





FIGURE 1. Bradford Young, *Black America Again* (2016). Frame grab.

# Doing It, Fluid

Elissa Blount Moorhead  
and the Making of a Moving  
Image Arts Community

**Introduced and Interviewed by  
MICHELE PRETTYMAN**

*Dedicated to the memory of Walter Blount III*

To frame my conversation with visionary moving image artist, writer, curator, and producer Elissa Blount Moorhead (EBM) about her work and practice, I take some inspiration from black musical traditions, which have been central to Blount Moorhead's roots. In 1974 when we were both little Black girls growing up in homes with fathers who loved and lived through music and black culture, the Blackbyrds, a Washington, DC-based music group established and produced by musical titan Donaldson Toussaint L'Overture Byrd II (known as Donald Byrd), released their first self-titled album (fig. 2).

The group, composed of Byrd's former students at Howard University, envisioned an eclectic sound aligned with the spirit of intense experimental and collaborative fusion of free jazz and funk pioneered by Byrd, Herbie Hancock, Yusef Lateef, Roy Ayers, Bobbi Humphrey, and Dr. Lonnie Liston Smith, among others.<sup>1</sup> The song "Do It, Fluid" has just a few lyrics but echoes this title refrain repeatedly. In truth, the song itself is not particularly fluid or "smooth" (unlike the group's other hits, "Walking in Rhythm" [1975] and "Rock Creek Park" [1976]): the vocals, keyboard, bass, and horns collide in a boisterous aural commotion. Evoking Fred Moten's description of sound as an "engagement with everything: with all the noise that you've ever heard," the song's performative and sonic brashness produces a *fluid* emanation, or a groove, that flows out of the interplay between the sum of its parts.<sup>2</sup> Resisting the sometimes-flattening expect-

tations of a “unified” sound, “Do It, Fluid” offers a sonic lesson in how black expressive life is animated by multiple voices, frequencies, desires, and creative impulses. Likewise, EBM is “doing it, fluid” as she embraces a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and impulses; collaborates in innovative ways that break down rigid hierarchies and production protocols; and leans in the direction of those forces, people, and energies that promote a generative, creative environment and meaningful work.

In this introduction to our conversation, I articulate the power of her fluid practices, which make way for the “unmolested,” unending flow of black expressive life and creative gathering.<sup>3</sup> I discuss our first face-to-face encounter and my “ride-along” with her and our photographers for the day, Taura Musgrove and my sister Terri Prettyman Bowles, through our hometown’s neighborhoods—particularly several West Baltimore communities that had been captured in iconic TV shows and news footage, but also in a number of groundbreaking cinematic collaborations in which she played a part. I center Baltimore, Blount Moorhead’s base, and its significant televisual history, making the case that through the work of EBM and others, the city is rapidly becoming a hub for black moving image and arts innovation and experimentation that is deeply connected to the city’s geographical, architectural, historical, and traumatic memory. I end the introduction discussing her seminal moving image project, *As Of A Now* (2018), describing how the innovative 3D installation imagines and manifests the speculative life and history that might have existed

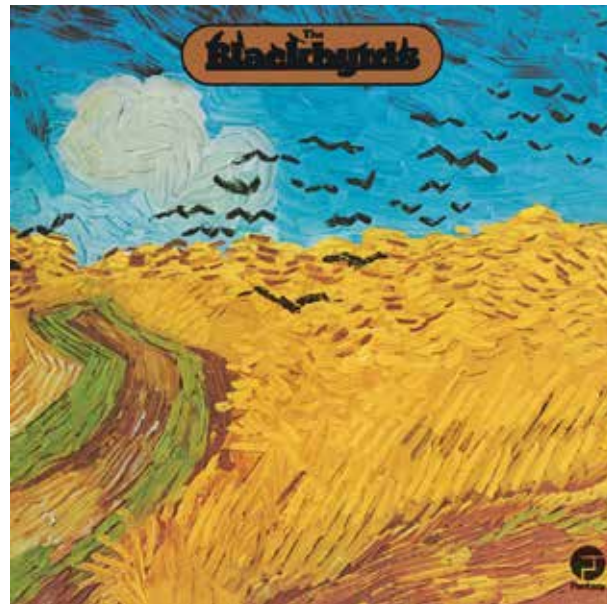


FIGURE 2. The Blackbyrds, *The Blackbyrds* (1974). Album cover.

beneath the façade of a Baltimore row home across three generations.

I foreground the history of the Blackbyrds, the musicality of this particular song, and the 1970s cultural zeitgeist of Washington, DC, to draw context from, and parallels to, the life and work of Blount Moorhead. Born and raised in New York, she spent her formative years in Washington. (As she told me, “I lived in NY the longest, but DC raised me.”) And while her inspirations and oeuvre transcend a singular locale, she remains connected to the legacy of Washington as “Chocolate City,” and the erasure of black cultural

and architectural histories figure prominently in her work.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by the cultural and political life of Washington, literally growing up with Howard University as her playground, her childhood was its own archive.<sup>5</sup> Steeped in the vitality of black culture by her parents, neighbors, and early childhood communities, and groomed by the encyclopedic musical knowledge of her late father, musicologist and deejay Walter Blount III, she was raised in what we might now describe as a kind of “black sociality,” where wisdom, gathering, and inspiration circulated matter-of-factly. Blount Moorhead learned early that community, acts of care, and the practices of rigorous collaboration were not only powerful energetic forces but also fluid pathways bending toward individual and collective actualization. “Doing it, *fluid*,” then, is less a smooth, cohesive aesthetic than a set of practices (a way of doing things) that embraces the complexity and the challenges of black creativity, black *making*, and black collaboration.

### A Fluid Praxis

I riff here on the term *fluidity* in a way that extends beyond its commonsense usage, and I use the terms *fluid/fluidity* (adjacent analytics to liquid/liquidity, the founding aesthetic and theoretical principle guiding the *liquid blackness* research group and this journal) to tease out a particular attribute or perhaps, an outcome, of a liquid praxis.<sup>6</sup> Since its inception the *liquid blackness* research group, which was founded by the force that is Alessandra Raengo and of which I was an early advisory board, now editorial board

member, and contributor, wrestled with ways to align studies of blackness, aesthetics, and rigorous pedagogy in community-oriented ways. We recognized, then and now, that this endeavor can be daunting as we face the politics (racial, financial, and otherwise), hierarchies, and limitations of universities, academic discourse, and the minefield that is critical theory. Our mission statement explains that, beyond a theoretical concept, for us, “‘liquidity’ also describes a way of *doing things* and specifically the strategic way in which the research group blurs the line between scholarship and practice by producing work that faces different communities within academia and beyond.”<sup>7</sup> And through our expanding network of students, advisers, board members, and readers as well as research projects, essays, panels, and now this journal, we continue to refer back to and refine the ways in which liquidity offers a meaningful intervention. Thus, inspired by the Blackbyrds, I use the term *fluidity* to further expand the aquatic, oceanic, and otherwise flowing metaphors that abound in black expressive culture—its making, aesthetics, and study—to call attention to the collapsed distinctions between care work, community ties, and artistic making that precede this journal and even Blount Moorhead, but nevertheless connect the artist to the music and geography she is steeped in.<sup>8</sup>

Fluidity speaks directly to and through EBM’s work and describes a *turn*, not a sharp theoretical one, but a gentler, yet definitive, motion of a head turned toward the radiance of the sun to be best positioned to feel its rays. Blount Moorhead’s practice

## **“DOING IT, *FLUID*,” THEN, IS LESS A SMOOTH, COHESIVE AESTHETIC THAN A SET OF PRACTICES (A WAY OF DOING THINGS) THAT EMBRACES THE COMPLEXITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF BLACK CREATIVITY, BLACK MAKING, AND BLACK COLLABORATION**

fluidly turns toward, leans into, faces, or positions itself in relationship to the people, questions, issues, and spaces that matter to her. As she describes in our conversation, she has always *faced* black life, not to disavow, bypass, or circumvent patriarchy, antiblackness, or whiteness, but because it is the metaphysical substance in which she exists, passes through, and passes around. Facing black life is an affirmation of its existence and power, and Blount Moorhead leans into that power.<sup>9</sup> She draws an analogy about her practice from the performances of Miles Davis and Nina Simone, artists who would at times face their band rather than the audience. She explains what this stance meant for her in an essay titled “The Eight-Point Plan of Euphorically Utopic World-Making”:

My father took me to see Miles Davis a few times growing up. What struck me most was his now-infamous tendency to play music with his back to the audience. Some say it was not a deliberate act of defiance, but rather a deep focus on his work—and his

stagemates. Maybe he would’ve said, “My back was not to the audience; I was facing my band.” Regardless of his reason, to my young eyes it was a gesture that resonated as a manifesto for so many aspects of life. It called out to me: “Don’t look over your shoulder; Let the world come find you—you don’t have to go to it. When they do find you, be totally into and enjoying your own bag.”<sup>10</sup>

For her, this gesture meant facing the things that mattered most, were most generative, including her creative partners. Oriented this way, her practice also evokes the phrasing often attributed to Bruce Lee’s life and practice of martial arts, that is, the admonition to “be water”—referring to the power of becoming “formless,” which in this case means not becoming attached to the “forms” of whiteness, antiblackness, patriarchy, and in fact, the refusal to understand these forms as all-powerful and all-encompassing.<sup>11</sup> It means being an unstoppable flow.

Fluidity also describes Blount Moorhead’s *flow-*

ing across multiple spheres including legal, curatorial, and museum work, advocacy in the arts and education, and moving image/art production. Notably, she served as the vice director and the director of design and programming at the Weeksville Heritage Center in Central Brooklyn, described in its mission statement as “an historic site and cultural center in Central Brooklyn that uses education, arts and a social justice lens to preserve, document and inspire engagement with the history of Weeksville, one of the largest free Black communities in pre–Civil War America, and the Historic Hunterfly Road Houses.”<sup>12</sup> As she and her colleague Jennifer Scott explain, “At WHC we foster this sort of unmolested creativity and give space for it to be developed, appreciated, critiqued, and displayed in its own community.”<sup>13</sup>

Blount Moorhead recognizes the power of collaboration as a vital, complicated, but necessary component of her life, practice, and workflow. At Weeksville she created and cocurated the “Garden Party Series” of music and culture and later cocurated, with Rashida Bumbray and Creative Time, a walkable exhibition titled “Funk, God, Jazz, and Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn” (2014) with four community-based art commissions by Xenobia Bailey, Simone Leigh, Otabenga Jones & Associates, and Bradford Young.<sup>14</sup> In 2019 she would again collaborate with Bradford Young on *Back and Song*, a four-channel video installation that explores modes of healing and care in the black community and their impact on the well-being and survival of Black people (fig. 3). Described by the Philadelphia Contemporary as “archival compilations

emphasizing forms of movement, rest, and ecstatic experience from across the African diaspora as crucial modes of healing and attunement to the body,” the project also foregrounds a recurring theme in Blount Moorhead’s work—the contiguities of black existence, erasure, and survival across time and space.<sup>15</sup>

Fluidity is also a lingering curiosity gliding along a surface, discovering the properties of the object, a memory, a building. On her website, Blount Moorhead describes this as a kind of indwelling or habitation of black life:

By exploring the poetics of quotidian Black life, the regularity, ubiquity, and simplicity, I attempt to emphasize gestural dialectics of quiet domesticity and community building. For me, this humor, love, strife, and care, highlights the familiar worlds I strive to convey. I would offer this embrace as a refusal of subjugation and the outside gaze.

I dwell in both immutable Black culture and the impermanence of its physical manifestations. The aesthetic and narrative choices I am making hinge on things that may be unseeable or veiled. I am trying to grasp them myself and hopefully offer a specific *tangible vibration*.<sup>16</sup>

Fluidity also captures the spirit of her practice as “having particles that easily move and change their relative position without a separation of the mass and that easily yield to pressure,” “capable of flowing,” and “subject to change or movement.”<sup>17</sup> Blount Moorhead has similarly articulated how she sees her work as a reorganization of the atoms, molecules, or



FIGURE 3. Elissa Blount Moorhead and Bradford Young, *Back and Song*. Installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art, March 2000. Photograph by Mitro Hood.

particles of black life. And as I trace the evolution of her projects, collaborators, and communities, I notice that she yields only to certain kinds of “external pressures,” not the pressures of media/film production protocols or the demands of whiteness but to

the genius, the “tangible vibration” of life around her. Blount Moorhead’s work is predicated on open engagement, listening (to the ideas of others and availing herself to audience reactions to her work) and yielding only to those voices that matter.



## FLUIDITY IS ALSO A LINGERING CURIOSITY GLIDING ALONG A SURFACE, DISCOVERING THE PROPERTIES OF THE OBJECT, A MEMORY, A BUILDING

Blount Moorhead's practice also intentionally disavows rigid production hierarchies and traditional modes of authorship that valorize the artist as a "singular genius" or emphasize certain voices at the expense of others. While many moving image industries, histories, and industry conventions often place limitations around who gets to create and how audiences will encounter cinema, Blount Moorhead's work rearticulates the praxis of black cinematic collectives like the LA Rebellion and the "New York Scene," which created spaces for collaboration in ways that embody what Raengo, inspired by Fred Moten, has termed "ensemblc."<sup>18</sup>

For that reason, Raengo describes the unique "archival challenges" of tracing Blount Moorhead's work given her disavowal of traditional forms of "creditation."<sup>19</sup> For instance, Blount Moorhead was one of three women to helm the vision of Jay-Z's *4:44* alongside Melinda Nugent and Gina Harrell, and she

played a significant role in the visual album's production, codirecting with her TNEG partners Malik Hassan Sayeed and Arthur Jafa.<sup>20</sup> Raengo also notes Blount Moorhead's impactful role in the making of both *As Told to G/D Thyself* and Bradford Young and Common's *Black America Again* (2016), where she was "lovingly acknowledged with a family portrait in the film" (see fig. 1).<sup>21</sup> Thus, her presence flows in and through these works in ways that are not always easy to identify or quantify.

Blount Moorhead emphasizes the power of pre-production as a particular kind of black sociality and the most vital part of the filmmaking process. She shares how this was particularly impactful during the making of *As Told to G/D Thyself*, directed by the Ummah Chroma collective—Terence Nance, Jenn Nkiru, Marc Thomas, Kamasi Washington, and Bradford Young—and in our conversations since the interview, which have emphasized the powerful impact of Nkiru (who is based in London). In relation to this process in *As Told to G/D Thyself* she says:

Everything that happened, that I cared about, happened before it [the film] happened, before it got out into the lens and out into the audience. It was a building project; it was an experiment in collaborative filmmaking. The DNA that was passed through and passed around and the energy built around it. . . I think people who experienced it and talked to me about it were perceiving what was happening. There was a break in hierarchy, there was—despite the gender of the people in the room—a feminine energy used to

make the work, and by that, I mean an anti-patriarchy, anti-capitalist view of filmmaking. All of those things came together and so, for me, the success happened before it even went to the editor.<sup>22</sup>

But make no mistake, both the historical record, anecdotal accounts, and common sense should remind us that working in these ways is neither easy, seamless, or without conflict and, in our conversation, Blount Moorhead expounds on what is gained in her vision of collaboration. Her work is animated by the challenges and joys of discovery, rather than a sense of mastery, as she navigates multiple roles, such as maker, producer, casting director, subject, visionary, and several mediums, including print media (“making” books, as she describes it), installations, and still and moving images. Her practice is a fluid way of being—not singular or of her own making—that embodies how the black imaginary shapeshifts, how its energy moves, expands, accommodates, and creates space. Fluidity emanates out of these individual and collective energies, where they merge, converge, diverge, and where a vision is achieved (or perhaps manifested) out of these convergences.

### Fluid Encounters

My first encounter with EBM was a virtual one. She was the invited guest for *liquid blackness's* 2019–20 research project, which in the past has spotlighted the work of several of her collaborators: Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Bradford Young, and Jenn Nkiru. And it was during these dynamic Zoom talks delivered in

November 2020 titled “Facing the Band: Elissa Blount Moorhead and the (Ana)Architectures of Community Ties” that I recognized her as a kindred spirit.

I witnessed the power and intimacy of these collaborations on my visit to her home in Baltimore about six months later, in May 2021, as we were all still navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Blount Moorhead generously agreed to conduct the interview at her home, but first the four of us talked at length like old friends (Blount Moorhead and one of the day’s photographers, filmmaker Taura Musgrove, were both fellows with the Saul Zaentz Innovation Fund, which funds creators and storytellers). After the interview, I wanted to see the city, which I had not lived in for over twenty years, through her cinematic eye and with a renewed sense of its shifts and recent cultural history. Growing up in Baltimore in the 1970s and ‘80s, I saw my hometown through the lenses of Black visual artists and photographers—friends and peers of my father, artist Jerry Prettyman. This return was a full-circle moment for me, to see Baltimore, a place I always thought of as strangely cinematic, through the lenses of a new generation of artists and filmmakers.

After the interview we jumped in the car for a ride-along during which Blount Moorhead allowed us to revisit some of the locations that are central to Baltimore’s black moving image landscape, including *Black America Again*, her own installation project *As Of A Now*, and *As Told to G/D Thyself*. As we made our way through her neighborhood, the historic West Baltimore community known as Reservoir Hill (where some of my family had also lived), I noticed a corner



FIGURE 4. Photograph (2021) of Baltimore row home that served as the prototype in *As Of A Now*. Photograph courtesy of Taura Musgrove.

lot where some women were enjoying an outdoor yoga class and others gathered in a community garden. This section of Whitelock Street had once been one of West Baltimore's most notorious open-air drug markets in the 1980s and '90s. But unlike parts of Brooklyn or Washington with similar histories, this pocket is still largely a black neighborhood (though the neighboring Maryland Institute College of Art has steadily encroached, eating away at the neighborhoods on the other side of North Avenue). "We'll make a quick stop," she says, and soon we notice filmmaker and award-winning cinematographer Bradford Young on an unpretentious, tidy street where kids ride bikes and outdoor gardens are watered. Neighbors pass by, each one greeting us. Perhaps this place still retains the *residue*, evoking the title of Merawi Gerima's powerful film about memory and loss in a changing Washington, but also those lingering memories, gestures, and affectations of Black

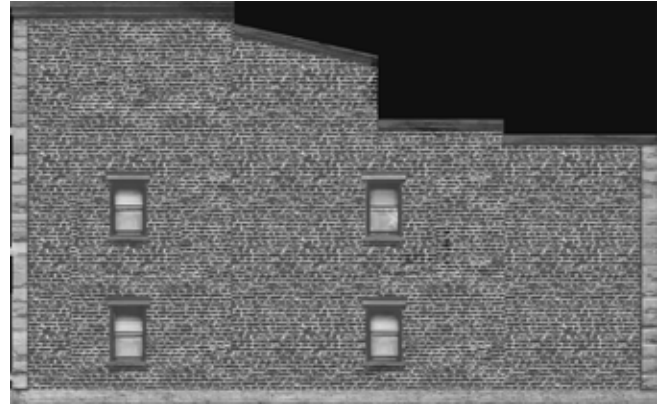


FIGURE 5. Elissa Blount Moorhead, *As Of A Now* (2019). Frame grab. Courtesy of the artist.

migrants from the Deep South of generations ago, a theme taken up in Blount Moorhead's work, as we discuss in our conversation.<sup>23</sup>

Continuing on our ride-along, Blount Moorhead points out the building that was the prototype for her massive moving image installation project *As Of A Now* (figs. 4 and 5) and the homes and studios of local artists, and filmmakers. During the ride, we note the ways in which Baltimore yields to and resists gentrification.

We make our way down North Avenue, a street with tremendous artistic and cultural history that runs from the city's West Side to its East Side, turning down the legendary Pennsylvania Avenue, a thoroughfare that was once the central hub of black Baltimore's commerce and entertainment. On this hot day on this once-famous street, trash teems, overflowing on sidewalks, and people seem to move in a state of collective agitation. Traces of homes' absent



FIGURE 6. Bradford Young, *Black America Again* (2016). Frame grab.

owners—usually described as “abandoned”—are visible everywhere. In 2015 during the “Baltimore Uprising” young people burst onto these streets in protest and grief over the police’s deadly treatment of Freddie Gray and the city’s long history of police brutality. These same blocks were captured in news footage and in stunning photographs taken by Baltimore photographer Devin Allen, whom I have described elsewhere as this generation’s Gordon Parks.<sup>24</sup>

Circling a community known as Gilmore Homes, we look for a painted marker paying homage to Gray featured in *Black America Again*, a film Jason Harris describes as “a watershed moment in Black Baltimore’s art scene and filmmaking community.”<sup>25</sup> We circle the block many times, a move I know is not a wise one. I decide to ask a young man to help direct us to it. He is polite to us, then screams a series of

insults at a nearby woman. We thank him and keep moving. Again, at each stop we make, people engage us, speak to us. We later realize that the painted image of Gray on the corner of a building, which had been captured in the film (fig. 6), had been removed and replaced with a massive, stunning mural a few blocks away with the title “The Power of the People” in block letters and a large image of Gray on its left side.<sup>26</sup> We pull up to the mural and take a few photos (fig. 7). It’s been years since Gray’s death, and the grief is still palpable and raw, although that emotion is being repurposed, transmuted into art, visual movement, and language. This place feels both changed and still the same. Staring at the mural, I’m reminded that past, present, and future inhabit the same space, a sensibility echoed by Raengo when she describes Blount Moorhead’s relationship to tem-



FIGURE 7. “The Power of the People” mural featuring Freddie Gray, Baltimore (2021). Photograph by Terri Prettyman Bowles. The artists who worked on the mural are Rameen Aminzadeh, Isaac Davies, Jerod Davies, Jose F. May, Justin Nethercutt, and Ernest Shaw.

porality as one where she “holds both her lineage and futures together in the same space at all times.”<sup>27</sup>

### Tracing Baltimore’s Televisual Imprint

Baltimore was one of many “up-South” destinations for Black folks fleeing the Deep South and has been home to a pantheon of notable natives, including Eubie Blake, Thurgood Marshall, Cab Calloway, Lucille Clifton, Anna Devereaux Smith, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jada Pinkett Smith and other seminal figures who would take up residency there at important moments in their lives, like Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, Henrietta Lacks, Oprah Winfrey, and Tupac Shakur. In elementary school, one of my teachers regaled us with a story that North Pole

explorer Matthew Henson (a Maryland native) lived reclusively nearby, a story I could never corroborate.

Much of Blount Moorhead’s recent moving image work taps into Baltimore’s black historical imaginary and is attentive to the invisible histories and lives of its “everyday people,” some of which embody what her husband, Mario Moorhead, describes as an “unmolested blackness.” But Baltimore’s televisual history is perhaps best known for the groundbreaking series *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (NBC, 1993–99), *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (HBO Entertainment, 2000), and *The Wire* (HBO Entertainment, 2002–8), which were all based on journalistic narratives exploring the underbellies of law enforcement, crime, and the drug trade in the

city. *The Corner*, a docudrama that tells real-life stories of people impacted by drug use in Baltimore, is based on the book of the same name written by *Baltimore Sun* reporter David Simon and Baltimore homicide detective Ed Burns. During our ride-along in West Baltimore, we pass through areas featured in both *The Corner* and *The Wire*, and I am reminded of the economic devastation of this part of the city and also that Baltimore is composed not so much of blocks as of the specific architectural phenomena of the corner: fluid intersections where particular kinds of black sociality, commerce, and violence collide.

The first episode of *The Corner* series, titled “Gary’s Blues,” begins with an on-camera prologue delivered by Baltimore native Charles S. Dutton, who directs and acts in the series. In this prologue he explains his relationship to the project and his own struggles on Baltimore’s corners:

I grew up and hung out on a corner, just like this one not too far from here. A corner like thousands of others across the country. It’s a place to go if you want to be seen and, to a lot of folks, it’s the information center of a neighborhood. You wanna know who’s got good drugs? You wanna know who got killed last night and why and who did it? You come here. The contradiction of it is, on one hand, the corner pulsates with life, the energy of human beings trying to make it to the next day. But also, it’s a place of death, be it the slow death of addiction or the sudden death of gunshots.<sup>28</sup>

Dutton poignantly describes the power of corners laying bare the impact of blackness and spatiality in

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the formation of individual and community identity and survival. Using a cinema verité approach, the series opens by shifting Dutton from a behind the camera presence to a persona within the film’s diegesis, as both narrator and documentarian, filming figures in the neighborhood and asking questions about the episode’s main character, Gary. As Gary, dismayed by the filmmaker’s personal questions, abruptly walks into a corner store—leaving the camera hanging, so to speak—the camera searches for a new subject. Doing a 360-degree pan, it pauses at each of the three corners at this intersection. At each one, its gaze transfixes the neighborhood residents. First it lands on three young men, their mouths hardened, their glances either avoiding the camera or confronting it (fig. 8). The intrusive, almost antagonistic cam-



FIGURE 8. Charles S. Dutton, *The Corner* (2000). Frame grab.

era moves on to the next curiosity, the next corner, pausing only long enough to register some combination of curiosity, resistance, defiance, resentment, or suspicion from the residents, not long enough for us to truly see or engage with them. In the series, we see the residents tracked through streets, alleyways, and drug dens, where no space, no action, exchange, or emotion is off-limits. This kind of cinematographic surveillance seems to hold residents captive as they are caught in the matrix, trapped in the grid.

This reading of the spatial parameters of black bodies in the visual sphere, specifically in urban spaces and hip-hop culture, as articulated in the work of Lauren McLeod Cramer, is particularly relevant here. Corners are reminiscent of the “joints” she describes in her architectural readings of hip-hop visual culture, as “the sites where varied things and people come together,” and also as “the points of articulation that bring together black bodies and ‘black cultural traffic’ that sustains race relations in the im-

age.”<sup>29</sup> And while *The Corner* and the other Baltimore TV series were powerful and, in some cases, offered pointed critiques of the systemic corruption and inequity rampant in urban law enforcement and the criminal justice system, they deploy a visual storytelling style that depicts people at the behest of these seemingly intractable frameworks; characters’ lives are largely seen through the perspectives of broken systems and flawed social infrastructures. The murder of Freddie Gray, who was surveilled and profiled moments before his apprehension and ultimate death, is an enactment of the deadly force of these visual and/or spatial grids that are then remapped onto the city in “rough rides” and other violent police tactics.

In contrast to the televisual images described above, the trilogy of experimental films made by Blount Moorhead and her friends/collaborators—*Black America Again*, *As Of A Now*, and *As Told to G/D Thyself*—use these same spaces to convey a sense of mystical power, transcendence, and sacredness. These West Baltimore spaces are not simply blocks, corners, or drug markets; they are places where beautiful people and things live and sometimes die, tragically.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in *As Told to G/D Thyself* and *Black America Again*, the concrete urban architectural grids, linear and streamlined, are often dismantled, replaced with green, naturalistic scenes and bodies caught up in rapturous movement. Lines are often broken by circles, mystical symbolism, and green space and empty housing lots’ overgrown grass become launching pads from which mystical children take flight or an outdoor classroom



FIGURE 9. Bradford Young, *Black America Again* (2016). Frame grab.



FIGURE 10. Ummah Chroma, *As Told to G/D Thysel* (2019). Frame grab.

where toddlers play with turtles (see fig. 9), bodies are captured in performance, Black faces in portraiture, and city spaces as hallowed. Blount Moorhead and this wave of filmmakers and artists reimagine Baltimore's visual iconography and unearth unseen life

and history in ways that penetrate brick and mortar and broken systems. The West Baltimore geography, architecture, and its people, which were left to ruinous disrepair and neglect, have been reclaimed, reminding that they are alive and beautiful (fig. 10).



## Blount Moorhead and the BAIR

In 2013 Blount Moorhead and her family left Brooklyn for Baltimore, where she would become a partner in the TNEG production company with visionary visual/moving image artists Arthur Jafa and Malik Sayeed, whose objective is to “create a black cinema as culturally, socially, and economically central to the 21st century as was black music to the 20th century.”<sup>31</sup> This is a seminal turning point for Baltimore’s visual arts; although there were already ripples of creative energy percolating on the ground (and a history of grass-roots Black artist communities that was decades old), Blount Moorhead and the TNEG imprint would create a seismic shift. Bradford Young and others would soon be drawn there. Baltimore offers a lower cost of living relative to other cities on the East Coast and, perhaps more importantly, proximity to DC, where iconic filmmaker and teacher Haile Gerima (a long-time mentor and influence on Blount Moorhead, Sayeed, Jafa, and Young, whose interrelations the *liquid blackness* project has studied under the moniker “the Howard Pedagogy Lab”) lives and works as a professor at Howard University.<sup>32</sup>

Collectively, these figures are powerfully reclaiming the possibilities of moving images as temporally and spatially dynamic, capable of creating multidimensional, sensorial, and expansively interactive—or simply fluid—viewing experiences. Thus, I call the work that emerges from Blount Moorhead and this network of collaborators the “Baltimore Arts and Image Renaissance” (BAIR). I use the well-worn term *renaissance*

instead of *collective* to place this network in conversation with the Harlem Renaissance and also to emphasize the gravity of the work these makers are creating in perhaps the first wave of creative output. The BAIR refers to works produced by Black filmmakers in Baltimore over this last decade and going forward; it also refers to the fact that many of these filmmakers live and work there, hire and develop local talent and personnel, often prominently feature the visual iconography of Baltimore and its history in the films themselves, and the way both films and makers reveal an overt engagement with cutting-edge aesthetic practices and uses of technology. Blount Moorhead is a centripetal force in this network attracting and galvanizing artists, filmmakers, and like-minded people to do important things together. These Black artists and filmmakers experiment with form, histories, and geographies and like other regional black arts movements from decades ago in Harlem, Newark, Chicago, and Los Angeles, they are animated by African diasporic, global, and regional influences and concerns as they embrace the power of creative gathering. And while these figures flow across different kinds of work, they seem to operate under a certain set of (spoken or unspoken) principles, questions, and concerns. This renaissance is fueled by an investment in the power of “making,” as I gather from Blount Moorhead’s description of herself as “a person who makes things”—and, I would add, a person who makes things happen.

While Blount Moorhead might resist being centered as a seminal figure, I argue that her investment in “how you affect the architecture of images,” her



FIGURE 11. Lotfy Nathan, *12 O'Clock Boys* (2013). Frame grab.

fluid practices, and her desire to engage across a broad spectrum of community members, plays an invaluable role in building and sustaining this community's efforts and in extending support to those within its reach.<sup>33</sup> Her "crew" would soon expand to include figures in film, activism, and art, such as filmmaker Radha Blank (*The 40-Year-Old-Version*, 2020); activist Tarana Burke; writer, journalist, and producer Ericka Blount Danois, who is also Blount Moorhead's sister; cinematographer Shawn Peters; and technologist and artist Tahir Hemphill, who are investing in the city in various ways. She also connects with local creatives like Jason Harris and Baltimore transplant Pierre Bennu.<sup>34</sup> Some would come to Baltimore to work on particular projects—musician/actor Common spent time there working on the independent film *LUV* (Dir. Sheldon Candis, 2012) and then later with Young on *Black America Again*—but all would leave

a footprint behind. These figures move fluidly between LA, New York, and London, but somehow now, at perhaps the apex of their creativity and the heights of their careers, Baltimore fuels something inside of them and feeds their imaginations. Some teach there or become involved in business and political issues disseminating a collective energy that values creativity and people over explicitly commercial concerns. In this network, Blount Moorhead nurtures the power of creativity (her own and others') through processes of teaching, learning, producing, curating, establishing art spaces, exhibitions, and moving image works.

Additionally, another wave of films capturing the experiences of Baltimore's young people have also emerged, including the documentaries *12 O'Clock Boys* (dir. Lotfy Nathan, 2013, fig. 11), about a young dirt bike rider; *Baltimore Rising* (2017), directed by Sonja Sohn, a cast member on *The Wire*, which chron-



FIGURE 12. TT the Artist, *Dark City Beneath the Beat* (2020). Frame grab.

icles the impact of the Baltimore Uprising in 2015; and *Step* (dir. Amanda Lipitz, 2017), which tracks the stories of high school–age young women on a Baltimore step dance team; along with the feature film *Charm City Kings* (dir. Angel Manuel Soto, 2020), which puts Baltimore’s dirt bike culture on the big screen. Baltimore transplant TT the Artist (also a Saul Zaentz fellow) recently released a quasi-experimental documentary titled *Dark City Beneath the Beat* (2020, fig. 12), which chronicles Baltimore’s recent history of club music as it intersects with contemporary youth culture. These films expand the narratives and iconography surrounding Baltimore, emphasizing resistance, resilience, and how cultural and political shifts are impacting young people. And in the last ten years or so

a range of visual and multimedia artists (and writers) are finding new inspiration in and from Baltimore, including the aforementioned media maker Musgrove, whose work uses virtual and augmented reality technologies to make Baltimore’s black historical sites and figures accessible; filmmaker/cinematographer Kirby Griffin; and visual artist/muralist Ernest Shaw, who has created murals across Baltimore, including working with other artists on the mural featuring Freddie Gray (see fig. 7).<sup>35</sup>

### **Emanations: Manifesting the Now**

I end with a brief discussion of Blount Moorhead’s *As Of A Now* project, which is a central entry in the archive of Baltimore’s moving image history and to our

understanding of contemporary black moving image work. Described by Blount Moorhead as “an ‘x-ray’ film projection installation that is 3D mapped onto a vacant row house, using audio visual narratives, augmented reality, and artifacts which reference its former Black denizens,” it was first installed in Baltimore in 2018.<sup>36</sup> The project, as she describes it, was conceived over a period of time, prior to the actual technologies that made it possible. But the project’s conceit was an even longer time in the making. For years Blount Moorhead noted how parts of Brooklyn were being gentrified, a factor that impacted her move to Baltimore. And on her arrival in Baltimore she became a student of its histories of redlining, abandoned properties, blight, and gentrification, but also of its legacies of historic communities, migration from the Deep South, and neighborhood pride, which she notes later in our discussion of *The Afro’s* “Clean Block Campaign.”<sup>37</sup> She imagined how she might depict the ways in black life—as atoms, molecules, and particles are transferred, transfigured, re-membered—and how they might be reconstituted as the homes and communities that in many of black Baltimore’s neighborhoods were left unoccupied and began to disintegrate. Vital to her was the idea of capturing experiences of everyday black life and imagining how mundane gestures, traditions, movements might or might not change over time. The project poses the question “How can stories that are attached to objects and now vacant buildings live beyond the loss of their material vessels?” in a process she describes as “moving augmented ‘atoms’ from

## **BLOUNT MOORHEAD IS A CENTRIPETAL FORCE IN THIS NETWORK ATTRACTING AND GALVANIZING ARTISTS, FILMMAKERS, AND LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE TO DO IMPORTANT THINGS TOGETHER**

then to now. From canvas to film.”<sup>38</sup> The project collapses three time periods in the life of a home (1908, 1968, and 2008) into one overlapping narrative, depicting vignettes of the history, memory, and energy of each family onto an interior-facing view of home. The central figure in the piece is a young boy/spirit whom Blount Moorhead describes as

a harbinger for disruption of the banality. An Abiku in Yoruba mythology refers to a child who dies and returns repeatedly. It means “predestined to death.” His presence is a metaphor for the instability of Black urban life despite our constant quest for equilibrium. He makes us question our alien/outlawness and our inability to enjoy routine or assimilation. Are we capable of co-existence at the site of our traumas? How do we feed our ancestors and maintain our collective sanity?<sup>39</sup>



FIGURE 13.  
Elissa Blount  
Moorhead,  
*As Of A  
Now* (2019).  
Frame grab.  
Courtesy of  
the artist.  
Cutout  
silhouettes by  
Pierre Benu.

In *As Of A Now*, Blount Moorhead invites us to experience the metaphysical, expansive possibilities of black life that often go unseen or unrecognized and that which has dissolved into the historical ether (fig. 13).

In the booklet produced to accompany the *As Of A Now* project, Blount Moorhead solicited words, poems, and perspective from folks who are connected to Baltimore. Writer, journalist, and professor D. Watkins offers a poetic view of Baltimore through the lens of its many abandoned homes or “bandos” in a piece titled “Bando-Proximity” (figs. 14 and 15):

I used to live on a block full of boarded up houses. The people didn't abandon them, the city wanted them—so the homes were purchased by the people with power and left to rot before they bulldozed them and threw them away.

I look at beat homes, vacant houses, or bandos, which is short for abandon—we call them bando's and I see myself. More importantly, I see us . . .

We see homes. Destroyed homes of love that once housed the village—our mothers grandmothers [sic] and everyone else that raised us. The places where our memories began—that first wheelie, a sweet frozen cup, that first date, and yeah, that first kiss . . .

We too see what's on the surface, we understand the damage; however, we also understand where it came from and understand how beautiful these homes were and know how beautiful they could be if we had an opportunity to occupy . . .

Baltimore is an amazing city full of amazing people doing amazing things, you just have to get to know them

## BANDO-PROXIMITY.

I used to live on a block full of boarded up houses. The people didn't abandon them, the city wanted them — so the homes were purchased by the people with power and left to rot before they bulldozed them and threw them away.

I look at beat homes, vacant houses, or bandos, which is short for abandon—we call them bando's and I see myself. More importantly, I see us.

I also see the outsider's perspective, understanding why they can't see the beauty that only a person with bando-proximity would know.

From afar, afar physically, culturally and spiritually—an abandoned row home is an eye sore, a city-stain composed of hollow brick shells, rotted wood and mashed sheet rock, colonized by roaches, drizzled in vermin piss, and paraphernalia, sloppily glazed with debris, working around the clock to elevate and every stereotype.

"Those decaying buildings do nothing but make Baltimore worse," is what they say and think.

We see homes. Destroyed homes of love that once housed the village—our mothers grandmother and everyone else that raised us. The places where our memories began—that first wheelie, a sweet frozen cup, that first date, and yeah, that first kiss.

My block defined family and showed unity daily. I saw the homie graduate, listened to him tell me how to do it and then helped him move into his first house that he bought all on the same block. Outside would probably look at the homie as another dealer hanging on the corner but his name is Aaron and he's the homeowner of that house on the corner—next to two bandos.

We too see what's on the surface, we understand the damage; however, we also understand where we came from and understand how beautiful these homes were and know how beautiful they could be if we had an opportunity to occupy . This type of understanding is 100% bando-proximity based—if you know, you know and if you don't you don't.

Baltimore is an amazing city full of amazing people doing amazing things, you just have to get to know them but in this town, we don't get know or invest in people, we treat them like those bando's—we bulldoze them and throw them away.

— D. Watkins



FIGURE 14. Image from *As Of A Now* (2018). Photograph by Shawn Peters, poem by D. Watkins.

but in this town we don't get know [sic] or invest in people, we treat them like those bando's—we bulldoze them and throw them away.<sup>40</sup>

I also argue that *As Of A Now* fluidly connects the present, Blount Moorhead's work, and black moving image history with motion pictures of the past by re-installing the power of projection. She pushes projection beyond the surface of a screen—or, in this case, a building—to open the expanse. *As Of A Now's* three-

dimensionality allows viewers to experience a home's interior scaled to mimic real-life dimensions, placing them in the same spaces the figures inhabit and expanding the possibilities of intimacy far beyond the capacities of theatrical screenings.

This work fulfills the objectives Blount Moorhead and Jafa expressed in their presentation for Creative Time Summit titled "A Case for Nonsense," when she states, "I/We/Us want to be things, meaning not ge-



FIGURE 15.  
*Abandoned  
Homes in Sandtown  
Baltimore* (2016).  
Photograph by  
Justin Tsucalas.

niuses, not producers of masterpieces, but producers of conversation pieces. In fact, not producers at all, but products, manifestations, or emanations of black culture. And I/We are interested in the life of things. Things are interesting. We were the things. Not people. Not subjects, but objects when we were brought to these shores."<sup>41</sup>

The work of Elissa Blount Moorhead and her fluid, intentional practices of collaboration and community-building galvanize black creative energies moving them, and us, from then to now and beyond.

### **Elissa Blount Moorhead and Michele Prettyman Interview**

**Michele Prettyman:** In the fall of 2020, you were invited by the *liquid blackness* and AMPLIFY research groups, both housed at Georgia State University, to offer a talk and masterclass titled "Facing the Band: Elissa Blount Moorhead and the (Ana)Architectures of Community Ties." Sharing that space with you, we were deeply impacted by your presence and your practice. I found a kindred spirit in you, so when Alessandra Raengo, the founder of *liquid blackness*,

asked me to interview you, I jumped at the chance. And I wanted to do the interview in person because your work is so grounded in intimacy, care, and people. So I came to Baltimore.

I find your work so profound because it is grounded in innovative ways of “making” and collaborative praxis, and also because it is connected to the creative sociality of generations of Black women artists and filmmakers who integrate work, family, and community. Recently I read a piece about Betye Saar and how her daughters grew up in her ecosystem, and of course we see how that has manifested in their own work or even in the work of someone like Kathleen Collins, who talked so intimately about her children, her life, and trying to manage her family life with her own pressing need to create. Could you talk a little about what feminine energy means to you and how that’s sort of a lived practice which we see in your work as well?

**Elissa Blount Moorhead:** I don’t want to be reductive and talk about it in terms of the spectrum of femaleness, or femininity, or woman-ness. I know that is a complicated proposition; but for me, it is rooted in being raised generationally in a practice of mothering, which could be done by anyone. In my family, it was generally done by the matriarchs, but also, quite a bit, across the spectrum. My great-grandfather was a massive matriarchal influence in our family. And not just our family. I watched him care for families in the Bronx and be an overbearing force in terms of care, culture, and neighborhood ties. I don’t really under-

stand work without a strong connectedness. I think it’s inextricably bound to everything I do.

Here [in Baltimore] we have an intentional community and, again, that’s something that dates to my paternal great-grandfather—but I didn’t find that out until I was also doing it. I found this book called *Nyack in Black and White* [Carl Nordstrom’s account of race relations in Rockland County] and my father was very blasé about my family’s role in that history. He said: “Oh yeah, you know my grandfather and other people worked with activists to bring one hundred Black families to that area of New York.”<sup>42</sup> My compulsion is based on protection, but also on creating generative work. I think collaboration is a manifestation of love. It’s a manifestation of real creativity, of humility, and being able to let go of something that you think you’ve created. If you study history, you realize that you’ve created nothing.

We’re kind of a perpetual riff on our ancestor’s work. The energy that AJ [Arthur Jafa] talks about, the passing of energy as opposed to hierarchically giving something, means that each time that energy is passed around, it gets ignited. I think about the way my mother parented, the way that I’ve tried to parent, and the way each connects to a wider building of community. It’s the same as a creative community. Being able to be vulnerable together is really important.

I’m working on a project now with a friend of mine, Pierre Benu, who’s an incredible artist, I mean, a real polymath with very nuanced sensitivities. We



## WE'RE HAVING A CONSTANT CONVERSATION AROUND OUR CONTRIBUTION, OUR ANCESTORS, OUR REAL-TIME PRESENT CARE. TO ME THAT'S WHAT FEMININE ENERGY IS

have to pause and ask each other, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" "Are you sleeping?" "Are the ideas right? Is it what we need? Is it making sense in terms of what's already in the world and what we want in the world?" We're having a constant conversation around our contribution, our ancestors, our real-time present care. To me that's what feminine energy is. That's what he's doing when he's caring for all our kids or when I'm caring for all our kids. At the same time, we try to help them understand that they're part of our process, and we're a part of their process, as artists.

**MP:** So, it's not rooted necessarily in gender, but in the ways that women have done this work and how that work now permeates. It isn't something that is solely the purview of women.

**EBM:** No, it's not gendered; this "feminine energy" is cultural. It's just that women are experts at it for different reasons. Sometimes men have become very good at it because there's not a female presence in the house. Culturally, it's been situated in women's spaces, but I think we all have the capacity for it, and we know that patriarchy, hierarchy, and hegemony are

the antithesis of this feeling. I know it because when I'm working in those conditions, I feel pressed and nervous and taxed, and it feels extractive. It's literally the exact opposite of the generative. On the other hand, it feels divine when I'm able to work with people, like Brad [Bradford Young], who have mastery over this mode of working as well. Maybe it's not a coincidence that his wife is a midwife and a life-giver; maybe it's not a coincidence that his two sisters are such a big influence on him. I'd like to think that we are just the holders and passers, but that we all have the capacity to build things in that very real collaborative way, whether it's your art, or a delicious dish, or a community, or whatever.

Sometimes we might view collaboration as a question of expertise—"I'm expert in this, I'm expert in that"—but that is a segmented and very siloed view. I believe the best part of collaboration is coming up with something, sharing it, and allowing someone else to reformulate the same question alongside of you. Then we just keep asking questions and refining it together. It's a slower process, so it might be frustrating for people who are commissioning that work. But it's very rewarding, and I think it shows up in the

work itself. I can see it in the way someone like Terence Nance builds a show [*Random Acts of Flyness* (2018)] with groups of people who, in and of themselves, already have beautiful practices. And then you watch how they all manifest separately and together. You just *know* it's right: you can see how collaborative efforts are present in the work.

**MP:** Your essay "The Eight-Point Plan for Euphorically Utopic World-Making," in *How We Fight White Supremacy: A Field Guide to Black Resistance*, unpacks some of the ways this was processed in your family lineage. You write:

I grew up in Washington D.C. during the time of liberation movements, communes, pan-Africanism, *shules*, art movements, Islam, voodoo, and black political and cultural nationalism. Black folks, including my parents, were searching for alternative ways to live together and raise a new consciousness. They were clear that being raised in an intentional community of Black artists, thinkers, activists, and pioneers was going to give us the grounding we needed to not just avoid the white gaze and the misguided idea of white supremacy, but to utterly ignore its existence.<sup>43</sup>

**EBM:** Wow, I said that? [*Laughs*]

**MP:** [*Laughs*] You said that. You described it also as "not giving whiteness your back and facing Blackness."<sup>44</sup>

**EBM:** Both Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Ranken [the editors of the anthology *How We Fight White Supremacy*] similarly come from a tradition of African-centered learning and building. I don't think it's a coincidence that their anthology asks questions that we all are asking.

I'm currently working on a project around the New Negro Movement, and it's been a hundred years now since that began and I was just joking around with my friend Shawn [Peters] yesterday, saying, "We've thought of nothing new; we've done nothing new. They gave us every answer in terms of black consciousness, black art, black performance." In that way, Baltimore is a parallel of Detroit, or of Chicago, or Lagos, or Kingston—pick one.

I've been thinking about the difference between those of us who were running away or avoiding racially based terror, like the "Red Summer," versus those of us who were coming from the Caribbean to meet up in Harlem. The folks who were coming from the Caribbean were in pretty much 100 percent black spaces, so racism and the way it was practiced here, the Klan and all of that, was inconceivable to them. We, instead, *understood that the bark on the tree of this country is racism*. From Ida B. Wells to Du Bois, we had very specific tools to face racism and we knew that it was egregious, but we were still engaging with it because we didn't have a choice. Think about the idea of developing yourself in a space where you don't even have to engage racism, although ignoring it is still engaging it. Ignoring is still work—right? That's different from absolute utter freedom from

it. But it's very different when something is on your shores, it's on your seed, in the seeds in your ground, or whatever.

I recently met a white person who was raised in DC at the time when it was "Chocolate City," and he said that *he'd* never had a white educator, he had only had Black women teachers. That impact on both Black and white people is immeasurable in terms of how you find freedom and clear thought. My teachers were not just interested in me doing well because students needed to do well. They were like, "You're going to take care of me." Literally or sort of metaphorically. They were tied to my outcome as a human being. When I said, "Oh, I don't want to do any more work," or "I can't think of anything else," my teachers would say things like, "I know your parents." They wouldn't even say, "Elissa, you can do more." They were like, "I know what you come from, I will call them. I have expectations." That kind of environment allows you to intellectually relax that "fight or flight" piece and to just focus on your nuanced humanity. So, I'm not interested in whether I'm not the only Black girl in a class. I don't have to engage in that fight. I'm interested in whether I can play jacks the best on my block. I can really drill down to my most nuanced self. And by the time I was old enough to hear "Oh, you know, whiteness rules the world, and patriarchy works this way . . .," by the time that happened, it was too late.

If you grow up in an all-black environment, that environment allows a lot of space. (You know, racism takes a lot of energy and time.) It allows a lot of time

for you to focus on the details of your life, the details of your inheritance in terms of who you are, your future-making. You're thinking about possibilities all the time. There's not a lot that's just sitting on your nervous system. And it's not as simple as the absence of white people, because, of course, we still interact with white people. Rather, it's the absence of the oppressiveness of whiteness, and white people are lucky if they're free from that as well.

The environment I grew up in was extremely impactful, but only in retrospect, because I'm not in it anymore. I wish I could have spent more time in that space, because it really made me think about process—what feels good and what doesn't. I can quickly identify friction or potential friction. I *absolutely* know that even with the gift it gave me—i.e., parameters to set up how I want to think about work or how I want to approach what's possible—I could go my whole life and never know enough about the details of black history and our contribution, and our work. When I was young, I remember my father saying, look, your culture is intellect. Your job is to constantly expand your brain. My environment left a lot of room for thinking about thinking. We were conscious people; thus, my work was focused on expanding my intellect as much possible as a kid. It's a privileged space to be in mentally. I want that privilege for everybody.

**MP:** In those formative years you were given a space filled with musical influences and learning from other people in your community, and yet there was almost boundless space for you to conceptualize—"What

shall I do with all that's been poured into me?" So when does what you learned in your childhood start to surface in your work?

**EBM:** My father would always say, "Share what you have, share what you know." I always knew that would manifest as process and giving back. I went to the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, and I studied video and film, and I knew then to document my neighborhood. I thought my neighborhood was special, like everyone does. I lived in a building that was filled with a representative from every black place in the world—Brazil down the hall, Ghana down the hall. It was incredible. Again, in the moment, you take it for granted that you can hear Creole out your window. But what happens when you are in a space where that's not the case? For me that was college, where I saw that people, including some Black people, did not have a multiplicity of blackness in front of them. They were using the narrowest two-hundred-year-old lens. I think that's when it clicked for me and I realized, "Oh, this is where I'm supposed to give. This is where I'm supposed to share."

In my life this "giving back" has manifested across different things. I had a radio show called "Come Sunday" and I would have people come on and talk about music and would give them space to riff on age-old questions and ideas. I wrote a lot for newspapers and things like that in college. Then, as I grew up, I engaged in advocacy, which is my need to keep people who were brilliant in brilliant spaces. It was a real compulsion. Both my parents are creative people

## MY ENVIRONMENT LEFT A LOT OF ROOM FOR THINKING ABOUT THINKING. I WANT THAT PRIVILEGE FOR EVERYBODY

and I always felt like there is always some sort of interruption—fiscal, legal, whatever—that keeps people from being able to share what they know and have. I really have so much respect for someone like Rashida Bumbray, who is a working artist, but also spends her days making sure that artists are funded and supported. These are two very different muscles, and I think very seldom people do both. It's almost impossible. One requires something that is quite singular and insular and the other one requires something that is facing outside, about observing and being with other people. I'm always trying to figure out how my practice can combine both, how I can collaborate and be with people, and have the solace to make stuff. I think that's how it manifested: it's an imperative. I don't know what I would do if I couldn't do that.

**MP:** So, there is writing, then there's some eye for how other people in this sphere are operating and what they need. There's also an attention to a kind of creative expression, that impulse that you need to

## I'M DEFINITELY A B-SIDE PERSON

nurture. Were these different ebbs and flows always operational in your ecosystem?

**EBM:** There's definitely a need to make. The thing I have the hardest time doing is documenting because, when I'm making, I'm just going forward, and I keep moving. But there's this compulsion to contribute to the continuum, that *passing*. To try to say something slightly different, or to amplify people who are already doing it well, saying it well, or did it well and didn't get the credit. Growing up we joked that you could say, "Oh, have you heard of this person—Miles Davis or whomever?" My father would say, "Yes, he's fantastic, but also have you heard of his cousin, Bliles Blavis?" [Laughs] Every person or every theory or every concept that we could bring to him . . . it would always be the B-side. Like him, I'm definitely a B-side person. I'm always really curious about the people who set foundations and have collaborative experiences but don't necessarily, sometimes as the exact function of their genius, attain mainstream attention. Right now, I'm exploring the theories of a particular person that, I understand now, set the stage for not just the New Negro Movement, but everything we access now, everything we're thinking about now from Black Lives Matter to artmaking . . . and I'd be shocked if anybody has heard of Hubert Harrison . . .

**MP:** I also came very late to Hubert Harrison.

**EBM:** My husband's family is from St. Croix, and his father is also a scholar, so we called him, and we were like, "Black Socrates, you know Hubert Harrison?" and he's like, "Oh, yeah, welcome." [Laughs] And you feel like, "Oh, I've been under a rock." But not just him as a person, but all the perspective that he brought and the fact that it has not been amplified. It cuts off an entire strain of thought. It feels interrupted in terms of the black consciousness. Obviously the Black Power Movement in the 1960s feels like it picks up his thread quite a bit, but not with the same potency. Harrison could curse people out, and he did. I mean, he wore the Socialist Party out; he wore out Booker T. and Du Bois, and everybody. I would have loved to see him be able to have more of a platform.

**MP:** I think some of us see these undulations of black genius and expressivity and how we are given different modes of access to them, in people we elevate and amplify who are always part of these mythical pockets. And when you describe it that way, I see it happening in your work: it's like creating space for *these* people, on *this* block that we don't know about; or *this* community of people who created *this* thing. And, as you say, I see it also across AJ's work too—creating space to see people, to see genius that has gone unseen.

**EBM:** It's emblematic! They are exemplars. They didn't come out of nowhere, right? I thank God for

Langston Hughes, but we all know who that person is. There's also a cost, there's a reason, and there's a process to becoming visible. Some of that is good, and most of it is not. Visibility requires things that obscurity doesn't require. And, again, back to my growing up in a particular kind of blackness, it also allows for criticality. It allows for rigorous discourse, because we're not worried about a gaze, or who's watching, or who's judging. The validity of people who are operating outside institutions and aren't tied to institutions is necessarily degraded by those same institutions or their minions. If there's someone who's autodidactic and a rogue out there with a soapbox and is way more rigorous in their thinking, what is the institution then? I'm talking about wanting everybody to be better.

In Baltimore I'm happy to take my son to the barbershop because I know that those are the really connected conversations, and that has never changed. When we first moved to Baltimore, people were like, "How could you sell your house in Brooklyn? How could you leave Brooklyn?" And yes, Brooklyn is my love. My grandfather went to Boys High. I have deep roots there. But I can't take the part of gentrification happening there that is about erasure, where layers of lived reality are no longer visible. One of the things my husband says is, "We came to Baltimore because Baltimore is unmolested blackness." [Laughs] And I don't want to be, again, reductive or essentialist, but sometimes I walk down the street here and I see an African retention in people, an energy that I can't quite get my arms around (see fig. 16). It's palpable, though.

And there's also a real black self-determination.



FIGURE 16. *Tubman House in Baltimore, Maryland (2021)*. Photograph by Taura Musgrove. Courtesy of the artist.

I don't know if it's a carryover from the 1960s, but I would like to theorize that it's connected to the fact that Baltimore was a black city for a very long time, full of people that were related to each other, and families lived in density together. What better place to try out new theories, to try out a personal style of expressivity with your aunts and your uncles living across the street in your neighborhood, with people that look like you who are not threatened by your very existence? That is where the most intellectual stuff comes from, the most interesting theories and style, and swag in general. And when those are cut, interrupted, demeaned, or not subsidized, it splinters and there are interruptions. We still make lemonade out of lemons, but I'm interested in how we can bring those molecules back together, and what we'll see, and how we will feel when that happens. That is what

I was trying to do with *As Of A Now*: imagine it and give it back to us.

**MP:** That's exactly where I was going to go—reconfiguring those molecules here in Baltimore. Let's talk about *As Of A Now* and how that project germinated.

**EBM:** It had two different germinations. The first one was a spark while working at Weeksville in Brooklyn and I was talking to these brilliant artists from London who were doing a version of AR [augmented reality], and I thought we could create something that would allow people to see inside a house, a hundred years ago, and see how much of themselves is still there. We don't often get to see moving images [of Black people] from a hundred years ago, so we don't know how people sat, or gestured. Is it the same? Are we the same? Are we different? Do we laugh the same way? We were surrounded by three of the most important housing projects in Brooklyn, historically, and I thought, How do you create that mirror? You're on the hallowed ground where your ancestors said, "We're creating an intentional space free from violence." So the second germination came when I was imagining, "What if you could have a façade open and you could see inside the building?" Then the technology emerged. Coming to Baltimore you see whole rows of vacant streets and then there might be one house with lights on and people on the stoop, obviously taking care of their stoop, and holding on.

And this didn't just happen; it is systemic. These people came with dreams and GI Bills, and said, "I want to set up a beautiful community."

I also started to read oral histories, which were triggering for me. Not only were people here so intentional—and there were so many free people in Maryland in particular—but there was a germination of ideas. They were focused on living among people they knew; friends and family lived within blocks. I was devastated thinking about what was potentially lost. Obviously, the houses are one thing whose residue no one was interested in. And people say, "Oh, they left their neighborhood," when we all know that no one buys their house and sets up their community and plans for it to be neglected, right? I didn't want to focus on the outside forces because we know what they are. What I wanted to focus on was this idea of the residual. So, if you could put on X-ray glasses and walk around, would you perhaps find someone's ribbon from winning *The Afro's* "Best Block" contest?

My friend Kirby Griffin is an incredible seer, photographer, and DP [director of photography]—he's just otherworldly. He took an image for this project of a standing wall that was exposed because the building next to it had come down, but there was still a bookshelf inserted into the wall, and you could see the books sitting on the shelf (fig. 17). Thinking about the life that was lived made me very emotional. So *As Of A Now* was me trying to think about a hundred years through seminal moments.

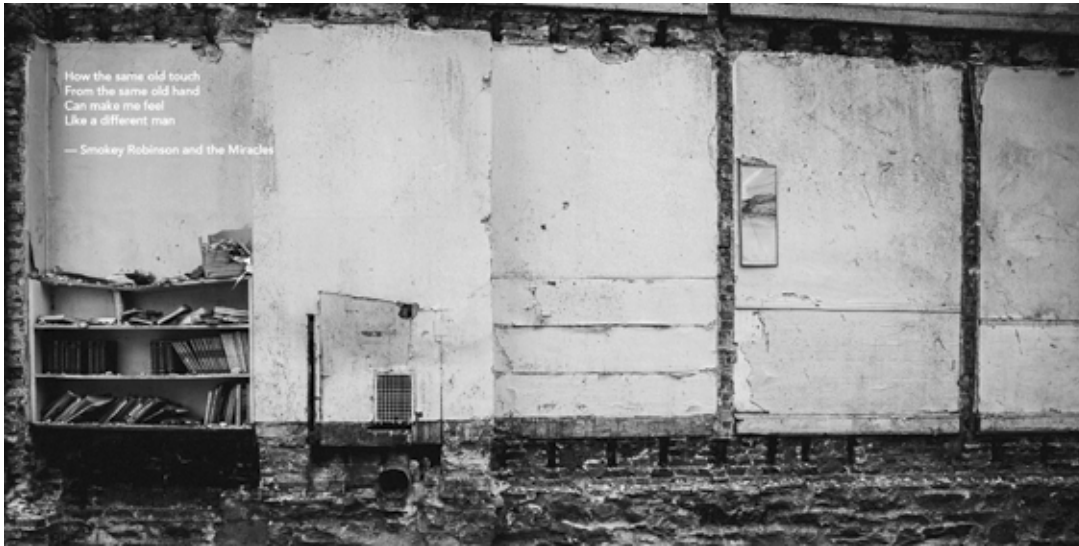


FIGURE 17.  
*A Library  
Lost* (2018).  
Photograph  
by Kirby  
Griffin.

**MP:** *As Of A Now* takes place over three time periods: 1908, 1968, 2008. But it took some time for you to conceptualize this, right?

**EBM:** Yes, it took a long time. Again, initially the technology wasn't quite meshed with what I was thinking. I wanted to peel away that layer of that row house and think about this child inside who's ambivalent about life on earth or life in a metaphysical sense. So he leaves, and comes back, and he goes to where his ancestors were, but he also lives in real time. His parents are troubled by that, but he's not. He's moving through time and experiencing those moments. I was also thinking about the solitude and the quietude of our everyday lives. Just reading those books left on the shelf or taking a shower. The things that are not often overlapped, because black images are often

very dramatic, around trauma or even comedy, but just the extremes, as opposed to the sort of quotidian day-to-day. I wanted to reignite and put those residual pieces that were there back together and contemplate them. There's no beginning, middle, end, necessarily.

**MP:** I've written about *As Of A Now* and I was fascinated by a series of moments in the piece. Again, the installation allows us to see inside of a house in a way that resembles how we might look inside a dollhouse. And we see figures actually moving in the various rooms of the house. Toward the end, there is a knock at the door; the man opens the door and gets a telegram, some kind of bad news, and he goes to the woman, who cries in his arms. Then the telegram, the single piece of paper, becomes dozens, and then





FIGURE 18. Elissa Blount Moorhead, *As Of A Now* (2019). Frame grab. Courtesy of the artist.

there is a flurry of hundreds of papers. They all come billowing across the screen. Then the image of the boy appears, and his face covers the entirety of the house and he is awash in this flurry of papers (fig. 18). It's difficult to describe, but it is so powerful. Since it is an installation piece, how do you imagine that people could see it going forward?

**EBM:** I don't know. I've thought about it and then not. [Laughs] I can't fathom it on a computer. It doesn't have the same impact. It's rendered to scale, so it's literally your size. It's you, it's interacting with you. And it's place-based. I mean it doesn't necessarily need to

be Baltimore because Baltimore is Detroit, Chicago, DC . . . But I do think it needs a space, and it needs an audience to engage with it and each other. I just haven't figured out how else to show it except in real life. I really want people to not have much in between them and the image. It's already enough that the image is an image. If I could, I would bring those people to life and rip back the wall myself, so I don't want to get too far from that. It'll probably stay an installation until technology can advance and tell me something else.

**MP:** The last thing that I want to cover segues directly from this notion of reimagining the conditions by

which we experience moving images. I teach several iterations of film history and I think a lot about the beginning of moving image history and how this moment that you and others are amplifying and reimagining is very profound. In some ways, your process is an undoing of the things that were so problematic about what filmmaking meant over the twentieth century. There is beauty and imagination in American cinema—that goes without saying—but if we go back to the first half of the twentieth century, seminal white men, “auteurs,” were doing this seamless, magical work that supposedly nobody else is really having a hand in, and they’re doing it off in this “La La Land” Hollywood, an elusive, far-off, mythical place. They do it through an assembly line with very little consideration for the labor that undergirded these systems, as if it all just happens. And this system produced a fungible commodity that doesn’t reflect the particularity of people’s lived experiences. Yet you are part of a very dynamic undoing of this relationship to moving images. You didn’t set out to undo that history, but just by being attentive to your own process, you’re creating another relationship to motion pictures. How do you see your work within this history? I’ve described your work, and some of the work of people you’ve collaborated with, as “experimental,” but that doesn’t quite fit. I’m searching for what this is, and I’m wondering how you frame it and whether “experimental” is a useful frame for you. I’ve also used the term *expansive*, which evokes Youngblood’s term *expanded cinema*, but there are some Black artists, like yourself, who are working in a way that’s much more

expansive.<sup>45</sup> The tableau, the imagination, is so much bigger.

**EBM:** That’s so interesting, because I go back to this idea of “no white gaze.” In terms of the media that I grew up with, again, if I’m watching it, it’s black. I didn’t have a sense of anything else. So, if I watched it, I could parse through and pick out what was black about it. I know a lot of people have things to say about Wes Anderson films, but I like symmetry. I went to design school, so I’m really interested in it and quite a few of them just seem very black to me. And people are like, “Oh my god, are you crazy, it is so not.”

**MP:** [Laughs]

**EBM:** But once I looked him up and I realized he was born the same year I was, and I wonder how much of my black consciousness is also pulling at pop culture. In my mind, if it’s in my house, if it’s in my body, then it’s black. It’s not that there’s nothing to be gained from those first hundred years. It’s about what processor you put it through, how you see things, and where you find your commonalities when whiteness is not a problem. So it’s the same thing with films. They do not belong to Sidney Lumet or Woody Allen; it is more about an aesthetic, an interesting thing that’s tied to our time. When you’re talking about the idea of expanded film, I think about what Merawi Gerima did with *Residue* (2020). When I saw it, I was like, “I can go to bed for the rest of my life now.” I felt the

**WHEN YOU LISTEN  
TO ARETHA FRANKLIN,  
OF COURSE YOU HEAR  
NOTES AND WORDS  
AND CADENCE, AND ALL  
THAT STUFF, BUT REALLY  
IT'S WHAT YOU FEEL  
ON YOUR SPINE. WHAT  
DO YOU FEEL?**

same way with Shabier Kirchner (DP) and Steve McQueen (director), who worked on *Lovers Rock* (2020). I say their names together because the hierarchy of film is quite patriarchal, just like the idea of a single auteur is patriarchal. I often think that DPs and certain other people metaphorically occupy the space of women, because they are birthing. Shabier is there giving birth, you know? Directors often get all the credit, in film, in particular, as opposed to in TV, where writers get a lot of the credit. I like that because it's closer to the birthing process. I also think it breaks down hierarchy because of the way you're paying attention to the elements of the making when you're in it. I mean, I doubt anybody watched *Lovers Rock* and was not like "How did Shabier do that? What on earth! Where is he? Oh my god, how's he in the

room like this? How am I in the room?" These practices automatically bust up the hierarchy. I think that is what happens when women and Black people get in the room: the hegemony, the hierarchy, and all these things get busted up. This expanded media has the potential to expand our feelings.

All I really care about is what it does to people, as opposed to whether they think it's genius work. I'm working on a television project now, and I find that really satisfying. But I also think about what *Lovers Rock* did; I'm thinking about what I hope Brad and I did with *Back and Song*, i.e., to be more experiential, and that the film itself is an apparatus for healing or feeling in some kind of way. I say all the time, when I saw *Lovers Rock*, I felt like it was so much of what AJ and I talk about all the time and what TNEG was proposing, which is: *you feel it on your spine*. When you listen to Aretha Franklin, of course you hear notes and words and cadence, and all that stuff, but really it's what you feel on your spine. What do you feel?

The idea of making work that reveals that it's not singular is so dope to me. It really undermines the "singular genius" bullshit. Another project that did that was the documentary *Strong Island* (dir. Yance Ford, 2017), because of the way the filmmaker was able to put themselves in the process. *Strong Island* is a story about the person's family member, and we're looking at images, and we're looking at their [the filmmaker's] hand, and I thought: this is it. This is how, first of all, you show your process, and second, through your process, you let people know that they're in on it, and they're on a ride with you in a particular kind of

way. I think that putting yourself in the story, like we see in *Strong Island*, has been frowned upon.

I see institutions becoming deeply personal; people are putting themselves inside of them and then sharing what they have in them. I love that. I'm not saying I'm connected to all of it, but I think that breaking down and revealing the process is a way forward for me. I think it's genuine, and vulnerable, and real. I'm hoping that that's the difference, that'll be the mark that sets us apart from those first hundred years.

**MP:** That's great. That's an incredible place to land. Thank you so much! ■

**MICHELE PRETTYMAN** is a founding member of the *liquid blackness* research project and serves on the editorial board of its journal. She is a scholar of film and African American cinema and visual culture, a media consultant, and an assistant professor at Fordham University. Her research explores black aesthetics and cultural histories, experimental filmmaking, digital storytelling, and the intersections of creativity and spirituality.

## Notes

- 1 I would add a few other earlier vanguards in the experimental jazz/funk archive, including Cecil Taylor, Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman, and Alice Coltrane. Taylor's work in particular continues to have an influence on Blount Moorhead.
- 2 Wallace, "Fred Moten's Radical Critique."
- 3 Blount Moorhead cites her husband's usage of this term later in the interview, and I find it to be an apt description here.
- 4 See Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*; and Thompson, *Black*

*in Place*. These two important books explore the life of "Chocolate City." Asch and Musgrove explore the political history of the Chocolate City, while Thompson provides a relevant discussion of how the city and its black cultural moorings have been simultaneously repurposed and erased.

**5** Archer, "Conspiracies and Caretakers." Archer's essay meaningfully articulates the notion that our families and communities function as archives.

**6** See Eshun, "Liquid Africa." Eshun's beautiful essay analyses the liquidity and temporality in Samuel "Blitz" Bazawule's short film *Diasporadical Trilogia* (2017) and provides a stunning parallel to Blount Moorhead's use of time in *As Of A Now*.

**7** *liquid blackness*, "What Is Liquid Blackness?"

**8** See Warren, "Black Care," 44. A similar point was made by Jenny Gunn during the teach-in; see Raengo, "Teach-In."

**9** *liquid blackness*, "Facing the Band."

**10** Blount Moorhead, "Eight-Point Plan," 245.

**11** See Nguyen, *Be Water*; Lee, *Be Water*; and Moten, *Black and Blur*. What here is described as "formlessness" resonates with Moten's idea of "informality."

**12** For more on the Weeksville Heritage Center, see the website at [www.weeksvillesociety.org/our-vision-what-we-do](http://www.weeksvillesociety.org/our-vision-what-we-do).

**13** Scott and Moorhead, "Taken Not Granted," 62.

**14** Creative Time, "Funk, God, Jazz."

**15** Philadelphia Contemporary, "*Back and Song*."

**16** Blount Moorhead, "About" (emphasis added).

**17** *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. "fluid (adj.)," [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fluid](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fluid) (accessed August 28, 2021); Raengo, "Black Study @ GSU," 18.

**18** Forster and Prettyman, "Close Up."

**19** Raengo, "Teach-In."

- 20** Blount Danois, "Meet the Creative Women."
- 21** Raengo, "Teach-In."
- 22** Blount Moorhead, "Elissa Blount Moorhead."
- 23** See Gerima, *Residue*. Gerima's film tells a haunting tale of a Washington man who returns to find himself disoriented by the erasure of his childhood memories in the gentrified city. Merawi is the son of Haile Gerima and Shirikiana Aina.
- 24** Allen, *Beautiful Ghetto*. The photographs in this compilation first appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on May 11, 2015. I made this comparison in February 2021 while on a Fordham University panel discussion titled "Black Lives Matter and the Political Landscape," sponsored by Fordham's Department of African and African American Studies.
- 25** Harris, "New Day Again . . ."
- 26** This beautiful mural in the Sandtown/Winchester neighborhood was put together by the nonprofit Beats, Rhymes & Relief, founded by Rameen Aminzadeh and Omar Al-Chaar. The artists who worked on the mural are Rameen Aminzadeh, Isaac Davies, Jerod Davies, Jose F. May, Justin Nethercutt, and Ernest Shaw. It was also supported by NETHER, BAPS, and family and friends of Freddie Gray.
- 27** Raengo, "Teach-In."
- 28** Dutton, "Gary's Blues."
- 29** Cramer, "Icons of Catastrophe," 145.
- 30** See Allen, *Beautiful Ghetto*.
- 31** TNEG, "Ethos."
- 32** See *liquid blackness*, "Black Ontology." Alessandra Raengo has referred to the influence of cinematographers trained at Howard University as "the Howard Pedagogy Lab."
- 33** Blount Moorhead, "Elissa Blount Moorhead."
- 34** Jason Harris teaches and works in journalism and black technological futures and founded the BLKRobot Project and

the Mothership Connection. Also see Kirby Griffin's work at kirbygriffindp.com and Pierre Benu's work at pierrebenu.com.

- 35** Another figure worth noting is Baltimore native Darryl Wharton-Rigby, a Black filmmaker who now resides in Tokyo but was an important figure in Baltimore's TV and filmmaking history in the 1990s and 2000s.
- 36** Blount Moorhead, "Elissa Blount Moorhead Presents at the 2019 Creative Capital Artist Retreat."
- 37** *The Afro*, Baltimore's black newspaper, led this campaign for several decades.
- 38** Blount Moorhead, *As Of A Now*, 2.
- 39** Blount Moorhead, *As Of A Now*, 2.
- 40** I have excerpted portions of Watkins's poem, "Bando Proximity," 49.
- 41** Blount Moorhead and Jafa, "Case for Nonsense."
- 42** Nordstrom, *Nyack in Black and White*.
- 43** Blount Moorhead, "Eight-Point Plan," 246.
- 44** Blount Moorhead, "Eight-Point Plan," 245.
- 45** See Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*.

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