
Break Yourself at Home

The Queer Hospitality of Camille Billops and James V. Hatch

ABSTRACT Since the heyday of Billops-Hatch film criticism in the 1990s, critics have noted the generic indeterminacy of the Family Trilogy. These accounts have illuminated the films' complex fusion of autobiography and documentary, surrealism and social critique. I build on this body of film scholarship by attending to the aesthetic strategies and formal practices through which Billops and Hatch constructed—and, more importantly, shattered—oppressive ideals of the family, particularly in the first two installations of the Family Trilogy: *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982) and *Finding Christa* (1991). Focusing on the films' protocols of autobiographical disclosure, I examine how Billops and Hatch stage negotiations of familial intimacy and estrangement. I am interested in how the two films defamiliarize familial relationships and democratize care work in ways that resonate with the motives of family abolitionism, and I ultimately argue that they offer a dexterous display of Billops and Hatch's queer hospitality. **KEYWORDS** queer hospitality, care, kinship, Camille Billops, James V. Hatch, the Family Trilogy

Now we are beginning or pretending to open the door, that impossible door, sublime or not. We are on the threshold.

—Jacques Derrida¹

So, we're always living these funny edges. You know the funny edges, you know. But ultimately, it's just two elderly people living in a loft.

—Camille Billops²

In the later years of her life, the artist and filmmaker Camille Billops expressed but one regret about her decision, in 1961, to give up her four-year-old daughter for adoption: she only wished she had done so sooner.³ As Billops told bell hooks in an interview published in 1996, she had “had enough guilt giving Christa up” as a college student and young single mother, and she cared neither to perseverate on that guilt nor to perform any shame—so often expected of mothers who refuse to endure the unendurable

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for their children—on-screen, on the page, in her art.⁴ “I was trying to give her something else, because I felt she needed a mother and a father,” Billops recounts in the experimental documentary *Finding Christa* (1991). A roving exploration of the aftermath of abandonment and adoption, the film culminates with Billops’s apparent reconciliation with her daughter.⁵ But while it follows a neat narrative of familial rupture and restoration, what in fact drives *Finding Christa* is its unrelenting inquiry into the conspiracies—as cruel as they are casual—that protect “the” family at the expense of “its” members. In one of her more candid moments in the film, Billops has this steely half-apology to give: “I’m sorry about the pain it caused Christa as a young child—I’m very sorry about her hurt—but I’m not sorry about the act.”

To abandon motherhood in order to pursue one’s artistry and the life of one’s mind: this, as Billops came to understand, was as much an irredeemable act as it was a feminist statement. Irredeemable, on one hand, for generating a great wound from which neither parent nor child would recover, Billops’s fateful decision to give Christa Victoria up for adoption also constituted a feminist refusal, demonstrating her unwillingness to surrender her life to the double standard by which mothers (and never fathers) are made to maintain the worlds of others—family or not.

Black feminist theorists have long examined this double standard and uncovered its racialized origins. For instance, in “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” Saidiya V. Hartman shows how slavery and its gendered afterlives have extracted Black women’s reproductive work in order to secure such liberal humanist abstractions as freedom, family, and care. At the same time, Black women have been historically deprived of these ideals and categorically figured as scapegoats for the destruction of both white and Black forms of social organization. “She is the best nanny and the worst mother,” Hartman pointedly writes of the figure of the Black woman.⁶ By tracing how conditions of violation, unconsent, and dependency were transposed from antebellum fields to twentieth-century domestic spaces, Hartman reveals Black women’s care work to be at once “coerced and freely given.” For Hartman, this political-poetical paradox drives the subjection and fugitivity of Black women under modernity: fixed as providers of care in “a world blind to her gifts, her intellect, her talents,” Black women nonetheless improvise “forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance” that “are not reducible to or exhausted by [racial capitalism].”⁷

Billops’s refusal to perform maternal labor must be understood within the historical context of Black women’s “coerced and freely given” care work. Far

from an instance of individual pathology or failure, Billops's decision to opt out of the role of mother, like Sethe's decision to save Beloved from enslavement via infanticide, may best be understood as an act of "claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name'), which her culture imposes in blindness."⁸ These "breakings" of the family, if that is at all an appropriate name for the act, speak not to a desire for kinlessness but to a wish for forms of social relation that defy the brutalities of slavery (in the case of Sethe) and the encumbrances of poor single motherhood (in the case of Billops). "There are other ways to name each other as our relations," Tiffany Lethabo King writes.⁹ Or, as Billops repeated on numerous occasions throughout her life, as a way of contesting the expectation that Black women care for everyone except themselves: "Everybody ain't mommy." Hear her insistence in a 2006 interview with *The HistoryMakers*:

They need to really get that clear. Everybody ain't mommy. Why they got to—every man ain't no daddy. They don't do that to men. They let men just go hi de hi, hi de ho, silver and go anyplace they want to. They walk away from the family, walk away from the dead mama, walk away from anything they want to, and they don't necessarily bear the responsibility of it. But when mommy walks away, ooh. Now, who put those rules down, God the father?¹⁰

Who put those rules down, indeed? This is precisely the question that Billops and her longtime partner and collaborator, the theater historian James V. Hatch, committed their films to investigating. The couple's co-conceived "Family Trilogy," composed of the short autobiographical documentaries *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982), *Finding Christa* (1991), and *A String of Pearls* (2002), "seeks to disrupt the façade of orderly respectability that depends on the conspiracy of silence within the family," as Valerie Smith has incisively suggested.¹¹ Each installment of the trilogy opens up a Pandora's box of traumatic experiences haunting Billops's family and situates these familial struggles within broader conversations about intimate violence, substance abuse, police brutality, and mass unemployment, to name a few of the film's historical contexts. Interweaving clips of home movies, scripted reenactments, and staged interviews, the Family Trilogy at once bears the imprint of Billops and Hatch's motley artistic practices (the couple worked across sculpture, printmaking, poetry, drama, and a variety of other mediums throughout their lives) and develops its own signature style, which Billops and Hatch described later in their careers as "docu/fantasy."

Since the heyday of Billops-Hatch film criticism in the 1990s, critics have commented on the generic indeterminacy of the Family Trilogy. Valerie Smith has noted how Billops and Hatch's integration of home videos and scripted reenactments allows them "to address at once the psychopathology of [Billops's] particular family as well as the nature of the oppressive cultural weight that the image of the nuclear family bears."¹² Similarly, Monique Guillory has observed how the interplay of realism and surrealism in Billops and Hatch's films works to break the fourth wall. Her attention to the "dense, emotional surplus" punctuating the narratives of the Family Trilogy shows how Billops and Hatch "imbue the film[s] with a disconcerting sense of restriction in reality," namely the restrictedness emerging from the space between familial repression and expression.¹³ Aestheticizing Billops's family in such a way, reframing their history in order to reckon with the asymmetries of family ideals and interpersonal realities, attests to Barbara Lekastas's suggestion that "the dividing line between life and art in [Billops and Hatch's films] is ever shifting."¹⁴

By assessing Billops and Hatch's practice of archival bricolage and by deconstructing moments of cinematic excess, the aforementioned genealogy has illuminated the Family Trilogy's complex fusion of autobiography and documentary, surrealism and social critique. I propose to build on this body of film scholarship by attending to the aesthetic strategies and formal practices through which Billops and Hatch constructed—and, more importantly, shattered—oppressive ideals of the family. Focusing specifically on the films' protocols of autobiographical disclosure, I will examine how *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* stage negotiations of familial intimacy and estrangement. I am interested in how the two films defamiliarize familial relationships and democratize care work in ways that resonate with the motives of family abolitionism, and I will ultimately argue that they offer a dexterous display of Billops and Hatch's queer hospitality.¹⁵

"Queer hospitality," as I will refer to it across this article, names a mode of interpersonal engagement rooted in ambivalence and vulnerability. Rather than treat these affects as stages to be worked through or conditions to be achieved, queer hospitality emphasizes the ongoing work of ambivalence and vulnerability in the provision of care. Moreover, it harnesses these intimacies to imagine new forms of solidary relation and mutual support, ones untethered from the exclusionary protocols of family and kinship. For Billops and Hatch, queer hospitality also served to affectively bind their "characters" and their viewers, relating the two groups not only through the visual apparatus

but also through a shared set of ideologies clustered around the family. By challenging their “casts” and audiences to question the ethical fragility of the family, Billops and Hatch practiced a queer hospitality that was both cinematic and extracinematic. This article strives to build on the work of scholars like Shannon Maguire, who sees queer hospitality as effecting “the alteration of economies of inheritance and belonging,” by scrutinizing how Billops and Hatch defamiliarize the figure of the family and, in turn, imagine otherwise conditions of care and connectivity.¹⁶

DERRIDA AND QUEER THEORY

My thinking on queer hospitality derives primarily from my reading of *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*, but it also draws inspiration from the work of Jacques Derrida and from discussions within queer theory. Derrida theorized hospitality as a universal right, an ethical obligation, and a paradoxical phenomenon: “Hospitality is owed to the other as stranger. But if one determines the other as stranger, one is already introducing the circles of conditionality that are family, nation, state, and citizenship.”¹⁷ Operating on a circuit of seduction and threat, “hospitality,” according to Derrida’s formula, cannot be reduced to a relation between the powerful and the powerless; it rather indexes a dynamic of mutual (if uneven) embrace and coercion, where the capacity of the host to accommodate his guest is circumscribed (1) by his receptivity to the guest’s vulnerability and (2) by his animosity toward the guest’s burden.¹⁸

Derrida’s attention to the *hostility* latent within hospitality (he used the portmanteau “hostipitality” to capture this conundrum) provides a useful lens for studying the vexed relations both resident in and produced by *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*. Through their intertextual references to each other, the two films construct a discursive space for audiences to reflect on the fraught topics of abuse and adoption. Inviting their audiences into their films’ conversations serves as one way that repair is staged, and yet Billops and Hatch’s directorial hospitality extends well beyond discourse and into the diegeses of *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* themselves. In both films, the codirectors construct cinematic spaces comfortable enough for their intimates/interviewees to trade secrets and share their grievances against, as well as their attachments to, “the seductive power of the family romance.”¹⁹ I will reveal the effects of such hospitality to be both ameliorative and exploitative.

While several critical ventures have brought Derridean hospitality to bear on queer desire, art, and racialization, the term remains largely absent in queer theory.²⁰ This gap is surprising, given the field's long-standing impasse with respect to questions of queer sociality, and while this article does not fill this lacuna in any explicit or systematic fashion, it does gesture toward queer hospitality as one vantage from which "the relational debates" may be approached anew. To sum it up crudely, this "arena of interpretive battle" has congealed around the conflicting heuristics of queer universalism and queer particularism.²¹ Where proponents of the so-called antisocial thesis champion a universalizing vision of queerness (in which queer desire is understood as an abstract singularity both inherent in, and antagonistic to, all social forms), adversaries of this thesis maintain that queerness intersects with other embodied particularities (and that therefore queer desire is a powerful force for creating alliances across axes of social difference, including race, nationality, and class).²²

What unites both sides of this debate, however, is the presupposition that queerness is non-realizable—that queerness either exists in negative relation to the socius, as Lee Edelman has suggested, or that it looms on the horizon, beckoning the subject out of the "here and now" and toward what José Esteban Muñoz has memorably called "an anticipatory illumination of another world."²³ If queer theorists of both antisocial and utopian persuasions thus share in their skepticism about the existence of queerness in the present, then how might queer hospitality—as the opening of a door, "that impossible door," for he whom one can never plan for in advance or indefinitely—prove otherwise? Might an ethical framework of queer hospitality account for the provisional nature and racially sexed distribution of care, all the while working to unearth buried, *present* forms of relationality that defy the terms of debt and obligation?

It is here that I see Camille Billops and James V. Hatch breaking into the conversation. If contextualizing the couple's lives and works through Derridean philosophy and queer theory seems a perverse and idiosyncratic method, then it serves, I hope, to pay homage to their films and legacies. I limit the ensuing discussions to an analysis of *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* because the two films are widely marked, even scarred, by evidence of such perverse idiosyncrasy. Unlike *A String of Pearls*, the final installation of the Family Trilogy, *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* center on mother-daughter relationships. In so doing, they develop feminist commentaries about how male violence and ignorance structure the nuclear

family. My readings of the films highlight moments where Billops and Hatch stage conflict, catharsis, and reparation between mothers and daughters. These moments blur the lines between oral history and critical fabulation.²⁴ They not only document Billops and Hatch's queer desire for family abolition but also enact spontaneous instances of intergenerational reparation and historical transmission.

INTERLUDE: AT THE CROSSROADS

A preservationist impulse drums through *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*. As Billops spoke of her work, "It's all about documentation. No one rescues us . . . Ain't nobody comin' for us . . . You are your best resource."²⁵ Framing such self-rescue as a kind of insurgent archivism, Billops suggested to bell hooks that "the most revolutionary thing you can do is do a book about your life. Don't let anybody call it a vanity press. You just do this, this magnificent thing, and you put it on the best paper you can find. Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, and do a lot of them so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together."²⁶ Elsewhere in that same interview, Billops envisions the future recipients of her and Hatch's insurgent archive: "We have said that when we drop dead, my husband, Jim Hatch, and myself, that wherever we leave the collection, it will be stipulated that all the film will be open to anyone who is perceived of as a family member, because it was their history."²⁷

I don't know whether Billops and Hatch would have perceived me as part of their tribe, whether they would have invited me off the streets and into one of their salons, whether they would have found my voice or image worth publishing or, as they were wont to do with friends and family members, filming. Still, I like to imagine. I can't help but feel that their history—a history of granting permission to themselves and to other under-represented artists, with no promises of fortune or recognition or even happiness—is also mine.

Likely it is this presumptuousness that has brought me here, to the corner of Broome and Broadway in New York City, to look for traces of the couple. As I stand in the heart of SoHo, peering through the glass entrance at 491 Broadway, I am trying to imagine the lives Billops and Hatch led in this limestone building. I am searching for signs of the communities they fashioned up above, in their storied loft on the seventh floor, where they sheltered their archives for nearly fifty years. But maybe I am looking in the wrong places.

By Billops's account, she preferred to exist at "the crossroads."²⁸ In art as in life, she and Hatch developed a tendency to inhabit the "funny edges" between Black and white, between man and woman, between family and foreigner.²⁹ It is this constant flux, this propensity for improvising communities around borders of race, class, and nation, that I regard as one of Billops and Hatch's profoundest displays of queer hospitality. In the following analyses of *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*, I highlight how Billops and Hatch denaturalize bonds of kinships and give the lie to any neat distinctions between "natural" and "chosen" families. Dissolving the boundaries between "real" and "fictive" kinship—a mission binding the Family Trilogy—was one way Billops and Hatch engaged in a "communism of incommensurability," which Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson defines as "a sphere of social relation structured less by the social fictions of possession, equality, and exchange, than by collective, entangled, and historically informed practices of sharing out, just distribution, sustainability, and being together in difference."³⁰

And yet, as we shall see, Billops and Hatch's queer hospitality was not free of its own ethical pitfalls. Only by plumbing into the psychic depths of domestic abuse and adoption were they then able to stage the ethical reckonings—the renegotiations of family—that constitute *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*. Paradoxically, then, violation serves as a condition of ethical possibility in both films. It is something of this same violative impulse—namely, a desire to break into worlds refused and refusing—that has animated this article.

In the absence of Billops and Hatch, I wait for them at the threshold. The minutes pass like strangers in this Disneyfied corner of SoHo. (Perhaps I should have known better than to expect to be welcomed, without notice, into the building of their former residence?) No one buzzes me inside. In their absence, I will have to search for Billops and Hatch wherever their works—queerly, hospitably—invite me in.

PRIMAL SCREENS

When they named their film company "Mom and Pop Productions," Camille Billops and James V. Hatch were not being facetious. Their cinematic enterprise was, at almost every level, a household affair. To defray expenses related to shooting and production, the couple enlisted Hatch's children to help with editing and camera work; and in order to further trim costs associated with their films, they frequently employed Billops's family

members as actors.³¹ It is unclear how the couple compensated individuals involved with their films, in particular those individuals occupying a liminal position between relative and employee.³² But the familial nature of Billops and Hatch's filmic legacy also extends beyond pragmatic and financial concerns. After all, the figure of the family lay at the heart of the couple's artistic vision, and throughout each of their six genre-bending films, they turned to Billops's family members not only to populate this vision with "carnal density" but also to interrogate its ideological substrates.³³

Let us now acquaint ourselves with the "cast." We shall begin in the kitchen, for it is here that, a few minutes into *Suzanne, Suzanne* (the twenty-five-minute, 16 mm black-and-white documentary that would launch Billops and Hatch's film careers in 1982), audiences are first formally introduced to Billops's family: first, to Suzanne's son Damon, her mother Billie, and her grandmother Alma, who are gathered around a dining room table; and then to Suzanne herself, who stands alone on one side of the kitchen, straightening out a dress on an ironing table. The camera pans over to Suzanne as Damon smacks on bubblegum and Billie applies makeup to Alma. The women banter with one another, suffusing the scene with an air of affinity and competition. Elevated from its seeming banality, the kitchen is here symbolically established as a space of epistemological exchange, where the women trade on jokes and secrets that the viewers—like the sole male in the scene, Damon—are not privy to.

As Suzanne, Billie, and Alma go about their routines, viewers learn that they are getting ready to appear in a fashion show. This mundane scene acquires a sense of familiarity as the film cuts, in flashes, to archival footage of the women in past shows—walking down runways, posing for portraits, modeling gowns designed for them by Alma. This visual archive testifies to Alma's artistic legacy and secures her spot as the creative origin of the lineage of women on-screen. Historically, as well as in the live action of the film, Alma's work as a seamstress becomes what Alice Walker once described, in speaking of the buried genealogies of Black women's art, as "the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."³⁴

Despite or because of Billops, Billie, and Alma's mutual attraction to art and glamour, Black female ancestry becomes a contested site of interfamilial struggle in *Suzanne, Suzanne*. When Billops asks the women whether they are featured "as three generations" in their community fashion shows, Billie leaves no beat for hesitation and proudly replies, "Yes, all the time. All the



FIGURE 1. Three generations. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1982. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

time.” Suzanne sets down her iron and casts a side-eye at her mother, as if triggered by the statement. But right when she appears ready to voice an objection, she simply smirks. Lips pursed, Suzanne holds her tongue. She furrows her eyebrows and momentarily peers into the camera, cluing the viewer into some silent tension simmering between her and Billie (see figure 1).

Billops and Hatch were not aware of the deep, pervasive woundedness existing between Suzanne and Billie when they set off, in 1977, to conduct interviews for the film. Initially conceived as a documentary about Billops’s niece Suzanne Browning’s addiction to heroin, *Suzanne, Suzanne* morphed, as the filming process unfolded, from an individual portrait of Suzanne into a dialogue between her and her mother, Billie Dotson. One such dialogue is choreographed at the beginning of the film. In that opening scene, we see alternating close-up shots of Suzanne and Billie as they each lament the death of their family patriarch. Suzanne poses a litany of questions to her deceased father (“Do you love me? And if you do love me, why did you treat me the way you did? Why did you take out your hostility on me? Why was it that I was always the one to receive the whippings and nobody else? And why is it that sometimes you couldn’t just hug me and tell me that you loved and cared for

me?”). Meanwhile, Billie opens up about the “guilt feelings” she grappled with after losing her husband. She pinpoints his death as the moment she “finally gave a sigh of relief.” Already at the outset of *Suzanne, Suzanne*, then, we are asked to bear uneasy witness to the formation of a traumatic bond, one that emerges from a mother and daughter’s shared grief as well as, we will later learn, from their entangled relationship with domestic violence.

With this harrowing context in mind, the aforementioned kitchen scene may appear on first glance as an instance of mere narrative exposition (and an emotionally inconsequential one at that). As Valerie Smith has observed, however, such snapshots of domesticity, especially as Billops and Hatch juxtapose them with an array of photographs and home movies culled from personal archives, lend the “characters” a personal history while at the same time “establish[ing] the family in familiar middle-class respectability.”³⁵ The familiarity of these “still-moving images” in turn creates for viewers a sense of intimate proximity to Billops’s extended family, affectively and historically.³⁶ Gradually, the film’s montaging of family archives, interviews, and reenactments leads viewers to draw connections between Suzanne’s drug addiction, her abusive relationship with her father, and her resentment toward her mother for conspiring in silence. As *Suzanne, Suzanne* progresses, we feel, or rather we are seduced into feeling, as if the antagonisms animating each exchange are straightforward, natural facts—though the film’s roving eye constantly estranges these familial tensions from their interpersonal contexts.

In one scene, for instance, Suzanne sits on a stool in a dimly lit room with her back to the camera. Though she occupies the center of the frame, the action follows Billie, who applies makeup to Suzanne’s face. Adorned in a gleaming, beaded white gown, Billie resembles Alma, who similarly wears a white dress and sits on a sofa tucked away in the background, overlooking the scene. Suzanne—here literally without face—appears as a visual counterpoint to Billie and Alma: she is the unsexed child being stylized by her mother’s hand and through her grandmother’s gaze (see figure 2).

The discipline of gender emerges as a salient theme, as throughout this scene Billops interviews Suzanne about her appearance. Asked whether she looks more like her mother or father, Suzanne responds that she resembles the latter. “I had Browning features,” she explains soberly, “Puffy eyes, they sort of sit back into the head.” By juxtaposing Suzanne’s verbalized feelings of being “extremely ugly” with Billie’s boasts about participating in the Mrs. America contest of 1979, *Suzanne, Suzanne* sets mother and daughter in antagonistic opposition. Against the melancholic, wounded Suzanne



FIGURE 2. Making up Suzanne. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1982. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

recounting traumatic memories of childhood abuse and feelings of self-worthlessness, we see the manic, prideful Billie, whose self-awareness is betrayed in moments where Billops asks her about glamour and flatters her about her appearance (at one point, Billie even acknowledges how she “got [her] ego stroked” by Billops, who prods about her history in pageantry).

The archetypal depiction of mother and daughter is upended, however, during the film’s climax. There, the two are finally placed on (visually) equal terms. The frame fixes on Billie and Suzanne as they sit beside each other and face the camera, mother peering out from behind her daughter’s shoulder. A spotlight silhouettes their profiles (see figure 3). Billie and Suzanne gaze longingly ahead toward somewhere just beyond the camera, and in a tense, back-and-forth conversation, they confront, for the first time, how they were *both* physically abused by the late head of their household (he is only ever identified in *Suzanne, Suzanne* by his jaunty family nickname, “Brownie”). As they recount their shared memories of being placed on “Death Row” by Brownie, an air of competition permeates the scene.

The conversation becomes something of an interview as Suzanne turns into the primary questioner; Billie, the primary respondent. Asked repeatedly by



FIGURE 3. “Well, would you like to hear what it was like for me, waiting?” Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1982. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Suzanne whether she wants “to hear what it was like, for me, waiting” to be put on Death Row by Brownie, Billie proceeds to recount her own memories of abuse. “I can really understand how you felt,” Billie assures, choking back her tears. She insists, “I can really understand, Suzanne, how it felt to go on Death Row.”

Suzanne’s restrained silence in the face of her mother’s presumption of shared experience (empathic as it may be) once again reinstates the two figures as innocent daughter and domineering mother. This air of competition dissipates, at last, when Suzanne and Billie acknowledge the asymmetries of their grievances. Billie confesses to having felt “absolutely free” in the wake of Brownie’s death, as though she could finally “do some of the things [she] always wanted to do,” and Suzanne, finally recognizing that she “didn’t understand” Billie’s pain as she had thought, looks back toward her weeping mother. She reaches over to her and wraps her in a tender embrace.³⁷

VULNERABILITY/VIOLABILITY

It would be a mistake to regard the vulnerable scene between Suzanne and Billie, or any of the previously mentioned scenes for that matter, as an

unmediated expression of truth. And yet, by that same token, it would be just as mistaken to neglect the spontaneity that emanates throughout the film and exceeds even the mediation of the cinematic apparatus. I have rehearsed *Suzanne, Suzanne* at some length in order to try and capture how the film trades on reality and artifice by toggling between representational modes. Billops's casual interviews with her unmade-up relatives give way to staged dialogues between glamorized subjects. These tableaux dissolve, in turn, into stills from family archives. By approaching their subjects through different media and with different levels of familiarity—here casually, there formally—Billops and Hatch generate a prismatic image of the Billops family. Each character defies his or her script, staging, and intentional self-portrayal; each character smuggles in his or her own self-representation, consciously and not.³⁸

Billops and Hatch attend closely to the gendered stylization of their family members in *Suzanne, Suzanne*.³⁹ In a sequence of shots featuring “Suzanne’s handsome brother, Michael,” Billops conducts her interview from inside a bathroom. Appearing as a mirrored reflection, she asks Michael to reflect on a series of serious subjects: Brownie’s death, Suzanne’s addiction, his memories of “Death Row.” Michael’s unironic answers to Billops’s questions is betrayed by the preposterousness of the *mise-en-scène*, in which he tends meticulously to his giant, Dalí-style mustache (see figure 4).⁴⁰ Throughout *Suzanne, Suzanne*, the men tend to be portrayed this way. Their earnest, self-serious sentiments contrast with the frivolous, less-than-serious business they are seen conducting (for example, one thinks of Billie’s husband, Mr. Dotson, who treads in and out of the film as something of a blissfully ignorant bystander, curiously unaware of such family traumas as Suzanne’s addiction, despite his careful eye—and hand—in recording family events on his Bell & Howell camera, the footage from which constitutes a significant portion of *Suzanne, Suzanne*). What coheres through these snapshots is a portrait of the unconcerned dailiness of male life, a portrait that sits at odds with the relative ordinariness of Suzanne and Billie’s trauma.⁴¹

Call it queer hospitality: the way that *Suzanne, Suzanne* makes the home, and elaborates the fantasy of a happy family contained therein, in order to break it, to reveal its faulty foundation. This breakage occurs on two levels. First, there is the shattering of familial self-conception. The totemic significance of characters’ familial identities (Brownie as patriarchal tyrant, Billie as untrustworthy accomplice, Suzanne as wounded delinquent) unravels each time Billops and Hatch toggle between representational modes, casting each character in a light that is here and now idealizing, then and there



FIGURE 4. Michael looks back on Death Row. Screenshot from *Suzanne, Suzanne* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1982. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

de-idealizing. This kaleidoscopic gaze effects, second, a fracturing of viewer's subjective experience.

As *Suzanne, Suzanne* constructs and deconstructs the family, dialing in on each of its members with varying degrees of formality and intimacy, it lures its viewers into inhabiting the positions of curious onlooker, self-righteous voyeur, and implicated witness—sometimes all at once. What sutures these subjective positions together is the film's unflinching look at the family and the ethical lapses performed in its figural name. Billops and Hatch welcome audiences into their relatives' broken home and its closets of historical traumas; as directors, they invite their viewers to invent justifications for, as well as criticisms against, the familial ties fastening and loosening before them.

Early on in *Suzanne, Suzanne*, our eponymous antihero captures the unsettling dynamics binding her family by offering us a riddle: "They gave me everything I wanted. I didn't want for nothing. But that wasn't enough." *Suzanne, Suzanne* lingers in this elusive discontent—the haunting, violent silences that cohere as "the family"—and thus, while it clocks in at a brief twenty-five minutes, the film unfolds like a work of endurance art. One

worries as one travels through the film's various frames. One wanders. One holds one's breath and waits to see whether the family on-screen will stand the test of time, and to what illusory ends.

ATTACHMENT STYLES

The wide reception of Billops and Hatch's next installment of the Family Trilogy—the Sundance award-winning *Finding Christa*—is due in part to the contextual groundwork laid out by its prequel. Hatch likened the unfolding of the Family Trilogy to “the serialization of novels, and how once you finally establish your family, those stories continue from one generation to the next.” *Suzanne, Suzanne* provided “just enough reference to pull in the viewer about what happened in the past,” and as a result it created for *Finding Christa* an “automatic audience.”⁴²

Even more than establishing the “characters” and introducing their plot, *Suzanne, Suzanne* also opened up a discursive space between audiences, “actors,” and the filmmakers themselves. On at least one occasion after its release, Billops traveled with her sister, Billie Dotson, to screen *Suzanne, Suzanne* and to discuss the topic of domestic abuse with college students.⁴³ Together, Billops and Dotson used the film's intimate subject matter as an opportunity to address broader cultural taboos. This pedagogical practice continued with *Finding Christa*. Accompanying the film's televisual release in 1992 was a prerecorded interview with Billops, in which the filmmaker reclaims her decision to abandon motherhood and ponders “the adventure they [men] want to deny us, to hit the horses and ride the trail.”⁴⁴ Thus *Finding Christa* arrived to its family audience (it appeared as part of the PBS series *Point of View*) as a feminist statement about the encumbrances of single motherhood, the possible affordances of adoption, and the limits of any notion of “the family” in securing individual fulfillment.

Structurally, *Finding Christa* bears many resemblances to *Suzanne, Suzanne*. It likewise opens by presenting a set of grievances that are posed by a child to her parent (in this case, Christa addresses Billops: “Why did you leave me?”). It likewise takes a recombinant approach to these motivating questions, integrating family interviews, archival footage, and dramatized reenactments in order to present to the viewer a range of hypotheses. It likewise concludes with a hopeful gesture: in the closing shot of *Suzanne, Suzanne*, the camera zooms in slowly on Suzanne as she wonders whether her father, were he still alive, would have been proud of his family; and in the

final sequence of *Finding Christa*, we see alternating, handheld shots of Billops and Hatch as they wave sparklers somewhere outdoors, elatedly smiling and repeating the phrase “Welcome back, Christa,” as if in the middle of a family celebration.

Billops and Hatch’s aesthetic play on repetition and difference, mirrored as it is between *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*, deserves sustained critical analysis, a dialectical reading of the two films that falls outside of this paper’s purview. For the remainder of this article, I will rather turn my attention to two sequences that formally and aesthetically distinguish *Finding Christa* from *Suzanne*, *Suzanne*—in part because they record a generic shift in Billops and Hatch’s filmmaking sensibilities; in part because they trace a continuity in the couple’s commitment to queer hospitality; and in part because their fantastical pretensions sit (ch)eerily beside the film’s more realist elements, which have received the bulk of critics’ engagement.

Billops and Hatch assigned the label of “docu/fantasy” only to their fourth film—*The KKK Boutique Ain’t Just Rednecks: A Docu/Fantasy about Everybody’s Racism* (1994)—but early glimpses of the convention can be detected in the surrealist scenes threaded throughout *Finding Christa*. The first of those scenes appears roughly midway through the film, following on the heels of a shot in which Billops, sitting in her arts studio with two friends (photographer Coreen Simpson and playwright George C. Wolfe), contemplates whether or not to reunite with her daughter. It has been over twenty years of separation, and now Billops has received a cassette tape from Christa Victoria, requesting contact. Wolfe insists that Billops has “no choice” but to meet Christa. Simpson details her own upbringing in the foster system and the yearning she felt in childhood to see her birth mother’s face.

Billops defers any decision-making. The shot then dissolves into what appears to be a black-box theater. Suddenly Wolfe, now holding a microphone and clad in the formal attire of a game-show host, announces the “auditions for the mother-daughter recital.” Enter Billops. Donning bowed pigtails and a puffy, white, prairie-style dress, she tries for her part and yodels onstage. In her disempowered position as a contestant, she could just as well be the daughter as the mother in this audition. Her song ends and she curtsies. Wolfe, our host, nods to a pianist who has been accompanying Billops all the while, receded in the background behind Billops. The camera zooms in closely on this pianist’s face toward the rear of the stage. As she tips her hat off to Billops, she reveals herself to be Christa. Have mother and daughter passed the test?



FIGURE 5. Billops and Christa in an unwitting collaboration. Screenshot from *Finding Christa* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1991. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

The over-the-top theatricality of this scene betrays its poignant metanarrative: the “free” artist remains forever accompanied by all she has left behind. Although *Finding Christa* tends, as a whole, to portray Billops as the self-concerned “artist who gave up her daughter,” here she is both mother and artist—and Christa is revealed to be her stealthy companion.⁴⁵ It is a moment of bewildered recognition. With full force, Billops performs her shock at what, or rather whom, she thought she once and for all abandoned (see figure 5). In contrast to the film’s realist scenes, here we receive Billops’s fantasy of self-liberation from motherhood.

Her absurdist performance, which turns out not to be a solo show but a duet between mother and daughter, exudes what I have been calling queer hospitality. Billops and Hatch rewrite the foundational terms of the guest-host relation by refracting it through the game-show format (a format they will adopt in *The KKK Boutique Ain’t Just Rednecks*). Onstage, neither Billops nor Christa advances toward the other; neither one receives the other. With Wolfe as the judge of their audition, they try out for a mother-daughter relationship that they presumably already embody. As contestants, they are

locked in an unwittingly collaborative performance. The blurring of artistic and familial bonds here evokes, through a kind of remix, the fashion show sequence at the beginning of *Suzanne, Suzanne*, where the staging of matri-focal lineages gives viewers a glimpse into each woman's (dis)comfort with her gendered roles.

FAMILY UNFOUNDED

In *Finding Christa* the family becomes an art. Billops and Christa's duet attempts at reparation while at the same time granting mother and daughter the freedom of "going nowhere immediate," with "the future . . . not yet within their grasp," to reprise Alice Walker.⁴⁶ Toward the end of *Finding Christa*, after they have reunited, Billops and Christa practice this art together. Each woman trades details that might help the other better understand herself.

Billops goes first. We are back in the black box, in another surrealist sequence. This time, Billops and Christa face each other as they sit around a draped table. Billops is clad in a mystic's garb, her hair veiled in a bejeweled scarf, her hands fanning a stack of cards. She looks down at one card and, as though possessed by an apparition, begins to retell the moment of her and Christa's initial severance (see figure 6). Billops was headed to the Children's Home Society in Los Angeles when Christa, four years old, "stole my keys from the Volkswagen. And I said, 'Christa, where are my keys?' And you said, 'In the sky.' And we had to jumpstart the car."

The frame cuts back to the bedroom. Billops and Christa sit on a mattress and perform the roles of mother and daughter, this time in realist fashion. Billops shows Christa photographs, personal records, and an array of family documents to inform her about the people she comes from and the places they left behind. With their decades of separation behind them, Billops and Christa sit uneasily beside each other, swirling in and out of fantasies of what could have been in the past—were the figure of the family more amenable to them both—and what could be different now (see figure 7). Asked in a 1992 interview about her and Christa's relationship after their reunion, Billops responded, "We had a honeymoon for the first 10 years and now we're each trying to find the other one as an adult, to have a relationship that did not begin with her as a little baby. And that takes another bit of time."⁴⁷

Finding Christa preserves for viewers that bit of time. An act of queer hospitality itself, the film traverses the emotional interim between Billops and



FIGURE 6. A mystical Billops recalls leaving Christa at the Children's Home Society. Screenshot from *Finding Christa* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1991. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.



FIGURE 7. "Is this my baby book?" Screenshot from *Finding Christa* (dir. Camille Billops and James V. Hatch), 1991. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Christa's honeymoon and eventual divorce, documenting their attempts to reckon with—rather than reconcile—the edicts of kinship. From start to finish, we watch Billops and Christa play-act as mother and daughter: a blessing and a curse, an embrace and a retraction.

CONCLUSION

In their irreverent approach to themes of addiction, abuse, and adoption, *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* are resolutely traumatophilic, to borrow psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou's term. This is not to suggest that the films treat domestic violence and adoption in the manner of "trauma porn." Rather than make a fetish of trauma and thereby render its contents and associations unchanging and unchangeable, *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* recognize, following Saketopoulou, that "trauma that is not inserted into circulation does not wither and disappear: it stalls and controls us."⁴⁸ If traumatophobia fixes trauma by overdetermining its effects on subjectivity and sociality, then traumatophilia, by contrast, returns to scenes of trauma as a site of creativity.

In *Suzanne*, *Suzanne*, one watches as mother and daughter delve deeper into their individual (and at times invidious) traumas. Suzanne and Billie never quite "get over" the ways in which Brownie hurt each of them. Instead, they work through this suffering—a history of hurtfulness revived and magnified in the wake of Brownie—toward a greater degree of mutual recognition. Likewise, in *Finding Christa*, mother and daughter return to the scene of their severance to try to imagine new bonds to unite them. "People see it as bravery," Billops said of the film and its interrogation of her decision to give up Christa, "I think of it as a cleansing."⁴⁹

But what, exactly, do Billops and Hatch's films strive to cleanse?

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, the cleansing enacted in both *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa* is not merely of family trauma but also of the foundational trauma underwriting the figure of the family. For all their reparative work, however, neither film succeeds in purging trauma, at least not totally. Hurtfulness serves as a stealthy backdrop in both films, expressing itself in scenes that vacillate between abjection and mania, sentimental realism and campy theatricality. One mother-daughter pair cries out in ecstasy as they recognize the affinity denied them when their late patriarch was still alive. Another pair yodels and improvises at the roles of mother and daughter in the only way each woman knows how. Queer

hospitality is one way of describing this traumatophilic mode of receptivity and accommodation, where connectivity is established not through the reification of identities but the always-partial improvisation of care. A celebration without revelation, Billops considered this work of queer hospitality. When asked what prompted her to continue to film her family in *Finding Christa*, Billops once remarked, “Well, the same thing that made us do *Suzanne, Suzanne*. It was celebratory, celebratory, that’s all. You know, it wasn’t like we would find the truth.”⁵⁰ ■

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (December 2000): 6.

2. Camille Billops (The HistoryMakers A2006.171), interviewed by Shawn Wilson, December 14, 2006, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, Session 1, tape 1, story 2, “Camille Billops lists her favorites.”

3. See Katharine Q. Seelye, “Camille Billops, Who Filmed Mother-Daughter Struggle, Dies at 85,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2019, online, www.nytimes.com/2019/06/09/obituaries/camille-billops-dead.html.

4. bell hooks, “Confession—Filming Family: An Interview with Artist and Filmmaker Camille Billops,” in *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 182.

5. In fact, Billops barred Christa Victoria from attending the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, where *Finding Christa* received the Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary. This dispute apparently initiated a series of separations and reunions between mother and daughter, with Billops ultimately excommunicating Victoria in 2013 and until Victoria’s unexpected death in 2016. See Yasmina Price, “A Tendency toward Dirty Laundry,” *Current / The Criterion Collection* (February 12, 2021), online, www.criterion.com/current/posts/7280-a-tendency-toward-dirty-laundry-camille-billops-and-james-hatchs-unflinchingly-personal-cinema.

6. Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (March 2016): 171.

7. Hartman, "Belly of the World," 171.

8. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.

9. Tiffany Lethabo King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 84.

10. Camille Billops (The HistoryMakers A2006.171), interviewed by Shawn Wilson, December 14, 2006, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 5, story 2, Camille Billops describes her relationship with her daughter, pt. 2.

11. Valerie Smith, "Telling Family Secrets: Narrative and Ideology in *Suzanne Suzanne*," in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 213.

12. Smith, "Telling Family Secrets," 209.

13. Monique Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops," in *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (New York: Routledge, 1998), 82–83.

14. Barbara Lekastas, "Encounters: The Film Odyssey of Camille Billops," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 395.

15. It may be objected that Billops's lifelong commitment to her family, on-screen and elsewhere, runs counter to any political project of family abolition. But as Sophie Lewis states in her recent polemic *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (New York: Verso, 2022), 2: "Loving the people in your family, mind you, is not at odds with a commitment to family abolition. Quite the reverse. I will hazard a definition of love: to love a person is to struggle for their autonomy as well as for their immersion in care, insofar [as] such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital. If this is true, then restricting the number of mothers (of whatever gender) to whom a child has access, on the basis that I am the 'real' mother, is not necessarily a form of love worthy of the name." This sentiment resonates with Billops's contention that "everybody ain't mommy," and it also aligns with Billops's reconceptualization of adoption, throughout *Finding Christa*, as a means of deprivatizing child care.

16. Shannon Maguire, "Parasite Poetics: Noise and Queer Hospitality in Erin Moure's *O Cidadan*," *Canadian Literature*, no. 224 (2015): 47.

17. Derrida, "Hostipitality," 8.

18. Wary of hegemonic associations of hospitality with femininity, I have made the economical but unsatisfactory decision to use the masculine pronoun when referring to both the figure of the host and the figure of the guest. See Derrida, "Hostipitality," 4–5.

19. Smith, "Telling Family Secrets," 213.

20. For three profitable articulations of "queer hospitality," see Daniel Hannah, "Queer Hospitality in Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 37, no. 2 (September 2010): 181–201; Shannon Maguire, "Parasite Poetics: Noise and Queer Hospitality in Erin Moure's *O Cidadan*," *Canadian Literature*, no. 224 (2015): 47–; and Vivian L. Huang, "Silence and Parasitic Hospitality in the Works of Yoko Ono, Laurel Nakadate, and Emma Sulkowicz," *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 47–72.

21. Robyn Wiegman, "Sex and Negativity: Or, What Queer Theory Has For You," *Cultural Critique* 95, no. 1 (January 2017): 220.

The binarism I invoke—queer universalism/queer particularism—owes a debt to Eve Sedgwick's foundational thinking on universalizing and minoritizing discourses. But where Sedgwick was concerned with mainstream, heteronormative society's uptake of queerness in culture and in politics, here I focus on queer theory's self-understanding of its relation to the socius at large. See Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), esp. xii and 7–9.

22. For a comprehensive overview of the relational debates within queer theory, see Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, J. Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 819–28.

23. I thank Ishan Mehndru for this insight. See generally Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and in particular José Esteban Muñoz, "A Jeté Out the Window: Fred Herko's Incandescent Illumination," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 153.

24. See Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11. Hartman defines "critical fabulation" as a historiographic method: "By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices" (11). I see critical fabulation as an apt framework for evaluating Billops and Hatch's incorporation of family archives into their films. Further analyses of this generic practice may wish to interrogate how Billops and Hatch remix archives in order to expose intergenerational silences, reimagine historical memory, and above all deconstruct the family romance that the home movies and photographs represent.

25. Camille Billops quoted in Connie Winston, "The Art of Remembering: Camille Billops and James Hatch," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012): 43.

26. hooks, "Confession—Filming Family," 184–85.

27. hooks, "Confession—Filming Family," 186.

28. Camille Billops and Ameena Meer, "Profiles and Positions: Camille Billops," *BOMB Magazine*, no. 40 (Summer 1992): 22.

29. Camille Billops (The HistoryMakers A2006.171), interviewed by Shawn Wilson, December 14, 2006, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 1, story 2, Camille Billops lists her favorites.

Further inquiries into these "funny edges" may wish to consider, for instance, Hatch's blackface mammy performance in *The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks*

(1994); aspects of Billops's cross-gender self-stylization; and the history of Billops and Hatch's expatriation to Africa, Europe, and Asia.

30. Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 9.

31. Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops," 68.

32. In her 1992 interview with Ameena Meer, Billops reported that she and Hatch made *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982) for \$20,000; *Older Women and Love* (1987) for \$34,000; and *Finding Christa* (1991) for "about" \$80,000. She went on to detail their practices of compensation: "We don't pay anybody. We're cheap. I have budgets for cameramen, but they don't get all that money! I say, 'Look, your income taxes don't need this anyway. So why don't you just take this two thousand dollars.'" See Billops and Meer, "Profiles and Positions: Camille Billops," 23.

A number of ethical concerns immediately arise, concerns in no small part tied to the generic indeterminacy of Billops and Hatch's filmography. Were these fictional films whose "actors" should have been compensated? Were these documentaries whose "subjects" needed to remain to some degree financially divested? These questions fall outside the scope of this article, and I invite other scholars to launch investigations into the histories of compensation associated with Mom & Pop Productions, connecting materialist interests with the issues of funding, marketability, and genre.

33. Linda Williams, "Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the 'Carnal Density of Vision,'" in *Fugitive Images: From Pornography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 36.

34. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," from *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 407.

35. Smith, "Telling Family Secrets," 208.

36. Tina Campt defines "still-moving images" as "images that hover between still and moving images; animated still images, slowed or still images in motion, or visual renderings that blur the distinction between these multiple genres; images that require the labor of feeling with or through them." See Campt, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal," *Social Text* 37, no. 3 (September 2019): 31.

37. Monique Guillory, for one, draws attention to the ethical precarity of filming and publicly circulating the emotional vulnerability of family members: "In showcasing Suzanne and Billie at such a vulnerable moment, Billops runs the risk of exploiting their pain to make her film (and her political point, even). But the fact that this is Billops behind the camera, that she does personally know these women and is likely already familiar with their relationships to Brownie, works to ameliorate some of the brutality of these accounts of abuse." See Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops," 72.

I likewise observe the ameliorative effects that went into the making of this scene, but I do not think that such amelioration necessarily negates the scene's potential for exploitation. Billops's directorial intentions cannot fully limit how the scene travels, how representations of the mother and daughter's vulnerable exchange is interpreted by

audiences, and how Browning and Dotson themselves are understood as characters (rather than multifaceted individuals), especially in moments where the film sharpens a contrast between Browning's suffering and Dotson's complicity.

38. Billops stated to bell hooks that the culminating dialogue between Suzanne and Billie in *Suzanne, Suzanne* "was not in the script, it was utterly spontaneous—it was total exposure." Monique Guillory suggests that it may be more analytically fruitful to examine how this unplanned-for moment, as well as other spontaneous moments in the Billops-Hatch oeuvre, evolved out of an original script. See hooks, "Confession—Filming Family," 182; and Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops," 71.

39. For gender-centered analyses of how men and women are represented in Billops and Hatch's films, see Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops"; and Lekastas, "Encounters."

40. Here, as Billops appears beside Michael in their mirrored reflection, her own mustachioed face lurks in the background. Valerie Smith suggests that the "image of a woman with braids and a faint but discernible mustache, standing beside a man waxing his mustache, deconstructs conventional standards of beauty that the film problematizes elsewhere." See Smith, "Telling Family Secrets," 211. I would also add that Billops's mustache serves as a queer counterpoint to Michael's hypermasculine embodiment.

41. This gendered contrast is not a gendered opposition. It serves, rather, to highlight how gender differentially implicates the family members in their collective trauma. Monique Guillory further claims that it "illuminates the need for mutual understanding and constructive alliances between women and their male partners." See Guillory, "The Functional Family of Camille Billops," 81.

42. Janet Cutler, Phyllis Klotman, Camille Billops, and James Hatch, "Camille Billops: Cultural Archeologist," *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 4.

43. Camille Billops (The HistoryMakers A2006.171), interviewed by Shawn Wilson, December 14, 2006, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 4, story 10, Camille Billops describes her short films about drug abuse and violence.

44. Camille Billops quoted in Julia Lesage, "Contested Territory: Camille Billops and James Hatch's *Finding Christa*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 454.

45. Sasha Bonét, "The Artist Who Gave Up Her Daughter," *Topic* (2019), online.

46. Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 402.

47. Jennifer Warren, "Camille Billops: Lost and Found," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1992, online, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-06-28-tv-2150-story.html.

48. Avgi Saketoupolou, *Sexuality beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 2.

49. Billops and Meer, "Profiles and Positions: Camille Billops," 23.

50. Camille Billops (The HistoryMakers A2006.171), interviewed by Shawn Wilson, December 14, 2006, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 5, story 1, Camille Billops describes her relationship with her daughter, pt. 1.