



*Rhythms and Currents:*

*Black Caribbean Film and Counter-Signifying Practices*

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by

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# *RHYTHMS AND CURRENTS:*

BLACK CARIBBEAN FILM AND COUNTER-SIGNIFYING  
PRACTICES

*Debbie Ebanks Schlums*

## **Rhythms and Currents: Black Caribbean Film and Counter-Signifying Practices**

In the last two years, public recognitions of the deeply engrained nature of global anti-Black racism have led to renewed calls for social justice. The widespread protests that emerged spontaneously after the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, in particular, demanded a new recognition of Black people's precarious relationship to nation states everywhere. While much of anti-Black racism scholarship centers the crisis in the United States, Caribbean scholars, artists and activists have long been engaging questions of racial justice. Indeed, from Marcus Garvey, to Walter Rodney and Bob Marley, Caribbean political and cultural interlocutors have seen themselves as part of a global struggle to reaffirm and reassert the humanity and agency of people of African descent. In this paper, I invoke this Caribbean emancipatory practice through close readings of four films from makers connected through the Caribbean as place and as Imaginary: *The Harder They Come* (1972) by Peter Henzell and Trevor Rhone; *Small Axe: Mangrove* (2020) by Steve McQueen; *Walk on By* (2018) by Sandra Brewster; and *UNDERcurrents* (2021) by nia love. I read these films through a diasporic lens thinking through Sylvia Wynter's deciphering practice, a method elucidating the counter-writing strategies inherent in the artwork, and through Rinaldo Walcott's application of the method that attends to the film's imagined emancipatory possibilities for being in the world *as human* and the material and discursive effects that arise from the corpus of Black aesthet(h)ics.

At its core, this paper asks, how do Black lives on the screen visualize an emancipatory future-present? How does cinema open up/transform space to comprehend the mattering of Black lives? And perhaps even more fundamentally, how do Black women drive this paradigmatic shift? I keep in mind Wynter's and Walcott's emphasis on paying attention to what the work is

doing. Moreover, I draw attention to the potential of Black Caribbean cinema to create the kind of scientific-cultural shifts Wynter hypothesizes. In the first section, I discuss Wynter's deciphering practice and then engage the method with the films. My aim here is to decipher how these films visualize and document modes of resistance to the oppressive legacy of white hegemony through colonial and neo-colonial systems. The final section suggests new transformative counter-signifiers in Black aesthetics in film that potentially shape current and future socio-political-cultural-economic organization. This new organization, Wynter theorizes, would conform to the natural organic and inorganic systems—the matter—which underpin current anthropocentric forms.

### **Deciphering and Counter-Signifying Practices**

In “*Rethinking “Aesthetics”*: *Notes towards a Deciphering Practice*” (1992), the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter contributes to film theory a method she terms a deciphering practice whereby it becomes possible to determine the unconscious purposes of the signifying image (240). The idea of purpose is key to her practice because it links perception (the eye), cognition (the brain), and affect (feelings) to ideological and *behavioral change*. A deciphering practice identifies the inner mechanisms of human organizational-discursive structures, or cultural Imaginary (248) down to the level of organic and inorganic systems. Wynter is interested in what these natural(ized) rules and regulations can teach us about the ways in which the Western ideology of “the nation” and corresponding socio-economic, cultural and political forms of organization might be reconfigured in order to live fully as human beings. A deciphering practice, therefore, works to reveal the counter-signifying elements of the film, which re-write and thereby re-create the existing social order into a new “global and popular Imaginary” (239). Wynter is working against the ideologies of scientific inquiry rooted in the Enlightenment's

Cartesian split which separated self from the world and catapulted binary thinking to the task of “discovering” the structures that determine how organic and inorganic systems interrelate. This logic underpins the Euro/White dominant culture since signifying aesthetic practices such as painting, cinema, photography, sculpture, theatre, and literature re-present Black peoples’ lives back to us already encoded with a scientific Cartesian split. For instance, “Science” through eugenics constructed the idea of whiteness as benevolent, superior, and human, and Blackness as evil, inferior, and non-human as the “natural order,”<sup>1</sup> resulting in the construction of stereotypes which cultural production under white supremacy seems to endlessly reproduce. Film as a signifying aesthetic-discursive practice thus encodes the ideology behind scientific thinking onto the subject—as body, as feelings, as individual and collective behaviors (247; 267) precisely because cinema reflects a type of realism which brings to life for the viewer what science “discovers.” Because cinema multiplies individual perception and reception to collective experiences (psycho-affective-social connectivity) in the theatre and exponentially through film distribution networks and online screenings, there remains significant potential for the moving image to effect behaviors at the level of the masses.

It is important to note that Wynter proposes a place for science *based on* science in order to contribute to an “emergent Imaginary” that diverges from the ideology of biological determinism which Richard Perry argues fixes race (7). Katherine McKittrick (2021) identifies this Imaginary as a “scientifically creative frame, that unfolds into a different future...the practice of making black life through, in, and as creative text” (51). Following McKittrick, I understand the epistemological shift the method of deciphering provokes as analogous to relational and anti-colonial Indigenous and Black Caribbean epistemologies which situate the human within all of

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<sup>1</sup> See biological determinism in Perry, 7-9; Manning 114-5; see also Wynter 251.

nature and not apart from it (45). Deciphering film and artworks, therefore, illuminates counter-signifying practices in the work by exposing colonial logics even and especially when works reproduce imperial-colonial-capitalist knowledge systems. The proposition Wynter and McKittrick bring forward regarding a deciphering practice is that if one knows the logic of the oppressive system, it becomes possible to dismantle that logic through image-making as counter-writing.

Wynter further hypothesizes Black Aesthetics as the primary mobilizing form with which to overcome and replace previous cultural/knowledge regimes because Black people are the most subjugated under the present (and hopefully shifting) social-scientific order. Deciphering further exposes what Rinaldo Walcott (2003) calls the politics of the moving image. In other words, a deciphering practice does not simply search for meaning in the text, and by extension film and images, but what that text is “*intended to do*” (267).<sup>2</sup> Walcott uses the methodology to make apparent the political impact of literary or film texts engaging Blackness and citizenship, or the more open-ended and less colonially-implicated, belonging:

I am also suggesting that we must do more than interpret them – we must also decipher their politics. By deciphering their politics I mean that embedded in the meanings of these texts are important political and social implications for fashioning all kinds of behavior which exist beyond the bounded text. Texts are worldly.... And this in part the power of words: to ascribe way beyond our imagined selves moments of immense meaningfulness. If such a project does not fit with some conceptions of art then we must rethink what art can, must and does do. (Walcott 71)

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<sup>2</sup> Wynter’s emphasis in text. Walcott (2003) provides a fulsome interpretation of Wynter’s deciphering practice in his essay that registers the impact of literary texts, “Desiring to Belong,” (50).

Noting Walcott's provocation, I adopt a deciphering practice in this essay to do this work of revealing how Black Caribbean films, broadly defined, dismantle racist colonial logics. I then suggest those areas that indicate a paradigmatic shift by looking at organic forms of organization that could produce the emerging, transformative "cultural Imaginary" as prospective sites of freedom.

### **Signifying and Counter-Signifying Practices**

Black film—as counter-signifying practice—presents non-stereotypical representations of Black peoples, though they may not escape them entirely. Typical racist portrayals of Black women characters, for example, might exhibit such stereotypes as the Jezebel or the Mammy.<sup>3</sup> Caribbean historian Barbara Bush (1990) traces the origin of the Jezebel stereotype to European notions of Black women as "tainted" and "corrupted" in opposition to the presumed purity of white women. By constructing Black women as "physically strong, exuding animal sensuality," European colonizers and enslavers could justify their labor abuse and sexual exploitation (15).

I argue that the female characters in *The Harder They Come (THTC)* defy the reproduction of a racist patriarchal ideology through a white, male, and upper-class gaze that constructs them as promiscuous and treacherous. A deciphering practice produces a counter-reading of these characters that disturb the very foundations of such Christian moral logics. Jose's girlfriend, for example, demonstrates her own agency as the lover of two of the most powerful men in the community, who takes the risk of being exposed for her duplicity. Rather than a Jezebel, the character demonstrates Black women's flexibility in looking out for their own well-being and

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Bush (1990) traces the ways in which contemporary images of Black women perpetuate stereotypes fabricated during the period of chattel slavery. Under this logic, Black women were constructed as biologically and therefore socially promiscuous, morally evil women who used sexual means to obtain favours. This is the Jezebel construct. The Mammy stereotype defeminized and desexualized Black women to justify white women's privileged position of relative power within the household and neutralize any perceived threat to the female enslaver's womanhood and position (Bush 13-15).



even survival. This reading subverts theories about the male gaze that do not consider the options of economically disadvantaged women and the agency they potentially demonstrate. The film thus generates a politics that creates space for the choices and behaviors of Black women in marginal circumstances.

The other key female character in *THTC* is Elsa. She is a young woman coming of age, one who is desired by both her guardian and the main protagonist, the rebel-hero, Ivan, and one who herself desires a man. Her primary function in the film is to care for those close to her. Faced with Ivan's individualistic ambition, she eventually forms an ersatz family with Ivan's partner in the drug trade, Pedro, and Pedro's terribly ill son. This shift in her allegiances, demonstrates a complex independence from Ivan, since she is still considered Ivan's partner. Instead, she makes a strategic decision to betray Ivan's location and acquiesces to the restoration of the drug trade she opposes because of her ethical worldview in order to save the boy. In this way, Elsa is a counter-signifier to the stereotypes Bush (1990) identifies, working against constructed attributes of Black women as promiscuous, as matriarchs, or as undependable women with unstable families who lack "morality" (18). Instead, she is a thoughtful, intelligent, independent character who cares both for herself *and* her chosen family. She also defies conceptions of the Black woman as a "fallen" being who fails to achieve the position of the "wifely model" of the European middle-class ideal who is subject to strict patriarchal authority, a stereotype that traces back to the patriarchal abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century (18-19). Although *THTC* was directed by a white Jamaican, Peter Henzell, and co-written with a Black Jamaican playwright, Trevor D. Rhone, Janet Bartley's performance as Elsa exudes subtle sensuality, defiance, and independence, as well as care and pragmatism in all her life decisions. Furthermore, although she plays a minor role compared to the charismatic performance of Jimmy

Cliff as the character Ivan, her decisions drive the narrative and ultimately decide Ivan's fate at the hands of the police.

The foregoing analysis performs the critical writing Wynter insists is necessary to counter the western European perspective that continues to dominate discourse in art and film criticism.

Indeed, Wynter insists that:

It should be stable and verifiable that these counter-signifying practices induce such a counter-writing and, therefore, such a counter-politics of “feeling” within the context of emergent new “battle of tastes” between the western middle class cultural imaginary, whose referent telos is that of the well-being of the middle class mode of the subject, and that the still emergent (and still bitterly contested) global popular Imaginary whose referent telos is that of the well-being of the individual human subject, and therefore, of the species. (Wynter 268-9)

An intersectional lens offers a reading of *THTC* that centres Black women's social position – constructed in modernity as occupying the lowest rung in a hierarchy of race and gender – as key to the larger project of attending to the much broader “well-being of the human subject.”

If *THTC* announced the beginning of indigenous Anglo-Caribbean filmmaking,<sup>4</sup> and a framing of Caribbean society from below that mirrored the lived experience of the Black masses in Jamaican society in the 1970s, Steve McQueen's *The Small Axe Anthology Series* (2020) presents a British Caribbean diasporic perspective from the same era. McQueen, born to Caribbean parents of the Windrush generation, documents some of the stories of that generation. I draw attention to the first installment of the anthology, *Small Axe: Mangrove*, that recounts the

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<sup>4</sup> Mybe Cham makes the claim of a nascent Jamaican/Caribbean film in his introduction to *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*.

story of a Trinidadian emigré in Notting Hill, Frank Crichlow, who was the proprietor of the Mangrove restaurant, a gathering place for the West Indian community. McQueen's portrayal of the Mangrove Nine, leaders protesting police violence, positions Black women at the heart of the 1970s Black Power movement in England—the “Mother Country” of the Caribbean imaginary at that time. Black women are central figures in the film's narrative which is based on real events remembered by the people involved in the anti-police protests in the then Caribbean neighborhood of Notting Hill. The women drive the progressive politics of Black Power ideology in contrast to white women's societal roles at the time. Alethia is a Black Power community activist. She demonstrates her fierce intelligence along with a great capacity to care. In the scene introducing Alethia, she stands in the foreground with her back to the camera facing the South Asian factory workers. She tries to persuade the workers to organize a union. This is an important scene, because it counters the racial separatist argument of Garveyism. Like Malcolm X in his later years, and in Wynter's Black present-futures, Alethia's purpose is to form transnational and transracial solidarity to overcome a (capitalist) system that oppresses all people of color.

Counter to the stereotype of the physically strong-therefore-animalistic Black woman, Alethia's strength operates through her vulnerability as she faces a prison term with an unborn child. In a scene outside of the courtroom, she sits next to activist Barbara Beese who frets about the consequences a conviction might have on her own child. Alethia offers encouragement by insisting the trial was about the kind of world their children would live in; that this oppressive situation had a purpose beyond them. Alethia repeatedly reveals a character motivated by ethical principles based on human rights who deploys her intellectual power to fight injustice, clearly placing her within the traditions of Black male leaders before her and, even more importantly,

Black female anti-slavery leaders, such as Nanny of the Maroons<sup>5</sup> and Claudia Jones.<sup>6</sup> Despite these “strong” women characters, McQueen does fall prey to representations of the Mammy stereotype that Bush (1990) calls a “defeminized neuter unit”(13) with “robustness of form” (15). The kitchen of the Mangrove was run by Aunt Betty. In the film, she is portrayed as a large woman with a wry sense of humor in an environment dominated by men. *Deciphering* this representation of Aunt Betty, helps us to move away from the Mammy stereotype to reveal the potential of a great exposition of Caribbean counter-writing—Carnival. In an impromptu Caribbean Carnival street celebration, Aunt Betty bumps and grinds in a fun, celebratory, sexually charged scene. She has agency in determining the execution of the dance, a dance that speaks less to promiscuity than it does to the sensual joys of the body.

*THTC* and *Mangrove* are narrative films that produce counter-writings of Black women stereotypes in favor of more complex images of Black women, but they do not at all approach the kinds of complex characters Black women creators might themselves produce, and they fail to break free of gender conformations. Despite these shortcomings, there are still notable radical counter-signifying practices apparent in the films worth mentioning by deciphering the specific aesthetic strategies of the filmmakers. Through the deployment of camera techniques, the filmmakers take advantage of cinema’s possibility to draw a connection between film and the

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<sup>5</sup> Nanny of the Maroons was a leader of the Maroons in guerilla warfare waged against the British during the First Maroon War 1720-1739. She was also the Chieftainess in her community and conferred National Hero status in recognition of her leadership. <http://www.nlj.gov.jm/history-notes/The%20Maroons%20edited%20final.htm>

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note the historical events that preceded McQueen’s film a decade prior. The so-called the Notting Hill race riots of the late 1950s were precipitated by a white mob attacking Black Caribbean residents who later armed themselves in self-defense (See *Notting Hill (memorandum)* in references). Claudia Jones was a key figure at the time who organized the first Caribbean Carnival in response to the race riots. She instituted the first iteration of Caribbean Carnival to protest the racist attacks and racism more broadly (Black Cultural Archives). The Carnival and subsequent demonstration McQueen puts a spotlight on in his film therefore falls within an emerging tradition of strong Black women at the forefront of Black Power movements in the UK.

body generating affect thereby producing a counter-writing. In this case, it is not the narrative that rewrites, but the camera and the cut.

An example of the power of the cut presents in *THTC* during the choir scene in the church. Repeated cuts juxtapose scenes of Ivan and Elsa in choir robes singing in the church and then lovemaking naked in the water. The cuts serve two purposes. First, the abruptness of the cuts reflect how the mind works between being present in the moment and drifting into the imagination, thereby imitating a neurological process, making visible what Wynter (1992) calls the “neuro-chemical opiate reward system”<sup>7</sup> and, what I would argue, Walcott (2003) terms simply as desire as it pertains to feeling and belonging.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the cuts occurring as the music crescendos, creates affective and haptic imagery relating the fluidity of the warm water to the softness of the skin, thereby heightening the sensuality of the scene. One almost feels the skin of the actors as their own in the haptic way film theorist Laura Marks (2000) suggests that film can do (22). Water symbolizes sacrament as well as the sweat of ecstasy achieved through religious fervor and sexual labor. The actors refuse to be disciplined by religion’s colonial structure, and instead, these cuts produce the experience of Black joy and ecstasy as a kind of freedom.

In *Mangrove*, McQueen also uses the camera as a counter-signifying practice. Sometimes he positions the camera at the level of the chest such that the spectator’s gaze is on equal plane with the characters on the screen thereby evoking a sense of identification with the protestors, who are members of the Notting Hill Black Caribbean community. The camera brings us close to them—

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<sup>7</sup> Wynter draws from Marx and Fanon to develop the concept of the “neurochemical opiate reward system in “Rethinking Aesthetics: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” (247-8) and uses the specific terminology in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* 60. Walcott gives specific meaning to the concept and its psychoanalytic underpinning of the phrase by constituting black geographies as spaces in which “desire structures belonging.”

<sup>8</sup> See chapter 3 in Walcott (2003), “Desiring to Belong.”

in relation to the protagonists rather than a distanced, observational view: we sit at the table while the men play cards; while the protestors deliberate legal strategy; while Frank contemplates. Perhaps the most brilliant camera work in the film, however, is where aesthetics and politics merge rather explicitly, but subtly, when the audience's gaze turns from that of the sympathetic spectator to the surveilling eye of the police. Using the camera to immerse the spectator in the scene, we are implicated as the camera's eye situates the viewer uncomfortably within whiteness as we watch from within the police van out at the protestors on the street and through a short and narrow viewing slit in the back door of the van. The spectator feels protected from the noise and commotion outside, and then enters into the fray with the rest of the police. The memory of this scene is later evoked in the courtroom through the piece of paper with a rectangle cut out in the shape and size of the viewing slit of the police van. The aesthetics of negative space on a flat plane clinch the argument for the protestors' freedom. Insisting that four policemen could not look out of that slit contemporaneously and assess the entirety of what was happening on the street, one of the lead protestors, Darcus, deftly exposes that the police's justification for brutality was entirely based on lies. The outcome of the trial produced what Manning Marable (1995) claimed Malcolm X desired, which is to challenge "whites to examine the policies and practices of racial discrimination" (100). The camerawork thus exposes the racist structure of the legal system by immersing spectators into one particular scene.

I now take a detour away from male creators and narrative films to decipher the works of two Black women experimental filmmakers. Their work considered in this context extends the idea of the Caribbean from place to Imaginary. The films *Walk on By* by Sandra Brewster and *UNDERcurrents* by nia love forsake narrative in favor of what aesthetics alone can do. The silent black and white 8mm film *Walk on By* visually mirrors the material outcome of Black everyday

being in Canada. Born in Canada to Guyanese parents, Brewster's *Walk on By* addresses the specific geographical surface and social space of Canada—what Shaunsea Brown (2022) situates as the Black Canadian landscape<sup>9</sup>—in which “the cultural value” of Brewster’s artwork must “be understood in ways that go beyond contexts of combatting white supremacy” (118) and instead, as Brewster, contends, show “just who we are” (117). Brown’s point is key, because it deciphers a womanist approach in order to imagine a space of kinship in expanded time—through the idea of Black mothering—in which the Black diaspora connects through a history of being-in-the-landscape and belonging to, and in, the Caribbean *and* Canada *at one and the same time*. The work proposes this way of being as an emancipatory future. Celluloid film when exposed to light through a camera, creates a sequence of images. Light again passes through the film material when projected, and frame-by-frame simulates movement in the image produced. In its very medium, then, *Walk on By* is Black life mattering through its migration from matter to light.

The footage itself presents street scenes depicting Black people walking by the camera, but the image is out of focus and it is impossible to identify any individual or their location. The camera lens creates a softness around the body, evoking a feeling of being at ease even on busy city streets and counter-writes social weapons such as surveillance cameras. There is nothing spectacular about the scenes that nonetheless mesmerize the viewer with the rhythms and flows of the dynamics and liveness of the ordinary Black people they portray. The film instantaneously transmits rhythms of forced migrations, the wellness of Black communities, the movements of Black liberation, and even the concept of the North as a place of freedom, creating a Black space of “temporal obscureness” (Brown 2022, 121). Deciphering rather than deconstructing, I think

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<sup>9</sup> See also Walcott (2003).

about the organizing principle of rhythms as an inorganic structure to re-imagine a world that could be a place of freedom. The figures, with their coats and jackets and hats, form part of the scenery of shops, streets, and trees. The co-mingling of organic bodies with the inorganic structures of the city visually connects the two systems of knowledge in a *belonging with* one's surroundings rather than a *belonging to* a nation-state.<sup>10</sup> Brewster's blurring of the image counter-signifies an always already encoded Cartesian split with the environment and its corresponding racial binaries, thereby troubling the foundational white settler narratives of Canada. Instead, the film suggests the possibility of life without existential anxiety and poetically propositions other ways of being and living on Indigenous land.

While Brewster's moving images "obscure" time and space, nia love's video *UNDERcurrents* imagines possibilities for contemporary Black life through movement in the psychic, organic, cosmic and historical rhythms of aquatic/cosmic waves. As an American artist with Haitian ancestry, I bring love's practice in conversation with the Caribbean to show how her work crisscrosses culturally and geographically through the diaspora and extends Black being beyond the Atlantic. love transgresses national borders to gesture towards the "emergent global and popular Imaginary" Wynter envisions (1992, 239). That Imaginary encompasses the Caribbean waters, the Middle Passage, love's Haitian ancestry and a deep "African spiritual sensibility."<sup>11</sup> Extending Brown's argument on womanist approaches in "building second-generation relationships to the Caribbean" (2022, 142), I suggest that the placenta-like scenes in which love performs movements submerged in the deep sea indicate a womanist aesthetic to express planetary belonging. love uses the camera to focus in and out—revealing and blurring,

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<sup>10</sup> Here I draw on Dionne Brand's reflections on belonging in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001).

<sup>11</sup> love is quoted in an artist Q and A following the screening of her film at the symposium, *Maps to the Door of No Return At 20*, revisiting Dionne Brand's memoir and its political-social-psychological implications.



blending in the colours to create a flattened plane that scales the ocean/sky to the cognitive capacity of the human. The figure, a Black woman—love herself (pun intended)—blends entirely into the scene, echoing Brewster’s blurring, and reducing while maintaining the difference between water, sea creature, space, ancestor and human.

It is worth raising Wynter’s (1992) concept of Aesthetic 2 which refers to the contemporary symbolic order that came into being during the period of chattel slavery and its progenitor, the “Enlightenment.” Wynter argues that the Euro-ethno-cultural position is viewed as biologically, and therefore, scientifically, superior to all other worldviews and which derive universalizing discourses. Moreover, the worldview self-replicates through cultural criticism, aesthetic and scientific production and their discourses (246). The abrupt turn away from Wynter’s Aesthetic 2 flickers in my mind during the viewing of *UNDERcurrents* as it transgresses conventional time and geographic coordinates beyond the Caribbean archipelago, to embrace the Atlantic waters, Turtle Island, the United Kingdom, and the continent of Africa, including all of the peoples, creatures and inorganic substances that create new relationships between environments and afterlives *concurrently*. Through love’s performance in the film, Black women’s aesthetics begins to do the work of not only countering, but provoking new questions, new possibilities from which to consider the world, not with hegemonic paradigms and paradigmatic hegemony, but with new proposals to be human in and of the world.

In *UNDERcurrents*, time collapses in a futurity of organizational and relational possibilities of earthly and cosmic socio-political life. love reminds us that, as earthly creatures, our basic structure is water. We are biologically and historically descendants of the Middle Passage and embody patterns of migration, trauma, and flexibility in what Saidiya Hartman (2007) calls the afterlife of slavery (5). One must pass through, above, on or under water in order to physically

and psychically tether the different locations of home and return, and for Caribbean peoples that return might be Africa, India, China, etc. in any one person. The film suggests that what is at stake in insisting on the continuity and “thrivance” of Black life is intimately connected to the ecology or well-being of the planet since the sea is where so many Black bodies dispersed into and along its shores. The sea is the source of all life, even as it represents Black death and struggle to survive. I suggest that love’s American citizenship does not preclude situating *UNDERcurrents* within the context of Caribbean works as a subsection of Black aesthetics.<sup>12</sup>

Through a diasporic aesthetic, love transgresses “nation” altogether to locate Black geographies.

Acknowledging the debates about what constitutes Caribbean cinema that Mbye Cham (1992) brings to the fore that would not delegate this film as belonging to a national elsewhere, there is an important aesthetic in this film, namely the imminence of water and the Black female body that is very much struggling to survive *with* her surroundings, that lends me to consider *UNDERcurrents* within the imaginary of the archipelago. Perhaps by translating her Butoh/Japanese-influenced practice into the slow movement of deep-sea diving, love uses the screen itself to transmit the sightlines of the sea into a sensorial experience of the water and its creatures, opening up possibilities for a haptic brushing up alongside ancestors. Turquoise water is not the objectified tropical paradise of the tourist gaze, but the more immediate presence of water as another being, blurring ancestral/human memory with the planetary notions of time and existence. The sea as signifier suggests that all of what we call life could recalibrate to a syncopation outside of neo-liberal internet capitalism in order to understand, in an embodied way

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<sup>12</sup> Consider, for instance, a range of aesthetic and critical texts made by and/or about the Caribbean that approach water as symbolic: NourbeSe Philp poem *Zong* (2011); Dionne Brand’s *Map to the Door of No Return* (2001); Andrea A. Davis’s *Horizon, Sea, Sound: Caribbean and African Women’s Cultural Critiques of Nation* (2022); or the artworks in the recent exhibition *Fragments of Epic Memory* (2021) curated by Julie Crooks at the Art Gallery of Ontario, with works by Sir Frank Bowling, Andrea Chung, Nadia Huggins, Jeannette Ehlers, Ebony J. Patterson, Rodell Warner.

of knowing, what the planet needs as reflective of what we need as a species. Through the immersion of her body in the sea— what I argue belongs to a lexicon of Caribbean visual culture, love connects the geography of the Black diaspora concurrently. The politics of Black life, then, are the politics of humanity; of all our relations now and irrespective of linear time. This view dialogues with Indigenous worldviews and suggests a potential allyship in looking for new/old ways of being in the world, a way in which the paradigm suggested is co-existence, co-mingling, relationality, rather than Cartesian anthropocentrism. As such, love’s film presents a radical reorganization that transcends the politics of nationhood and belonging to a conversation about Black futurity in the world. “Because bodies, actual and imagined, are at stake, it is imperative that we make representations matter beyond the discourse of merely seeing ourselves” (Walcott 2003, 98). While *Walk on By* does this at the level of individuals, communities, and nation, what love’s film is *intended to do* is to have us think about humanity as a body interconnected to everything we can imagine. The two films taken together help us understand Wynter’s call for an imagining of a new methodology of literary and film criticism whereby linking the subjective-cultural experience of being and performing as fully human is only possible in relation to the world around us, and, significantly, in relation to our imagination.

These two experimental films made by Black women show the power of the image to produce counter-writings in film. Stereotypes of Black women do not figure in their works. In Brewster’s, a plethora of diverse Black people and the blurring of specific identifiers of gender or otherwise, disable any stereotypical signifier that a hegemonic Eurocentric aesthetics might fix. love takes a different approach by inserting her own body into the work, making the Black woman so specific, so real and whole, that she defies any fixing of a racist sign. I concur with

Walcott's (2003) claim that "imaginative works often render much more complex and interesting constructions of our multiple historical experiences than other cultural forms" (46).

In this essay, I have tried to show how Black Caribbean aesthetics challenge us to think and experience the world differently, and how deciphering highlights possibilities to especially reject stereotypes of Black women and brush up against lived experience. However, I want to conclude with the possibilities for Aesthetic 2, as an opening to a conversation to come. Aesthetic 2 is where resistance meets freedom and the mattering of Black life is a given. Where are the indicators from the organic and inorganic worlds that lead to new paradigms through which we structure our world? In *THTC*, the rhythms of reggae and its corresponding culture through the plant life of ganja, offers a Jamaican Black consciousness to structure life in Kingston. Ganja is the means by which a Black underclass intensifies pleasure at the dance hall, contemplates communal decisions, and derives the sustenance by which they earn money to keep their families safe. Ganja maintains the extra-legal social order. The slower rhythms of the reggae soundtrack, both in *THTC* and *Mangrove* fuse with politically conscious narratives and signal the possibility of music and the herb to transform Jamaican and Black diasporic cultures, if not decolonized economies.

Brewster and love show even more fundamentally transformative possibilities for Aesthetic 2 beyond Enlightenment's love affair with individualism and the capitalist-communist divide. Brewster's down-to-earth rhythms demonstrate possibilities to *feel* Black belonging. If this feeling is carried over transracially into behavior, as per Wynter's argument, then a path opens to re-write local and national structures of citizenship. love's film orients the world around new/old routes set by the rhythms of water and aquatic life to propose new ways of organizing the broad, wide and deep ecosystems that support Black life, which is always already placed on the bottom

of the colonial hierarchy, as a way and means to promote Wynter's (1992) call for the "well-being of the individual subject and therefore, of the species" (269) and, I would infer, of all life. In the wake of COP 26<sup>13</sup>, one can only hope that we all learn to dance to these new rhythms.

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<sup>13</sup> UN Climate Change Conference 2021. COP refers to "Conference of the Parties" or countries.

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