

To think is always to follow the witch's flight.

— GILLES DELEUZE and FÉLIX GUATTARI, *What Is Philosophy?*

Another Litany for Survival

Little attention has been given to the historical coincidence between the invention of cinema in the early twentieth century and W. E. B. Du Bois's prescient 1903 statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." An investigation of the nexus at which the epistemological and ontological mechanisms of racism and the socioeconomic interests that racism serves collide with the mechanisms and interests that animate cinema might open a critical interrogation into the lingering logics of racism and the complex ways in which "race,"

"gender," and "sexuality" have come both to inform and deform various anticapitalist movements toward

Introduction

Black Liberation. In the name of such an interrogation, the present study takes flight from a set of theoretical explorations of cinema, cinematic processes, and their profound significance to anticapitalist, U.S.-based, Black Liberation movements, and heads toward an examination of black lesbian butch-femme sociality as an exemplary, though imperfect, effort to forge ways of living that enable the survival of expressions of life that, to invoke Audre Lorde, were never meant to survive.

If it can be said, however enigmatically, that "to think is always to follow the witch's flight," then the black femme is the "witch" whose flight the present book pursues in the name of thinking. The black femme is herein crafted as a figure that exists on the edge line between "the cinematic" or "cinematic reality" and what Gilles Deleuze refers to in his study of cinema as a "radical Elsewhere." The black femme thus offers a glimpse into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected. The figure of the black femme orchestrates this book's trajectory because she challenges each of the primary categories that have been constructed in response to racism, sexism,

and homophobia (“black,” “woman,” and “lesbian,” respectively) to contend with what is excluded from that category in order for it to cohere as such.

Yet this is not a book about the black femme, or even about black lesbian butch-femme. *The Witch's Flight* is an exploration of the conditions of possibility for their survival, as concepts, as identities, as communities, and, perhaps most important, as problems. It also is an evaluation of what the figure of the black femme in particular and black lesbian butch-femme sociality in general make available to contemporary thought about the connections between visual culture, blackness, gender, and sexuality. In this study the black femme is a figure that exists on the edge line, that is, the shoreline between the visible and the invisible, the thought and the unthought in the critical theories that currently animate film and media studies, African American studies, gender and sexuality studies (including women's studies and queer theory), and critical theory more broadly. Following Avery Gordon, it could be said that the black femme haunts current attempts to make critical sense of the world along lines delineated according to race, gender, and/or sexuality. Because she often is invisible (but nonetheless present), when she becomes visible, her appearance stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different, or differently.

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Because she marks a highly contested and contingent mode of existence—one that, as the Audre Lorde poem referenced in the title of this introduction makes evident, cannot not speak or not appear or not re-member—the black femme sets us to work on questions of survival, including considerations of affective labor, excess, and the (re)production of value. Like the black, the black femme is not but theory and flesh. Following *The Witch's Flight* therefore demands a theoretical scaffolding capable of, or at least calibrated for, framing “the problem of the twentieth century” without reifying the common sense that problem secures. I provide this scaffolding in the first two chapters and continue to build it in subsequent chapters. Each chapter contains a component of the argument that the book as a whole makes, thereby leading the reader into the subsequent chapters or back to the preceding. Nonetheless, each chapter both relies on and is relatively indifferent to the arguments in the other chapters and thus could be read on its own. The readers who choose to skip chapters will miss the overall argument's nuance but still should emerge with something of its substance.

Attending to the lines of flight set in motion by (un)successful attempts to contain or circumscribe the black femme within existing epistemological

categories provides an opportunity to elucidate the workings of the cinematic and the cinematic processes integral to contemporary racism, sexism, and homophobic violence.

Follow?

I derive my use of the term *the cinematic* from Gilles Deleuze's elaboration of the word *cinema* in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. According to Deleuze, film becomes, on its invention, "the organ for perfecting" a "new reality."¹ I insist upon the critical utility of understanding the complex and messy stuff of late-twentieth-century reality within the conceptual frameworks made perceptible by the development of cinema.

My use of *the cinematic* as a term through which to shuttle a complicated aggregate of capitalist social relations, sensory-motor arrangements, and cognitive processes runs the risk of subsuming things specific to other audiovisual media, such as television, under the rubric of *cinema*, a term commonly associated only with film. Yet many of the phenomena with which I am concerned here surfaced with the invention of film technology; thus, it is in the context of a sustained discussion of cinema that Deleuze identifies, characterizes, and engages with those types of images. Following the argument that Richard Dienst makes in the context of considering whether Deleuze's "movement-image might have existed in multiple forms beyond cinema" (and therefore of assessing Deleuze's relevance for Dienst's study of television), what I suggest is "not to say that cinema simply infected everything else with its logic" but to point out that cinematic images surface "in a range of activities sharing the same abstract (acentered, variable) relations of exchange and mobility."² Assuming the prevalence since the beginning of the twentieth century of the types of images and processes Deleuze describes—images and processes that are perceptible via film but that can be said to have appeared in other arenas contemporaneous with film—I employ the substantive *the cinematic* to designate a condition of existence, or a reality, produced and reproduced by and within the regimes of the image Deleuze identifies and describes. *The Witch's Flight* is Deleuzian to the extent that Deleuze's work on film provides a theoretical framework and a method for its elaboration and exploration of the cinematic.

The privilege I accord to films as vehicles that circulate "cinematic images" stems from their ability to put particular images into widespread circulation and to package them for various modes of consumption, including

intellectual consumption. With this in mind, I have chosen films or other configurations of images whose appearance reveals something within common sense with the potential to unsettle hegemonic conceptualizations of race, gender, and/or sexuality that rationalize, based on a set of conclusions about one or all three of those categories, forms of domination and exploitation.

Because my primary concern is with those images that have found ways of moving with relative ease by affirming aspects of common sense, I focus largely on mainstream and popular films or other images that have achieved broad circulation, rather than on films with a small or limited circulation. The invention of video and the mass distribution of films on video have made the public circulation of images faster and broader while rendering more variable the speed at which the images might be viewed; they might be fast-forwarded, rewound, paused, and reconsidered or re-circulated in a different context. Much of my analysis regarding specific films, for example, is the result of the type of methodical deliberation that is not readily accessible upon a first screening in a movie theater.³ Assuming the widespread availability of the images that interest me, I consider the formal and aesthetic characteristics of the film or films in which they circulate in an effort to assess the context for the reception of those images.

The context within which each of the cinematic images I discuss was produced, distributed, and exhibited provides a glimpse into that image's journeys and its currency as expressed most crudely, but accessibly, by box-office receipts and other standards of measurement particular to commercial film. (Box-office returns and production budgets are only two among many points of contact between film and money. Not only does filmmaking require a major investment of capital, but, as I discuss in chapter I, cinema's particular relationship with time binds cinematic images to money.)⁴

Because of my attention to film's role in the circulation of images, certain of the epistemologies and methodologies particular to film studies are invaluable to my analysis of film texts. Scholarly work that probes issues concerning questions of aesthetics, or the dynamics informing the reception or consumption of film images, have been invaluable to my attempts to explore the cinematic itself. But my engagement with film, film studies, and media studies is also an intervention into the manner in which questions of representation, race, and the economic function of media are framed. Deleuze's cinema offers a way of thinking about questions of "race," "gender," "sex-

uality,” and “representation” that challenge demands for “positive,” “negative,” or “accurate” representations—demands that assume the coherence of an indexical relationship between image and “reality” that has never cohered for blacks and other groups who consistently have claimed to be misrepresented. Deleuze’s theories of the cinematic contest these assumptions, allowing for a nuanced and critical understanding of film as part of reality, rather than as a reflection or representation of it, and of the dominance of cinematic processes in making sense of the world for those whose sensory-motor schemata has been habituated by film. In referring to cinematic processes as dominant, I am marking not only the extent to which our knowledges of the world increasingly are mediated by images but also the ways in which our sensory apparatus is accustomed to receiving and forming images according to the parameters and expectations put in place by cinema. For Deleuze, cinema is a mode of thinking, that is, of creating concepts.

Excavating and encouraging alternative ways of knowing and thinking requires the creation and adoption of new concepts and paradigms. Because Deleuze insisted upon creating his own machinery for knowledge production, readers of his work notoriously risk falling into “Deleuzeobabble,” a hermetic system of terms and concepts with precise, if at times obscure or obtuse, meanings created by Deleuze in his attempts to challenge and/or break out of existing philosophical systems. While I have attempted not to fall into Deleuzeobabble myself, I have adopted some of Deleuze’s terms where I think they might usefully challenge prevalent ways of conceptualizing an issue at hand. Yet Deleuze himself is notorious for having little or nothing innovative to say about race. *The Witch’s Flight* is enabled by Deleuze’s work but ultimately has to betray Deleuze’s commitments for its own. Because of this, it might be understood as working through a set of Deleuzian problems and paradigms in order to emerge with a brain, vision, and soundtrack of its own.⁵

Hear me.

In this volume I examine cinematic images of common sense in an attempt to locate the kernels of perceptions that might be capable of supporting alternate forms of sociality. What I am able to uncover is limited by my own cinematic perception and thus by the common sense(s) that condition it. Nonetheless, risking non-sense in the pages that follow, I have directed some of my own affective labor and channeled the labor I perform in my profes-

sional function as an intellectual into a project predicated on the possibility that various hegemonic and official common senses might be exploded, unleashing affectivity's creative, self-valorizing potential, if only in that any-instant-whatever that holds one enthralled by the explosion.

Though the cost of copyright clearances make it unreasonable (remember "reason" itself has economic interests) to think that an actual soundtrack might be sold with this book, each chapter corresponds with a song on the book's soundtrack. In 1971 the R&B group the Undisputed Truth released the enigmatic and haunting cautionary music notes of "Smiling Faces Sometimes," the song for chapters 1 and 2.⁶ In narratives about the civil rights and Black Power movements, the period between 1968 and 1971 is understood to be the turning point when the conciliatory call for civil rights was replaced by the nationalist-inflected, if often ambiguous, call for "black power."⁷ The implications of this shift, as well as its structures of feeling, have exerted considerable influence over the contours of black, radical, and progressive longings today, longings for something better, more just, funky, and intergalactic than the confining relationships that define the present.

6 The lyrics to "Smiling Faces Sometimes" caution listeners to be wary of appearances, to look under, above, through, and behind what appears. To turn a smile upside down. I cannot afford the cost of reproducing lyrics here. Go listen to the song. The lyrics are cautionary. They educate. But a consideration of the meaning of the song is flat without an account of the music, especially its bass line, which gets caught in an endless repetition. A similar claim can be made about the meaning of *The Witch's Flight*: the words on the page educate, forge lines of flight, and try to engender movement, but what this book is about also can be felt in the movement of its soundtrack. "Smiling Faces Sometimes" raises many of the questions the theoretical frameworks elaborated in chapters 1 and 2 have been constructed to address. Indeed, each song referenced in this book comments on the chapter for which it provides the soundtrack, thereby providing *The Witch's Flight* with an affective register that simultaneously exceeds and yearns toward what the book's sometimes dense critical theoretical prose can achieve. As Fred Moten would say, "Words don't go there." Yet both the words on these pages and the music on the soundtrack might propel one into a "lyricism of the surplus" that, while evading currently accessible common senses, still can be felt—like an intuition or premonition, something unseen, but nonetheless present(ly) (im)possible.⁸ The end of the world.

“The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.”⁹

Work with me.

How can knowledge be forged and shared without being detected by those with the power to prevent that knowledge from exerting a counterhegemonic force? In what ways are subjugated knowledges produced, and how do they survive attempts to incorporate them into dominant regimes of knowledge and their modes of production? How can subaltern common senses that elude consent to domination and exploitation, that create an alternative to existing power relations be crafted? The “slave song” (what Du Bois would have classified as a “sorrow song”) “Wade in the Water” is reputed to contain instructions for slaves about how to escape. Such clandestine modes of communication were common during slavery. Frederick Douglass, for instance, notes that “‘Run to Jesus / shun the danger / I don’t expect to stay much longer here’ was a favorite air and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.”¹⁰ The formation of a group of living beings capable of communicating hidden knowledges about how to achieve freedom is at issue in Douglass’s account. By necessity, that group excluded those whose perception had been habituated according to interests that dictated the former group’s enslavement.

Throughout *The Witch’s Flight*, the black femme sets to work on questions concerning the creation of the common under circumstances of domination, exploitation, and oppression. In chapters 3 and 7 I engage with films that seek to reconcile an account opened by the capture, transportation, and enslavement of living beings. But both films—Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* (1993) and Kasi Lemmons’s *Eve’s Bayou* (1997)—have a different sense of what freedom might require or entail. *Sankofa* valorizes those who died in the struggle for their freedom, while the possibilities generated in *Eve’s Bayou* grow out of the common sense of slaves. In chapter 7 Angela Davis’s seminal 1971 “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” written from her prison cell, informs my elaboration of what I refer to as “the black femme function,” a potential for self-valorization and creativity that is imminent in and generated by the cinematic itself. Wait. We cannot get there

from here. It is too soon. Or too late. Follow me down to Jordan's stream. And onto Eve's Bayou.

"And the traveller girds himself, and sets his face toward the Morning, and goes his way."¹¹

As for the witch, she takes flight from the theoretical scaffolding built in chapters 1 and 2, only to find herself fixed in chapter 3 by Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*, an occasion that allows us to dwell on the narrative of slavery that common-sense black nationalism posits in order to rationalize the subject it constructs and offers as adequate to the task of Black Liberation. The violence with which *Sankofa* expunges femininity and genital sexuality from its revolutionary subject is of particular interest. The figure of the black lesbian femme is among those *Sankofa* renders present impossibilities within the project of Black Liberation and within the common-sense black nationalism that currently solidifies black belonging.

8 Following a line of flight made available by the interrogation into the terms of Black Liberation *Sankofa* makes visible, I open chapter 4 with the first notes of "Four Women," as sung by Nina Simone. I begin that chapter with an interrogation into the temporality of the cinematic and move through a consideration of the ways in which the cinematic appearance of women in the Black Panther Party became part of the transvaluation that blackness underwent during the 1960s and 1970s. The negotiations around "masculinity," "femininity," and (hetero)sexuality orchestrated by Black Revolutionary Women allow us to glimpse the figures of the black butch lesbian and the black femme lesbian, but not in time to explore the alternative organizations of social life they make available within cinematic reality before they again escape incorporation into common-sense black nationalism.

Such organizations of social life escape valorization via the affectivity expended in order to make sense of the cinematic appearance of Black Revolutionary Women, but they persist as part of what Roderick A. Ferguson refers to as the "multiplications of surplus" generated by capital.¹² In chapter 5 Nina Simone's distinctive voice redefines the optimism of the Five Steps's version of "O-o-h Child," pushing its smooth and reassuring claims that things will get easier in a different direction altogether. Simone thereby sets to work on the psychic dimensions of black life and survival, revealing the "strange blending of love and helplessness" that "O-o-h Child" offers.¹³ In chapter 5 I work through Pam Grier's blaxploitation films, highlighting the ways that blaxploitation in general and Pam Grier's blaxploitation films

in particular work to make black nationalism commonly available and productive for capital, even as they generate excess or surplus that might be invested in subsequent projects. These projects might offer alternative organizations of social life, such as those organized by black lesbian butch-femme. In Pam Grier's blaxploitation films we glimpse the black butch and femme before they take flight, only to be caught in the mechanism of visibility as part of the machinery capable of valorizing female bank robbers in F. Gary Gray's 1996 film *Set It Off*.

In chapter 6 I analyze *Set It Off* in order to articulate the conditions of possibility for the cinematic appearance of black lesbian butch-femme sexuality. "Ghetto Heaven" by the Family Stand is on the soundtrack for that chapter. We apprehend the black femme as a figure that exists on the edge of the visible and the invisible, serving as a portal through which present (im)possibilities might appear. At the end of the chapter, we encounter "the black femme function," a capacity for self-valorization that persists as part of capital's own mechanisms of (re)production. The black femme function persists within capital as that which might offer alternatives to the organizations of sociality that capital currently sanctions.

In chapter 7 I analyze another commodity, Kasi Lemmon's 1997 film *Eve's Bayou*, which itself illustrates the black femme function. In this final chapter of *The Witch's Flight* my analysis of *Eve's Bayou* returns to the questions *Sankofa* opened up, those regarding the past, memory, gender, and the present (im)possibilities of and for liberation. *Eve's Bayou*, like *Sankofa*, raises questions of survival, (re)production, and the valorization of alternative organizations of social life within the cinematic; unlike *Sankofa*, it allows one to dwell upon forms of labor that enable the survival of those who, like the black femme and the black butch, were never meant to survive.

What did Erykah Badu say about "my cipher"? It keeps movin'. Like a rolling stone.

The coincidence between the invention of cinema and W. E. B. Du Bois's proclamation that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" reveals the importance of a politics of visibility to struggles against racism in the United States and to the related struggles against sexism and homophobia. Efforts to resist U.S. racism were varied and sustained during the twentieth century, and those trajectories of resistance that aimed for reform of existing structures and institutions, rather than radical or revolutionary change, more successfully deployed a politics of visibility,

which bore fruit with the reforms achieved by the civil rights movement. One of the implications of the analyses I present in *The Witch's Flight* is that a politics of visibility conducted on the terrain of the cinematic is inevitably reformist unless it breaks free from this world, the cinematic, itself. A radical politics must necessarily liberate itself from the world of the cinematic and the common senses that animate it, as I argue in chapter 2, wherein I turn to Frantz Fanon's thinking about the parameters of black ontology and the relevance of that analysis for theories of film and other aspects of visual culture.

The significance ascribed to colonialism and decolonization by most world-historical narratives of the twentieth century is undeniable. Yet, as debates within postcolonial studies concerning the *post* in *postcolonial* indicate, progressive histories that posit a "before" and an "after" of colonialism obscure how colonialism's violences, excesses, logics, economies, and common senses continue to inform and affect in fundamental ways existing organizations of life and activities of living. The perceptual mechanisms whereby living beings are ordered into "races" and "sexes" are essential materials for *The Witch's Flight*, which takes the nexus of cinema, racism, and sexism as its critical starting point and as the crucible in which cinematic reality takes form and maintains itself.

Indeed, I seek in *The Witch's Flight* to make those perceptual mechanisms visible to a critical common sense even as I both point out the extent to which cinematic regimes of the visible participate in struggles for hegemony and valorize other ways of knowing. Yet, an elucidation of the problems of visual representation and how they continuously are (re)constituted might strike a blow to the existing hegemonies of racism and sexism by (once again) undermining their claims to the inevitability of their rationalism and might assist, however minutely, in ongoing projects of decolonization and, yes, still liberation.

Before the witch takes flight, however, I turn in the next chapter to a sustained consideration of the theoretical scaffolding that allows one to perceive the cinematic and the perceptual processes that organize and maintain it. The work I perform in the next two chapters generates the witch's flight, because the witch—the black femme I desire and pursue throughout this study—takes her *raison d'être* from the very mechanisms and conditions that sustain the cinematic, even as her existence is part of a collective will to destroy it.