

Melissa Lyde

Ecstatic Rest and the Black Gaze in a Time of Loss

Peace of mind is received when the body is allowed to rest. Rest seems rather minor alongside the colossal and endless loss of life magnified by COVID-19 these last few years. But when you give yourself over to rest, you've effectively participated in your body's healing response, and healing is miraculous. Our bodies fight for us; it's the single organism that validates a genuine presence by inexplicably regenerating. And rest is required for this to occur in even the smallest of ways. Cinema is a part of the reparative process, given it's one of the most restful forms of entertainment.

Alfreda's Cinema has been an ongoing Black film series in residence at the Metrograph since 2019, bringing a range of programming that primarily centered Black women, and when COVID-19 struck the city, it created chaos. The pandemic cataclysmically altered our way of life down to the most minuscule of functions. Cinema is a lifestyle, so I won't say it took a backseat during the shutdown but for the time while theaters closed. Nonetheless resilient, Metrograph welcomed audiences to continue to view its programming online. And Alfreda's Cinema was invited to curate in this new virtual space while our lives in the most literal sense came to a screeching halt. Two years later and looking back, I'm still processing the task of programming films during a shutdown. I ask, Why did I do it? How was programming film part of fighting yet another global health crisis? And was it an effective part? In this age of representation, smart tech, and resignation, we're exhausted. I live in Brooklyn, a culturally rich city where you don't have to go far for a good time. But the weight of being Black brought out the trauma stored in my body. And what I felt was needed most through film programming was work that could heal the scars of real time through cinematic time and space.

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Being inundated with public executions of Black Americans as breaking news, day in and day out, left me deeply isolated. And the sensationalism of broadcasters reporting on these murders closely resonated for me with the frenzy of Blackface and lynching postcards; it all felt performative. I personally couldn't cope. I found myself even more anxious around police, thinking that I could be gunned down next. Like so many people, I fell into depression that I'm not completely out of. However, I shifted from going to pieces by radicalizing my cinema practice to induce a form of ecstatic rest and cinema. I quit a job I hated because it surrounded me with white privilege that disregarded my wellness. Over the next year, I reshaped my understanding of self-love. I focused on my mental and physical health. And I thought very seriously about the extension of Alfreda's Cinema as a brick and mortar. I made it a me year. I read (bell hooks mostly), watched Turner Classic Movies, and bought records. I spent practically every weekend at the record shop because it's more fun than therapy. I learned the art of deep listening. And I took that infamous leap of faith and began my sojourn of building a home of our own for Alfreda's Cinema.

First off, I've never been as happy as I am now. But leaving a steady job to start your own business is like welcoming heartache; it's confrontational and it bleeds you. In a way it's sadomasochistic, and I've never felt as raw as I do now, which echoed in my thematic programming. *Protect Black Women* (various directors, 1996–2021), *Move: Confrontation in Philadelphia* (Karen Pomer and Jane Mancini, 1980), *Two Early Works by Isaac Julien: Territories and Who Killed Colin Roach?* (Isaac Julien, 1985, 1983) with Light Industry, *A Powerful Thang* (Zeinabu irene Davis, 1991), *Nina Simone: The Performance Is Protest* (various directors, 1975–2020), *Dancehall Queen* (Don Letts and Rick Elgood, 1997), and my most recent program, *Kindred: A Consideration of Black British Cinema through the Lens of Black Women from 2014–2021* (various directors, 2014–2021), were all cathartic, each one touching on a deeper part of my soul. I resigned and then had the most heartfelt years as a film curator. At the end of the summer, I produced an immersive screening of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) on the beach in Queens. We reimagined the film as a live action and did our best to repurpose it in nature. We danced, we performed sonnets, we role-played, and for that afternoon we became the film.

During the beach performance, New York felt like the bad old days again, when art was created in a renegade fashion. I didn't have a permit for the screening, so when my production crew and I began setting up on the beach, the park's rangers became hostile toward us despite having already explained the event to them the day before. And then out of nowhere, a white savior appeared, a nosy man turned concerned citizen came to our rescue after my insinuation that our artistic demonstration was being subjected to racial bias by these monitors. I can't remember his name now, but he engaged with the rangers on our behalf repeating my claims of prejudice and effectively stopped them from kicking us off the beach. It's important to know that the state ceased issuing beach permits in 2021. The lesson I learned that day was that liberals fear being called out on their subversive racism. So, our immersive program was saved just in time as the guests began to arrive. The potential interruption only read on my face, and so the



Figure 1. Bata drummers Warren Smith and Baba Don Babatunde (The Last Poets) accompany Yemaya tribute dancer Pia Love in a ceremony honoring Yoruba. Photographed by Cameryn Hines.

audience enjoyed a dreamlike experience none the wiser (see Figure 1). It felt like I had embodied the spirit of Lorraine O'Grady, a brilliant Black woman and visual artist based in New York who often conceptualized Black beauty through performance art. The *Daughters of the Dust* immersive was another moment when I fell in love with myself. I trusted my vision, and with the help of friends, we pulled it off. I felt the same joy as being in a cinema surrounded by Black (women) people, laughing and talking back to the screen. In such moments, an artistic medium induces a restful euphoria and peace of mind that transports you away from your problems.

I remember this sensation of restful euphoria so consistently before the COVID-19 pandemic. The earth had shifted for Black cinema between 2014 and 2019. Repertory, new releases, indies, and restored classics were receiving their flowers. I tell you we were on a shooting star flying through the ether with no end in sight. This renaissance was largely led by the ingenuity of the programming team at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), particularly Vice President Gina Duncan and Programming Director Ashley Clark. I've been invested in Black film since my teenage years, and BAM was always the beacon. As I got older, I learned that Black film trends about every ten years. And although Gina and Ashley reignited the flames this turn, BAM has been very consistent with its diasporic programming for decades. Metrograph's first artistic director, Jake Perlin, fostered this during his tenure at BAM. Mahen Bonetti, founder of the New York African Film Festival, and Curtis John, who has programmed for New Voices in Black Cinema and the Caribbean film series and is the founder of the Luminal Theater, are among many

others who sculpted BAM Rose Cinemas to be hallowed ground for Black art house films.

When I was growing up post Y2K, Brooklyn was the epicenter for Afrocentricity and empowerment expressed, quite beautifully, through visual art and film. Brooklyn was sacred ground. And I can't imagine not having that community as a child now. I thank my elementary school teacher who showed movies on rainy days, my mom's second job for keeping her from picking me up on time, and my sister who forgot about me when she was running the streets. It was during these times of waiting that I'd drift into BAM to watch a movie. I studied music after school around the corner. And when I got older, I'd stay out late to catch a show after my lessons. In so many ways, natives are orphans in New York. You're basically an adult as soon as you learn the transit system; for me, that was around age twelve. Brooklyn sure as hell didn't look the way it does now back then. I knew where not to go, and folks didn't mess with me.

I was shaped by Brooklyn's Black bohemian movement, and I was warmly reminded of it while Ashley and Gina were programming together at BAM. The gravity of Black film programming by Black programmers is paramount to Black art. The Black gaze is important in communicating about art, because it means you'll be provided with articulate cultural comprehension of the art and how it historically resonates across all backgrounds. Black curators are precious with their protection and delivery of the culture. White curators don't share that intimacy and cannot translate Black art the same way as can Black curators. The white narrative is so conditioned and systemic that you wouldn't notice there isn't a Black person in a film unless you're Black, and that goes for all BIPOC.

American viewers have been conditioned to believe whiteness is the standard, and it's frightfully easy to forget about people of color in film. White male dominance in theatrical programming isn't the root of the problem, but it's a part of the problem. Some, although not all, white film programmers will dismiss the appeal of a Black film because of its profitability and relevance to a largely white audience. But what that white programmer refuses to do is see their own humanity in that BIPOC story.

What I want in my filmgoing experience is to be moved. And right now, for me, white narrative story lines aren't doing that. Hollywood is out of ideas, and there's no future in an industry that is slow to embrace the next generation of creators. To hear young people say, "I don't have cable" or "I only watch episodic TV" makes another etching on the tombstone of the motion pictures industry. Independent cinemas can bypass this decline, though, because what will never go away is community. It's human nature to get together, and it's essential to our growth as a society. No matter the number of policies enacted to separate us, people will find a way. When the COVID-19 pandemic began and New York was the first major American epicenter, I did think we're never going to regain the same momentum behind Black film as before. But spring came and then summer, and it felt counter-productive to stay inside. As my friend, DJ and nightlife activist Ali Coleman, imparted to me, "during slavery, even the enslaved rejoiced." His observation shifted my thinking from then on. We're going to go through hard times col-

lectively and repeatedly. If my ancestors can find peace and joy in their most trying times, then so can I.

As I advocate, crowdfund, and monetize Alfreda's Cinema, I'm envisioning a new age, a new society of filmmakers, cinephiles, and everyday people finding their way to it as a layover between work and home, a community who will come to consider it a sanctuary for ecstatic Black rest. Thus, the process of growing Alfreda's requires moving carefully, and that often looks slow. But I had to dismiss lingering self-doubts first. There is no room to think small of yourself with what I'm trying to accomplish. Cinema is a big endeavor. Opening a cinema "post" COVID requires adaptability; it requires shifting between analog and digital to be relevant while instilling a sense of pride in your support system. I don't think of Alfreda's Cinema as Melissa's cinema because it's virtually impossible to do alone; this is the people's cinema, and knowing that helps me conquer self-doubt.

Like Black bodies, Black culture has been historically commodified and displayed in a way that makes it inaccessible to the community that inspired it. My contemporaries and I want to get Black films to Black people in the way they're meant to be viewed on a big screen. Black art is not being redistributed back into our neighborhoods, a problem that reflects how insulated younger Black people are becoming. We don't need another liquor store or fast-food restaurant while we're being starved out of our own culture and intellectualism. And the powerbrokers who are pushing a dysfunctional narrative are poisoning us. We need healthy, community-building institutions to preserve our history.

For a long time, I thought I needed New York's existing exhibitor community to validate me. I thought their support would be proof that I'm worthy of facilitating film programs. The universe and my circle have shown me that I am. And when your purpose and passion align, that's when you really live. I stuck to the idea of finding pleasure in this life. I find that pleasure in cinema, in Black people, and in community.

Melissa Lyde was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and is the founder of Alfreda's Cinema. In addition to partnering with the Metrograph, she has programmed for the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), the Maysles Cinema, the Spectacle, and Light Industry.