liberals—the people who, in Baldwin's estimation, alleviated their anxiety about the country's state of affairs by helping out the Negro, albeit on their terms. The problem, Baldwin observed, was that as soon as white liberals discovered that their narrative of blackness did not align with blacks', liberals became hurt, disillusioned, or scared.

The camera floats over Baldwin's shoulder—in a figurative sense trying to see the world from his perspective—as he turns to Luster to offer as an example his experience with a white liberal who told him how hurt she was when a room of twenty black college students told her that she was of no use to them because she did not understand their world. Baldwin became infuriated when she said defensively that she was sure she had "done more for Negroes than they've ever done." When Baldwin pressed her, trying to gauge the extent to which she was willing to make further sacrifices, she declined, explaining that she could not afford to risk damaging her children. Her reluctance to pay the same dues to society that black parents were expected or forced to pay every day pushed Baldwin over the edge. The speed with which his words tumbled out of his mouth prevented an articulate delivery:

> You know, it's kind of an insult. I've, I, here I am, you know, as they say, I've no visible scars. I'm not a, I'm not isolated. I've got a family. You know. And a history. And I've got nieces and nephews. I can't protect them. You know. They're, they're in tremendous danger, all, every hour that they live, just because they are black, not because they're wicked, you know. And I mean this is, uh, from the, from the baby niece to the, to the oldest nephew who is only sixteen. Now if this is the way that, if this is the way that they are, you know, and I know that every time I leave my nephew I don't know what'll, what'll happen to him by the time I see him again, I mean not only inside, but physically. How can you expect me to take seriously somebody who says "I'm willing to fight for you, but I, but I can't afford to let my children, I can't afford to let my children be damaged"? And furthermore, how can I take seriously somebody who doesn't realize that children *are* being damaged by this, by the continuation of this, of this, of the system?[36]

In this moment, very near the end of the film, the documentary clearly invokes embodied black memory. Baldwin begins his monologue by referencing the fact that his body is unblemished—it has no scars—but that the damage is much deeper, in the soul, perhaps. Baldwin also invokes his

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family and black history to suggest, by extension, collective memories of shame, and damage that all blacks understand. Although Baldwin is not behind the camera or directing the scene, he certainly has the same impulse as the black documentarians who strove to create films with a purpose and to fashion a black past that had been denied for so long.

While I have no evidence that William Greaves ever saw *Take This Hammer*, it is clear that he and Baldwin shared the sentiment that blacks needed their past to be a useable past. That is, Greaves and Baldwin understood that mainstream social, political, and cultural expectations regularly denied blacks individual pasts and typically only saw their collective past as a problem to be solved. In Greaves's hand, documentary film could address the limitations of this worldview by showcasing black cultural excellence and by affirming a collective black cultural memory. In his 1966 documentary, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*, Greaves did just this. That the film was simultaneously a powerful meditation on black identity and memory and a commissioned piece for the USIA is remarkable enough. That the film garnered critical acclaim for its nuanced interpretation of black memory despite the fact that it was not released in the United States for decades after its completion is testimony to the power of its narrative and insight.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act triumphs, the USIA commissioned Greaves to produce a five-minute newsreel on an arts festival in Dakar, Senegal. The political motivation for the film was clear: call attention to the U.S. support of the celebration of African arts and culture, thereby offering a counternarrative to critics of the country's Cold War politics and its suspected involvement in the recent coups in Zaire and Ghana (the latter coup occurred just months before the festival began). Greaves accepted the job but was so overwhelmed by the spirit of the gathering that he turned in a film quite different from the one he was commissioned to make. The resulting forty-minute tone poem became the most comprehensive visual record of the First World Festival of Negro Arts as well as the most popular USIA film in Africa for the next decade.[37]

Although unseen in the United States due to the USIA's mandate, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* featured many of the country's leading artists. They were filmed in performance, of course, but also while observing the work of other artists from throughout the African diaspora. Greaves built the documentary around this exchange, often speaking in free verse about the mystery of origins, asking in various ways throughout the film, "Who am I?"

Shot entirely in sepia, the documentary begins with Langston Hughes on a beach, watching fishermen's boats come in. In the background, Greaves

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asks, "Who am I? Perhaps I am a poem by Langston Hughes." Answering by illustration, Greaves reads Hughes's anthem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the poet's declaration that black memory stretched across the millennia to the dawn of civilizations around the world. Beginning with Hughes's poem, and using rivers and seas as a motif throughout the film, Greaves offers a narrative that pulls together clips from the festival's performances, attempting to showcase performers from as many different countries as possible, while constantly trying to answer the question, "Who am I?"

During a long section dedicated to dance, we see folk dancers from several African countries while Greaves as the disembodied narrator muses, "The dance is an old friend of mine. It is a river in which the spirit swims and plays. It is a river in which the spirit weeps." After an extended clip featuring dancers from Chad, the narrator returns, and the question "Who am I" still resonates: "I am the American Negro spiritual. See how these Americans, these dancers of Alvin Ailey, search for me in their movements." We then see the opening two minutes of *Revelations* ("I Been 'Buked") as Greaves returns to Hughes's poem with which he began the film: "I've known rivers, ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep, like the rivers."[38]

Greaves makes no effort to hide his intention: African arts and cultural practices may be widely varied and may now be dispersed because of political and economic forces, but they are, in the end, a unifying, universal power that unites black people. The creative power of the arts was also a healing power. It healed by bringing people together, and it healed by allowing them to share in one another's stories. In this way, histories became memories and memories were woven back into history.

In the film's closing moments, Greaves's narrator changes his approach. The "I" we have heard throughout the film is now a "we." It is the people and cultures of Africa. It is the multivocal motherland. It is, more than anything else, the place that we must remember if we are to know who we are: "You who have journeyed to this place in 1966, we hope you have found much to delight and inspire you. We are glad to see you leave in such high spirits. When you return home tell everyone what you have learned here at our festival. Let us meet often. We will continue this conversation we have already begun."

The scene shifts to American artists in the Dakar airport, heading toward a waiting plane. The closing narration is now speaking to the Americans directly. The last person we see, the final person to board the plane, is Alvin Ailey himself. As he turns to wave, the narration concludes, "Goodbye. Remember what has happened here. Remember. Remember."[39]

Throughout *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* Greaves was calling for a remembrance, certainly, but also a fundamental shift in how African

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Americans should recognize their own past and their position in the world. With this extended visual poem he called for a revolutionized consciousness that could appreciate the roots of black memory throughout the diaspora. Clearly, Greaves was inspired by his experiences in Senegal. When he returned to the United States, however, the realities of a nation in profound turmoil pressed down on him.

By the late 1960s it was clear that the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were unable to stop the bloodshed in the nation's streets. The war in Vietnam was escalating and relying on a disproportionate number of black bodies on the front lines. And the nation's black leaders were being murdered. As the decade of civil rights triumphs turned into the decade of discord and race riots, new opportunities appeared for black documentarians to tell the story of black America. What did black America want? What would bring peace to the streets? Whose stories needed to be told?

A direct attempt to answer those questions came with *Black Journal*, an hour-long public affairs program that declared itself to be produced by, for, and about the black community. Hosted by Greaves and Lou House (who would later change his name to Walli Sadiq), *Black Journal* first appeared in June 1968. Airing just a few months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the first episode of *Black Journal* featured a story of Coretta Scott King's commencement address at Harvard University, the Black Panthers, and famed comic and actor Godfrey Cambridge.[40] (In fact, Cambridge was the first individual on screen in *Black Journal*. He appeared as a painter who silently painted the viewer's television screen black. When he was done, the graphic of the show's title appeared.)

Ostensibly, the show directly addressed the need for a black perspective in the nation's media.[41] However, since Alvin Perlmutter, the show's executive producer, was white, the majority of the black staff on *Black Journal* thought they were participating in a lie. When their requests for new senior leadership were not met, eleven of the twelve black staff members walked out in protest. By September, Perlmutter was gone and Greaves was serving as the show's executive producer and cohost. Although the episodes produced under Greaves's aegis were not substantially different from those that appeared before, the young black filmmakers on staff felt that they had a new liberty to "express themselves artistically" and to speak with confidence to the needs of black America.[42]

While they could not have necessarily known that Greaves would grant them the artistic independence they sought, the filmmakers knew that he was the most accomplished documentarian of the day. Working with him

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would be, at minimum, a first-rate apprenticeship, a "once in a lifetime opportunity."[43] St. Clair Bourne, one of the filmmakers on staff who became a leading documentarian himself, explained why Greaves was so important to the world of black documentary film:

> If you look at black filmmaking as an inverted pyramid, he's the base which everything else comes out of, because it was he who set up the three-point dictum that we were supposed to work by: one, to define the reality, the black reality, which in those days, as now, was usually problem/struggle; two, to define why the struggle/problem/situation evolved; but most important, he said—and if you didn't do this, then you were really derelict in your duty, and three, to suggest a way out. It did not have to be *the* way out, but you had to show people trying to attempt to resolve the difference.[44]

Perhaps because Greaves was so adept at "defining the black reality"—what Klotman and Cutler refer to as "creating a more authentic narrative of the black experience"—his reputation preceded him throughout the larger filmmaking world by the time of the *Black Journal* walkout.[45] He was particularly well known by executives at NET who had just aired his striking documentary *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class*.

On the surface, *Still a Brother* seemed to be simply concerned with offering a new perspective on what constituted the black community. White Americans needed to know that all blacks were not endlessly rioting, nor were they all destitute and angry. Further, blacks who were poor needed to know about the black middle class so that they could find in them effective role models.[46] At least, this was the thinking going into the project.

The documentary that Greaves completed reflected his own projection of the importance of the black middle class. In effect, he constructed a different reality—a black reality—and created a film that clearly had a purpose. It exceeded the expectations of the NET executives. Greaves was fully aware that he was submitting something other than what NET executives anticipated. Greaves recalled,

> We had difficulties once *Still a Brother* was finished because NET had not expected that kind of film. They had expected an *Ebony* magazine kind of film, but we brought them this documentary that talked about mental revolution and showed increasing militancy in the black experience. . . . So when NET executives saw the film they sort of blinked because they didn't know whether or not they really wanted to put it into the system. They weren't clear whether or not it would be acceptable.

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> There was a great deal of anxiety because these executives were looking at their mortgages and didn't know whether they would be tossed out of their jobs.[47]

To their credit, the NET executives honored their commitment to Greaves's vision and let the program run. Over the course of its ninety minutes, *Still a Brother* offered a multilayered interpretation of race and class in the American scene.

Structurally, *Still a Brother* seemed conventional: It acknowledged a problem, identified a little-known phenomenon, and said that it would tell the story of that phenomenon, suggesting that within its truth there lay a solution. It was 1968, and everyone knew that America was caught in the throes of social change; people began to pay special attention to the challenges of black urban life and the apparent unspooling of civil rights gains. In his role as narrator, actor Ossie Davis told the viewer that despite the troubles, there were other African Americans who had been working hard to make their presence known and who could be a stabilizing force for the country. These people were the black middle class.

One of the first talking heads to appear in the film is sociologist St. Clair Drake. He offers an illustration of the kind of person one finds in the black middle class.[48] Drake tells the story of two black men who worked in the local stockyards (the film does nothing to challenge gendered mores; black men are at the center of the documentary from beginning to end). They both leave work, get home late, and find themselves locked out. They both yell upstairs to their wives, who eventually let them inside. There are differences in their narratives, however. The first stockyard worker stops by the bar before going home and has too much to drink. Meanwhile, his wife is drinking at home. When the husband gets home, he and his wife get into a shouting match, most of which happens in public. The argument becomes physical, again in public. They finally go inside after much of the neighborhood has seen them—once again, since it seems to be a routine—and go to bed.

The other stockyard worker passes the same bar as his coworker, but he turns his head and ignores it. He and his wife get into an argument when he gets home, but the argument—which also involves raised voices and the possibility of a physical confrontation—only happens after the husband has been let in, the front door closed, and the shades drawn. Their fight remains private. Further, when the fight is over, they sit down in the kitchen and decide "how much money to set aside for the kids' education fund and how much to give to the church on Sunday." To Drake, the latter worker is middle class, while the former one is lower class.[49]

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Drake begins his illustration pointing out that both men make the same amount of money each month. So, for Drake, middle-class status was an expression of how one viewed the world and how one wanted to be viewed. It involved having faith in the future (saving for a college education) and hewing to a moral code of respectability (avoiding temptations to excess and keeping one's private affairs private). Greaves relies on Drake numerous times in the film, but this is the most important moment, since it frames so much of the narrative that follows: Being middle class, according to Drake and, by implication, Greaves, is not primarily about material claims but about a state of mind.

This state of mind is central to Greaves's film. As he tells stories about material possessions or life chances exclusive to people with high incomes, Greaves organizes them around the liminal space these blacks occupy: vacations in black enclaves like Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard or Sag Harbor in Long Island; expensive soirées where wealthy blacks and whites mingle freely. They are often seen trying to explain their own struggles about not quite fitting into the black or white worlds. Interspersed throughout the film are small gatherings of middle-class blacks who are viewed engaging in fierce debates about the state of the country and the place of blacks within it. These well-off African Americans wrestle openly—in the privacy of their salons, that is—with their role in the freedom struggle and their obligations to the community.

One man speaks at length about his dawning awareness of how he saw himself in the world and how he struggled with the changing contours of the country's political landscape:

> For some reason or another I never associated myself with the welfare recipient, the unemployed person, and now I realize that these are, uh, my people; and that I should be able to do something for them or with them. But yet I haven't so that I think is where the guilt comes in.
>
> I have empathy for my people, but yet in my middle-class value I still kind of think of them as "those people." And I'm aware of it and I think a lot of people in my particular class, if you will, are aware of it, but we are reluctant, we are just imbued with this white middle-class value where we think "white." So I take the position that these people have been denied—and I continue to say "these people," notice that, I continue to say "these people"—and, uh, like I'm not one of them when, in fact, I am one of them.[50]

Although this man's frankness is both gripping and unnerving, Greaves intersperses his subject's slow and contemplative narration with other visuals

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to keep the viewer interested. The first cutaway happens when the subject says that he has never associated with the welfare recipient and the unemployed person. At this moment, viewers see an extended shot of blacks in an urban setting. They are in the street; they seem to be poor and unfocused. They appear lost—lost to one another and lost to society. The second cutaway is longer, almost thirty seconds, and begins when the subject points to his own realization that he is talking about "those people" as if he were not part of them.

An important visual statement reinforces Drake's assertion that in the black world, at least, poverty has a public face: All of the scenes of "those people" are filmed outside. "Those people" are also rendered silent. The poor truly are subjects on display—and, disturbingly, too often on display in prone positions, with the right to remain silent. These visual choices develop as the film proceeds. Later, another middle-class black man narrates the mental challenges of his own discovery of how class and race mix, while unsettling visual projections of "those people" play on the screen. In this instance, Horace Morris, the associate director of the Washington, D.C., Urban League, recalls a harrowing story of his experiences in Newark during that city's race riots in 1967.

Morris decided to visit his family in Newark after attending an Urban League conference in New York. He picked up his stepfather and then, together, they went to see his brother with a plan to borrow a car to visit other nearby family. As Morris and his stepfather got into the car, three Newark police cruisers turned the corner. The officers got out of their vehicles and, without provocation, opened fire on Morris, his stepfather, and another forty or fifty residents who were gathered on the stoop of the brother's apartment building. With a deceptively flat delivery, Morris remembers the massacre: "My stepfather was mortally wounded and I had another brother who was wounded twice who required an operation and extensive hospital care. We were under fire, I would say, for approximately ten minutes by the Newark police. They said they were looking for a sniper on the roof or the upper floors of the apartment building, but they were still firing at ground-level range." Morris continues:

> And once we had, once I had the opportunity to collect my senses, really evaluate and think this thing through, it came through to me in stark reality: regardless of how far up the economic ladder any Negro goes, that there still is this oppressive thing of prejudice that he's subjected to on the part of the white man and I realized that I was extremely fortunate not to be killed myself. And that even though I had two degrees, even

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> though I had played football for Syracuse, even though I was an elementary school principal and had educated white children, even though I work with white people in the Washington Urban League, even though there are white people that I consider close friends, that in . . . as the boys say, when it gets down to the nitty gritty, right down to where it really matters, you are still a Negro, and you are still identified with every other Negro in America, be he in a ghetto or in a suburban neighborhood. You are still a brother. I think we just have to recognize this.[51]

Morris's interview marks a turning point in the film. The tone of curious musing about the state of mind of the black middle class morphs into more determined and angry declarations of how justice might be secured. Viewers hear this shift in Morris's words but also see the shift in how poor black bodies are displayed. As Morris offers his closing comments that he was "still a brother" despite his unusual life chances, Greaves runs footage from the Newark riots. Police roughly pull black men out of cars. Many of the officers interlace their directions with "boy." We see police assault blacks who, while getting beaten, continuously declare their innocence. Then we start to see death—a series of stills of black men lying in pools of their own blood, one sprawled across the backseat of a car.

Greaves's editing implies that black men will be victimized by a system that will not hesitate to kill in order to preserve the status quo. This interpretation is only heightened when bongos start to play a violent rhythm in the background and the film cuts to a funeral scene, and then to several sequential shots of a city in flames. As the martial bongo continues in the background, another layer of music builds and rests on top. It is "America, America." This disharmony slowly begins to fade as we enter another middle-class salon where we hear a black man essentially giving a lecture to his peers about John Brown and revolutionary zeal. It turns out that Richard B. Moore, identified in the film simply as a "Harlem Bookstore Owner" (no mention is made of his prominent community role as a longtime civil rights activist, communist, and black nationalist), is the source of the opinions.

Morris's recognition that he is "still a brother" offers a reading different from what we've seen earlier in the film. Before, even though the speakers did not literally use the phrase, they evinced a social anxiety that was a collective declaration to lower-class blacks that they, the middle class, remained black. Even if some were only just realizing this connection, they were sensitive to the ways in which they suffered some of the same challenges that defined racial life in the United States. But experiencing Morris's narrative, however, we see the recognition that regardless of their

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class standing, middle-class blacks were still (only) a brother in the eyes of whites.

Greaves interprets the middle-class response to an increasing racial militancy as a reflection of a revolution of the mind—a moment of rising consciousness that linked still (only) being a brother with still being a brother. The middle class was on the verge of reconnecting to the larger black community, catalyzed by a new sense of self-esteem and an appreciation for a collective memory filled with accomplishment. Sitting in front of a sign that reads "Black is beautiful and it's so beautiful to be black," Atlanta psychiatrist Dr. J. Denis Jackson speaks to this issue directly, referencing the cruel dualities in society that inevitably had a negative effect on African Americans.

Jackson says that this duality—a philosophy of good versus evil—"makes us ashamed of just being black." He continues:

> There is a bone-deep shame about being black which pervades the entire black community and it has no respect for class. The black bourgeoisie is just as ashamed of being black as are the masses of Negroes. This was done due to a concerted effort over many years and generations by the white propagandist. We intend to counter-propagandize. We intend to tell black people that they are valuable; that they are important; that they have made contributions to the world and will continue to make contributions to the world. But first they must look upon themselves in a better light. Hence, black is not ugly. Black is not evil. Black is beautiful.[52]

Just as in those previous moments in the film where Greaves cut away from the interviewee to make visual statements about the black body—the black body as a site of anonymous poverty and the black body as a receptacle of violent intention by the state—Jackson's interview was followed immediately by a reading of another black body: Bayard Rustin.

As one of the nation's most prominent civil rights activists and perhaps the most important political adviser in the black community, Bayard Rustin was widely celebrated as an arbiter of positive change. In the film, Rustin acknowledges a new mentality among blacks and salutes it: "Black people now," he says, "are proud of being black. They are proud of their hair. When I was a child I was taught that if a Negro was light complexioned and had straight hair he was somebody. And I was taught that because I had nappy hair and was black I was nobody. Young Negroes today are proud of their black skin; they're proud of their nappy hair and . . . . That's what they are. Now that is new and, to me, that is good."[53] As Rustin completes his

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thoughts, the camera pans up and closes in on his full head of naturally "nappy" hair, an Afro, with a slight fade on the sides. There is no doubting the fact that even though the revolutionized mind meant that the meanings of the phrase had changed, he is still a brother.

Riven throughout with social anxieties operating at different registers, the film's depictions of the black body and black space (core elements of Greaves's "black reality") force a reconsideration of the film's title. What does it mean to still be a brother? While wrestling with that question, the film reasserts an authentic Negroness that the blackface journalists sought, affirms the history of struggle that performers in the AAADT projected with their bodies, and abides by the documentarians' commitment to create a useable narrative of the past for the sake of the present and future.

MEMORY, SKIN DEEP

I do not remember if my brother called me into the family room to watch another seminal moment in the era's cinematic cultural race battles, but I recall being there all the same. Previously, at my brother's invitation, I had seen John Shaft give the white man the finger and, in doing so, create entirely new ways to read the black body. My only memory of this second moment—of the entire film, in fact—is an image of a black man sitting in a bathtub filled with gallons upon gallons of milk.

That man is Godfrey Cambridge, the same person who opened the first installment of *Black Journal* two years earlier and who was an early guest on the show. He was immortalized in my mind for this particular frame (not even the scene, just the frame) from *Watermelon Man*, the 1970 project of filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles that marked his return from Europe. Like Greaves before him, Van Peebles could not find compelling work in the United States and left to develop his skills and pursue his craft. While in France, Van Peebles directed *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, his first feature-length film. The film caught the eye of Hollywood producers, and soon he was signed to direct *Watermelon Man*, a social commentary clothed in a comedy built on a fantastical premise.[54] The movie tells the story of Jeff Gerber, an unbearably loud and obnoxious bigot who doesn't know what to make of the black activists he sees on the nightly television news and with whom his liberal wife sympathizes. Although having little obvious in common except for their two children and the privilege that accompanies their white skin, the couple has a comfortable suburban life and appear faithful to each other, even if Gerber endlessly lobs unwanted advances toward the office sexpot.

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Trying to bathe the black away, Watermelon Man *(WATERMELON MAN © 1970, renewed 1998 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.)*

Everything seems to be in order in Gerber's life until he wakes up one morning to discover that he is no longer white (Cambridge plays Gerber in whiteface for the first twenty minutes of the film). At first he believes his dark skin to be an overreaction to the tanning bed he uses religiously, but as the days wear on, he becomes increasingly desperate and experimental, trying everything to force his skin back to its normal pigmentation. After every skin lightener on the market fails, he bathes in gallons of white milk. Before we see him steeping in a tub of milk, however, we hear him repeatedly chanting "ooga booga dooga do." When the camera enters the bathroom we understand: While bathing in the milk, he is also reading *Voodoo without Killing Chickens*, apparently "number one in Haiti." He is willing to try anything to remove this curse.

This is the moment that I remember: a forlorn and dark-skinned black man, sitting in a bathtub filled with white milk (presumably whole milk, as I think of it), veering dangerously close to losing his mind. I did not recall the "jungle chanting" his wife hears before she finds him in the bathtub reading his book of voodoo, nor did I remember their exchange. The image, though, was indelible, much like Gerber's skin color.

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After a few days of calling in sick, Gerber decides he has no choice but to go public in his new skin. Predictably, mayhem ensues. From causing a near street riot when he is "caught" by the police as he is running to catch the bus, to being asked to move out of his home by his neighbors because his presence was bringing down property values, Gerber suffers an endless slew of humiliations that were familiar (if exaggerated for the sake of filmed entertainment) to so many real African Americans. The shock of these negative experiences is mitigated—but always only temporarily—when he takes advantage of his neighbors' racism, forcing them to double what they originally offered him to move out of the neighborhood. Additionally, the office mate who had been repulsed by his "white" masculinity and endless comeons aggressively pursues him as a hypermasculine sexual object. (After they consummate their relationship, Gerber becomes disgusted with her for her obvious racist presumptions of black male sexual prowess. He leaves her apartment in haste, and, confirming his sudden and shocking critique, she slings racial epithets at him and then yells "rape" from her apartment window as he makes his way in the street below.)

As Gerber continues to navigate life in this skin, the viewers see other changes happening. The children had already been sent away, but his wife soon follows, failing to realign her liberal race politics with the color of his skin and the reality of their new life together. Understandably, he seems to lose his mind, though not long before Van Peebles makes it clear in the film's closing scene that Gerber has gained a hyperclarity.

In the film's final minutes, Gerber talks on his phone with his wife. She is clearly still in love with him but is also unable to reconcile her emotions with her husband's reality. Despite being embittered by her unwillingness to embrace her stated politics, Gerber is polite enough and reassures her that he is doing well. As they are hanging up, however, the film cuts to an overlapping scene in which we see Gerber going through rudimentary military training for the literal revolution with other radical blacks, all of whom are using the tools of subjugation—mops and brooms—instead of rifles. Gerber, the film implies, is not only no longer in blackface; he is now fully and truly black. With each spearlike thrust of his headless mop, Gerber embodies the revolutionized mind of the late 1960s. He is prepared to do more than give the finger to the system, and his arms have already begun to strengthen as they prepare to carry the burdens of blood memory. We know that the newly black Gerber who flung himself across his bed earlier in the movie while wailing, "I want my whiteness back!" is gone. The desire to forget black memory is released, and black embodied memory is embraced.[55]

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