IN FOCUS

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This In Focus comprises essays by film programmers and editors about their crucial work in the summer of 2020, in the wake of the protests after the murder of George Floyd and as the COVID-19 pandemic re-shaped public life. Whether these presenters engaged issues of racial justice or the pandemic directly in the method and material they programmed, attention to the work and professional contexts of those who make our current screen experiences possible is not only timely but urgent. As institutions from universities to museums seek to foreground cultural values of inclusivity, film programmers, exhibitors, and distributors join academics and archivists in the mission of film preservation and wield significant power to shape the public’s imaginary through the films they decide to introduce, screen, or protect and how they present them to the public.

Looking at film culture from the perspective of film presenters makes it clear that film communities, especially scholars, need to attend to the work of bringing movies and people together. Film programmers labor behind the screen in a variety of roles, managing both the endless concrete details of administrative work and the abstract conceptual work that film exhibition seems to both require and devour. As such, they are well positioned to speak with authority about the effort that cultural change requires. The particular film programmers and curators sharing their wisdom in this In Focus are Melissa Lyde, founder of Alfreda’s Cinema; Maya Cade, creator and curator of Black Film Archive; Brett Kashmere, director of Canyon Cinema; Livia Bloom Ingram, film programmer and vice president of Icarus Films; Daniella Shreir, founder and programmer of Another Screen; Jon Dieringer, editor of Screen Slate; and Heitor Augusto, film programmer and co-founder of NICHO 54. Typically, these professionals remain in the background, ceding center stage to the films and filmmakers they cham-
pion. But here, for the first time in some cases, they write candidly from their unique vantage points as institution builders. Together they theorize what I call this “years-long 2020” as an era that both requires and allows for renewed frameworks of care, rest, and creativity. Such frameworks not only facilitate what audiences watch on-screen but also bring critical attention to how they watch and process those experiences.

This years-long pandemic of uncertainty, grief, and loss has revealed yet again the fragile bonds and railings that hold American society just to this side of total collapse. Or are we in the aftermath of collapse and still falling? At this writing, over six million have been lost to COVID-19 globally; on February 7, 2022, the bells of the National Cathedral tolled 900 times in remembrance of 900,000 US deaths. What will the death count be when this In Focus collection on film programmers and their efforts to expand the film imaginary is published? This years-long period of devastation is further marked by lives lost to what I can only think of as a centuries-long ongoing crisis of anti-Black state violence enacted chaotically and brutally—killings that are unsettling for their random yet systemic nature. Invoking this crisis, I remember Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, who were killed in 2020. I am further shaken by news of Amir Locke’s murder on February 2, 2022, as he slept huddled in a blanket in Minneapolis. And yet somehow the streets are filled with traffic, with people flowing to and from social events, campuses, and shopping malls. As a society, many of us, across demographics, go on. Institutions have gone on. I go on. Yet however necessary I am told that it is to return to normalcy (or whatever this is), it still feels like a betrayal of my hopes for the questioning and changing of norms, for justice and expanded equity.

I still recall my feelings of relief in mid-March 2020 as my calendar of overproductivity cleared. One by one, various obligations were postponed or canceled, and my days became quiet, became mine. Where my overcommitments had been were now emptiness and disappointment, to be sure, but also relief: breathing space even as breathing became dangerous in a new way. That’s how I would define the years-long moment of the COVID-19 pandemic: an exhausting cycle of sighing to exhale and then suddenly catching and holding my breath at the latest horror, worrying always about what I was breathing in.

It’s now spring 2022, and a big part of my mind is still caught in horror, as if suspended in amber at the events that precipitated this years-long 2020. That suspension arises in part from the death all around us but also from my deeply felt sense of betrayal and abandonment. In March 2020, I felt something close to optimism, because questions of power, justice, and equity were front and center, including the urgency of addressing climate change, honoring the #MeToo movement, and affirming that #BlackLivesMatter. It seemed that even regular (not specifically activist) white people were upset about the corrosive effects of racism, and not just in the abstract but in the lived realities of actual people.

I miss the sound of protests today, because I wonder if as film educators and curators we haven’t all missed the chance to rethink and reimagine everything about what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. It seems now
that the range of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements issued from colleges and universities, multinational corporations, and museums reflected less solidarity than the co-optation of genuine movements for change. Are small mission-minded film distributors, programmers, and curators more trustworthy? What is the name for the particular kind of preemptive, protective exhaustion people of color (I) feel at the thought of returning to contexts that leave them (me) vulnerable to being targets of microaggressions, not to mention the ever-present possibility of violent trivialities interrupting or even leading to the taking of their lives? Where do we (I) find rest?

This In Focus on film presenters comes out of my desire to recognize and explore the often unsung creativity and originality involved in the hard work of truly expanding the visual narratives of Black and brown lives by making sure forgotten films are seen and new films find their audiences. Film presenters facilitate access. They are conduits between audiences and the movies. As social changes spotlighted the stakes of being together, it is fitting to hear from those administrators, curators, and entrepreneurs whose missions involve throwing open the gates and bringing audiences into community with one another through film exhibition and distribution. In their roles, these cultural leaders responded to the long 2020 moment in creative ways that challenge how we see and show the movies. What’s more, they expanded access to rarely seen and urgently needed material. Their exhibition work and the forums they created constitute a crucial form of film preservation in that they document expanded visions of film history in the present while contextualizing this work with new ideas and original writing.

As contributor Melissa Lyde writes, “[r]est seems rather minor alongside the colossal and endless loss of life magnified by COVID-19 these last few years.” Yet with her illuminating discussion of “ecstatic rest,” Lyde inspires readers to reframe their moviegoing as a creative act. All of the essays touch on the pivot to virtual exhibition in 2020 and what was gained or lost in that turn. The essays illustrate the many forms of work and creativity that go into making film culture more inclusive. Expanding the range of available film materials is the product of goodwill and serendipity as much as professionalism, as Livia Bloom Ingram points out in her reflective essay on the restoration and re-release of Madeline Anderson’s films. Both Ingram and Brett Kashmere, who writes about Toney Merritt’s films and their material life, explore this years-long moment through historical narratives about crucial cultural organizations and the restoration work they do. Consequently, I see this In Focus as bringing the many magicians—or rather, the workers behind what appears to be the magic of film presentation—out from their projection booths and offices to share their perspectives on what it means to show movies right now: a time of diminished resources when many of us have new and multiple care responsibilities and reduced social infrastructure for support. Jon Dieringer calls for compassion for film workers; he notes that “[e]xhibiting film—particularly on film—requires a great deal of labor that is often unseen or unacknowledged. It depends on an ecosystem of programmers, print traffickers, projectionists, distributors, communications and social media personnel, managers, ushers, and other front-house staff.” Dieringer’s
thoughts echo across the collection, but his contribution highlights the interdependent workers and systems that move movies onto the screen.

To assemble this collection, I invited film distributors, media center leaders, collectors, and programmers to write about their work in the years-long moment of 2020–2022. I opened the door to anecdotes, rants, manifestos, essays, personal perspectives, or historical narratives that would address what it means to be a film programmer now. I encouraged authors to reflect on what it means to collect, sell, screen, stream, aggregate, distribute, and otherwise center film and media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the #BlackLivesMatter protests of summer 2020, the 2020 US presidential election and subsequent insurrection, the ongoing climate change crisis, and the #MeToo movement.

Many of the contributors are entrepreneurs working with small groups of collaborators or on their own both to conceptualize their projects and to bring them to reality. They are driven by personal passion and social mission; as Maya Cade writes, “The most pressing impetus for Black Film Archive’s birth was an ongoing conversation in the Black community regarding Black trauma in film” that predated the 2020 protests. And Black Film Archive has in many ways sought to make encounters with Black images, on a variety of themes and historical moments, enticing and informative. Sparked by feeling “desperate” to show Italian filmmaker Cecilia Mangini’s work, Daniella Shreir’s Another Screen “aims to place films in their historical context and, through interviews, essays, and the films themselves, give them a new or more extensive life through translation.” Subsequent short-term screenings on this free-to-view platform have featured rarely seen work by Fronza Woods, six Brazilian films about labor and work, Marguerite Duras’s French television documentaries, and more. Formed during the pandemic, these creative and visionary portals bring rarely seen materials to new audiences within new critical frameworks. All the In Focus contributors speak from deep ethical commitments to audiences and love for the movies that draw our attention, as audience members and scholars, to a vulnerable and changing infrastructure that requires compassionate and participatory spectatorship. To that end, Heitor Augusto engages the very project of film presentation, calling on programmers of Black film in the United States to decenter US perspectives and to engage more with Latin American artists. Like all of the contributors, Augusto writes in the first person from a place of expertise and experience, providing both analysis and a form of memorial. Thus, the authors of this In Focus mark but also look beyond our collective experiences of this years-long 2020 moment. Through their work, audiences of all kinds have found new ways to be together apart as we explore a new future amid the horrors, amid the possibilities.
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.

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
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 Afro-centricity 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 counterproductive 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.
On Building Black Film Archive, a Digital Archive that Responds to a Movement

The first seed of what would become Black Film Archive was planted during the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. Across the country, Black Americans gathered in the streets to question their relationship to death, whiteness, policing, and memorialization. As this visible refusal of the status quo gained exposure, Black Americans began reconsidering memorialization and representation in every facet of American life. Suddenly, there was a renewed collective energy for reassessing the history of Black imagery in the media. Many Black Americans began asking ourselves and one another, How does media, especially film, represent our history, and can it ever accurately memorialize our experiences?

This moment of reckoning positioned streaming platforms such as Netflix to launch Black Lives Matter tribute categories that collect existing Black films while also putting Black moviegoers, critics, and artists in prime position to question the role of these Black-driven collections. That positioning, combined with my lifetime of dedication to Black film scholarship, brought out my desire to create something that directly addressed Black Americans wanting to engage more deeply with Black cinematic history.

The most pressing impetus for Black Film Archive’s birth was an ongoing conversation in the Black community regarding Black trauma in film. In June 2020, the discourse surrounding Black screen representation generalized

Black films as being mostly traumatic. I hoped that I could develop a register that would help people reframe and better understand Black cinematic history, something that would reckon the total weight of the past and allow people to consider the radical ideas and expression found in Black film’s past.

The fight for Black visibility on-screen is as old as the motion picture industry itself. The moving image portrays the reflections of a society’s attitudes and expressions. Cinema has always been a space where we share, develop, and reflect our belief systems. Shared identity and knowledge are grown through expansive temporal and spatial visions of remembrance in cinema. These shared visions shape collective imagination.

Black Film Archive, which began as a Twitter thread in June 2020, developed beyond its roots when I asked myself, “How does making Black cinematic history readily accessible shift collective imagination?” With this question in mind, it became abundantly clear that a Twitter thread that gathered currently streaming Black films made before 1960 was not enough. With only a link and photo, this thread could never realize my intentions, could not shift the collective imagination as I set out to do.2

The fully fleshed out Black Film Archive is a digital resource providing history and context for over two hundred currently streaming Black films made from 1915 to 1979. Each film page has a trailer or embedded video and provides a synopsis written with Black viewers in mind. Black films are defined on Black Film Archive as films that have something significant to say about the Black experience; speak to Black audiences; or have a Black star, writer, producer, or director. The criteria for selection are as inclusive as possible, allowing the site to cover the broadest range of what a Black film can be.3 The films collected in Black Film Archive are visions of Black being across time.

When confronted with the demands of archiving, curators often embark on a quest for objectivity and neutrality while zeroing in on a narrative of “forgotten” or “overlooked” works. But archives, by nature, are not neutral.4 In order to be effective for the community it is longing to serve, every archive must be built with continual self-examination and accountability. The quest for neutrality also begs the question “Forgotten to whom?” when the overlooked framing is one of the only considered entry points for embarking on archival work. With my earliest archival efforts while studying at Howard University, it became clear to me that when it came to film history, this quest for objectivity was a journey that had long minimized the contributions of Black performers, directors, and film workers. The moment of mass reckoning that demanded Black Film Archive’s creation meant I had the mental freedom to

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2 See Maya Cade (@mayascade), “here’s an ongoing thread of all the black films before 1959 i [sic] can find publicly available (streaming / public domain / rentals),” Twitter, June 10, 2020, 1:03 p.m., https://twitter.com/mayascade/status/1270763607354224642?s=21. This thread continued through March 24, 2021.
4 The phrase “archives are not neutral” is often credited to a social media campaign initiated by archivist Ashley D. Stevens.
imagine building a platform that spoke directly to Black people’s needs. My website would expose the myth of objectivity in archive curation by addressing the creators and audiences excluded by white collectors and collections.

In building Black Film Archive, I started by contending with the hurdles to create order out of the chaos. Before I uploaded any film or designed any page, I knew it would be imperative to challenge the way whiteness is centered in how Black films are seen, discussed, and heard. To avoid reproducing such oppressions, I researched and wrote all the descriptions of films collected in the Archive, using “What does this mean to a Black person?” as a guideline. I spent a lot of time thinking through what the resource I wanted to build should look like, interrogating how visual design cues I was ruminating upon would make Black people feel. I spent a great deal of time rearranging the relation of the films to one another on the site, ensuring the foundation I was building would be inviting and have the potential to evolve. Creating any archive is an act of community care, but centering Black people in that archive requires you to dethrone the status quo.

The demands of varied curatorial standards across streaming platforms means that classic Black films are dispersed across and within various services and were largely buried outside of Black History Month commemorations (if they were promoted at all).5 Despite curators’ present-day interest in reengaging with Black cinema, it is my firmest belief that building and collating Black films on Black Film Archive is an act of transforming collective memory. Black Film Archive is a foundation that will withstand the tides of curatorial fascination changing.

To intentionally preserve is to remember and to reimagine what the future could hold. From the countless correspondence I have received, it has become clear that Black people treasure Black Film Archive because it honors the social contract we have long held ourselves to and because it challenges default narratives about cinema history and builds critical awareness of African American contributions. In Black American culture, primarily Black American southern culture, family preservation is a task for everyone. Everyone carries the precious burden of recording, carrying, and sharing ancestral mementos to preserve the legacy of those who came before them. I feel in kinship with the actors, writers, directors, and producers legacies deserve continued examination and celebration. Because that is so, I will always carry the task of preserving their legacy.

Maya S. Cade is the creator and curator of Black Film Archive, a living register of Black films from 1915 to 1979. Her work has been awarded notable distinctions by the New York Film Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics. She was the Fall 2021 Research Fellow at Indiana University’s Black Film Center & Archive and she is now Scholar-in-Residence at the Library of Congress.

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5 As on Black Film Archive, “classic Black films” are defined here as films before 1979.
Effecting Repair: A Canyon Cinema Report on the “Rediscovery” of Toney W. Merritt

The Bay Area–based independent filmmaker Toney W. Merritt has been creating work for over fifty years. His unique corpus of personal films and videos draws upon and subverts numerous experimental, narrative, and documentary strategies and techniques. Like the work of acclaimed African American visual artist David Hammons, who rose to prominence in Los Angeles and New York in the 1970s and 1980s, Merritt’s work shares some of the same allegorical and self-referential aspects and obscure humor and is distinguished by an unusual combination of playfulness, opacity, and formal concision. As a graduate student at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) in the late 1970s, Merritt was part of a thriving subculture of personal cinema and radical individualism. Like many of his teachers and peers of the time, such as James Broughton, Mike Henderson, George Kuchar, Robert Nelson, Dean Snider, Babeth M. VanLoo, Marian Wallace, and Al Wong, Merritt made art firmly rooted in a San Franciscan bohemian tradition and style. Iconoclastic, performative, and disarmingly funny, Merritt’s films belong to a broader repudiation of the aesthetic seriousness that dominated experimental cinema culture in the 1970s.

This repudiation of aesthetic seriousness and cultural gatekeeping is further borne out in Merritt’s involvement with the No Nothing Cinema group, which posed a challenge to the institutional hierarchies and professionalization of the Bay Area’s avant-garde film establishment by advocating for more inclusive, transparent, and democratic programming. However, despite being an active, long-term presence in the San Francisco Bay Area film community, Merritt remains an underappreciated contributor to the postwar American avant-garde film movement and alternative media culture. He has been left out of most of the significant histories of regional, national, and international experimental media. Scott MacDonald’s *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* and *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000* barely mention him. How to account for Merritt’s absence from the American avant-garde canon?

I assert that Merritt’s recent reemergence after decades of neglect is emblematic of the current curatorial infatuation with “overlooked” and “forgotten” artists—artists who, for reasons of race, sexuality, gender identity, class position, or geography, were marginalized or ignored for the majority (if not the entirety) of their careers. In a recent discussion about the French West Indian filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, *Another Gaze* founding editor Daniella Shreir points out that “[t]he idea of ‘rediscovery’ in [Maldoror’s] case basically signifies her long overdue discovery by white curators and programmers . . . the vocabulary around this sort of curation evokes the idea of an archaeological dig. It’s a kind of fetishism of the unfindable, of the ‘forgotten.’ But forgotten by whom?” Set against 2020’s sweeping protests of racist state violence, Shreir’s analysis of “rediscovery” discourse provides an urgent call-to-action for institutions that have historically operated in the interests of white artists and audiences.

The organization I work for, and of which Merritt has been a decades-long member, is one such example. Founded by the filmmaker Bruce Baillie in Canyon, California, in 1961, Canyon Cinema began as an alternative exhibition venture created by and for friends. Baillie’s backyard microcinema emerged in response to the top-down, centralized American media monoculture of the 1950s. Established amid a hotbed of countercultural activity and revolutionary politics, and in a spirit of do-it-yourself, community-based organizing, Canyon Cinema began as a forum to share locally made films (and other small-gauge fare) in a neighborhood environment. Intimacy, flexibility, and a rejection of formality and normality were its defining principles. The series quickly became semi-nomadic, hopping across a heterodox assortment of Bay Area locations, from an anarchist restaurant in Berkeley, to the Oakland Art Institute, to Chick Strand’s backyard, drawing additional artists into its orbit as it went. In late 1966, this flourishing network of Bay Area independent filmmakers founded Canyon Cinema Co-op as a member-
owned and operated distribution company and film service organization. A year later, its exhibition practices were rebranded as Canyon Cinematheque, which in time split off to become the San Francisco Cinematheque. In 2012, Canyon’s members voted to become a nonprofit, the Canyon Cinema Foundation.

After more than fifty years, Canyon Cinema remains committed to reimagining what it means to be a reliable distributor of artist-made films. With a special emphasis on American West Coast and Bay Area experimental cinema, the collection now includes nearly 3,500 unique titles, representing approximately three hundred artists. The technological shifts brought about during the digital era, however, have necessitated broadening that scope to better represent today’s expanded, multi-platform moving image culture. For most of its existence, Canyon Cinema was almost exclusively a purveyor of works finished on 16mm film. As a consequence of this commitment, Canyon has, however unintentionally, helped to perpetuate the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of the format wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

Debates around medium-specificity shaped the demographics of Canyon’s collection. Due to a confluence of economic, social, and cultural factors, video was, from its beginnings, inherently more accessible, economical, and user-friendly than film. The prevalence of white male artists working in 16mm is in part a result of these conditions. Arguments about whether Canyon should distribute works finished on video—an issue that rived the organization for decades—seem as much about maintaining barriers to entry and exclusivity as about the potential complications of managing an inclusive, multi-format collection.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential threat to Canyon Cinema as a distributor of (primarily) niche, (primarily) physical media objects. In her June 2020 article “Artists’ Film and Video Online,” Erika Balsom summarized the shifting conditions of distribution early in the pandemic. “With cinemas and art spaces around the world suddenly subject to indefinite closure, film festivals have rushed to organize virtual editions, while institutions and commercial galleries have anxiously maintained their visibility by initiating online programs, often presenting changing selections on a time-limited basis.” Balsom notes that this new super-abundance of streaming media had both benefits and drawbacks for film enthusiasts constrained to online viewing. The increased accessibility of formerly difficult-to-see work and the comforts of domestic spectatorship are offset by the psychic strain of overabundant choice and the diminished social and affective conditions of at-home screenings. “The positives of this new regime, in theory and practice, are clear. So why does it stress me out?” Balsom asks. “The seemingly endless barrage of links induces a feeling of glut, certainly. But beyond my sense that there are too many great films and too little time, significant issues of presentation exist.”

4 The co-op was formally incorporated in 1967. See MacDonald, Canyon Cinema.
5 Former Canyon Cinema director Dominic Angerame describes the debates about whether Canyon should distribute video in MacDonald, Canyon Cinema, 413–419.
For Canyon, the streaming paradigm—in concert with the turn to online instruction due to the pandemic, the educational marketplace’s growing preference for short-term digital site licenses over physical media purchases, and mutating customer demands and expectations—has provided an occasion for introspection and evolution in recent years. Consumer demand drove Canyon’s collection development strategy during the pandemic. Customer inquiries catalyzed Canyon’s sponsorship of a new 2K digitization of Christopher Harris’s *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004), for instance. In addition, collection development has been guided by an organizational commitment to making Canyon’s distribution program more inclusive and more representative of contemporary media practices, including moving image work produced in digital and hybrid formats, and for gallery and other nontheatrical forms of presentation, while allocating more resources (such as support for the digitization of film prints) to filmmakers historically underserved by Canyon and experimental media distribution more broadly.

Take, for example, Toney Merritt, whose films are greatly in need of restoration. Over the course of his career, Merritt deposited twenty-three 16mm films and eleven video works with Canyon for distribution and exhibition. His consistent and consistently adventurous artistic output has been recognized with screenings at esteemed venues, including La Cinémathèque française, London Film-Makers’ Co-operative, Anthology Film Archives, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pacific Film Archive, and the Ann Arbor Film Festival. But in recent decades, few such screenings of Merritt’s have occurred. The fact that many of his films are very short (typically one to four minutes) make them easy to underestimate. Utilizing a reflexive comedic sensibility more common among video artists of the era, films such as *EF* (1979), *Asiam* (1982), and *Lonesome Cowboy* (1979) elaborate a recurring character (played by the artist); Merritt’s tongue-in-cheek, thirty-second *Revolution* (1982) subverts the romanticized iconography of the Black political radical by way of an unexpected pirouette as a pun on “revolution.” As Merritt admits, “These films contain a measure of angst, irony and humor. Without the latter, it would all be bullshit.”

In a field as self-serious as experimental film, Merritt’s jovial, self-deprecating nature may have impeded more critical engagement with his work, even though white male artists such as Bruce Nauman, William Wegman, John Wood and Paul Harrison, and Stuart Sherman and white male-dominated movements such as Fluxus have been widely celebrated for comparable works. Viewed through an art historical lens, Merritt’s work aligns with the well-documented traditions of performance art and minimalism in addition to experimental film.

Adding to the stakes of his relative critical neglect, Merritt’s studio and his entire personal archive of film materials were completely destroyed in 2020 by the Walbridge fire in Sonoma County, California. Merritt fortunately survived the fires and has described and documented the charred remains of his studio and the work that was lost when it burned (see Figure 1). After consulting with Merritt, Canyon staff determined that most of the distribution

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prints in our collection are the only extant copies of most of his 16mm films, while the original film materials—including negative and reversal originals, preprint elements, and magnetic sound elements for all his 16mm work—have all been lost. Video transfer copies of twenty of Merritt’s 16mm films do survive, but these transfers are markedly inferior to the actual film prints and can only serve as reference copies, unsuitable for exhibition.

Over the past year, the precarious nature of Merritt’s body of work provided a focus for Canyon’s approach to digitization and digital collection development. In collaboration with Harvard Film Archive, we initiated new high-definition scans of all twenty-three of Merritt’s 16mm films in distribution at Canyon. For safety purposes, those now one-of-a-kind prints were subsequently withdrawn from circulation. The new accessibility of Merritt’s work occasioned a retrospective program at Philadelphia’s Lightbox Film Center in October 2021. Additional screenings of some of Merritt’s digitized films have taken place at University of Chicago’s Film Studies Center, the Museum of Modern Art, and Media City Film Festival’s THOUSANDSUNS CINEMA program online. Meanwhile, a 2021 National Film Preservation Foundation grant is funding new distribution prints of ten of Merritt’s films. These new prints will allow Canyon to bring Merritt’s work to new audiences, both in the Bay Area and more broadly. As a result of the grant, a touring program of Merritt’s films will be offered to festivals and cinemathèques that showcase historic and contemporary artists’ films.
The current fetishization of “lostness,” “discovery,” and “firstness” has obscured the inequities that enable such curatorial frameworks in the first place. In the case of Canyon Cinema, I believe many of its lesser-known artist members would be better appreciated today if more internal consideration was given to the power dynamics that determine opportunities. For decades, Canyon Cinema Co-op followed a policy of “neutrality” when it came to promoting members’ films. This policy disadvantaged filmmakers who were not already familiar to programmers while benefiting established artists such as Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage, and Baillie. Toney Merritt’s films provide an instructive example: their precarity exposes what “lostness” means in a material sense. By recognizing and taking steps to address the organization’s implicit biases and allocating resources toward underserved and under-represented artists, Canyon Cinema can begin to effect repair for past and ongoing structural imbalances. However, a more equitable distribution of resources must also be accompanied by framing practices and hermeneutics that resist the rediscovery trope. Further reparative work is necessary to ensure that artists historically overlooked by those in power are not reduced to fetish objects under the guise of diversity.

Brett Kashmere is executive director of Canyon Cinema Foundation and a PhD candidate in Film & Digital Media at University of California, Santa Cruz. He is also the founding editor of INCITE Journal of Experimental Media and co-editor of Craig Baldwin: Avant to Live!
Hello? This is Madeline Anderson. They said I should speak with Livia? It was April 22, 2015, when her distinctively high voice first reached my office phone. Icarus Films represents one of my titles, I Am Somebody (1970). It’s on DVD for the educational market, Icarus has been good over the years. Well, I just found another film of mine. In a closet. A 16mm print. Likely the last. So I wondered: Would you take it? Yikes; definitely not! If working for years in the museum world has taught me anything, it’s that the only surviving print of anything belongs in an archive. To find a good home for the print, I phoned Dr. Dan Streible, director of the New York University (NYU) Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) graduate program, where I am a guest lecturer. He, in turn, recommended Walter Forsberg, a MIAP graduate recently hired as media archivist for a museum so new that it was not yet open to the public: the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. Like any startup, a new arts institution may be better resourced and lighter on its feet than the more established peers; instead of lengthy turnaround times for acquisitions, they may be able to move quickly to accommodate unusual opportunities. I contacted the museum with fingers crossed.
When I was growing up, my dad, who worked in the film industry, would say that a good deal is a deal that’s good for both parties. By that standard of mutual benefit, the NMAAHC and I made a good deal. First, Icarus obtained from Anderson the rights to distribute her “closet” film, Integration Report 1. It turned out to have been made in 1960, a decade earlier than the other Anderson film that was already in the Icarus collection! Then, the NMAAHC acquired from Icarus not only the 16mm print, which they scanned and preserved, but also the rights to bring both Integration Report 1 and I Am Somebody, which they also scanned and preserved, into their permanent collection. They received on-site exhibition rights for the films in perpetuity, plus the right to exhibit Integration Report 1 globally via their website—a valuable license package. In return, Icarus then received brand new scans of both films plus a sum to cover the costs of licensing limited rights to Anderson’s second film, A Tribute to Malcolm X (WNET, 1967). Icarus could then produce a DVD that included what Anderson calls “my three major films” to both non-theatrical and home entertainment markets, finally making her directorial oeuvre available to the general public.¹ NMAAHC curator Dr. Rhea Combs conducted an interview with Anderson that became a DVD extra, and Forsberg wrote preservation notes to accompany the release.

When I Am Somebody: Three Films by Madeline Anderson entered the world in 2018, lovingly produced and art directed by Jessica Lee, viewers had the chance to see and study all of Anderson’s films together for the first time. Film programmers took up the cause of expanding film history by recognizing this unsung pioneer. They followed in the footsteps of longtime Anderson champions such as Jake Perlin by selecting her films for screenings and honoring her with accolades, including the 2019 Golden Gate Persistence of Vision award from the San Francisco Film Festival. As critics and members of the press took notice, Anderson’s name increasingly appeared in articles on the pioneers of film studies, documentary history, labor studies, women’s studies, and Black history. In 2020, the Library of Congress selected I Am Somebody for inclusion in the National Film Registry. At the time of this writing, Anderson is now recognized, and recognizes herself, as the first African American woman known to have directed a documentary film (Integration Report 1).²

But let’s back up: How did I Am Somebody make its way into the Icarus Films collection? And furthermore, how did Anderson’s films even get made?

“We licensed the distribution rights to I Am Somebody from Moe Foner at Local 1199, the New York Health and Human Services Union,” explains Jonathan Miller, longtime president of Icarus Films.³

“When Icarus Films signed I Am Somebody on March 25, 1980, our interest was in acquiring and releasing documentaries related to Labor Studies,

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² Anderson, “Mother, Filmmaker, Activist.”

³ Jonathan Miller, in discussion with the author, January 2021.
African-American Studies, History, and Women’s Studies. . . . We met at Moe Foner’s office, in the Union Building by Times Square. As far as I know, other unions weren’t making films like this at the time. Maybe training films or promotional films, but not seriously.”

*I Am Somebody* was in fact one of three films that Miller and Ilan Ziv signed from Foner and Local 1199; the other two titles were *Hospital Strike* (John Schultz, 1959) and *Like a Beautiful Child* (John Schultz, 1967). Schultz, who had worked under the journalist Edward R. Murrow at CBS, subsequently began teaching at Columbia University, so when the union asked him to direct their third film, he instead recommended Madeline Anderson.4

Anderson grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on “Barney Google’s Row,” an impoverished tract of homes condescendingly nicknamed after a billionaire cartoon character. She grew up loving movies and harbored early filmmaking aspirations, but when she enrolled at NYU, it was to study teaching. In her films, Anderson united the two practices: “I wanted to make films to teach. I wanted to tell people about the accomplishments of African Americans. And then I became politicized. I wanted to tell people about the struggle Blacks were facing to become equal citizens of the United States.”5

A fortuitous job as a live-in babysitter for filmmaker Richard Leacock was Anderson’s entry to the industry.6 In Anderson’s words:

I told [Richard and Eleonore Leacock that] I wanted to be a filmmaker and they were so excited and supportive of me. . . . [Richard created] Andover Productions and he hired me to be his in-house production manager. That was the beginning of my career in the industry. . . . Ricky worked [with] Willard Van Dyke, D. A. Pennebaker, Shirley Clarke, and, later on, the Maysles brothers. I got to know all of these extraordinary filmmakers. They would look at films, they would critique films, and invite me to come and participate, so I ended up having this incredible informal education by some of the brightest minds in filmmaking. . . . Through Andover Productions, and using most of my salary, I directed and produced *Integration Report 1.*7

As Dr. Terri Francis explains, “[Anderson] titled the film *Integration Report 1* with the idea that it would be the first in a series of reports. Networks, however, did not show any interest in supporting the project. To view *Integration Report 1* is to feel the weight of its continued relevance as we continue to face police brutality amid job and housing discrimination as well as persistent inequities in educational opportunity decades later; it is also to mourn the subsequent films Anderson might have produced.”8

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5 Anderson, “Mother, Filmmaker, Activist.”
6 Anderson.
7 Anderson.
Still, with her directorial debut under her belt and her experience at Andover Productions, Anderson became a professional editor and the second Black woman allowed to join the editors’ guild. “Of the one thousand union members, ten of them were Caucasian women, and one African American woman, Hortense ‘Tee’ Beveridge,” Anderson said. “[Tee] was a wonderful editor but she did car commercials. I was not interested in doing commercials, I wanted to make documentaries.” Once she was a union member, Anderson was able to land a position working for National Educational Television (NET). With Ford Foundation support, the network created the storied program Black Journal (1968–1977), produced by William Greaves. Anderson was already working at NET when the program began; A Tribute to Malcolm X, her second directorial work, was made under Black Journal’s aegis.

And then came her third film, I Am Somebody. In 1969, four hundred Black female hospital workers in Charleston, South Carolina, went on strike for union recognition and a wage increase, only to find themselves staring down the National Guard. The South African–born president of one hospital typified prevailing attitudes when he said that he was “‘not about to turn a $25 million complex over to a bunch of people who don’t have a grammar school education.’ His idea of making nice to his angry [B]lack workers—many of whom were the grandchildren of slaves—was to give them Robert E. Lee’s birthday as an extra holiday.”

The workers’ strike, which garnered national news headlines and the support of celebrities including Coretta Scott King and Jacqueline Kennedy, was organized with Local 1199, a union based in New York. When it was founded by Leon Davis, this union was composed largely of white male Jewish druggists, but 1199 soon expanded to include hospital workers. It might appear that Local 1199 had no incentive to help organize and support a strike out of state, let alone make a film about it. But that wasn’t how Moe Foner saw it. “It’s no accident that the organization of hospital workers resulted in a coalition between the labor movement and the civil rights movement,” he explained. “Dr. King; A. Philip Randolph; everybody.” Looking back later on the historical significance of the strike, he added, “Charleston was the most important civil rights event since Dr. King’s death. I’d say that it was a reawakening of the spirit, a new possibility of changing things in the South by creating a union of [B]lack women workers, that the story had people in jail, escalating tensions, and the possibility of explosion.”

Anderson’s own meaningful personal relationship to labor organizing dovetailed fortuitously with Foner’s vision and funding strategy: “Foner broached the idea of a movie to Mrs. Coretta Scott King when she was in Charleston to lend her presence to the strike. [King] offered the sponsorship of the American Foundation on Nonviolence, which she heads.
Enthusiastic support for the project came also from the organization Reverend King had headed until the time of his death—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.” The resulting film is thus notable in many respects: for the extraordinary people and events that it portrays; the courage and determination of its subjects; the artistry and vision of its director; the ambition and resourcefulness of its producer; and the extraordinary solidarity between individuals and institutions that enabled not only its creation but its re-birth today.

At a lecture I saw in college, the historian Howard Zinn was asked how a small number of people could ever hope to win the fight for social justice in the face of overwhelming odds. His response surprised me: “We are not alone; the artists, the musicians, the filmmakers—they’re on our side.”

I’m hesitant to draw conclusions about what this experience says about film distribution, archiving, or programming writ large because of the idiosyncratic nature of independent organizations and the enormous amount of timing, skill, goodwill, and serendipity that allowed this project to occur. The system we have for film production, distribution, exhibition, criticism, contextualization, and study is far from ideal, and successes are limited and rare. Perhaps the one thing it’s fair to generalize about is just how fragile all of this is. If this same situation were to come up today, it would play out very differently—or not at all. The museum colleagues on whom this relied have moved on in their careers; physical media is a less and less popular or necessary product; it’s increasingly difficult for a small distribution firm to spend this kind of staff time on a risky investment, as this one was even then. Still, there are valuable projects that our current moment facilitates: I’m excited about having just signed Rocío (2019), the first film by Darío Guerrero, co-founder of the Undocumented Filmmakers Collective, and about the perspective offered by the documentaries of Cameroonian director Rosine Mbakam, whose films I have also signed for North American distribution. In their own ways, these and other films carry on the struggles of the past, conversing with earlier films and collaborating on the fight for gender, racial, and labor equality with colleagues across space and time.

It’s also not time for a victory dance when there is much work still to be done. Integration Report 1 and A Tribute to Malcolm X have yet to be recognized by the Library of Congress. Historical inaccuracies riddle descriptions of Anderson and her work, even in respected and well-intentioned sources. Anderson has described a film she made on Martin Luther King Jr. that remains lost. The work of countless marginalized artists will never see the light of day. The legacy of Moe Foner and Local 1199 is often overlooked or forgotten, even in descriptions of I Am Somebody. The independent film ecosystem is increasingly fractured and imperiled, making releases like this one less and less likely. The struggle for labor, gender, and racial justice still faces violent and overwhelming odds.

It’s natural to feel alone—as hospital workers or cultural workers, as teachers or students, as individuals struggling to make a noise or a difference.

14 “I Am Somebody.”
15 Anderson, “Mother, Filmmaker, Activist.”
in a crowded cultural environment. It’s natural to see our work and the work of our time as isolated from others and from the work of the past. And yet the increasing attention to Anderson’s films does illustrate possibilities for collaboration among individuals, companies, and institutions on the basis of overlapping and aligning missions and interests.

Curating, distributing, releasing, programming, promoting, presenting, championing: the work of bringing films to the world lies not simply in selecting films or projects but also in shoehorning artwork of value into public consciousness. A very small percentage of our task is having a Great Idea. The rest is logistics and pavement-pounding, perseverance and print traffic, contracts and budgets, research and documentation, negotiation and communication. Telling the world that a project is going to happen, that it’s happening, and that it has happened requires that we right and re-right, write and re-write the historical record. If we’re lucky, in this process we may find continuity, solidarity, and collaboration. We may find that we are not alone.

Livia Bloom Ingram is a film curator and vice president of Icarus Films. Ingram has presented hundreds of films for venues including Lincoln Center, the Museum of Modern Art, the Cinémathèque française, and the US Department of State.
I founded the streaming platform Another Screen in March 2021 to present a partial retrospective of the work of Italian documentary filmmaker Cecilia Mangini (1927–2021). I had seen Mangini’s last film, *Due scatole dimenticate* (*Two Forgotten Boxes*, with Paolo Pisanelli, 2020), at International Film Festival Rotterdam, having previously only seen unrestored, low-resolution scans of her midcentury work on YouTube. I had read as much as I could online about her films made in the late 1950s through the early 1970s, which chronicles Italy’s so-called economic miracle and the rituals and communities that were disappearing with it. Later that week in Rotterdam, I saw her speak as part of a panel discussion on “being a woman filmmaker”; organized by one of the festival’s curators, the panel brought together a collection of women working in very different contexts who all happened to have films showing that year. Mangini responded to the moderator’s non-specific and baggy questions with the lack of inhibition that so often comes with age, not to mention the outsider status conferred on her by both her gender and a funding and distribution system particular to Italy that forced documentary filmmakers in the 1960s to, in Mangini’s words, “act under the radar like drug dealers.”¹ I was taken by her incredible presence and sense of humor and arranged to interview her a month later in Rome. That was February 2020. I didn’t make it to Rome that year, of course, and woke up to the news of her death one morning the following January.

I was desperate for other people to experience Mangini’s work, much of which had only recently been restored, but I had nowhere to show it. The majority of her films are around eleven minutes long: a duration that generally only seems appropriate in a festival or gallery setting. (In the 1950s

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and 1960s, they were shown as part of a ten- to twelve-minute slot in Italian cinemas, prior to the feature the audience had come to see.) Perversely, their brevity turned out to be rather perfect for a pandemic-era attention span. I didn’t expect the archive that holds the majority of her films—many of which hadn’t even been scanned in 2021—or the films’ various rights-holders to agree for them to be put online, let alone without any temporal restrictions or geoblocking. To do Mangini and the specificity of Italian documentary history justice, and to try and preemptively counter the ambivalence I expected the Cineteca di Bologna would feel about having her work streamed online, I proposed to commission a new piece of writing on Mangini and a translation of an interview with her I had found in an out-of-print Italian book. I also suggested we subtitle the films in five languages and assured them that I would also reach out to festivals and exhibitors to gauge their interest in showing the films in person once cinemas reopened. The archive agreed without any pushback.

I designed Another Screen’s website to feature each curated program on a single page. Despite the inevitability of one film coming higher up on the page than another, this meant that all the films could be given equal space. Nothing can replace the wonderful unpredictability and uncanniness of being one of a collection of strange bodies in the same dark room, yet I imagined Another Screen’s visitors as more like visitors to a gallery than cinemagoers. Text and image were juxtaposed; the idea was that a visitor could “wander through” (scroll up and down) the program, reading the “wall text” before deciding which piece of work to linger on first. At that point, I hadn’t yet considered whether Another Screen would have a future beyond the Mangini program. But its presentation—which aims to place films in their historical context and, through interviews, essays, and the films themselves, give them a new or more extensive life through translation—set a precedent for future programs. This presentation also, I hope, prevents Another Screen from becoming a content mill. The platform’s programs are also intentionally irregular, reflecting and drawing attention to the fact that writing, translating, and editing take time.

Before the pandemic, I had been dispirited by the cinematic landscape in London, where I was living, as it seemed only to serve (or rather to generate) a largely passive, unimaginative, and moneyed spectator. Then, in the pandemic’s first wave, a seemingly infinite amount of challenging work was made freely available to anybody with an internet connection; suddenly, those who had never previously engaged with so-called experimental work were making their way down the rabbit hole of artists’ Vimeo pages and were drawn to the websites of galleries sharing the work of artists they represent. The pandemic did force artists to accept exposure over any real-world currency, but the fact that viewers didn’t have to be based in a metropolitan center and that young people might be engaging with this work without their parents’ assistance was genuinely exciting and unprecedented. (I wonder what the wave of cine-literate films from filmmakers of this generation will look like.) For my part, I have to confess that the hyper availability of work in those first few months felt so exhausting that I ended up barely watching anything, even though I drew up a spreadsheet and a schedule. At that
moment, I was paralyzed by feelings of uncertainty and cynicism about the role and power of feminist film theory and criticism to act on the world in any real way. Already in the 1980s, Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane had suggested that feminist film theory had become “cut off from its original sense of bold innovation and political purpose.” In the 1990s, B. Ruby Rich called it an “area of study rather than a sphere of action.”

I still feel that way somewhat, so Another Screen represents my reaction to the way in which women and other marginalized filmmakers have been marketed by the increasing number of streaming platforms and the corresponding influx of available content. Through their restricted, unimaginative lexicon, most streaming services suggest that these filmmakers have to be discovered, pioneers, or firsts to be worth watching. That last epithet is especially troubling because, as film scholar Elena Gorfinkel noted on Twitter, “to reify the /first/ women directors is to promulgate a highly dubious notion of film historical development & transformation, a limited idea of film history, obscuring other makers & material conditions.” In addition, the idea of a first has the unwanted result of emphasizing the role of the director above other film workers; it diminishes the contribution of editors, costume designers, and script supervisors—roles which were, and still are, more likely to be occupied by women. These epithets are obviously part of marketing strategies and may be intended as a means to the laudable end of bringing more people to the work.

As a nonprofit, however, Another Screen attempts to frame the films in more complex ways. The publication of both contemporary and new texts allows visitors to grapple with the reception of the films at the time of their release and invites them to reconcile the sometimes difficult political legacy with our contemporary moment. I think it important to give space, where possible, to the personality of the filmmaker via extended interviews, so that they can express how they feel about being “discovered” or “rediscovered.” To move away from what I consider to have become tired territory, the texts we publish about the films tend not to address representation; I consider the assessment by a writer of whether a protagonist’s image is positive, negative, or complex to be much less interesting than the film’s historical and national context. I try to remain vigilant of what is inevitably lost in showing films online, and consequently I often feel much more comfortable presenting material that was made on video or for television, such as the militant videos of Carole Roussopoulos from the 1970s and the televisual interviews con-

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4 Elena Gorfinkel (@cinemiasma), “This opens onto the problem of fetishising ‘firsts’; to reify the /first/ women directors is to promulgate a highly dubious notion of film historical development & transformation, a limited idea of film history, obscuring other makers & material conditions. Give up the fetish!,” Twitter, July 15, 2021, 8:32 a.m., https://twitter.com/cinemiasma/status/1415650439169777668.
ducted by Marguerite Duras in the 1960s. Our films are kept online for a minimum of a week and a maximum of three weeks so as not to jeopardize in-person exhibition opportunities or to let the films linger and lose value to over-availability. Finally, a growing pool of translators has allowed us to reach audiences in countries more resistant to the exhibition of subversive work, including Japan, South Korea, Russia, and Indonesia.

One of the things I love most about going to the cinema is gauging the reaction of other viewers as they filter out of the theater, listening in on insightful and often hilarious snippets of conversation. Another Screen has allowed me, through tools for communication such as Letterboxd and Twitter, which are often similarly unfiltered, to eavesdrop in a similar way on interpretations of films that extend beyond the perspective of Western feminism and to facilitate fascinating analyses that extend across languages and give the films I share with the world a new and more extensive life.

Daniella Shreir is founder and co-editor of Another Gaze journal and founding programmer of the journal’s “sister streaming platform,” Another Screen. She also works as a translator of literature, curatorial texts, and subtitles. Her translation of Chantal Akerman’s Ma mère rit (My Mother Laughs, Silver Press, 2019) won a PEN award.

The repertory and art house theaters in New York City started to announce that they were closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 12, 2020. Within a few days, any holdouts were shuttered by then Governor Andrew Cuomo’s executive order to close the in-person operations of all non-essential businesses. By the time theaters were given permission to reopen in March 2021, several factors had changed the operating ecosystem of repertory and art house cinema, including their venues, distributors, staff, critics, and archives.

The pandemic accelerated technical trends that had been growing over the preceding decade. During that time, celluloid film exhibition became an increasingly rarefied (and in some cases fetishized) experience; discourse around film shifted online as print publications and alt-weeklies closed; and streaming platforms increasingly pulled consumers away from the cinemas to consume film and television series through a constellation of personal screens and devices. Even before the pandemic, these developments presented the public-at-large with a nagging question: Why pay to see a digital video projected in a cinema when you can watch it at home, at your convenience, and process the experience entirely online? The analog cinephilia of film prints, in-person viewing, lobby chatter, and thoughtfully edited print publications was already in jeopardy; the COVID-19 pandemic put it on an indefinite pause.

If one knew where to look, though, there were occasional signs of cinematic life. Like many of my friends, I made several pilgrimages to the Mahoning Drive-In in Leighton, Pennsylvania, a longtime destination for weekend-long marathons of 35mm prints (often exploitation films from col-

lectors/presenters such as Philadelphia-based Exhumed Films). In 2020, the Mahoning felt like a godsend for those of us withdrawing from lack of grain and flicker in our images. Back in New York, experimental filmmaker Bradley Eros occasionally threw socially distanced outdoor expanded cinema screenings on rooftops, in gardens, and in parking lots. And despite *Film Comment*’s abrupt and disconcerting hiatus at the onset of the pandemic, there was an unlikely resurgence of film culture in print. This revival included new zines such as the *Infuriating Times*, a xeroxed compendium of notes, manifestos, and dispatches from the projectionist/archivists at the Chicago Film Society; *No Cinema*, an illustrated publication of essays; and critic Nick Pinkerton’s *Bombast* zine. (*Film Comment* did relaunch as an email newsletter one year after it ceased print publication.)

But if this narrative of accelerated cultural decline seems trite, perhaps less so would be an account of how shifting attitudes about labor have changed filmgoing, not to mention how other practical and often invisible aspects of the film exhibition ecosystem have contributed, for better and for worse, to the uncertain ecosystem of film presentation in 2022. Before March 2020, cultural workers at institutions such as the New Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music began to unionize, and this continued through the lockdown as employees of Film at Lincoln Center and Anthology Film Archives also voted to form unions. This wave of labor organizing can be seen as an inevitable reaction to the untenable wages of cultural work in New York City today, not to mention the absurdity of a system in which healthcare is tied to one’s employment as a public health crisis shuts down the economy. Few, if any, executives at cinema nonprofits lost their jobs during the pandemic, but many front-line employees were laid off, including box office staff and managers as well as programmers, projectionists, publicists, and marketing assistants. At mission-driven nonprofits that rely on momentum and routine, such as nonprofit theaters, most workers are only paid a fraction of what executives earn. When the economy shut down in March 2020, it was inevitable for employees in all industries including film institutions to ask, What am I doing here, who is benefiting from my work, and am I being valued at my worth?

As of this writing, repertory and art house cinemas in New York have reopened, and it’s useful to take stock of how things have changed. In January 2022, the Omicron variant led to rapid fluctuations in new COVID-19 cases and created a period of renewed challenges and uncertainty. Exhibiting film—particularly on film—requires a great deal of labor that is often unseen or unacknowledged. It depends on an ecosystem of programmers, print traffickers, projectionists, distributors, communications and social media personnel, managers, ushers, and other front-house staff.

For programmers, obtaining prints has only become more difficult since the pandemic started. In my own experience programming at Roxy Cinema Tribeca, getting written confirmation of a 35mm booking is now often only

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a tentative guarantee of its availability. Both myself and other programmers I’ve talked to have announced screenings only to receive soundtrack elements instead of a film print. That was my experience with Def by Temptation (James Bond III, 1990) in October 2021; the venue announced that the film would be screening in a digital format before the distributor informed us that a print materialized, only for it to not be a print at all. At other times, distributors send something with a vaguely similar title. That happened with a Metrograph screening of Unfaithful (Adrian Lyne, 2002), which they received by mistake instead of a planned-and-canned show of Unlawful Entry (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992). Film programmers have begun to swap notes about the respective failings of FedEx (faster but less reliable) and DHL (once slower but more reliable, but now the worst of both worlds). Shipping delays were not unheard of before, but anecdotally they seem to be more frequent. Perhaps it’s a mix of pandemic fatigue at all points of communication plus the difficulty of accessing physical archives when many people are still working remotely. Due to labor issues and employees being stretched thin, there often aren’t opportunities to do a proper print inspection in advance.

As a filmgoer, I wonder what my own expectations for COVID-era exhibition should be. Although I care deeply for analog film exhibition, I am sometimes surprised to hear others vent their frustrations about last-minute format changes or venues being slow to communicate schedule changes. Maybe cinema’s typically escapist or immersive nature makes a less-than-ideal presentation feel like a betrayal even when it becomes necessary due to trying circumstances. However, the future of film exhibition depends on acknowledging the often unseen labor that goes into screenings. It depends on patrons being respectful to front-of-house staff during these uniquely uncertain times. When film worker unions communicate with their audiences about what they can do to help, it’s important to listen and follow through. As in so many other aspects of professional and social life, film exhibition is a place where people come together to imagine a more equitable future. To me, such a future must involve workers being compensated fairly relative to owners, executives, and managers. As filmgoers, it’s our role to support them however we can.

Jon Dieringer is a writer, editor, programmer, and archivist based in Brooklyn. He’s the founder and editor-in-chief of Screen Slate, an organization that covers New York City film culture. For many years he worked as the technical director of the media arts nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix.
Blackness, one could say, is the main connector between a set of references as American as Audre Lorde, Nas, or Christopher Harris and myself, a Black Brazilian curator who obsessively ponders the power of programming films for diverse audiences. Through my work I have engaged in multiple conversations within the African Diaspora, and those conversations also helped shape my worldview. I see my work as a result of many experiences and discourses, for I believe that one’s identity surpasses the confinements of national borders. My views on Blackness and Black film draw from and respond to Latin American histories of racialization, the American experiment, Caribbean authors, the Afropean paradigm, and contemporary African criticism on West’s idealization of Black ancestry.

Having said that, I must make it clear that my emotional and intellectual investments reside particularly in the tensions and debates within the Diaspora. My work is committed to revising the rules that govern the relation between center stage and background. I am interested in presenting film in places—particularly Black spaces—open to broadening the conversation.

Thirty years ago, Stuart Hall redefined the questions we ask around Black culture. I wish to play on his original query—“What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”—and bring to the conversation a different set of

reflections. Following Hall, my work emphasizes how economic power plays a determining role in who gets to speak and to be heard when it comes to defining “Black” film. Film programming is by no means outside such power dynamics, and that truth motivates me to write here to programmers and scholars in general and to Black Americans in particular.

My work has helped me forge an international network, particularly with racialized people, and I observe a lack of curiosity on the part of Americans regarding anything beyond the boundaries of America. That is to be expected to a certain extent, given the power of the United States to relentlessly blast narratives of destined greatness. What sometimes leaves me frustrated is seeing Black Americans dancing to that same tune. The myth of American exceptionalism leads Black Americans and I to encounter the world differently. We see and acknowledge one another on the basis of a shared experience—Blackness. But I am nevertheless left with the impression that I am more interested in them and know infinitely more about them—including their films—than they care to know about us. By “us,” I do not mean just Brazilians but rather people who are Black and from the African Diaspora but not American. This feels particularly true when it comes to the voices from Black Latin America. When interactions happen, their self-sufficiency permeates the relationship, as if Americanness grants people—including African Americans—a sense of fullness.

Contemporary film programming is missing a real, mutually appreciative exchange between Black Diasporic filmmakers and American audiences. With few exceptions, those who have more power have been given a bigger share in shaping what understandings around Blackness have been exported throughout the Diaspora. The international dominance of the English language certainly contributes to this dynamic. However, attributing such massive power exclusively to language oversimplifies a complex problem.

Centering American perspectives on Black film is problematic on multiple levels. The one I wish to highlight here is the commodification of Black culture. When programming Black film, we must embrace our practice with an understanding of such material that expands beyond the realm of Americanness. Such vision represents a valuable weapon to fend off the never-ending buying-and-selling of our existence. After all, it is more difficult to commodify a whole culture when one cannot classify it as easily.

Film programmers interested in Black film must engage in a practice that decenters the United States within Black film culture. Decentering the United States must be a continuous act, for there is no finish line. However, decentering the United States also should not be turned into a competition. It requires both a collective deprogramming of internalized discourses and asking oneself repeatedly to be curious enough to look beyond what is easily accessible.

I myself have a long road to travel to decenter American media from the ways in which I perceive Black creations. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air

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2 The international dominance of the English language certainly contributes to this dynamic. However, attributing such massive power exclusively to language oversimplifies a complex problem.
(NBC, 1990–1996) taught the teenage me that it was cool to be Black. Spike Lee’s films likewise gave me words to define racism. Justin Simien’s *Dear White People* (2014) helped me find a voice to reflect on whiteness. An unconscious positive bias toward Black America’s cultural production carried into my programming practice and critical thinking. However, in recent years I have become more alert to that partiality and try to translate that awareness into action, which includes forging closer ties with my fellow Black Latin Americans, seeing myself in their lives, perspectives, discourses, and histories.

Those ties were critical to assembling the film retrospective “América Negra: Conversas entre as negritudes latino-americanas” (Black America: Conversations around Blackness in Latin America), which screened thirty-five films from ten countries in May and June 2021. Above all, this retrospective represented an effort to build a collection of imagery that did not privilege the United States. The project was sponsored by NICHO 54, an institute working for the promotion of Black Brazilians in the industry for which I serve as the head programmer. We elected to ask ourselves a simple question, which became our guiding premise: What would arise if we were to decenter the United States as an interlocutor and narrator of Black lives?

Gazing upon Black Latin America from Brazil, we learned about the similarities shared by numerous countries from the region. One example is the impact of so-called scientific racism on Argentina and Brazil, where genocidal motivations generated strategies for erasing Blacks from both countries after they became independent nations in 1816 and 1822, respectively. Among these strategies were starvation, army drafting, sponsored immigration of white Europeans, and miscegenation as a way to “secure superiority of white blood.” In Brazil, such language was not hyperbolic. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Brazilian academics were concerned with how a country that they perceived as backward would assimilate into modernity. A leading voice from that time was the anthropologist João Batista de Lacerda (1846–1915). Speaking in 1911 during the First Universal Races Congress, de Lacerda’s lecture “Sur les métis au Brésil” (“On the Mestizo in Brazil”) outlined how “vices of [the] Negro were inoculated in the white race, as well as in the mestizo race.” He further claimed, “Within a century, Brazil’s mixed-race population shall have quite a different appearance from the current one. After a given period of time, the streams of European immigration, which daily intensifies and increases the white element of our population,

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3 *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* premiered in Brazil when I was fourteen years old, on March 19, 2000, on SBT, a network channel.
4 The full line-up, as well as a complete set of information about each film, is available at SALA 54, Institute NICHO 54’s streaming platform. See https://www.sala54.com.br/programacao/.
5 For a broader understanding of the institute’s initiatives, please refer to its official website: https://www.nicho54.com.br/.
7 *Revista do Instituto Histórico de São Paulo* [São Paulo’s historic institute magazine] (São Paulo, 1904), 53–54. All translations are my own.
will ultimately suffocate the elements within which could persist some traces of the Negro.”

During “América Negra,” audiences also became familiar with musical traditions from the Caribbean portions of Venezuela and Colombia that an uninformed viewer might easily identify as Brazilian, were it not for language differences. We further discovered that racial profiling in Ecuador bears astonishing similarities with that of Brazil. We saw similar reflections in the stories of Latinx Black women. Lastly, we recognized a shared approach to genre as a tool to reflect on Black experiences.

Through the power of film programming, “América Negra” helped audiences identify differences between their experiences as well. Putting different films in conversation allowed viewers to better understand the peculiarity of our point of view. Black Brazilians make up the majority of the nation’s population, a unique feature in relation to both the rest of Latin America and the United States.9 Watching the calls for acknowledgment from Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Peruvians, and Afro-Bolivians gave us as Black Brazilians a broader context for our struggle for recognition and reparations. While race-based affirmative action has existed in Brazil for the last two decades, Afro-Mexicans were only acknowledged by the state in 2015 and accounted for in the national census in 2020. Afro-Bolivians are still rendered invisible to the national discourse, and Afro-Peruvians are perceived as phenomena exclusive to Chincha Alta, a city 124 miles south of Lima.

Once “América Negra” made room for different conversations to happen, it became possible for viewers to consider other starting points, ask fresh questions, and bring new takes to old topics. It only took us programmers demonstrating greater curiosity to keep our hearts open while investigating the Diaspora. “América Negra” did not intend to offer a definitive take on Latin American Blackness; rather, its goal was to showcase voices committed to the broader reality of the Diaspora.

This is a call I would like to make to every programmer working with Black film in its multiple definitions: I call on you to decenter the United States as the natural provider of Black narratives. Once a programmer commits to curiosity about Black life beyond Americanness and translates that curiosity into their practice, they contribute to a less shallow, more nuanced approach to Black representation.

My goal in writing this essay is to stir up some energy within my fellow programmers, especially Black film professionals based in the Global North. We do not always get a chance to speak to one another, so consider this essay the start of a conversation. It does not aspire to be prescriptive but to ask what films we are missing, what perspectives we are ignoring, and what paradigms we keep reinforcing. Film programming cannot sponsor a definition of Blackness merely on the terms of its opposition to whiteness, and slavery


should not consume so much of our screen time—the reality of it already does. We must approach the supposed binary between positive and negative representation with extreme caution. White terror has served as the plot of many great films, but there is so much life outside of it.

Above all, the collective enterprise of defining Black film should encompass voices from radically different backgrounds. The Black in Black film can be both palpable and ethereal. It comes in a plethora of languages—literally and metaphorically. That is the perspective in film programming I want to continue to share. I hope you do too.

Heitor Augusto has been working in the intersections of film programming and curatorship, researching, writing and teaching since 2008. More on his work at: www.heitoraugusto.com.