*Garrett Bradley*. America. *2019*.

# On Black Affective Forms: A Conversation with Garrett Bradley*



HUEY COPELAND

*Huey Copeland*: I'd like to begin by talking about the ways you're engaging the archive in your work, recruiting a range of different materials, even outtakes from your own films. Your process—mixing and working on different projects simultaneously—seems to resonate with but also exceed what scholar Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation" in terms of posing the question "How do we return to and engage the archive in order to reframe it with all of its liabilities and possibilities?"[1] In this sense, your work also resonates with what I've recently called "black auto-citational practice," a modality that you can see in Hartman's work, in Arthur Jafa's and Carrie Mae Weems's work, or in Glenn Ligon's work—which, in many ways, is all about returning to aspects of one's own production, to those things that ultimately weren't included in a final project, and saying, "Well, this material continues to have a life and can have a life of its own."[2] It's a mode of working that suggests a particular kind of ethical relationship or stance to archives, both institutional and personal ones. I wonder if you could talk about how you've been moving toward that approach and what's been inspiring you or informing you as you try to develop relationships to the material and to the visual that honor both your engagements with communities and your sense of yourself as both a filmmaker and a facilitator?

*Garrett Bradley*: Yeah, okay. Cool. I guess I'll start off specifically with *America* (2019), which I started in 2014 and for which I did a lot of archival research, including spending days watching films at the Black Film Archives in the Library of Congress. It was inspired by an article that a friend, the artist

* This conversation first appeared in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Garrett Bradley: American Rhapsody*, curated by Rebecca Matalon, at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2020.

1. On "critical fabulation," see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2, (2008), pp. 1–14.

2. See, respectively, Huey Copeland, "A Seat at the Table: Notes of an Institutional Creatures," *October* 168 (Spring 2019), pp. 63–78, and Huey Copeland, "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death," *ASAP Journal*, June 4, 2018, http:// asapjournal.com/love-is-the-message-the-message-is-death-huey-copeland/.

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Byron Kim, had sent me about the Museum of Modern Art, New York's discovery of what they thought to be the very first film with an all-Black cast and integrated production: *Lime Kiln Club Field Day* (1913), starring Bert Williams and Odessa Warren Grey.[3] They started restoring it in 2004 and finally released it one hundred years after it had been shot as a series of unassembled outtakes. *America* is very much, for me, connected to the discovery of this film. It is also connected to a survey I had read that the Library of Congress had done in 2013 which stated that 70 percent of the feature-length films made between 1912 and 1929 had gone missing.[4] If we know that this one film that does exist—out of the 7,500 (or so) that are missing—is extremely progressive, what would it mean to make the assumption that there is a whole body of work, lost to the archive, that is equally as progressive? And that's what *America* is. It's a chronology, a series of vignettes rooted in Black and "American" history that function as visual illustrations and exist as a physical timeline.

As a person who works in the world with people, who's making work that is often inspired by personal and peripheral experiences, by observing the things that are around me, I am always thinking, Where can I help? I think of myself as a facilitator, and right now, the best way that I can take action is through the communal and collaborative effort involved in making personal films about issues of relevance to me and the communities I interact with. With *America*, I actually started off thinking about the work in a physical way because I was digging through a timeline, I was digging through a chronology, a history, that had gaps. And to me, that felt really counterintuitive to two-dimensional space. It felt harder to translate that research, that chronology, within a single screen than to create an accordion-like installation of a series of screens in physical space that people could move through and around. It was less about trying to make "art" or be in an art space. It was more about asking, What is the clearest and most efficient way of dealing with the subject matter that actually makes sense in my own brain, you know? How do we construct a chronology that is not necessarily linear? On a technical or formal level, we did this by using chiffon, which is highly transparent, as the material for the screens, creating a kind of layering effect.

*Copeland*: That's totally fascinating. Hearing you say that, I think, Well, of course that makes sense! Because with *America*, even if you're watching it on a laptop or on a big-screen TV as a single-channel work, there's a way in which each moment within the film holds a multiplicity of other moments within it.

3. Felicia R. Lee, "Coming Soon, a Century Late: A Black Film Gem," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2014.

4. David Pierce, *The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912–1929* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress, 2013).

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Being able to physicalize the multiplicity of the film's unfolding and to have these moments spatially held in relationship to each other seems to really make sense in terms of the experience you're trying to generate.

It's also very interesting to think about you as a filmmaker. I love that you emphasize that it's a practice that has to do with engaging bodies and space, with working and moving in between sites and subjects and communities. Your language, in other words, underlines that the practice of filmmaking is always deeply corporeal and interpersonal. But I think there's a way in which we train ourselves to receive films without thinking about the behind-the-scenes, the apparatus, the structural conditions of a film's construction, because, of course, we want to immerse ourselves in the mirage that's before us, to have this moment of suturing to the phantasmatic.[5] Even the choices of clips and stills from *Lime Kiln Club Field Day* that you use in *America* often seem motivated by a desire to reveal the actualities of production as well as the kinds of aesthetic and political engagements they represent. Though you're not necessarily showing us how every shot of either film was framed and produced, there's still this kind of indexical cue that asks us to examine how we think about cinema and film as fitting in with larger social apparatuses and the ways in which we can read with and against what is ultimately given us to see, so that we can begin to understand—to borrow a phrase from Jacqueline Goldsby—"the larger social construction or organization of the world at a given moment."[6]

*Bradley*: Going back to Hartman and her term critical fabulation, which I just love so much, leads to another question that you had prompted, which is the question of possibilities versus liabilities and how the different spaces of "traditional cinema" and visual art intersect, how they present different ways of moving through those two issues. I think, on the one hand, filling gaps is a natural part of the human experience. I think our minds naturally create a narrative around the things that we don't know. Part of what the practice of meditation really forces us to do is to move away from the narratives we formulate in the absence of information. Of course, there's another type of meditation that's really mantra-based, which is, in some ways, about doing the exact opposite—filling that space up with new narratives rather than emptying it out. "Things will always work for my highest good." "Everything is going to be okay." I think as I've gotten older, I've learned how to be more

5. In film theory, "suturing" describes a cinematic effect, imposed by a system of editing techniques, that structures a viewer's suspension of disbelief and results in an identification between the viewer and the camera eye that maintains the illusion of the filmic narrative. See Stephen Heath, "On Suture," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 76–112.

6. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 26–27.

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conscious of filling gaps and how to use that tool in a more crafted way in my work, in a material and in a physical way. And I think that as I've moved through my work—again, going back to possibilities versus liabilities—it's become more and more clear that these two things are always interconnected, they are never separate from each other.

When I make a movie and I send it to the company that's funding the film for their review, they may not understand or value X, Y, or Z. It's my job to find a way to both approach form and storytelling in the way I want while also giving people—funders, audiences, etc.—the things that they feel they need. At times, it's about making compromises. But a part of my soul would die, frankly, if I felt that just because this one space—the traditional film world—doesn't understand the more experimental modes and models I am working in, that those aspects of my practice need to disappear. There's another space for it; there are other possibilities for it.

*Copeland*: I think that describes, in such poetic, political, and tactical terms, the way in which one moves with and against different kinds of platforms and institutional frames in order to carve out provisional spaces of autonomy. Of course, those spaces are always already compromised, but they still might allow you to speak to the connective communities that you want to in these direct ways that maybe just sticking with one kind of platform or medium wouldn't allow.

And perhaps that relates to this idea of you as a kind of facilitator, which I love, and which very much makes me think of how Arthur Jafa describes the importance of his godmother's work as a church usher to his aesthetic practice, because it was her role—and subsequently his—to point out those possessed by the spirit. In his practice, I think there's a certain Black feminist ethos that undergirds many of his choices and decisions. At the same time, I think there's a whole range of Black feminist cultural practitioners, from Meg Onli to Martine Syms to Toni Morrison, who have been interested in reframing everyday experience from a Black feminist perspective. I wonder if you could talk about how that lands for you and animates your work or doesn't?

*Bradley*: I think part of working in the mundaneness of the everyday makes a lot of sense because it's what we're closest to. On some level, it's the most universal and relatable space to start from. Where Martine's work or Toni's work and mine meet is perhaps in understanding how abstract and fantastical even the mundane is. I think for me the interest in the everyday is also an attempt to understand the connection between the personal and intimate, the internal and external. I'm interested in bridging these spaces, above and below, inside and outside. Writing in particular is probably one of the only art forms that really, truly, on some level does balance exactly the internal and the


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external. If someone asked me, "What is the one object that represents these two spaces?," it would have to be a book. But as a facilitator, that's exactly what I'm interested in doing, bridging these two worlds, above and below, together into one space.

*Copeland*: That's fantastic! I think the question that naturally follows is about your real investment in engaging particular locations and populations, especially in New Orleans, whose history takes on a much larger significance when we think about the unfolding of life across the modern world and Black life across the diaspora. Given the focus of your film work—where it takes place, who the subjects are—how do you imagine speaking to audiences in a range of different contexts as the work circulates and appears in different locations? It is very specific but also has this expansive quality precisely because of its engagement with questions of the everyday.

*Bradley*: Yes, exactly! I think the question of the everyday and of the unfolding of Black life across time could apply to all the work that I've been doing lately, but in particular this project *AKA* (2019), which is about upward mobility as it exists between women, between mothers and daughters. *AKA* came to me by way of looking back on films that I had watched as a child and trying to sift through those narratives and the questions they presented and what they would mean in a contemporary context.

I got a grant to develop an adaptation of a famous twentieth-century race film, which I've been thinking about making for years. I tried to put together a more traditional pitch and it was so flat and lacking substance. I was really having a hard time articulating my ideas—both why it was significant and how it would be told. But it wasn't coming together. Then I got an invitation to make a new work for the Whitney Biennial last spring, which offered me a space to think about this larger project in a new and more experimental way, not as a pitch but as a series of screen tests that might leave more room for discovery.

The process of making *AKA* started with a series of questions. My first question was, okay, are these classic race films at all still relevant? Or, to be more specific, how do we think about the relationship between white women and Black women across generations in a way that is contemporary but that may have also been touched on in these older films? How do we think about love? How do we think about upward mobility? How do we think about the way we see ourselves and the way we think others see us?

In order for me to make an adaptation of a classic American film, even if it's a Hollywood film, I needed to understand how it was going to be relevant in contemporary space in a contemporary moment. And the only way to do that was to talk to people who might feel in any kind of way directly connected to or reflected in that narrative. So, I went to family members, I went

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to friends, and I went on social media—which has been an ongoing resource for me. I always start off with a series of questions that are no different from the questions that I would ask an audience in a panel once the work is done. I think that language is really important for me as a way of creating an ethical bridge between the process and where the work ends up going, because oftentimes they're so separate from one another.

What becomes more complex is the visual illustration of the feedback that I get. So, I had mothers and daughters coming together. I interviewed each of them separately. They were mothers and daughters who self-identified as being in a mixed-race household or in houses where everyone was the same race but had really different skin tones and felt like they could speak to feeling like they were treated differently than their mother, for instance, or differently than their daughter.

I just started off with questions: How do you see yourself? How do you think the world sees you? What did these older films get right, what did they get wrong? I'd send links to the films so they could rewatch them. What ended up happening was a series of dialogues and transcripts, and a lot of conversations, probably 12 one-hour-long conversations. I would pull certain pieces of dialogue out of those conversations. Then I would do what we were kind of talking about earlier in terms of filling gaps. This one woman in particular, Lindsay, she kept asking her mother, "Are you color struck?" "Are you color struck?" And she kept asking it over and over and over again.

To me, that one phrase, "color struck," became the premise for the whole visual landscape of the piece.[7] What does color struck mean when you visualize it? How could I work with analog filtrations so that when the light hit the lens, you've got rainbows and stars across the screen, layered over everyday spaces? It's just this really trippy, weird little piece. I don't know if I'm sort of rambling here, but I think that my process is to always be open. It always starts with questions and it's open to what those answers might be. The work comes from those answers and it doesn't change when it's brought out into the world. The meaning of it and the purpose of it don't change in terms of how I talk about it. How people interpret it, maybe that's different.

*Copeland*: That's really interesting, especially as it underlines your critical relationship to the normative structures of contemporary filmmaking, whether they be the process of casting or trying to think about the location. In your work, if I'm following, it's not about imposing a predetermined structure that "content" is set into, but instead about simultaneously generating an understanding of what the content and the form are through conversations with this

7. *Color Struck* (1925) is a play by Zora Neale Hurston that explores the notion of "colorism," which describes discrimination based on the color of one's skin. In Hurston's play, she examines the internalization of racism among and between African Americans of varying skin tones.

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larger set of communities and interlocutors who are sometimes in the films and sometimes the audiences for the films. It gives us a sense that your work is coming from a particular place that is not being shoehorned into the world that a Hollywood production company imagines a film from New Orleans needs to look like or fit into.

As such, I think your process also interestingly puts pressure on the notion of auteur cinema. It's not as if you're imposing "the *Bradley* optic," but more like you're really trying to think carefully about how you're visually and sonically constructing a material world that is connected to and an emanation from the place it was made.

*Bradley*: I love the idea of challenging the notion of the auteur in cinema. And as you say, in many ways, my work is very much directed and dictated by the specific communities I engage—by specific places and specific people.

I would also say that yes, my work is about Black life. It is also a series of love stories. My love for the people that I work with, and my love and compassion for circumstance. And my hope that in making something, it will induce the same level of compassion and imagination—the ability to imagine being somebody besides yourself—for the viewer, and then to bridge gaps. It isn't just for Black folks, it's for all of us. It's for us to think about how we can work within existing spaces and how to illuminate the beauty that we are and bring it on a mass scale to people so that they can connect with it.

I think you can see this in a feature-length documentary that I'm working on right now which is about a woman I met in the process of making *Alone* (2017) who I have been filming for the past two years. *Alone* was about my friend Aloné Watts, and her having to deal with feelings of extreme loneliness and isolation as a result of her partner's incarceration. I don't know if you remember, but there's a lady at the very end of the film who makes this analogy between slavery and incarceration, and you see her very briefly.

*Copeland*: Yeah, like a little flash.

*Bradley*: A little flash. While I was making *Alone*, I contacted this organization called Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, and they connected me with a series of women who had gone through this process and could give advice to Aloné based on their own experiences navigating the intentionally complex prison system in the United States. This was how I met Fox Rich, who robbed a bank with her husband in the '90s. She served two years because she took the plea deal. But her husband was coaxed into not taking the plea deal and then ended up getting a numerical life sentence—sixty years—for a first-time offense. He served twenty-one years, and when I met Fox it had been twenty years at that point. She

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was selling Cadillacs. She is an incredible human being. She started these "Power Parties" when she was in prison where she would get all the women to circle around her, and she would talk about what it meant to be empowered and how to find the right partner for yourself.

*Copeland*: Amazing.

*Bradley*: Ninety percent of my experience filming Fox was watching her on the phone. Her whole life is on the phone, maneuvering the bureaucracy of the prison system. And I started thinking about how when you're making more traditional films, or you have financiers behind you, they have certain expectations for how stories are going to be told. I feel like there's no reason why that should, in any kind of way, eclipse the possibilities for other, more nuanced, even more essentialist ways of telling the same story.

What would it look like to take every single moment that we have of her on her phone, in her office, for the past two years and just have each one of those shots back to back, right? However long that string-out ends up being. Maybe it's two hours of her on the phone. That, to me, says just as much as an hour-and-a-half, narratively crafted documentary piece of journalism that has all these other expectations on it in terms of its form and structure and how the audience is going to understand it.

*Copeland*: That sounds incredible. I love the way you're pushing against certain filmic structures or avoiding them, but still invested in a kind of visually rhythmic propulsion, so that there is a logic to the film, though not at all the one through which we usually think of cinematic or imagistic moving-image works as captivating. Does that make sense?

*Bradley*: Totally.

*Copeland*: It's liberatory, I think, in terms of moving us away from certain kinds of forms we've come to rely upon without critically interrogating what those forms are, what their limitations might be, or how they are already caught up in heteronormative, patriarchal, white, masculinist presumptions. Your tack, it seems to me, is to develop a form from a different positionality and with a different set of concerns and subjects and audiences in mind.[8]

*Bradley*: A part of the failure of Hollywood is that they are so eager to compartmentalize identity—to differentiate between Black audiences or Hispanic audiences or queer audiences, for example. I think we're so much more sophisticated than that. Film viewers, like the population, are incredibly diverse, and there is no reason why the work we do shouldn't reflect that.

8. See Huey Copeland, "Photography, the Archive, and the Question of Feminist Form: A Conversation with Zoe Leonard," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 2 (2013), pp. 176–89; and "The Fae Richards Photo Archive: A Panel with Garrett Bradley, Huey Copeland, Lanka Tattersall, and Rebecca Matalon," panel discussion at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 27, 2019, https://www.youtube.com watch?v=0-5gf2qqPB4.

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*Copeland*: I think that's exactly right. You know, I was in Paris in May, where I saw the exhibition *Le modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse* [The Black Model: From Géricault to Matisse] at the Musée d'Orsay, which is the French version *of Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, a show that was originally presented in New York. It was wonderful to see so many Black folks at the Orsay, in particular Black Americans; there was a Black woman from New York at the show who was looking at a painting and she said to me, totally unsolicited, "Aren't we beautiful?" And I was like, "Well, yeah, but did you need some nineteenth-century French painter to tell you that?"

And maybe some of us do need to actually find ways of telling ourselves that and communicating that within hegemonic frames. Because not only are we dealing with the onslaught and historicity of a certain visual regime intent on emptying Black people of interiority and producing us as a species of stereotype, but it's a regime that also impoverishes everyone and makes us not able to see precisely those connections that might otherwise link us—connections that I think your work is really trying to stage and to offer as a proposition or a spur for a set of conversations that can happen and perhaps have different kinds of outcomes and take us to different places.

*Bradley*: Right, exactly. Yeah, I think with *Alone*, that was definitely the goal. But to go back to *America*, this makes me think of the trauma that existed around the material from *Lime Kiln Club Field Day* and what it meant to go through it frame by frame and try to find these moments that were beautiful, despite seeing Bert Williams in blackface. There was something really powerful in that process. Those films are seventeen frames a second, and so there's all this nuance that we can miss. For me, I thought that was a powerful lesson in my own work as well, which is that I would like to think that it can't rely on the holistic nature of cinema, meaning it can't rely on the durational quality of it, on the music, on the sound. It has to also work as an image, as a still image. If you pause it, will it still say the same things? I hope so.

*Copeland*: I think what's amazing about *America* is that you give us these moments of joy that you're able to find, but it's not as if you're saying the terror doesn't exist. But even within the terror, there's something that exceeds it, that emerges from it, and that there's also something in the visual that exceeds any singular ideologically motivated attempt to script it in one way. And I think in this moment, when we have so many people trying to think about Black visuality, your work holds out a really exciting model because for so long, I think there's been a way in which the visual, to its core, has been

this "problem space" within African American culture.[9] Your work says, "No, we can own this visuality and inhabit it and have an understanding of the ways in which it's been deployed as a weapon against us. We can't give up on visuality as something that still helps us produce ourselves, but we can do it in other terms." And that, to me, is incredibly inspiring. As someone who has often thought, I don't know about representational imagery, we might have to just let that go, now, I'm like, oh no, Garrett *Bradley* has shown me we can hold onto it!



9. On the notion of "problem space," see David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).