2021

Water the Roots: The Fluidity of Blackness and Time

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by

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April 8th, 2021

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Brief Description

Through the creation of this short film, I hope to analyze the relationship between Black experiences and experimental film, while exploring the potential for social commentary and Black thought to prosper outside of the bounds of commercial cinema.

Project Abstract

I am remarkably privileged to have attended Vassar College as an undergraduate, and as a result, I have reaped the benefits of classism and systemic racism. I am indebted to the Black and brown residents of Poughkeepsie City and the Indigenous people such as the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians and the Lenape who were forcibly removed from the land on which Vassar sits. It means nothing to me that my degree carries the name of a well-respected institution, if I am not able to use my education to benefit those communities I have harmed either directly or tangentially as a Vassar student. I may never be able to fully repay that debt, but through projects such as this one, community organizing, and participation in abolitionist efforts, I intend to try.

This project is a meditation on Blackness, life, death, loss, and spirituality. Although this thesis was executed in hopes of fulfilling an academic requirement, each frame provides insight into my experiences as a low-income Black and Native Hawaiian woman living under the structural oppression instituted by the United States. Blackness, geography, ancestry, and modernity all come into conversation within this film through the breaking of commercial cinema conventions like narrative continuity and linear time. I chose to create this piece without the use of popular Hollywood cinematic conventions to demonstrate the fact that experimental film has a greater capacity for social commentary than commercial film. With this thesis, I hope to call attention to the ways in which commercial endeavors are restrictive for progressive

thought and to demonstrate the emotional impact and societal critiques that can blossom when filmmakers are not bogged down by expectations to generate box office success.

Chapter One

Experimental Film: Candor Over Capital

In the Vassar film department, conversations about the potential for cinema to act as a liberatory medium come up time and time again. With the power to evoke emotion and portray individual experiences through visuals, sound, and editing, film is remarkably different from any other mode of entertainment. But not all genres of film are capable of making radical social commentary or inspiring societal reform. In America specifically, commercial cinema is largely dominated by wealthy, white filmmakers, directors, executives, and producers, which often results in the marginalization of Black and brown low-income voices, omitting the perspectives of those most structurally oppressed.[1] This lack of representation inhibits the extent to which commercial films are able to generate dialogue about structural oppression in the United States.[2] Commercial cinema also seeks to appeal to broad audiences in hopes of ensuring box office success. As a consequence, commercial film companies are most unlikely to fund and support a film that may generate discomfort or stir political backlash from audiences or executives.

As an aspiring filmmaker invested in abolition and decolonization, I took it upon myself to explore other branches of filmmaking that place more power in the hands of the filmmaker and have the potential to uplift often marginalized voices. It was in this search that I developed an affinity for experimental film and admiration for works that subvert traditional Hollywood conventions in exchange for more varied modes of storytelling that privilege experience over

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[1] https://datausa.io/profile/soc/producers-directors

[2] Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart, “Encountering the Rebellion,” in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Film & Television Archive, 2011), 300.

objectivity and commercial appeal.

One of my primary goals with this project is to examine the ways in which experimental film provides a greater threshold for societal critique than commercial Hollywood cinema. As the name implies, commercial cinema privileges profit. Consequently, Hollywood films follow certain cinematic conventions like narrative continuity, seamless editing, and fluid dialogue to ensure a wide audience appeal.[3] Most of these commercial films utilize the latest, state-of-the-art, tens of millions of dollars in funding, and an extensive crew, things that are often not granted to or utilized by experimental filmmakers. The majority of experimental films are made outside of industry economics, where filmmakers often pay out-of-pocket for production, occasionally utilizing money from small grants. Because experimental film is such a vast and wide genre there are no clear statistics on the average cost of production, but as of 2014, the average independent film budget was $750,000, which is notably lower than the average cost of commercial productions.[4]

This low-budget approach often affords experimental filmmakers more independence than they would have if they attempted to create a Hollywood film. By operating on a small budget outside of the commercial film industry, experimental filmmakers are able to avoid pressure from large production companies, who can provide substantial funding but will ultimately dictate the final product. One of the most famous experimental filmmakers, Maya Deren, used an inexpensive 16mm Bolex camera to make all of her films, a camera she purchased with the money inherited from her father's passing.[5] Deren very famously stated "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick," a testament to her dedication to

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[3] Debra Fried, "Hollywood Convention and Film Adaptation," *Theatre Journal*39, no. 3 (1987): p. 299, https://doi.org/10.2307/3208151.
[4] Eleven04 Productions, "Independent Film Budget Breakdown," Eleven04, December 19, 2018, https://www.eleven04.net/blog/2018/12/19/independent-film-budget-breakdown.
[5] Judith E. Doneson, "Maya Deren," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed April 3, 2021, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/deren-maya.

non-commercial film practices, forging a career completely apart from the Hollywood mode of production.[6] This model of filmmaking breaks down the financial barriers that often prevent low-income people of color from creating their own film works.

With fewer financial barriers preventing people from creating experimental films, there is a larger opportunity for marginalized people to share their life experiences, many of which are a testament to the violence of structural oppression. It is this model for filmmaking that drove me to take on this film project despite my lack of access to funding or any film equipment other than my phone. In many ways, I am grateful to have missed out on the expansive and expensive film equipment that Vassar can provide, because it gave me a greater opportunity to demonstrate how experimental film can elevate marginalized voices, even without money.

As profit is the primary goal for commercial cinema, box office numbers and broad viewership are privileged over all else. Where commercial cinema reaffirms capitalist motives, experimental films offer viewers the opportunity to think outside of those widely popular notions and consider alternative lenses through which we might view the world. To attempt to capture and portray identity in commercial Hollywood cinema is to commodify the experience of those portrayed, at times unknowingly and unintentionally.[7] The commodification of Blackness is something that has become extremely common in film, fashion, social media, and more. The commodification and consumption of Blackness predate Hollywood and is traceable back to traditions of blackface minstrelsy from the late 1800s. Nyambura Njee articulates this perfectly stating that, “The commodification of Blackness within our mainstream media serves as a kind of pervasive symbolic blackface, acting with the same political motives on minstrelsy.”[8]

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Nyambura Njee, “ Share Cropping Blackness: White Supremacy and the Hyper-Consumption of Black Popular Culture,” *McNair Scholars Research Journal*9, no. 1 (2016): pp. 129.
[8] Ibid, 120.

These entertainment practices continue to manifest themselves in American popular culture, where "Blackness is rampantly consumed, commodified, and appropriated, while Black people daily lose their lives to police brutality and systemic racism."[9] Instead of replicating those exploitative methods, I chose to lean into the subjectivity of my own Black experience in hopes of unearthing something other Black viewers can relate to. By creating something true to my lived experiences, I was able to avoid the use of stereotypes and trauma porn in my work, two things that are often utilized in commercial film and have a history of serving white audiences at the expense of people of color.

Experimental films are known to ignore and/or subvert the typical storytelling conventions utilized in Hollywood cinema. Through the use of fragmented portrayals of experience, abstraction, and idiosyncratic narrative tactics, experimental film is able to challenge audiences' expectations and perceptions of the world, while encouraging active viewership through the interruption or disturbance of conventional sensibilities. Fine examples of this cinematic tradition are visible through several of the films I discuss later including *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018) and *As Told To G/D Thyself* (2019). I have chosen this particular mode of production because it enables a more complex portrayal of Black belonging and dispossession, two things this film seeks to explore.

The value of experimental film as a mode for Black expression and social commentary was demonstrated to me through the L.A. Rebellion film movement. In the words of Dr. Alessandra Raengo of Georgia State University, the films of the L.A. Rebellion are "A body of work that expands the film history canon by demonstrating unseen possibilities of cinema as a medium and an art form to articulate experiences that have always been at odds with mainstream

[9] Ibid, 124.

narrative structure and visual repertoires.[10]" As commercial cinema privileges the mainstream, the experiences of marginalized communities are hardly prioritized or depicted in a way that is not exploitative or prized for exoticization. This is something many filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion worked to combat as they positioned themselves in opposition to Hollywood's Blaxploitation films. The determination to "Preserve the possibilities of 'black imagination'" drove L.A. Rebellion filmmakers towards techniques of abstraction and fragmentation in hopes of calling attention to incongruities in American society.[11] I hoped to replicate that same model of creativity in my work for this thesis.

Chapter Two

Treatment

This treatment was written before filming to provide an outline for what I hoped to accomplish with this film. This project utilizes minimal scripted dialogue to avoid structured and disingenuous portrayals of emotion and to give primacy to the visual aspects of this film. Saturated color and symbolism allow for abstraction, as the film draws parallels between ancestral connections and the ever-changing sea. The plot of this film can be broken down into three parts: discovery, refraction, and reflection.

Discovery

This piece opens with an artistic glance into the emotional state of a Black woman living in the present day. Though I intend to leave these characters nameless, for the sake of this paper I will refer to her as Ava. This film opens to a series of quick-cut shots of nature and the outdoor

[10]Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart, "Encountering the Rebellion," in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Film & Television Archive, 2011), 293.
[11] Ibid, 298.

environment where most of the film is shot. Extreme close-ups of flora and soil are dispersed between footage of water. The soundscape of this sequence is crisp and intensified, with sounds of rustling leaves and rippling water. Brief moments of human intervention are seen as Ava, barefooted walks through the grass and dirt, grazing twigs and leaves with her hands. The camera does not yet reveal Ava in her entirety, suspending the reveal of her face.

Ava eventually finds her place at the foot of a dock, and the camera pans upward to reveal an expanse of water laid out before her. Finally, the camera reveals Ava's face, as a straightforward, handheld shot captures her distant stare ahead. Close-ups of her face are intercut with brief glimpses of archival footage from protests and social upheaval. These clips are taken from both modern racial justice movements and protests dating back over sixty years ago. This juxtaposition demonstrates the liminality of time and the generations-worth of pressure weighing on Ava's psyche. The soundscape of this scene is chaotic and jarring. Diegetic sounds from protests are heard over grading static, all the while natural sounds from Ava's surroundings echo throughout the scene. This cacophonous sound design signifies the deconstruction of time where Ava finds herself frozen not in a moment of time, but in a feeling of hopelessness and despair. As the scene progresses, tears begin to stream down her face and her weeping becomes stronger.

Superimposed over the rapidly changing visuals are the lines of a poem. Each phrase is broken up and the poem is nearly indigestible to viewers, who are only able to grasp a word or two at a time. This piece is deconstructed and left intentionally disjointed, a testament to the sheer disorienting chaos that occupies Ava.

Archival footage of famine and protests reach a climax, progressing in speed and becoming less and less comprehensible. Instances of Black despair seem to blend together in one discordant blur. Then everything comes to a complete halt, and the camera settles solely on Ava.

Tears stream down her face and she falls to her knees. The camera lingers on Ava, taking breaks between medium-depth shots to focus on close-ups of her clenched hands and reddened eyes. The soundscape seems to come to an abrupt halt, and the sounds of wind and nature around her become muffled as if they are heard from beneath the water.

Refraction

The noise dies down even further and Ava's weeping subsides. Though she is no longer actively crying, tears continue to run down her cheeks. The only sound left is the cool breeze of wind that parallels Ava's shaky and uncontrolled breathing. She closes her eyes and attempts to settle her wheezing. The camera slowly pans from a frontal view of her face to her profile, revealing the profile of another woman standing before her. With her eyes closed, Ava is unaware she is no longer alone. This woman sits eye-level with Ava, and her placement between Ava and the water raises questions as to where she came from. Her position on the edge of the dock seems to suggest she emerged from the water. We will call this other woman Eiya.

Ava opens her eyes to find a stranger sitting before her. She is taken aback, but before she can react or ask this woman who she is, Eiya places her hand atop Ava's. This act of comfort silences Ava entirely. As a stark contrast to the blue and green scenery, Eiya wears a bright red dress that falls down to her ankles and flows in the wind. Her stoic demeanor is a stark contrast to Ava's visible discomfort and consternation. Eiya rises to her feet and extends a hand to Ava. When their hands make contact, the film cuts to a compilation of archival footage from the ocean. A condensed, rapid sequence of waves crashing and underwater footage ends with close-ups of water droplets caught in Eiya's hair and dripping off her shoulders. We quickly cut back to the dock, and Ava stares back at Eiya with curiosity and awe. A clear dichotomy is

drawn between the two, one from land and the other from the sea.

Together, Ava and Eiya venture through nature in a sequence that draws upon the visual traditions of the Southern Gothic, similar to *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). The two seem to spiral through a myriad of emotions over the span of a few minutes. Seemingly random, these interactions work to demonstrate the five stages of grief. Initially, Ava finds herself pulling away from Eiya, as she becomes hyper-aware of the fact that she has no bearing on the situation at hand. As Eiya attempts to bridge the gap between them and emotionally disarm Ava, her reaction turns angry and frustrated. Ava eventually breaks down entirely and collapses into Eiya who comforts her. After a while, the two begin to enjoy themselves, frolicking around the garden and splashing each other on the shore. The sun begins to set and Eiya walks towards the dock. Ava, afraid of being left alone follows quickly after her, desperate to extend their shared moments of joy for as long as possible. Eiya stands near the edge of the dock facing Ava.

Eiya and Ava switch places. Ava, now standing on the edge of the dock with her back towards the water, looks towards Eiya, the two of them standing face-to-face as they were when Eiya first arrived. The camera is positioned such that their profiles are eye-level to one another once again. The gaze lingers there for several moments before zeroing in on Ava and cutting to a clip of her heels, sitting over the edge of the dock. Ava falls back into the water and disappears beneath the surface.

Reflection

Ava wakes alone, lying on the dock drenched from head to toe. Her white dress clings to her skin and water puddles around her. For a moment, she lies there still in solemn contemplation, her gaze fixed towards the sky. Slowly but surely she separates herself from the

wooden planks of the dock and rises to her feet. With a final glance towards the water, she gathers the skirt of her dress and walks back towards her home. Long shots show Ava as little more than a figure moving in the distance as she journeys back to her house. Ava does not smile or utter a word, but a look of determination shines through her eyes. Though she walks in solitude, there is an understanding that she is not alone.

Chapter Three

Influence and Inspiration

As these filmmakers came out of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, their work acts as a tangible representation of how students from prestigious institutions like Vassar, which have and continue to cause harm to people of color, can use their higher education to spur revolutionary movements and uplift marginalized voices. Most of the films from the L.A. Rebellion movement are invested in interpreting and linking different forms of Afrocentric imagination to histories of the African Diaspora. These reflections ruminate on the relationship between place and self, deconstructing then reevaluating temporality in an attempt to provoke radical thought and complex understandings of the Black experience. Consequently, the L.A. Rebellion's works were widely recognized for their ability to "Rejuvenate conversations about creativity in situations of oppression or neglect," inciting a wide variety of filmmakers to follow in their artistic footsteps.[12] Many of these films are structured around ancestry, historical consciousness, temporality, and a sense of belonging, all themes that are active in this project.

Killer of Sheep (1978) by Charles Burnett and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) both center forms of Afrocentric imagination, subverting traditional cinematic storytelling

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[12] Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart, "Encountering the Rebellion," in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Film & Television Archive, 2011), 293.

conventions to capture different dimensions of Black life. In *Killer of Sheep,* for example, character development does not take place through overt signals like dialogue and narrative conflict. Instead, access to the landscape of the mind occurs through an emphasis on characters' gestures and positionality in society.[13] This approach was my inspiration for Eiya and Ava as two characters offered little explicit insight into who they are, only glimpses into the emotional impact of racial injustice and anti-Blackness in America. Both women have experienced moments of fatigue and disappointment at the thought that there may be no end to Black suffering in America, but it is the recognition that they carry the strength of ancestors that have passed and future generations to come that motivates them to continue fighting.

Ancestry and spiritual guidance come together in this film much like in *Daughters of the Dust.* In this southern gothic film, the future child of Eli and Eula narrates the story, tying the past, present, and future together through the influence of both futuristic and historic Black experiences molded together. This deconstruction of linear time is also demonstrated through Nana Peazant, the spiritual community matriarch. "We are two people in one body. The last of the old and the first of the new," Nana exclaims as she implores her family to honor their ancestors and carry them with as they embark on their new journey.[14] It is the idea that each person is made up of themselves, those who came before them, and those yet to come that inspired me to make this film.

Dash's approach to narrative structure and her decision to stay away from male-oriented, western narrative structures were also very influential. Instead, she chose to "Let the story

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[13] Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Stewart, "Encountering the Rebellion," in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating A New Black Cinema* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Film & Television Archive, 2011), 304.

[14] Machiorlatti, Jennifer. "Revisiting Julie Dash's 'Daughters of the Dust': Black Feminist Narrative and Diasporic Recollection." *South Atlantic Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 107.

unravel and reveal itself in a way in which an African Gullah would tell the story."[15] This mode of storytelling subverts traditional Hollywood conventions and honors Black oral traditions. By focusing primarily on the perspectives of Black women, Dash was able to draw similarities and juxtapositions between each generation, demonstrating that, despite how different these women are, they all possess the same connections to their ancestry.[16] Those generational ties help to guide them and structure their sense of self. I firmly believe that those ties transcend death, and are integral aspects of Black life.

The works of Safi Faye often highlight strong Black female leads living in rural Senegal. Although her films often take on a Senegalese perspective, her cinematic goals and processes can still be applied to African American film. Faye's pieces depict the divine and intrinsic relationship between Black women and nature, which I call upon in this film by drawing parallels between the emotional resilience in Black women and the strength and magnitude of the ocean. One of Faye's techniques for depicting this naturalistic relationship is through the use of color composure. Faye utilizes an aesthetic style where the colors of her subjects operate in conversation with the colors in nature, either complimenting them and creating a unification between the two or by contrasting them entirely to illustrate displacement. Similar to *Selbe: One Among Many* (1983) and *Mossane* (1996), I wanted this film to carry a visibly warm tint to echo the warmth felt between Eiya and Ava as a result of their ancestral connection.

Safi Faye's background as an ethnologist helps her to recognize the significance of oral history, and she applies this rich tradition in her cinematic practice. Faye utilizes legends and folklore to merge the historical and the imaginary, a creative method that enables her to

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[15] Tara Brady, "Daughters of the Dust: the Film That Inspired Beyoncé's Lemonade," The Irish Times (The Irish Times, June 1, 2017), https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/daughters-of-the-dust-the-film-that-inspired-beyonc%C3%A9-s-lemonade-1.3101556.

[16] Machiorlatti, Jennifer. "Revisiting Julie Dash's 'Daughters of the Dust': Black Feminist Narrative and Diasporic Recollection." *South Atlantic Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 101.

demonstrate how tradition and modernity come to a head in African cinema. Author and screenwriter, Tolagbe Ogunleye, argues that folklore "Folklore is evidence of the ancient African life force and past that Africans forcibly brought to America, maintained through an expressive sense."[17] This very idea is demonstrated through *Mossane,* a film Faye created to "Show how tradition and modernity currently confront each other in African reality."[18] It is this phenomenon that I hoped to speak to in my thesis, with Eiya acting as a physical manifestation of Ava's ancestral roots. Though there are inequalities and injustices inherited with Blackness, there is also strength and kinship that comes with the recognition that you come from a long line of Africans whose resilience made it possible for you to live the life you live today.

Hale County This Morning, This Evening (2018) also had a large impact on the production of this short film. Directed by RaMell Ross, *Hale County* demonstrates the quotidian beauty of a small, predominantly black, Alabama town and the residents that call it home. When I first saw this film, I was taken aback by its fractured reconstruction of time. There was no linear progression to be seen yet every frame seemed to flow gracefully from one to the next, gliding from one vignette to the next and at times settling on a cloud and lingering there for minutes on end. Through this interruption of linear time, Ross is able to curate a viewing experience that generates excitement and anticipation despite the lack of narrative continuity or a formal plotline. I especially love that aspect of *Hale County* because it reminds me of what it is like to sit and listen to elders speak. The conversation may branch off into a dozen different directions and no wrong turns, for every path holds its own beauty and wisdom. It is that feeling

[17] Ogunleye, Tolagbe. "African American Folklore." *Journal of Black Studies*27, no. 4 (1997): 435–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479702700401.
[18] Beti Ellerson, "Safi Faye's Mossane : A Song to Women, to Beauty, to Africa," *Black Camera*10, no. 2 (2019): pp. 250-265, https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.10.2.18.

or organic fulfillment that I appreciate most from storytelling and to evoke that emotion in viewers through filmmaking is what I hoped to capture in my thesis.

Finally, I was heavily influenced by *As Told to G/D Thyself* (2019). This film was co-directed by Marc Thomas, Jenn Nkiru, Terence Nance, Bradford Young, and Kamasi Washington, a collective self-identified as The Umma Chroma. This 22min piece is a remarkable journey from start to finish, filled to the brim with evocative imagery and euphonious music. Co-director and composer Kamasi Washington described this film as "the journey to understanding that you can shape the world into what you want it to be."[19] This desire to reshape the world and construct a more just future is a common thread throughout the film works that have inspired my thesis. When I consider the potential for experimental cinema to act as a liberatory medium, it is due greatly to the fact that film provides boundless possibilities for imagining the future, which *As Told to G/D Thyself* exemplifies perfectly.

Chapter Four

Water The Roots

As I look at this film, I see water operating on multiple levels. Firstly, water provides a metaphor for nourishment and replenishment. I edited this film to emphasize the liminality of time and to break down the idea that we are worlds apart from our ancestors and future generations because of the passing of time. When considering ancestral spirituality and how I might bring the past, present, and future into conversation, I thought about Black intergenerational relationships as a tree. The leaves of the tree that spawn fruit and seeds are demonstrative of generations to come. The branches and trunk act as the present, drawing in

[19] Tosten Burks, "Kamasi Washington's New Short Film 'As Told To G/D Thyself': Watch," Spin, April 2, 2019, https://www.spin.com/2019/04/kamasi-washington-as-told-to-gd-thyself/.

nutrients from the soil, and the roots represent the ancestral connections that keep us stable and make it possible for us to grow in the first place. At several points throughout my life, I have felt isolated and defeated by structural oppression and the state of race relations in America. All of my Black friends and family members often discussed feeling a similar way.

When considering how I might approach this film in a manner not only provides a valid social critique but offers a sense of hope and support to Black viewers. This goal drove me to consider what it is that motivates me and drives me to push through moments of self-defeat to keep fighting for a better future for Black youth. The answer was simple. I look to my family, the elders that I knew, and the ones I never had the privilege of meeting. In centering my ancestry at the core of my social justice movements I am able to walk with the knowledge that I do not stand alone, and that everything I do is a continuation of the work accomplished by those who came before me.

Water also functions as a parallel to the perpetual strength passed down from one Black generation to the next. When I look at the ocean in particular, I see an unstoppable force, perhaps even one of the most powerful things on Earth itself. Yet even though the ocean is always changing, some things remain the same. The ocean's potential strength, its sheer magnitude, and its ability to connect people all over the world never falter. I think of Blackness in a similar way. It is something that lasts forever and transcends time. As the ocean is ever-present, so is the spirituality of our Black ancestors, guiding the ship from one destination to the next.

Water provides a calming support, cradling those who float on its surface the way that an elder might, while providing the food and nourishment essential for life and prosperity. When I think about the immovable, indestructible, and immeasurable grandeur of the ocean, I see a reflection of the resilience of generations of Black people fighting in perpetuity to ensure a

better future for generations to come. One day we will look down upon the water and see the reflection of a world better than the one we know now.

Appendix

Selbe: One Among Many (1983) and *Mossane* (1996) dir by Safi Faye

Daughters of the Dust (1991) dir by Julie Dash

Hale County This Morning, This Evening (2018) dir by RaMell Ross

As Told To G/D Thyself (2019) dir by Kamasi Washington, Terence Nance, Jenn Nkiru, Marc Thomas, and Bradford Young

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