
Woman, Alone? Camille Billops, Self-Possession, and *Older Women and Love* (1987)

ABSTRACT This essay “Woman, Alone? Camille Billops, Self-Possession, and *Older Women and Love* (1987)” focuses on the unique dynamics in the personal and professional relationship between Camille Billops and James V. Hatch. It maps the complexities of Billops’s selfhood, which she pursued in defiance of societal norms that typically sideline women as “helpmeets” to creative men. I use the Billops-Hatch film *Older Women and Love* as a case study and commentary on the complexity of women’s self-possession as they navigate sexual intimacy, aging, relationships to their bodies, and death. I also discuss the importance of partnerships in amplifying self-expression, highlighting the nuances and challenges of intimate relationships in the context of art-making. **KEYWORDS** Camille Billops, James V. Hatch, *Older Women and Love* (film), working and intimate partnerships, feminism, partnership dynamics, Black female subjectivity, artistic practices, spirit possession, creativity

You better leave my woman alone.¹

—Ray Charles

Still, they are, always, *women alone*, subjects (un)becoming, women who are their own plentiful company. It is, as Ntozake Shange notes, to find god in oneself² (emphasis mine).

—Kevin Quashie

My contribution to this special issue of *Feminist Media Histories* on Camille Billops (1933–2019) and James L. Hatch (1938–2022) explores the complexities of Billops’s radical sense of self-possession, which existed on its own terms and was influenced and amplified by her decades of intimate and creative partnership with Hatch. Collaboration and artistic kinship were central to Billops’s way of being in the world (beyond her work with Hatch), and she formed powerful connections with others as a woman possessed or more precisely, “self-possessed.”³ I consider how this term accounts for

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Billops's sense of herself and her approach to art-making, and I find evidence of self-possession in the image archive of the couple. Using a photograph of one of the couple's early New York City lofts, I offer a reading of the image, which captures how they shared, negotiated, and demarcated their living space in ways that reveal something of their individual and coupled personalities, needs, and desires. Pairing self-possession with the framework of the "woman, alone," I ponder what it might mean for Billops, and other creative women, to live within the bonds of partnership (romantic, creative, domestic) but to also find pleasure in their "own company" and "to find God" in themselves, as Quashie articulates in the epigraph.⁴

Finally, I provide an account of the couple's filmmaking praxis using their experimental documentary *Older Women and Love* (1987, 26 minutes), which features a diverse group of women (largely friends and acquaintances of the couple) in pursuit of intimate and sexual self-possession. I argue that the film is a compelling case study of how Billops's and Hatch's creative voices surface in their work together.⁵ In his many years of collaboration with Billops, Hatch no doubt observed the force of her self-possession—her intense artistic vision and her need for self-expression—and became attuned to her powerful energy and that of the women in their ecosystem. He likely understood that his roles, at least in part, were to witness, listen, document, and create space for the voices, desires, and perspectives of the women, and he was active in the making of the film as an interviewer and an on-screen storyteller. *Older Women and Love* provides, perhaps, the clearest evidence of how to read the couple's collaborative filmmaking practice and their distinct and sometimes oppositional creative voices.

SELF-POSSESSION AND AN/OTHER

Standard definitions of "self-possession" refer to composure and control over one's emotions, yet my usage of "possession" emphasizes being overtaken by a spiritual or Divine presence or energy.⁶ Connecting "self" and this variation of "possession," I argue that Billops's "self-possession" refers to how she was overtaken, compelled, and transformed by the force of her creative will and the outpouring of its expressive power. Billops's self-possession was demonstrated in the ways in which she adorned her body and fashioned her personal style and presentation. This included her provocative uses of makeup, clothing, and hair styling to craft a signature look that was influenced by Egyptian (Kemetic) figures and goddesses and likely shaped by her early experiences in

Egypt with Hatch.⁷ Her mystical style set her apart from the mundanity of contemporary fashion trends, projecting her internal mysteries, her whimsy, and her cultural inspirations outward in ways that seemed to please her. Billops evoked the powers of goddess energy using her art and self-presentation as her own tapestry of hieroglyphs for us to decipher and contemplate. Self-possession also surfaced in Billops's unrelenting drive to build a world of her own making defined by her desires, curiosities, and inclinations even at the cost of disrupting familial, maternal, and social relationships and expectations. It was embodied in her exploration of different artistic paths across many mediums and forms—first in the ceramic arts and painting and later in her artistic activism, filmmaking, and in the Black arts archive that she and Hatch built and shared with their interlocutors and disseminated to academic institutions.⁸ In this context, self-possession is a force of creative will, pursuing spaces of expression and connections with others to amplify its power.

Billops's creative overflow spilled onto her intimate relationships and networks, and she centered these communities in her filmmaking.⁹ Her connections with her family and friends were invaluable to her as they were often her muses—the inspirations and subjects of her filmmaking. Barbara Letkatsas, who provides important early context for Billops's emergence as a filmmaker, writes: "Billops gradually arriving at filmmaking as a natural—and, for a visual artist, especially attractive—branch of archival methodology, as the best means to document her family and friends."¹⁰ Thus, while this essay centers Billops as a self-possessed force and a subject of creative inquiry, I explore self-possession alongside the influence of intimate partnership and the precarities of creative coupling and collaboration.

As I explore the dynamics between Billops and Hatch I recognize some challenges inherent to the study of intimate partner relationships and, following Maria Corrigan, acknowledge that, "The question of family ties is a tricky one in academia."¹¹ There is a sense of unease and intrusion when wading into the expanse of intimacy between people as this space is, in some ways, inaccessible and unknowable, and it is difficult to parse one person's influence or contribution from another's. I also recognize, however, that we would not be able to recover the vital roles that women have played across film and cultural histories where they were not credited at all or were casually referenced as girlfriends, lovers, wives, and widows, instead of as consultants, researchers, visionaries, creatives, or as filmmakers themselves, were it not for scholarship that delves into these questions.¹² Women who worked in film

alongside male partners were often subsumed and overshadowed by them, making this methodology of tending to the intimate details between couples a necessary one. This approach helps us form a clearer picture, bringing these figures into the light and into the historical record. I take some inspiration from other scholars whose work, as Maria Corrigan describes, “roots itself firmly in the domain of emotion, kinship, and marriage (perhaps the most unfair form of friendship) in order to examine the female labor that has gone into the consolidation of the global reputations of film auteurs.”¹³ Thus, I foreground the precarity and the utility of delving into these intimate archives believing that it expands our perspectives of film authorship, practice, history, and labor.

Significantly, Billops’s relationship with/to Hatch in the context of intimate couple filmmaking partnerships departs from the narrative where the woman was often subject to erasure in her partner’s shadow.¹⁴ Unlike the instances where the male figure is valorized for his vision and artistic prowess at the expense of his female partner’s contributions, it was Billops who was the driving force in the couple’s oeuvre.¹⁵ Hatch was, in his own right, a renowned scholar, archivist, and an insightful creative visionary, but their filmmaking centered on Billops’s interests and her investment in mining her life and the lives of the people around her. Billops was not the supportive girlfriend or wife, nor the widow who kept her husband’s legacy alive, but was in fact *the* force whose energy and presence tended to eclipse Hatch.¹⁶

SISTERS IN SELF-POSSESSION: BILLOPS AND KATHLEEN COLLINS

Billops is connected to lineages of Black women writers, artists, and filmmakers who infused their intimate desires into their letters, journals, plays, essays, and films, revealing the influences and challenges that creative and intimate partners would play in their work.¹⁷ Most notably I find a strong parallel between Billops and film pioneer and writer Kathleen Collins, who worked with her first husband Doug Collins on a range of film projects, and later imbued her work with the quandaries, pleasures, and perils of creative and intimate partnership with men.¹⁸ Collins was a foremother of cinematic female subjectivity whose work emphasized self-possession, intimacy, and self-discovery. In much of Collins’s writing and both her films, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* and *Losing Ground*, women navigate desire, vulnerability, and selfhood in some tension with the men around them. In *Losing Ground* the film’s protagonist, philosophy professor Sara Rogers, is

lost in her own mind, detached from the vitality of her inner life, and longing for ecstasy and the pleasures of a more inspired existence. Sara is ultimately spurred to a greater sense of self-possession in the midst of a broken marriage, and like filmmakers Collins and Billops, finds herself experiencing a cathartic release as she lets go of conventional mores and professional demands. The film captures Sara's pursuit of self-possession in a series of scenes: writing and doing research, visiting a psychic and a church, and reminiscing with her mother—always pursuing answers to her internal crisis. But it is only by acting in an intimate student film that she accesses a sense of performative and sensual power, and the facade of her life cracks open revealing a new relationship to herself (with or without a husband). Reflecting on Sara and Collins, L. H. Stallings argues that, "In her filmic representation of Black women and love, Black women are not primarily choosing between self and a man's love or self and a nation's love: They are choosing between different versions of themselves and the forms of relationality that can express those selves."¹⁹ Stallings continues, saying that, "It now seems clear that filmmaking and directing were providing Collins with another way to examine the self and transform her own consciousness about love. She was becoming the cultural icon, a film director that could stand alongside the blues singer in communicating sexual empowerment, among many other experiences."²⁰ Stallings's articulations of love, intimacy, and self-making are particularly applicable to Billops as they align with how she accessed parts of herself through her relationship with Hatch and with a set of trusted interlocutors, which ultimately helped her come into herself instead of losing herself. Like Collins, Billops embodied an indomitable spirit of self-possession and a creative outpouring that is unleashed when a woman is attentive to her impulses, curiosities, and the world around her.

CREATIVE COHABITATION: SPACE AND AN/ANOTHER

To further explicate the complexities of self-possession and intimate partnership, I consider Billops and Hatch's living quarters as a visual metaphor for the tensions and complexities inherent in creative coupling and sharing space. In my research, I discovered a trove of photographs, a 2017 video interview with the couple in their apartment just a few years before Billops's death, and even a dynamic animated short, which each capture aspects of the couples' life together and how they shared space with a community of artists, students, neighbors, and friends.²¹ These networks of



FIGURE 1. Billops and Hatch's Eleventh Street loft, 1972. Hatch can be seen at his desk in front; Billops is in the back, working on her ceramics. Photo Credit: The Hatch Billops Collection.

kinship are foregrounded in the Ryan Lee Gallery's catalog for its 2021 exhibition *Friends and Agitators: Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian Browne and May Stevens, 1965–1993*.²² The catalog documents these women's impact on art history and how they influenced New York City's art communities and provides valuable context for their ecosystems and creatives spaces. One photo found in the catalog and its attached caption (see figure 1) gives us a window into Billops and Hatch's shared living, working, creative, and community space in the early 1970s.²³

The photo captures the bustle of a community of creative people: men, women, young people, and children of different races all deeply and attentively immersed in various kinds of making. Billops, identified by the caption as sitting in the back, and wearing what appears to be a toque, sits in the middle of the activity working on her ceramics. Hatch stands alone, somewhat isolated in the front corner of the loft and frame. Billops and those working at the tables sit adjacent to the loft's large windows, taking advantage of the natural light that streams in. By some contrast, Hatch, who is neatly dressed and undaunted by the camera's presence, is somewhat disconnected from the creative activity. He stands upright at a desk tending to some papers

and books, momentarily disconnected from the people, their creative energy, and the sunlight. The room overflows with books, supplies, tables, equipment, and even flags representing various countries, which surround Billops and the makers. The image raises many questions: Was Billops working with or teaching the young people? Did Hatch prefer to have his own space apart from the pull of Billops? Was he, a man, alone? How does one exist as a creative entity in the midst of other creative energies? Is this image characteristic of the relationship and spatial dynamics in the loft?

We cannot be sure of what one photo in the life of the couple means, but I offer it as evidence of some of the possible dimensions of intimate partnership and the kinds of spatial relationality they make possible. This might include spaces of connection and meaningful making, but also the necessity of a certain ambivalence or distance from one's partner and self-possession as means of claiming space. The photo also gestures toward a way of understanding the centrality of space in intimate partnerships and in art-making and how space can be shared, repurposed, and differentiated from film industry space, like studios, which are defined by productivity, commerce, exclusion, and monetized labor. Billops and Hatch claimed creative space for themselves, but they also designed their living environment to function as an open, accessible, "free" space where others could make, learn, gather, and actualize their creative selves together.

WOMAN, ALONE?

I return to the two epigraphs that open the essay as important points of departure relative to Black female subjectivity, expressive agency, and intimacy, which are central to my reading of Billops as a figure who relished in the delights of her own imagination yet was open to a creative life that could be influenced, and perhaps challenged, by others. The first, the refrain from Ray Charles's song lyrics, I reference with some irony. "Leave My Woman Alone" was released in 1956, the year Billops at age twenty-three would give birth to her daughter Christa, whom she later gave up for adoption. This aspect of Billops's life was a defining one and she would go on to make the groundbreaking film *Finding Christa*, which chronicled mother and daughter's tempestuous reunion and attempts at reconciliation. The song also evokes the social mores of the 1950s, the era of Billops's young adult life, where the cracking facade of conservatism in America would soon give way to waves of protest and countercultural and artistic movements. Billops refused to become a casualty of the norms and demands of the time and faced intense

scrutiny, if not outright judgment and criticism, for giving up her young daughter for adoption and not embracing her family's sociocultural expectations. After giving up Christa, she was questioned for pursuing an unorthodox creative and intimate life with Hatch—a white, married man with children. Billops herself said, “I had obviously done something that was unacceptable to the tribe. When women want to change their lives, it's unacceptable.”²⁴ Though she was surrounded by friends, family, and a sense of community throughout her life and foregrounded her family's relationships in her films *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* and *Finding Christa*, Billops charted a course that often defied her family of origin and the social dynamics of the time.

Charles's song also offers a perspective on heteronormative intimacy of the time, underscoring notes of jealousy and possessiveness, if not outright ownership. In the intense lyrical and emotional register of the song, any would-be suitor of Charles's titular “woman” is warned to “leave my woman alone.” Yet the song's background singers dubbed “The Raelettes,” harmonize the phrase “woman alone” repeatedly, emphasizing it over “leave my woman alone.” This vocal harmonizing creates a sense of contrast, creating the effect of rhetorically uncoupling the song's “woman” from the possession of her jealous lover and placing her in her own category, as a “woman alone.”²⁵ The song's lyrics and performance reiterate a recurring tension between Charles, the iconic, male artist, and the complex possibilities that arise between he and the female background singers, who offer a slightly different reading of the lyrics. Perhaps some of this tension results from some sexual energy between Charles and one or more of the singers, but it also points to the fertile conundrum of collaboration, in this case, attuning one voice to others to create harmonic chemistry and the ways in which artists are brought to extraordinary creative heights in the midst of oppositional, intimate, performative, and sexual tensions.²⁶ This tension between the masculine and the feminine, the artist and the supporting figures, between possession and self-possession, isolation and connection, are all central to how I read Billops and Hatch's creative partnership. Billops, even as she was coupled with Hatch, pushed against overdetermined narratives that centered a marital relationship over the relationship that a woman has with herself. She was, at times, a woman, alone in her willingness to boldly construct her own vision and parameters around intimate partnership and selfhood.

Charles's lyrics exist in some contrast to the second quote excerpted from Kevin Quashie's 2004 book *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)becoming the Subject*. I place Quashie's quote after Charles's to

provide a bridge from the song's antiquated cultural logic, which reflected relationship ontologies of possession toward an articulation of the possibilities of different kinds of intimacies and a deeper relationship with ourselves as powerful beings. Quashie's words evoke the paradoxically quotidian yet majestic power of women simply being with themselves and finding God as "plentiful company" displacing the centrality and the ubiquity of intimate partner relationships. Thus, coupled, or uncoupled, there is a self-possession that a woman might take hold of, or which might take hold of her, and which might be meaningful, productive, enlivening, and "unbecoming," or transgressive.

Quashie's passage appears in chapter 3 of *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)becoming the Subject* (a chapter poignantly titled "Liminality and Selfhood: Towards Being Enough") where he poetically describes a cyclical set of intimate desires and tensions that sometimes haunt the lives of women—a longing for love or romantic partnership and for a life of meaning outside of these confines. Using the framework of the "girlfriend," he explains these tensions, arguing that, "The liminal subjectivity of girlfriend selfhood is a liminality of otherness, a surrender that embraces what it is to be other, a practice of tension between two essential principles: 'I am (a) me' and 'I am someone's an/other.'"²⁷ In this the first of Quashie's trilogy of moving tomes on the analytics of blackness and subjectivity, "quiet," and "aliveness," he offers perspective on how the self is constituted as a being and in relationship to being coupled, as he writes:

What is tender, undeniable, fluid, like winter, memory, or hunger: this practice of pairing with an/other and oscillating between states of (dis)identification yields a liminal identity, a subjectivity that is material and corporeal but which also transcends the limits imposed by corporeality, visual culture, and colonization—a selfhood that challenges the normative constructions of "self."²⁸

With Quashie we might understand both the variegated subjectivities of selfhood and selfhood as it navigates an/other, yet within these liminal subjectivities there is the possibility for the notion of expanse, which I mentioned earlier; that in the cultivation of the self and an/other something raw is felt that actualizes a heightened awareness of selfhood, a deepened sense of sentience with an acute sensitivity to the porous nature of being, self-possession, and making. Surrender and tension are constitutive poles or frames through which the self, intimate relationships, and art are made and

Quashie's formulation of the "self" and "an/other" influences my conception of both the "woman, alone" and the notion that self-possession does not exist in isolation or as a discrete or fixed state of being; instead, it is always in a metaphysical state of reformation, reconstitution, and reimagining and part of a dynamic universe of relationalities. Together, both quotes provide a road map guiding the essay through subjectivities that countless Black women artists, creatives, writers, and filmmakers and everyday folk have navigated.

OLDER WOMEN AND LOVE: TWO APPROACHES

In this final section I describe how the couple's film *Older Women and Love* illustrates how Billops's self-possession, curiosity, and creative will were complemented by Hatch's understated support, openness, and sensitivity. Billops relied on her partnership with Hatch to help her actualize and refine her filmmaking style, and Hatch's steady presence anchors the film, creating space for Billops's bold, curious, and whimsical energies to come to the fore. Writing about Billops's oeuvre in the early 1990s, Letkatsas does not fully acknowledge Hatch's specific role in the early films, simply saying that "her task was made considerably easier by the collaboration of her husband and his son by a previous marriage Dion Hatch who is the cameraman for all three of Billops's films."²⁹ Letkatsas affirms Billops as the creative and inspirational force in their filmmaking, yet relegates Hatch to less a partner and more a "helpmate" who lightened her load. In *Older Women and Love* in particular, I argue that Hatch occupies a significant role, not just as a cowriter and director, but also as a vocal and visible presence in the film. This, in turn, frees Billops to be herself, playing the roles of interrogator, agitator, and provocateur, who asks probative, sometimes intrusive questions, and also as a character, whose comical, whimsical persona elicits tantalizing sexual tales from the female subjects in the film. Hatch provides a sense of balance, or perhaps another approach, to telling the women's stories and creates space for a compelling counternarrative to Billops's more brash tone.

Older Women and Love relishes in the joys, absurdities, delights, and humor surrounding sex, desire, partnership, and the self-possession of women of various ages, races, and life stages. The women in the film are of different backgrounds and navigating a range of experiences from disability to divorce, loss, child-rearing, and changing relationships to their bodies, time, and death. While this diverse group of women is subsumed under the precarious term "older," Letkatsas provides some context for the use of the term,

suggesting that it was “inspired by a romance that Billops’s aunt has with a man forty years her junior.” This detail also aligns with the couple’s practice of mining Billops’s friends and family for subjects they would explore in their filmmaking. In *Older Women and Love* I find further evidence that self-possession is not simply being led by one’s own impulses and lived experiences, but also by an openness to the fluidity of collaboration, redirection, and alternative modes of making. In the interviews in the film the women address self-possession head on describing how they navigate the complexities of pursuing love and sex, question the value of marriage and partnership, and embrace their bodies. It captures a range of perspectives in a series of staged scenes, vignettes, and interviews, and these components—some comical, others more poignant—feature women alone, in friend groups or with lovers. While it foregrounds many voices, the film articulates a clear set of imperatives—that there is profound agency in claiming our capacity as women to live, to love, and to desire, that these feelings can be explored at any age and stage of life, and that desire is never fully absent. The women in the film, whom Letkatsas identifies as “tough and weathered” and “between forty-five and seventy-nine,” are framed as figures we should sit with and listen to; women who tentatively, or in other cases boldly, offer us the pleasure of entering their intimate worlds.

The opening prelude to the film introduces viewers to three women identified by Letkatsas as novelist Marianne Hausner; middle-aged mother, and photographer Mary Ellen Andrews; and journalist Evelyn Cunningham, who was married several times but has “abandoned the practice.” Hausner and Cunningham are likely in their seventies and offer some of the frankest perspectives on sexuality. The film opens with the camera trained on Hausner who sits in a kind of yogic position on a bed/couch describing her sexual philosophy, saying, “I’m not into any special kinds of sex” and not into “chains clanking,” but instead emphasizes the “wonderful” feeling of warmth and love. This is in some contrast to Cunningham, who sums up her approach with the phrase “I’m big on bodies” as she explains her desire for a nice, taut one. Andrews, a white-appearing divorcée whose children encouraged her to pursue relationships, is demure, even shy, but acknowledges having relationships with Black men on her visits to the Caribbean.

The film itself flows, almost dancing back and forth between female and male energy in a variety of contexts. We are introduced to several “characters,” including a voluptuous female singer, whom Letkatsas identifies

as Patti Bown, who functions as performer, narrator, and a comic foil. She is first shown playing piano and singing a jazzy rendition of “Danny Boy” as the film’s title appears in blue letters just above her head along with the words “written, produced, and directed by Camille Billops and James Hatch.” Unlike the couple’s aforementioned films, Hatch plays a much more tangible role here as an interviewer, participant, and storyteller who shapes the film’s narrative and tone. For instance, in one early sequence in the film, Hatch’s voice is heard off-screen asking a woman a series of questions:

Hatch: Have you ever had a lover younger than you?

Woman: Yes.

Hatch: How’d it go?

Woman: Not so great.

Hatch: Why?

Woman: He didn’t know enough; they don’t know anything when they’re that young.

(Woman laughs, followed by Hatch’s laughter.)

A few scenes later, Hatch surfaces as an on-screen presence. His profile is shown in split-screen adjacent to a man and woman. The woman recites some feminist erotic poetry in a dimly lit room as the man listens attentively. This split field of view placing Hatch in the frame with the couple is an unusual visual strategy as the viewer cannot tell why he is there or what he is looking at, yet in this scene, and in a subsequent one, it is clear that the women’s experiences and stories will be complemented by the presence of men’s voices, bodies, and perspectives, creating a discourse of many voices and a sense of sexual tension. Men, like a younger baby-faced man who appears early in the film, the man who listens to the woman’s poetry, and Hatch are deeply present and attentive, and they often interact with the women in the frame or scene. Men also appear on-screen sharing their own sexual stories with older women or, at other times, listening to and affirming the women as they revel in their sensual memories. One man pulls out some tiger panty hose and holds it up to a woman’s leg as if he is her partner in a bit of stage performance; another man describes the “radiant” expression on his own mother’s face after he enters the home and realizes that a sexual encounter had taken place. In yet another scene, Hatch appears on-screen in dark lighting casting his shadow on the wall behind him (see figure 2). Centered on a bench, stroking his cat (the couple was often seen with cats), he recounts



FIGURE 2. Still capture from *Older Women and Love*, featuring James V. Hatch and pet cat Shango.

an instance where he was asked to bring an older disabled woman to see her dying lover.

As Hatch recalls the logistic difficulties of helping the woman, he describes being moved when the aging couple, both wheelchair-bound, was brought together to kiss, saying: “When those two old people saw each other they just lit up. It was like magic.” Hatch brings a perceptive, attentive energy, moving fluidly from his roles as interviewer, observer, and storyteller who recounts his own observations and feelings. His interviews are composed, sometimes serious in tone, and his presence on- and off-screen is in sharp contrast to Billops’s, which is more provocative as she tugs on the threads of gossip, scandal, and the underlying taboos of relationships between older women and younger men. Hatch and the other men are witnesses, not passive, but open to the fullness of the stories, fantasies, and desires of the women. Hatch’s presence is one of support, and he maintains some distance from the female subjects and from Billops, whom he is never in the same frame or scene with. The relationship between Billops and Hatch is not fully on display here, and in fact, they exist together only through a sense of implied shared space in the film’s experimental diegesis and as cinematic co-creators; yet their personas



FIGURE 3. Still capture, a “gossipy interlude” from *Older Women and Love*. Pictured *left to right*: Camille Billops, blues vocalist and pianist Patti Bown, and Christa Victoria, Camille’s biological daughter.

and storytelling approaches, perhaps like their relationship, allows one to create space for the other.

In some contrast, Billops is shown on-screen throughout the film, but only in what I describe as the “gossipy interludes” captured in the screenshot here (see figure 3).

These staged vignettes are sprinkled throughout the film, providing a kind of B-roll footage that is juxtaposed to the central narrative spine of the interviews. Against the film’s backdrop, a large loft space in New York, the participants sip wine and talk casually, and by the end of the film they spill out onto a rooftop, revealing a grand view of the city. Billops, donning her signature eclectic style, cozies up to the film’s participants (all friends and family with whom she has some rapport), prompting them to discuss accounts or experiences of relationships between older women and younger men. The characters/subjects giggle and share inside jokes and sexual innuendo with Billops but are generally prompted by her. She is both participant and fly-on-the-wall as she slides around the corners of the room teasing out these stories for the thrill of discovering some juicy tidbit of gossip. While

Hatch and Billops are both “interviewing” the film’s subjects, Billops revels in her networks of kinship and what they reveal about everyday people and the insight they might offer into the mysteries of women’s lives. The women’s sexuality, sometimes framed as humorous or even absurd, is foregrounded with the use of costumes and props like photographs and the tiger stockings. The film suggests that while there are many social cues that determine which women are attractive or sexy, a woman can be unexpectedly alluring and sensual in ways that live outside of our socially constructed notions of desirability. The film encourages us to be titillated by the frankness of the “older” women’s experiences with sex, particularly with younger men, but not to be fooled by a woman’s appearance, capacity, or ability; in essence, the film argues that sex, desire, longing, and vitality are for everyone, and that a relationship to one’s sensual self is never fully lost.

Ultimately, the couple’s different approaches to making *Older Women and Love*—Billops’s more assertive, sometimes confrontational, approach that teases out conflict and social taboos, and Hatch’s sensitive, conversational commentary, create a productive dissonance reflective of our collective discomfort with female desire, sexuality, bodies, and their capacities. The film pokes at the rigid frames and narratives that have been erected around female desire and sexuality and instead offers a porous and polyvocal network of voices, stories, and experiences. The “characters” in the film and Billops and Hatch all become subjects of self-possession, agents in a shared creative enterprise of witnessing, listening, and being affected by one another. While Billops and Hatch work together on the film, they pursue alternative paths and different techniques in the creation of a single artistic project. The dialectical tension in the film confirms my sense that Billops moved and created in a self-possessed way, not as a singular being, but as one who embraced the expanse of creative possibilities, input, and participation from her intimate/creative partner and from others.

As we contemplate the mysteries and creative power of Billops and consider the implications for how we study filmmaking and intimacy, Billops’s work and praxis might compel us to more deeply mine our own personal and interpersonal impulses in our research and critical inquiry. As a prolific maker, seeker, instigator, and visionary she offered up her life and her personal and familial experiences to reimagine art-making, storytelling, community, and archiving. Her work and lifelong collaboration with Hatch deserves particular attention, as through both figures we might discover an

expanded set of possibilities for filmmaking, not solely as industry or labor, but as modes of kinship and self-discovery. Billops and Hatch created a unique social experiment that birthed not so much a model, but a way of thinking about collaboration and the value of living a creative life. Through them, we can explore how our partnerships might foster a depth of creativity, transforming how we might live, make, and learn together as beings among other beings. Was Billops herself a woman in love or a woman, alone? We may never fully know. Yet we get to discover, inhabit, and bear witness to the robust trail she left behind for us; evidence that she embodied a passion for meaningful making and, whether she was coupled or alone, she remained one with herself. ■

MICHELE PRETTYMAN is a scholar of African American cinema, visual culture, and popular culture, as well as an accomplished media consultant. She has taught courses on African American and global cinema, race, gender, and media. Her work examines the intersections of performance, culture, and representation and includes recent publications in the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* and *Black Camera*. She has curated significant projects, such as the inaugural film festival for the Tubman African American Museum and has partnered with the American Black Film Festival through her cofounded organization Daughters of Eve Media. Michele also serves on the advisory board of *liquid blackness*, contributing to its innovative research on Blackness and aesthetics.

NOTES

1. Lyrics to Ray Charles, "Leave My Woman Alone."
2. Kevin Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 79.
3. The Ryan Lee Gallery's catalog for the exhibition *Friends and Agitators* (<https://ryanleegallery.com/room/friends-and-agitators-1965-1993-exhibition-catalogue/>) provides vital context for her early collaboration, activism, and community building: "Upon her arrival in New York in 1965, Billops joined Browne in the circle of activist black artists pushing for civil rights, quickly becoming involved in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which was founded in 1968. Browne joined the BECC's negotiating committee in 1969 and took up its fight to challenge the Whitney Museum's exclusion of Black artists from the planning of the 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. In 1972 Browne and Billops became co-directors of the BECC along with Andrews, Clifford R. Johnson, and Russell Thompson."
4. My essay focuses on heterosexual partnership and does not account for the nuances of queer intimacy.
5. Billops and Hatch are both credited as directors, writers, and producers of the film.
6. See Merriam Webster's definition of *self-possession* as "control of one's emotions or reactions especially when under stress: presence of mind, composure." www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-possession#:~:text=noun,stress%20%3A%20presence%20of%20mind%2C%20composure.

7. Billops's and Hatch's archival and publishing efforts are well documented. See their archive at Emory University: <https://archives.libraries.emory.edu/repositories/7/resources/2379>.

8. Additional context for the creation of the archive is found in the Ryan Lee Gallery catalog, which states that "in 1975 Billops and her husband, the Black theater scholar James Hatch, founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, an archive of oral histories, photographs, and publications aimed at the promotion and preservation of Black culture. In 1981 Billops and Hatch began publishing *Artist and Influence*, an annual publication which featured interviews between prominent Black cultural figures and New York artists." (<https://ryanleegallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Friends-and-Agitators-Press.pdf>).

9. She explained the power of family, kinship, and community in an interview with bell hooks, saying, "Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together." See bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (Routledge, 1996).

10. Letkatsas's original essay, "Encounters: The Film Odyssey of Camille Billops," was first published in the *Black American Literature Forum* in 1991 then later in *African American Review* in 2017. See *African American Review* 50, no. 4: 825–38.

11. I refer here to Corrigan's essay "A Widow's Work: Archives and the Construction of Russian Film History," published in *Uncanny Histories of Film and Media*, edited by Patrice Petro, 185–204.

12. Corrigan as well as Catherine Grant, with her essay "Home-Movies: The Curious Cinematic Collaboration of Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Goddard," in *For Ever Godard*, ed. Michael Temple, James S. Williams, and Michael Witt. (Black Dog, 2007) do this precise work of naming and quantifying the impact of women who worked alongside their renowned filmmaking (male) partners.

13. Grant, "Home-Movies," 186.

14. Examples of couples in this lineage would include the early religious filmmakers Eloyce King Patrick Gist and her husband James Gist, Alice B. Russell and her husband Oscar Micheaux, Louise Greaves and Bill Greaves, Shirikiana Aina and Haile Gerima, Kasi Lemmons and husband/collaborator Vondie Curtis Hall, and filmmaker/producer Tonya Lewis Lee and Spike Lee.

15. According to the epigraph that opens Catherine Grant's essay, Goddard famously said of the Straubs (a German-born, French-based filmmaking couple) and he and his partner Anne-Marie Miéville that, "The Straubs work in tandem, on the same bicycle, him in front, her behind. We have two bicycles."

16. Franya Berkman writing about the challenges faced by musician and composer Alice Coltrane, the wife of musician John Coltrane, resonate here, as she explains that "For better or worse, Alice experienced the fate of many exceptionally talented women married to men recognized for their brilliance: while her own contributions received attention, she never really got a fair shake." Franya Berkman, *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

17. I am thinking here of Lorraine Hansberry and Kathleen Collins and an anecdote about filmmaker Julie Dash shared with me in a conversation with her former partner

Arthur Jafa. Jafa, who was the cinematographer of the film, explained that he felt people did not give Dash enough creative credit for the film.

18. See Hayley O'Malley's "Close-Up, the New York Scene, Art on Her Mind: The Making of Kathleen Collins's Cinema of Interiority," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 80–103, doi: 10.2979/blackcamera.10.2.07, and L. H. Stallings's *The Afterlives of Kathleen Collins: A Black Woman Filmmaker's Search for New Life* (Indiana University Press, 2021), which each explore Collins's history with her former husband Doug.

19. Stallings, *Afterlives of Kathleen Collins*, 54.

20. Stallings, *Afterlives of Kathleen Collins*, 78–79.

21. This video piece featuring Billops and Hatch was produced and conducted by the late Pellom Daniels III and Randall Burkett. This edited interview was featured in the exhibition *Still Raising Hell: The Art, Activism, and Archives of Camille Billops and James V. Hatch* (fall 2016–spring 2017) at the Schatten Gallery, Emory Library, at web.library.emory.edu/exhibitions/still-raising-hell-billops-hatch.html and billops-hatch.library.emory.edu/documentary.html.

22. These artists witnessed each other's power, often creating self-portraits of one another that captured not just the other's likeness, but a deep sense of aliveness that only intimacy, self-possession, and intuitive awareness can see.

23. The photo is credited to the Hatch-Billops Collection. Dion Hatch confirmed that this photo was taken at 54 East Eleventh Street, #4.

24. Letkatsas, "Encounters," 832 (*African American Review*).

25. Bob Stumpel offers context for the Raelettes at <https://theraelettes.com>.

26. Robert O'Meally's phrase "antagonistic cooperation" (a phrase he attributes to Ralph Ellison) is useful here as "as a form of community building, of competition and coordination" in jazz, art, and fiction. See *Antagonistic Cooperation: Jazz, Collage, Fiction, and the Shaping of African American Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

27. Quashie, *Black Women*, 78.

28. Quashie, *Black Women*, 78.

29. Letkatsas, "Encounters," 826.